

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**<sup>1</sup> 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.

**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**

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.

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.

**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 reasons 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 FOUR 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.

# Women's Collective Ireland (WCI) Pre-Budget Submission 2024

## 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 51 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 April 2022 including renaming the organisation to 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.

**WCI projects made a total of 150,944 engagements with women in 2022.**

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. Currently women around the country are feeding into and updating our WCI Manifesto naming the issues that affect grassroots women. Women are highlighting their daily difficulties of being in real fear of facing the rise in costs. This leaves women in our communities to live in unstable financial situations.

Once the wording of the up-and-coming Care Referendum has been published, WCI will consult with women through hosting discussions and events to include and highlight grassroots women's input and voice. Previous workshops and submissions in relation to Article 41.2 highlighted that:

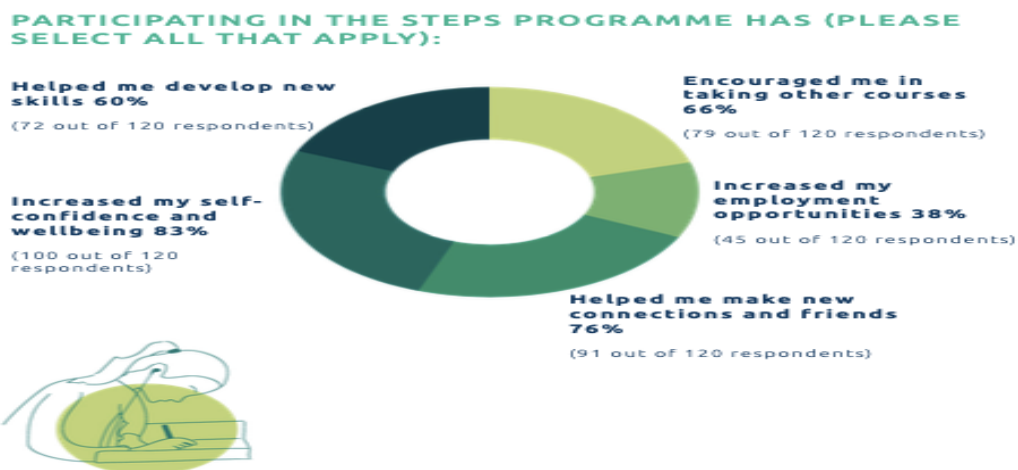
“The overriding view of the WCI members who participated in the workshops was that Art.41.2 a referendum should be held as soon as possibly with the aim of amending Art.41.2 of Bunreacht na hEireann to reflect the complexity and diversity of women's lives, roles and experiences in the world today, as well as the evolving shape of family life and the crucial importance of care work communities and in our society as a whole”. **(WCI 2019)**

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.

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 represents 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.

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 latest data WCI STEPS for Women (2022) 38% increased their employment opportunities and 66% on to further education.



## 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 pre budget 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 **three key areas** to ensure sustainability and development of WCI work in the context that marginalised communities need change the most and investment in grassroots women will bring about that change.

## Area 1 - Investment in Staff & Organisational Development

WCI recognise that cost of living crisis is 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 grass roots 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 welcomed Minister O’Gorman commitment to Gender Pay Gap reporting.

“When it comes to participation in the labour market, women face far greater obstacles than men. Persisting gender stereotypes, the glass ceiling preventing women from senior positions, and the fact that women take on a much larger share of family caring responsibilities and unpaid work in the home, are all contributing factors to a significant pay disparity between women and men in Ireland. (8 March 2022)

**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 for the first time. Nevertheless, the 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 worker have, Degrees, Masters, some with 15 years plus experience.
- 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, this would also significantly help us to recruit and retain employees. In 2024 WCI professional development focus in the areas of equality, diversity and inclusion, digital literacy, and wellbeing. 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.

## **Area 2 - Investment in Women's Grassroots Programme**

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 on the basis of areas of commonality rather than nationality or legal status. Integration should also include other minority communities such as women with disabilities, Traveller women, lone parents, and women of the LGBTQIA+ community.

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 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. Seeking investment to support WCI to develop a suite of needs-based programmes including the following two new initiatives:

WCI projects are crucial in supporting the participation of women from different backgrounds, and in particular women most distant from decision making processes, into political and public life. WCI would like to emphasize that grassroots women are very active and visible at local level and contribute to civil society, but they are not getting beyond representation on the local school boards and community group volunteering roles. However, there appears to be no next steps outside of local level activism. An allocation for programme funding for this year enabled WCI to develop a Women's Leadership Programme (8 weeks) which will be delivered from September 2023 through the 17 WCI Projects to grassroots women across the country from participation to politics; including empowering activities, to understanding public civic society and taking action and representation roles.

- (a) WCI are seeking programme funding to further develop our work promoting women's leadership and representation through:
- Expansion of Women's Leadership and Progression Programme supporting women to take on leadership roles, focusing on their political participation. Key elements will include:
    - o Voter participation programmes
    - o Organising regular Women and Politics events, training, and workshops
    - o Developing a toolkit for practical steps to support marginalised women to participate and represent their communities in local politics.
- (b) A goal for WCI would be to deliver an 'Inclusion, Diversity and Solidarity Community Programme'. This programme would provide a range of targeted initiatives 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. This would explore, name, recognise, and address barriers for inclusion and embed a shared understanding of valuing diversity and embracing all in our community.

### **Area 3 - Expansion of WCI to New Geographic Area**

WCI Strategic plan area of action is to identify, research and collect data on opportunities for expansion into new areas. 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.

WCI have identified Galway as one geographic area in which a WCI Women's project could provide valuable supports to disadvantaged women. Our initial exploration with community groups in the area indicate that there is a huge gap in services and supports for women in the area. Funding to develop a WCI Women's Project would allow WCI to conduct an extensive needs analysis with the grassroots women in Galway, community groups and local authority to provide a WCI bespoke service for grassroots women, including outreach, in the area. We would open a new WCI Galway Women's Project providing vital service and supports for grassroots women experiencing disadvantage.



## Conclusion

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 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 who engage with women who experience disadvantage 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 fora”, 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)*

We look forward to working with the Minister and 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.