

Women's
Collective
Ireland

“Women Inspiring Women - Stronger Together”

WHO WE ARE

Women's Collective Ireland is a national women's community development organisation advancing marginalised women's equality through women's community development. Women's Collective Ireland represents and works directly with women experiencing disadvantage, through our 17 Grassroots Women's Community Development Projects and National structures.

Women's Collective Ireland has a unitary legal structure, which requires particular governance and creates specific obligations nationally and locally.

OUR VISION

An Ireland where **women in all our diversity are flourishing.**

OUR MISSION

To support **grassroots women**¹ through collective and practical actions to achieve their **full human rights and true equality.**

OUR WORK

Women's Collective Ireland supports grassroots women through women's community development locally and nationally. Women's Collective Ireland's work on the ground is central and fundamental. It shapes all our collective actions. The national work derives from and advances the work of our community development projects supporting grassroots women's empowerment.

Women's Collective Ireland work directly with women on the ground from disadvantaged communities, to build women's confidence and self-esteem through Feminist Community Education.

The Women's Collective **17 local Projects** are best placed to identify and respond to the specific needs of grassroots women in their communities and each of them have developed a unique programme of work with women. Our work **continues to evolve** in response to the needs identified by grassroots women. We work to make real connections in order to ensure **voice and visibility** of grassroots women.

¹ With thanks and acknowledgements to Gabriéli do Livramento Gonçalves, Brenda Caroline Geraldo Castro, José Baltazar, Salgueirinho Osório de Andrade Guerra (2019).

To us, grassroots women is a term used for women living in often working-class, marginalised, rural, and urban communities, who experience exclusion for whatever reason including economic, cultural, social and political exclusion.

OUR GUIDING VALUES

Our values guide our work. When we speak or act, we are:

WELCOMING

We actively reach out to, include and develop relationships with the diverse women in our communities.

FOR WOMEN

We are feminist in our thinking and in our actions.

WITH WOMEN

We seek to be supportive of and are energised by the women we meet and work with.

COLLECTIVE

We create spaces for women to get together safely, be themselves, learn, share experiences, have their say and get involved.

ROOTED

Our words and deeds are grounded in the lives and experiences of the grassroots women we meet and work with.

ABOUT CHANGING THE WORLD

We actively listen and hear women's voices supporting transformation. We speak out about the barriers to women's equality and participation, and campaign for positive change.

Women's Collective Ireland have developed a reach of over 36,000 women across Ireland.

OUR STRATEGIC GOALS



Strategic Goal 1

Reaching out and **engaging** women.



Strategic Goal 2

Supporting women's empowerment and participation through feminist **community development**.



Strategic Goal 3

Voicing the issues affecting grassroots women and **increasing visibility**.



Strategic Goal 4

Achieving **sustainability**: growing and developing as an organisation.

Introduction

This proposal is being submitted to Minister Roderic O’Gorman - Minister of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Carol Baxter - Assistant Secretary General, International Protection, Integration and Equality Division and Jane Anne Duffy - Principal Officer, Equality Division, seeking reinstatement and investment of funding to Women’s Collective Ireland (WCI).

Women’s Collective Ireland (WCI) is a national women’s community development organisation, core funded by the Department, to advance disadvantaged women’s equality through women’s community development. WCI represents and works directly with women experiencing disadvantage, through our 17 Women’s Community Development Projects across both rural and urban communities. We have 47 mainly part-time place-based staff, most of whom work on the ground in WCI Women’s Projects throughout Ireland. WCI’s national team comprises of 5 part time staff who manage and administrate the organisation on behalf of the WCI Board.

WCI launched our new Strategic Plan 2022- 2026 in April 2022. The launch incorporated the renaming of the organisation from the National Collective of Community Based Women’s Networks (NCCWN) to our new name Women’s Collective Ireland (WCI). Our new visual identity and name - Women’s Collective Ireland provides a framework to inspire all of us for a common vision of *‘An Ireland where women in all our diversity are flourishing’*. The strategic goals we have developed reflect the collective priorities and aspirations of our national grassroots women’s organisation.

During the lifetime of our previous Strategic Plan 2016-2021, we have achieved the goals we set out to achieve with “our collective energy” and have developed a **reach of over 36,000 women across Ireland**. We do this in the knowledge that we have an important role to play in Irish society, amplifying grassroots women’s voices.

