



Women's
Collective
Ireland

Women's Collective Ireland (WCI)
Pre-Budget Submission 2025



An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige
Department of Children, Equality,
Disability, Integration and Youth

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Introduction

This proposal is being submitted to Minister Roderic O’Gorman - Minister of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth, Carol Baxter - Assistant Secretary General, International Protection, Integration and Equality Division and Jane Anne Duffy - Principal Officer, Equality Division, seeking 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 55 mainly part-time place-based staff, most of whom work on the ground in WCI Women’s Projects throughout Ireland.

WCI are working within our Strategic Plan 2022–2026 goals and objectives which reflect our work and vision for ‘An Ireland where women in all our diversity are flourishing’. With “our collective energy” we 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.

17 Women’s Collective 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.



2023 Outputs:

In 2023, Women’s Collective Ireland had:

- **108,946** engagements by telephone, text, referrals, and one to ones.
- **13,354** participants who took part in WCI programmes, services, and activities.
- **7,834** social media posts.



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 disadvantaged women's equality both locally and nationally.

Our work is rooted 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. Much of the support and capacity building focuses on addressing the barriers to equality and participation and their consequences for women in all their diversity, including but not limited to women who are working class, without formal education, living in poverty, older women, lone parents, from the Traveller community, minority ethnic, migrants, women with disabilities, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, living in rural areas, unhoused, 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 through 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.

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 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. WCI consulted with grassroots women on issues and policies in 2023. Grassroots women around the country fed into our WCI Manifesto naming the issues that affect grassroots women. The manifesto was launched earlier this year. Women have highlighted their daily difficulties of being in real fear of facing the rise in costs, leaving women in our communities to live in unstable financial situations, affecting their overall wellbeing.

Ireland is experiencing its highest inflation rates since the early 1980s. The price of energy, food, and everyday essential items has risen and is placing pressure on millions of families. Inflation hits the poorest hardest, in particular, the grassroots women we work with. The cost-of-living crisis will continue to deepen existing poverty and tip others into poverty.

Our work not only implements WCI objectives but also supports other government policy objectives, i.e., 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, referrals, and counselling. 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.

As WCI is core funded for staff and some overheads only, local projects lever in programme funding from a variety of sources to outreach and deliver their programme of work to support disadvantaged women’s inclusion in education, training, cultural and community life and overcome barriers. In the 17 Projects, this has resulted in the additional employment of approximately 200 people, managed and coordinated by WCI staff.

In relation to national programme delivery, national staff source funding to deliver WCI targeted, needs-based community education programmes at local level through each of the 17 projects. In recent years, WCI has successfully sourced funding from the ESF Fund, DSF Reconciliation Fund and DCEDIY as outlined below.



WCI STEPS for Women Programme

WCI have developed a unique ‘**STEPS for Women Programme**’ supporting women distanced from the labour market to explore career and employment options. Supporting women with key skills and unlocking their own strengths including confidence building, recognising transferrable skills to employment, exploring the workplace landscape, IT and social media skills, CV and interview preparation and goal setting. Outcomes of data WCI STEPS for Women (2022) 38% increased their employment opportunities and 66% on to further education. (*WCI Publication report 2022*).

WCI Grassroots Women Bonding & Bridging – Weaving All Island Connections (2022/2023)

WCI developed a ‘Grassroots Women Bonding & Bridging – Weaving All Island Connections’ pilot programme which engaged and connected grassroots women from different geographic communities in the north and south of the island. We targeted six diverse groups of women in rural, urban and border communities and across community, social, economic and cultural lines. The Project provided opportunities for grassroots women from diverse communities across the Island to come together to share skills and life experiences, challenge their perceptions of each other and increase their knowledge and mutual understanding through identifying their commonalities while recognising and valuing their different views, traditions and

cultures. The programme culminated in an in-person residential event that brought all participants together.

“It’s important to have women from both sides of the border, from across the Island together and connecting with each other” (*Weaving All Island Connections Project Participant*).

The Programme also identified ways of supporting and working together towards positive and sustainable changes to women's lives across the Island of Ireland. WCI designed a Toolkit for First Steps & Opening Conversations manual for WCI projects as well as others who wish to begin the first steps of engaging with and building connections with women from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It is based on the experience and learning arising from the roll out of this pilot project. (WCI publication report 2023)

WCI Women and Leadership (2023)

Women’s Collective Ireland would like to acknowledge our first core programme funding last year from this Department. WCI are grateful to the Department for the support and recognition of our work with grassroots women in our 17 women's projects in 2023. WCI designed and delivered the Women in Local Leadership (WILL) programme in 17 WCI projects between September-December 2023. This 8-week programme encapsulates the route from participation to politics including empowering activities, understanding public civic society, taking action, and representation roles. Overall, **184** women participated in the programme.

"I feel more confident to be able to put myself forward in a community/political/group. That I have a valid voice and I will be heard." (*WCI WILL participant evaluation, 2023*)

WCI projects are crucial in supporting the participation of women from diverse backgrounds, and in particular women most distant from decision making processes, into political and public life, and supporting women to take on leadership roles. WCI projects run voter participation programmes, organising regular Women and Politics events, training, and workshops.

Women in Local Leadership Programme

In 2023-2024:

- **17** WCI Projects delivered the WILL Programme between September 2023-January 2024
- **184** women participated in the programme

"We as women need to know our power and stand in that power"

"Let's campaign, not complain"

"If you can see it, you can be it!"

Key Areas for Investment

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. The primary purpose of WCI prebudget submission is to highlight to the Government the key areas WCI identify which require investment to advance grassroots women's development including situations where existing WCI services or supports are inadequately funded. We thank the government for the support this year and seek support for our future work. We are seeking your consideration under **two key areas** to ensure sustainability and development of WCI work in the context that marginalised and under resourced communities need change the most and investment in grassroots women will bring about that change.

