

Women's
Collective
Ireland

**NATIONAL SURVEY
OF THE PEIL STEPS FOR WOMEN
PROGRAMME (2017-2022)**



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"IT MADE MY FAMILY SEE I WAS NOT JUST A WIFE AND MOTHER, THAT I HAD OTHER QUALITIES THAT WERE HIDDEN AWAY."

"I HAVE CHANGED AS A WOMAN FROM THIS PROGRAMME. IT HELPED ME TO TRY NEW COURSES AND GET A JOB."

"I LEARNED ABOUT STEPS THROUGH RWCDP. AT FIRST I WAS SCARED TO GO BUT ONCE I GOT IN I WAS SO SURPRISED HOW EASY GOING IT WAS. AND HOW I LEARNED A LOT."

"THE STEPS PROGRAMME MADE ME REALISE THE SUPPORT THAT IS OUT THERE. IT MADE ME SEE THERE IS MORE TO MYSELF WHICH I HAD FORGOTTEN ABOUT. IT ALSO MADE ME REALISE THAT THERE ARE OTHER WOMEN OUT THERE THAT CARE."

"DURING MY TIME, I WAS HOMELESS AND BATTLING DEPRESSION AT A VERY LOW POINT IN MY LIFE, THIS PROGRAM GAVE ME ENCOURAGEMENT AND SUPPORT AND A DISTRACTION."

"BEING PART OF THE STEPS PROGRAM WAS ONE OF THE BEST THINGS TO HAPPEN TO ME. IT GAVE ME THE PUSH TO GO FARTHER AND TAKE TWO MORE COURSES THAT REALLY ENHANCED MY CHANCES OF FINDING WORK."

"MADE ME REALISE IT IS NEVER TOO LATE TO BE EDUCATED. STEPS IS TRUE TO ITS NAME - A STEPPING STONE INTO A WORLD OF ART, TO A PLACE I KNEW I BELONGED. THERE WAS NO ADVICE WHEN I LEFT SCHOOL, I HAD NO ONE TO TALK TO ABOUT WHAT I WANTED TO DO AS MY DAD DIED WHEN I WAS 13 AND I HAD TO GO TO WORK. STEPS WAS MIRACLE. I NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD HAVE IN MY LIFE SO THANK YOU TO ALL."

"I HAVE HAD AN INCREDIBLE JOURNEY AFTER DOING THE STEP PROGRAMME."



INTRODUCTION - JOANNE COFFEY

Currently a third-year student at Maynooth University completing a BA in Social Science. Joanne particularly enjoys studying subjects related to community education, development, equality and policy strategy and assessment. When the opportunity arose within WCI for a piece of work to be completed on developing a survey to capture the experiences of the grassroots women that had taken part in the STEPS for women programme, Joanne willingly volunteered to take on this task. Her own personal experience as a past participant on the PEIL STEPS for women programme meant she had a greater understanding of the programme and she recognised that this was an ideal work experience project to showcase her new learning, from her BA in Social Science programme.

The journey of self-development and growth began when I started the STEPS for women programme in 2017 with Women's Collective Ireland - Lucan. This programme opened doors, creating new experiences and long-lasting friendships. Some participants joined me in completing the level 7 certificate in women's studies. This was the incentive for me to continue the road of education and undertake a degree in social sciences. I was interested in learning more about social issues and combining anthropology and social policy which allowed me to explore issues through an anthropological lens focusing on community and individual experience.

I undertook the STEPS survey during my eight-week placement with Women's Collective Ireland. This survey was ideal as it aimed to capture women's lived experiences from the programme, reinforcing the value of supporting women through community education praxis. This allowed me to put my newly developed skills into practice by evaluating a programme in which I had first-hand experience of its positive impact and which was the catalyst for my development, making it a personal and exciting project.

I am looking forward to completing my degree and trying to develop my skills as a facilitator in the future. I thank WCI - Lucan and Ronanstown for their support, guidance and encouragement on this journey. I would like to thank Women's Collective Ireland for giving me the opportunity to work with them on this survey. I also thank all of the women who completed the survey, for sharing their individual stories and experiences, which are so valuable and interesting to read. To conclude, as discussed by bell hooks, learning is rooted in a process of empowerment, change, respect, social justice and collective consciousness - everything that this programme encapsulates.