WCI welcomes commitments made under the Programme for Government in relation to gender equality and socio-economic equality and very much appreciates Government’s commitment to funding our organisation. However, since 2008 WCI funding has been cut from €1,946,000.00 to the current level of €1,730,000.00 in 2022. The lack of full reinstatement of funding has impacted on our capacity to provide a full range of needs-based services and supports to disadvantaged women at local level due to the reduction and impact on staffing hours and pay.

17 Women’s Collective Ireland Local Grassroots Women’s Projects

At local level, WCI Projects work directly with disadvantaged women and with statutory and non-statutory organisations and agencies to increase disadvantaged women’s social capital. At National level, we participate on key National structures supporting women’s equality. In 2021, operating under Covid 19 restrictions, WCI projects made a total estimated 123,333 engagements with women through technology and telephone. As the only National organisation working specifically and directly with grassroots women from disadvantaged communities, WCI have demonstrated that we are an experienced and essential part of the infrastructure to support and advance equality for disadvantaged women both locally and nationally. Our work is embedded in grassroots feminist approaches which underpin all aspects of WCI work and organisational structure.

WCI addresses a wide diversity of issues impacting on the most disadvantaged women in Ireland. WCI's specific focus is to provide support and capacity building for working class women, women without formal education, women living in poverty, older women, lone parents, women from the Traveller community, minority ethnic and migrant women, women with disabilities, lesbian and bisexual women, women living in rural areas, homeless women and women experiencing domestic violence. WCI Projects recognise disadvantage in relation to women's socio-economic circumstances. In addition, rural Projects work with women who are often further disadvantaged due to social isolation and lack of access to supports and services. Marginalised women are identified through outreach, referrals from statutory and community agencies, consultation, local statistics, and information.

As WCI projects are core funded for staff and some overheads only; local projects leverage in programme funding from a variety of sources to enable outreach and delivery of their programme of works to support disadvantaged women's inclusion in education, training, cultural and community life and overcome barriers. Our work not only implements WCI objectives but also supports and compliments other government policy objectives, e.g. women's health & well-being, education, employment and domestic abuse supports. WCI holistic services and supports represent excellent value for money. Supports and services provided by the WCI Projects include targeted outreach strategies, accredited and non-accredited needs-based community education, training, health and wellbeing, childcare centres, drop-in/information centres, resource and referrals, and counselling. In the 17 Projects, this has resulted in the additional employment of approximately 200 people, managed and coordinated by WCI staff.

Impact of Covid 19 on Women

WCI have learned from our experience during Covid 19 that we need to take time to reflect on our work, particularly in relation to the work undertaken and support during the pandemic. Our continuing work supported women's participation, equality and empowerment, and development of strategies to increase resilience, creativity, and vital connections for disadvantaged women. We have listened carefully to the voices of our board members, staff, advisory groups, stakeholders, funders, and the grassroots women we work with. We have also explored the local and national contexts.

The impact of the Covid pandemic and the measures taken to manage it, are widely acknowledged to have had a far greater and negative impact on women across the world and have certainly increased gender inequalities in Ireland. That impact continues and is likely to have consequences not yet revealed, which will only emerge with time. What we do know, is that women have carried a disproportionate burden of care, have endured a much higher level of gender-based violence, particularly in home, have lost more employment opportunities and have been under-represented where key decisions were made, during the pandemic.

Nationwide research carried out by Women's Collective Ireland "*National Impact Survey - Women During COVID-19*", (3,369 respondents) has assisted us to gauge the impact of COVID-19 on women in Ireland. In particular, the findings highlight the burden of care carried by women as having an impact on their mental health and wellbeing. For Women's Collective Ireland, the impacts identified by women across the 17 WCI Projects assists us to inform the context and implementation of key actions in our new Strategic Plan.

WCI local projects are currently working with grassroots women on the findings of our national survey during the pandemic. COVID19 Pandemic has had a huge impact on women in many areas of their lives including:

- Isolation & Loneliness
- Strain on Mental Health and Wellbeing
- Medical Issues
- Disconnected from support systems
- Lack of access to the adequate Internet services
- Fear & Concern

The impacts above have been and are more severely felt by grassroots women in communities which were already dealing with layers of inequality and exclusion. As one woman shared, *“My anxiety has increased, feeling pressure about money, job, feeling lonely and not socialising”*.