Women's Collective Ireland is calling for:

1. Investment in Staff & Organisation Development.
2. Investment in a multiannual programme funding package for grassroots women.

Area 1 - Investment in Staff & Organisational Development

WCI Board's focus is to ensure that investment in staffing continues to be the main ask of the 2025 submission, particularly in relation to further developing and growing resources to enable pay parity across the sector (in line with the Wheel's National Guide to Pay and Benefits in Community, Voluntary and Charitable Organisations).

WCI recognise that cost of living crisis is impacting, and will continue to impact, on the communities in which we work 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.

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 grassroots level that enable those who would not otherwise, participate in all aspects of society. 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. 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. Organisational development is key to advancement and success of our vibrant organisation.

WCI ARE SEEKING YOUR SUPPORT BY VALUING WOMEN AND WOMEN'S WORK THROUGH:

Investment in WCI for sustainability. Last year's funding increase had enabled the WCI Board to apply an incremental increase. Nevertheless, the previous stagnation of pay has continued to result in a lack of pay parity both in the community voluntary sector and with public sector pay scales. Investment 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 and would enable WCI Board to apply annual incremental increases for staff and explore bringing staff pay scales in line with public sector pay scales. WCI Board also aim to recognise staff experience and qualifications as many of our workers have bachelor's degrees, and master's, some with 15 years plus experience.

WCI are seeking your support to value women and women's work. WCI made submissions to the IHREC report 2024 Ireland and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and welcome the IHREC Commission Recommendation that:

“Core, multi-annual, ring fenced, and autonomous funding is made available to civil society organisations, which ensures decent work and adequate wages for staff and builds capacity to meet increasing need for advocacy and services.” (*IHREC Fourth Periodic Report, p18, 2024*).

WCI PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT:

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, and this would also significantly help us to recruit and retain employees.

In 2025 WCI professional development focus in the areas of equality, diversity and inclusion. We want to ensure that WCI is an inclusive organisation in the women we work with in the community but also in the women we recruit.

WCI aim to deliver an 'Inclusion, Diversity and Solidarity Community Programme' with WCI staff. This programme would explore a range of targeted initiatives that projects could deliver to support the development and integration of new communities through inter-culturalism and ethnic diversity, community diversity and solidarity within the local grassroots women's projects. WCI would explore, name, recognise, and address barriers for inclusion and embed a shared understanding of valuing diversity and embracing all in our community with staff.

Area 2 - Investment in Women's Grassroots Programme Funding

Embedded in WCI local action plans of work are the prioritisation of the needs and experiences of marginalised women living in Ireland. WCI utilises women's community education as a vital tool in tackling educational disadvantage for women as it provides a model of education, from first steps to third level, which encompasses the needs of women. It starts with the lived experience of the participants and validates their experiences and knowledge. We recognise that adequate supports must be contained within community education programmes to ensure access for the most marginalised of women. We also recognise the need for a greater focus on integrating diverse women based on areas of commonality rather than nationality or legal status. Investment will support greater community integration and counteract the rise of the far right.

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. Supports and services provided by the WCI Projects include targeted outreach strategies, particularly in rural areas where many women are geographically isolated and disadvantaged.

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. Programme funding to support this work is currently sourced and leveraged in by local WCI projects. To mitigate against this informal ad-hoc procedure WCI are seeking a commitment to an equitable,

sustainable, multiannual programme funding package that empowers women's community projects to address the needs of grassroots women and the local communities.

The success of the WCI Women and Leadership Programme has demonstrated the need for needs-based targeted national programmes delivered locally. Based on WCI strategic objectives and identified need, we are seeking investment to support WCI to develop further a suite of needs-based programmes to enable participation and inclusion.

Investment would enable WCI to provide tailored WCI empowering activities for the health and well-being of women.

- a) Design a WCI Women's Health and Wellbeing Toolkit Manual encapsulating our WCI Well-being Statement and step by step programme activities outlines including health resource information for grassroots women.
- b) Deliver the WCI Women's Health and Wellbeing Programme in 17 projects.

Women's Collective Ireland 17 projects prioritise women's health and wellbeing by providing positive health and wellbeing services through community education and development praxis. WCI recognises the importance of intercultural and intersectional approaches via tailored and targeted support. WCI believe that positive health and wellbeing services facilitate participation and engagement supporting individuals in their journey to better health and wellbeing ensuring both personal and community advancement through active citizenship and collective action. WCI perspective is that learning and making connections are fundamental parts to positive mental health and wellbeing. We believe that supporting the health and well-being of women is vital in bringing about change and enriching women's lives, families and communities.

WCI's Ambition to Expand WCI to New Geographic Areas

WCI have an ambition under WCI Strategic plan to identify, research and collect data on opportunities for expansion into new areas not served by a women's community development project. An increase in funding and investment would allow for an expansion of our work to other geographic areas and support more women experiencing disadvantage. 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 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.

Conclusion

WCI have an important role to play in furthering government commitments to women's equality and a new 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. Our WCI work with grassroots women aligns with the current Strategy objectives which aim to advance socio-economic equality for women and girls; to promote their physical and mental well-being; to increase their visibility in society and equal and active citizenship; to promote women's participation in leadership; to combat gender-based violence; and to embed gender equality in decision-making.

WCI would like to see progression on the development of a new National Strategy for Women and Girls with the development of clear actions and indicators and allocation of appropriate resources. This can provide a whole-of-government framework to advancing women's empowerment. We welcome the recommendation from the evaluation of the NSWG for future national equality strategies that:

“Resources should be allocated to support the capacity of seldom heard and marginalised groups to participate fully in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of national equality strategies.” (*CEs evaluation 2023*)

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

WCI 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.

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.