Findings from our survey highlight that women's well-being and mental health will be one of the key areas of work for WCI local Projects going forward. WCI continuously, holds women's well-being as a core value.

Cost of Living and Supporting Resilience and Gender Equality

Ireland is facing a cost-of-living crisis as the price of energy, fuel and food have increased with inflation at its highest rate in 22 years. Central Statistics Office (CSO) data shows the annual rate of inflation rose to 7% in April. Data from the ESRI and Central Bank clearly shows the disproportionate impact of rising prices on low-income households, including those on social welfare. While the management of wealth falls mainly to men, the burden of poverty is disproportionately carried by women. Grassroots women have identified food poverty, heat poverty, access to public infrastructure and the digital divide as key areas of concern. WCI are also very much aware that solutions to the coming climate crisis, which will further significantly affect women, should be combined with poverty-alleviation activities.

Ukrainian Refugee Support

Russia invaded Ukraine on the 24 February 2022. The largest military assault on a European state since World War II. The invasion has caused the largest refugee crisis in Europe forcing millions of women and children to flee, many of which have and will continue to come to Ireland. Swift action is required to provide housing and essential social and psychological support to victims of war.

While this situation places additional pressures on the country to provide recourses for communities, Women's Collective Ireland are well placed in our communities to offer practical support and offer an open welcome to these women and children in our women's projects and crèches. We will endeavour to include this vital support to Ukrainian families new to our communities in our implementation plans. One such example includes work of our WCI South Kerry Project in supporting women due to 500 Ukrainian families newly arriving to the local community (June 2022).

National Strategy for Women and Girls (NSWG)

WCI have an important role to play in furthering government commitments to women's equality outlined in the National Strategy for Women and Girls (NSWG). As a member of the NSWG Strategic Committee, WCI represents the voices of disadvantaged women in developing and monitoring the NSWG. The NSWG recognises the role of WCI in supporting the achievement of this outcome.

“Socially excluded women, particularly those living in poverty, are supported to access education, training and employment opportunities” through the commitment to Action: 1.19 to “Support and resource women’s community development, as a means to provide services and support for socially excluded women.”

This outcome is achieved through supporting community organisations, such as WCI local Women's Projects, who engage with women who experience disadvantage in order to build capacity and increase participation in existing community-based socio-economic programmes. It is the experience of WCI that providing access to education, training and employment, through outreach and development work, can change not only a woman's life but impacts on her family and community and can help address intergenerational unemployment and poverty.

‘Advance Women in Leadership at all levels’ (Objective Four) in relation to ensuring “Greater visibility and voices of socially excluded women represented in policy and decision-making for a”, the NSWG commits to “Support women’s community organisations to identify relevant local structures for participation and support the participation and progression of women within these structures locally, regionally and nationally.” (4.14)

Women living in poverty are best placed to identify the impacts of poverty and exclusion and WCI recognises the need for capacity and confidence building and development in order to enable women to speak their reality - valuing their own experience and expertise. WCI provides opportunities to enable the voices of women experiencing disadvantage to be heard and to have the opportunities to affect decisions and policies that impact on their lives

We look forward to working with the Minister and his officials on evaluating the current strategy and developing and implementing a new National Strategy for Women and Girls.

Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality

WCI have made submissions to the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality, seeking to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in the workplace, politics, and public life, particularly in relation to disadvantaged women. WCI welcomed the recommendations of the Citizens

Assembly on Gender Equality (24th April 2021), as a significant step in the advancement for women's equality. The recommendations by the Citizens send a strong and clear signal that women's equality needs to be at the centre of our Constitution, our legislation and our policies. The recommendations have the potential to really transform women's and girls' lives in this country and include the key elements that we need to achieve gender equality. WCI urges the Government to prioritise its implementation of the recommendations without delay.

WCI recognises that while there have been many successes in the fight for equal rights for women globally and nationally, equality has yet to be realised, particularly for disadvantaged women. In line with the Citizens Assembly' recommendations and through our work with women across the country, it is evident that while gender inequalities impact on all women, women experiencing disadvantage are impacted disproportionately. Women living in poverty face barriers to access health services, which in turn makes them more vulnerable to ill-health, physical and mental, thus exacerbating health inequalities. Furthermore, access to education is impacted by lack of finance, leading to multi-generational unemployment and poverty. Families headed by a lone parent, the majority of whom are women, are consistently and significantly more likely to be living in poverty and deprivation than the general population. The income of women in paid employment continues to be significantly less than that of men. In addition, the concentration of disadvantaged women in part-time and low paid insecure work is of concern to WCI. Domestic and sexual violence remains a serious issue for women we work with which can be further intensified by social exclusion and poverty. Women and children are all too often forced to remain living in homes where violence is ongoing, due to a lack of financial resources or viable alternatives due to lack of education or social capital. We have seen this issue being visibly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Actions required for key areas for reinstatement and investment

WCI look forward to working with you and your officials to ensure the sustainability of our valuable work, carried out with disadvantaged women throughout the country. WCI's work aligns with commitments to the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals and Citizen's Assembly recommendations, underpinning sound community development practices, reflecting a response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on women's poverty and social inclusion.

We are seeking your consideration under three key areas to ensure sustainability and development of WCI work - seeking reinstatement and investment of funding to WCI.

Area 1 - Reinstatement of funds to 2008 levels.

Area 2 - Investment in staff and in strengthening organisational structures.

Area 3 - Investment in National Programme Funding.

Women's Collective Ireland have developed a reach of over 36,000 women across Ireland

Context that supports the key areas of reinstatement and investment:

The WCI Board have serious concerns about current limited financial and human resources and the implications for the sustainability of the organisation and, particularly, our work on the ground. As outlined above, we are working with funding less than 2008 funding levels. Furthermore, we are aware that our services are crucial in this time of post pandemic. As WCI projects are core funded for staff and some overheads we urgently need investment in programme funding for women as this is central to WCI supporting grassroots women's advancement in society. Organisational development is key to advancement and success of our vibrant organisation. WCI recognises that the current crisis has underlined how the community and voluntary sector is crucial to the lives of many women in terms of social outlets, work, and community participation. The impact of the pandemic has highlighted the extent of gender-based inequality across the Irish economy and society. Women engaging with WCI highlighted that the pandemic had a disproportionately negative impact on their lives, incomes, access to childcare, employment opportunities and women's health. The burden of home care and home schooling was carried disproportionately by women, with the more vulnerable and disadvantaged carrying the greatest burden. WCI are concerned with the prospect of spending cuts and austerity to follow due to the pandemic, which will be likely to impact women more negatively. Findings from our survey highlight that women's well-being and mental health will be one of the key areas of work for WCI local Projects going forward. WCI holds women's well-being as a core value. Self-care and counselling are key components required to allow grassroots women heal from situations which have arisen.

A focus for WCI is on support for Ukrainian women and families new to our communities is embedded in our local action plans, encompassing prioritisation of the needs and experiences of those women most affected by the war. Aspirational goal for WCI to deliver an integration programme entitled Ireland & Me to be targeted at migrant women, including Ukrainian women. Providing a range of targeted courses and initiatives to support interculturalism and ethnic diversity, and community diversity within the local grassroots women's projects.

We aim to continue to make WCI internally and externally digitally ready. We have started work internally in 2022 utilising new IT systems. Our consultation with grassroots women findings shows that there are gaps between those who have access to technology equipment and those who do not and women who were further disadvantaged by having no ICT skills. For many learners, digital literacy and access to digital technology is a real barrier to engaging in our courses and workshops. WCI projects are working on breaking down barriers to participation through mitigating educational disadvantage.

WCI aim to highlight the understanding of the systemic change that is needed to achieve full equality for women and girls. Work at local level to forward the work on the Citizens Assembly recommendations and ensuring that we address the challenges faced by grassroots women in their diversity, including migrant women, women of colour, Traveller women and women from ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ women. The economic impact of the pandemic has hit women hardest, resulting in a "she-cession" with women's jobs and incomes disproportionately affected, with no guarantee of a return to pre-pandemic levels once the crisis has passed. Recovery from the impact of the pandemic is the key economic

issue facing the country, and the emergence of inflation is an immediate challenge facing those on low incomes and relying on state supports.

Our participative, ongoing, consultation with women helps us to target programmes and supports for women and represent their voice on issues affecting women's lives. Our ongoing research will help support WCI collective voice; identifying the needs, issues and challenges now experienced by women; feed into work planning; and help WCI to influence new strategies being developed in response to issues identified. Women's Collective Ireland recognises women's diverse needs and we will work to address these specific needs in the different communities we work and live in. Women's Collective Ireland will take appropriate and effective action to improve grassroots women's participation in our communities and society.

Action 1 - Reinstatement of Funds to 2008 Levels

Reinstatement of funding would enable the WCI Board to further implement good governance procedures and processes in relation to bringing pay parity for staff in line with other organisations in the sector. The collective cuts to already low pay and the stagnation of this pay, has resulted in a lack of pay parity both in the community/voluntary sector and with public sector pay scales. Reinstatement of funds would enable the board of WCI to apply include annual incremental increases for staff and explore bringing staff pay scales in line with public sector pay scales.

As Ireland moves into Post COVID 19 Pandemic times of rebuilding, re-engagement and recovery, WCI have a vital role supporting disadvantaged women in society that have found themselves in situations more vulnerable than ever. WCI staff, in the main, live or are from the communities they work in. WCI recognise that cost of living crisis is and, will continue to, impact on these communities disproportionately, including on our staff. The valuable community work of WCI staff has never been more required nor the sector more in need of support. WCI staff have a vast insight and knowledge of what is happening for women and their needs because WCI Projects work directly with grassroots women. Investment in meaningful professional employee development leads to a more robust internal team of resilient women role models working in our communities which WCI believe is required to thrive in today's environment. We recognise that this plays a big part in organisation's growth and expansion.

The reinstatement of the WCI funding to 2008 levels would allow for the resumption of supports and services for disadvantage women that were lost due to the cuts. A further increase in funding and investment would allow for an expansion of our work to other geographic areas and support more women experiencing disadvantage. Furthermore, this would support us in working with the recently new to our communities, including from Ukraine.

Evidentially, when women are supported, it impacts positively on their children, families, and communities. It can halt multigenerational unemployment, low educational attainment and increase participation in both community and society. WCI need continued reinstatement and investment in core funding to enable us to continue our work to advance disadvantaged women's equality. While it is evident that gender inequalities impact on all women, women experiencing disadvantage are impacted disproportionately.

Action 2 - Investment in Staff and in Strengthening the National Organisation Structure

The staff of WCI are our most valued asset and provide highly skilled, unique interventions, not provided elsewhere. WCI Project staff work with women from disadvantaged communities at a grass roots level that enable those who would not otherwise, participate in all aspects of society. The WCI Board are committed to valuing and investing in staff to support them in their intensive, frontline work with women. Government investment would enable the Board to provide targeting training and professional development for staff, recognising and valuing their role in building capacity and supporting participation of disadvantaged women.

At present, the WCI have a national team of 5 part-time employees, comprising of CEO, National Financial & Operations Coordinator, National Programme Coordinator, National Operations Officer and National Communications Officer equating to the equivalent of 4 full-time workers who oversee all 17 Local Women's Projects and are working at national organisational level. To maximise our limited resources, WCI have centralised our administration, including accounting and payroll processes, increasing efficiency, and enabling better governance and accountability. However, a stronger expanded, national team would further strengthen and increase our sustainability, enabling WCI to fully engage and participate as a national women's organisation. The link between local community development delivery and national strategy is vital to the successful implementation of national policy objectives. A stronger, expanded national team will link grassroots women with the Government's commitments on Gender Equality.

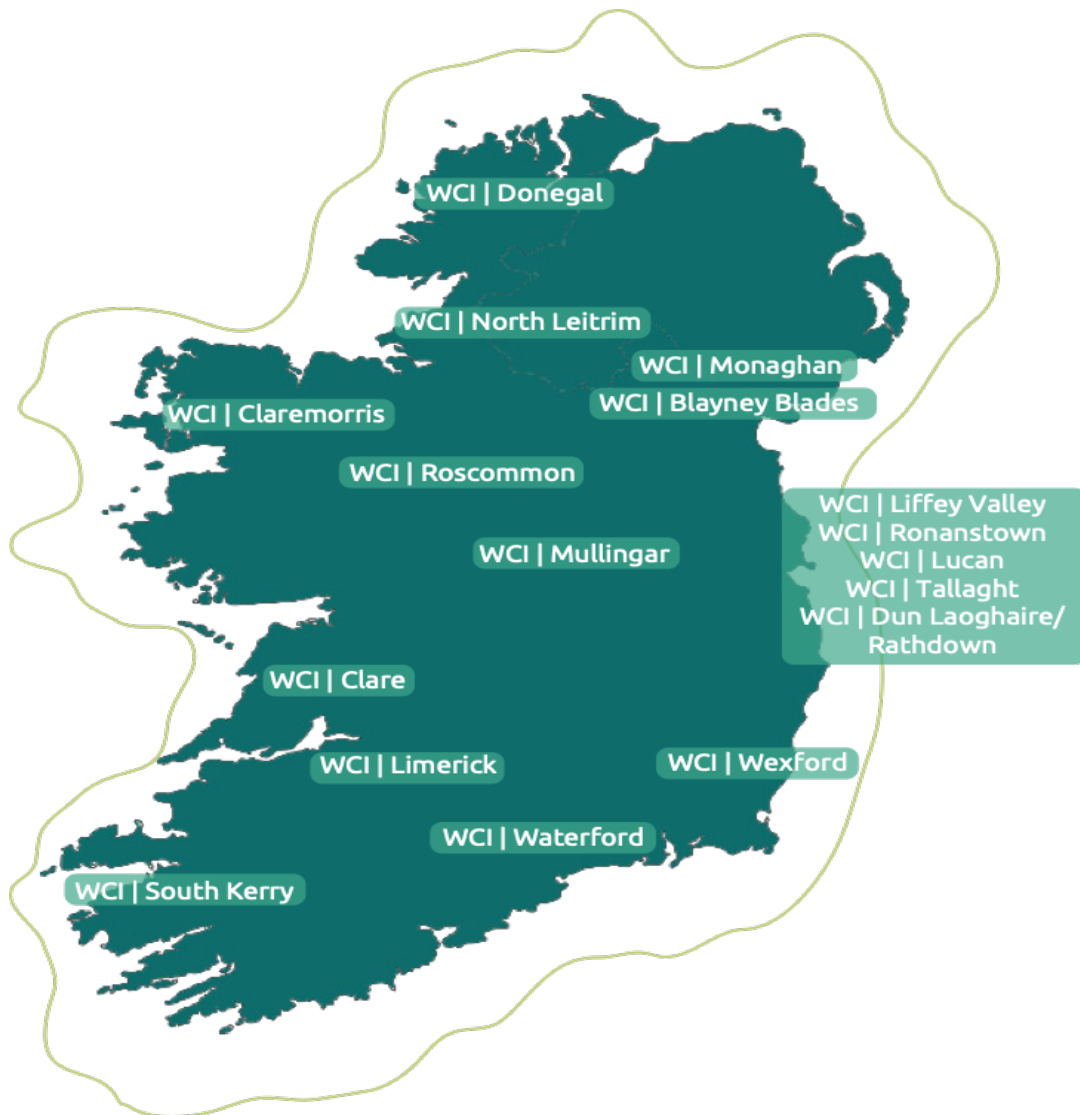
Action 3 - Investment in National Programme Funding

Embedded in WCI local action plans of work are the prioritisation of the needs and experiences of migrant women living in Ireland, with a specific focus on supporting Ukrainian Women and their families new to the communities in which we work. A goal for WCI would be to deliver an integration programme entitled Ireland & Me specifically targeted for Migrant Women, including Ukrainian Women. This programme would provide a range of targeted courses and initiatives to support interculturalism and ethnic diversity, and community diversity within the local grassroots women's projects.

Notes:

"As CEO of Women's Collective Ireland, I welcome the leadership role working with you in such an exciting feminist organisation, that work is FOR WOMEN, WITH WOMEN, is ROOTED in the community with COLLECTIVE spaces for women. Our work is grounded in the lives and experiences of the grassroots women we meet and work with." (Miriam Holt - April 2022)

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Locations of Women's Collective Ireland Women's Community Projects

Women's Collective Ireland have developed a reach of over 36,000 women across Ireland