WORDS USED TO DESCRIBE THE STEPS
FOR WOMEN PROGRAMME







ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE IRELAND (WCI) WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FUNDERS THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND (ESF) AS PART OF THE PROGRAMME FOR EMPLOYABILITY, INCLUSION AND LEARNING (PEIL) SUPPORTED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN, EQUALITY, DISABILITY, INTEGRATION AND YOUTH. THANK YOU TO THE STAFF OF WCI FOR THEIR HARD WORK ON THE STEPS (SKILLS, TRAINING, EQUALITY, PARTICIPATION AND SUPPORTS) FOR WOMEN PROGRAMME. WE WOULD ALSO LIKE TO OFFER OUR SINCERE THANKS TO THE WOMEN WHO KINDLY GAVE THEIR INPUT AND TIME TO COMPLETE OUR SURVEY.



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

RESEARCH PURPOSE

The aim of this survey is to evaluate the impact of the PEIL¹ WCI STEPS for women programme by capturing women's experiences and their journeys.

The importance of conducting such a survey lies in the self-reported perception of the changes experienced through participation in the STEPS programme.

CONTEXT

The United Nations define community education as a process where the conditions of social and economic progress are created through participation within the community and the reliance on community initiatives. These partnerships are made possible through supportive, locally situated organisations that respond to the needs of their communities. This distinctive approach supports individuals and collectively empowers communities to improve the quality of their lives, and actively engage in their communities and society.

Women's Collective Ireland (WCI), formerly NCCWN, works directly with women nationally and locally through its 17 community development projects. It supports women through its community education and feminist approaches, aiming to address poverty, gender inequalities and social exclusion.

The STEPS for women programme, **funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) as part of the Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) 2014-2022 through the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth**, is integral to addressing these social challenges. It was first introduced in 2017 and successfully supported 296 women through the STEPS for women programme in seven WCI Projects between 2017-2020.

The programme funding was extended and the programme expanded to 10 WCI projects to engage with women, building relationships that shape and enhance their lives and those around them from 2020-2022. It focused on supporting women to find employment, return to education or identify new skills they wished to learn, and then supported them in the process.

The delivery of the programme using an online platform was challenging during the pandemic. However, these obstacles were overcome, and the programme continued to successfully benefit many women during this difficult period. This is a credit to each WCI Project and the adaptable and innovative facilitators and Project Coordinators.

**IN TOTAL, STEPS FOR WOMEN
PROGRAMME ENGAGED OVER 500
WOMEN BETWEEN 2017 AND 2022**

¹ The Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning, PEIL for short, is the only ESF programme in Ireland for the 2014 to 2020 period.

ABOUT THE PEIL STEPS FOR WOMEN PROGRAMME

The Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) has been funded by ESF through the EU funds division in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

This ESF Funding allowed WCI Projects to **engage with women** in our communities in order **to reduce isolation, increase confidence, build relationships and foster a sense of personal power in women** to give space to consider their plans for future employment or education. WCI (formerly NCCWN) “STEPS for Women” programme consists of a method of critical reflection, inquiry and action.

Our goal is to support women on their journey of understanding and unlocking their own strengths with encouragement to follow up their interests in particular fields, and to prepare for future careers.

The programme was run over 14 weeks one day a week covering the themes of the word ‘STEPS’ which spells out:

S - Skills

T - Training

E - Equality

P - Participation

S - Supports

Each week we covered aspects of the themes and sometimes a combination of a few of them.

The WCI STEPS for women programme encapsulated:

- ⊙ Personal development and confidence building to support the women in becoming aware of their wants, needs and potential.
- ⊙ Women’s wellbeing is a big focus of the programme including “Time for Me”.
- ⊙ IT skills and communications.
- ⊙ Equality training - opening up an understanding and discussion of women’s position in society and discussing topics of women and leadership.
- ⊙ Career planning and goal setting including CV building, interview skills and job seeking skills.
- ⊙ Guest speakers invited to some programmes to share their skills, linking what is available in the community.
- ⊙ Progression: Direction, Guidance and Planning Pathways.
- ⊙ Supports such as childcare, computer access and referrals were available.
- ⊙ Mentoring was an ongoing aspect throughout the programme.
- ⊙ Other opportunities previously offered include IWD events, outings, theatre trips and other workshops on offer at a given local Project.

METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out using a quantitative survey. It has a mixture of open and closed questions to capture some personal experiences as well as quantitate data. It was distributed to the 10 WCI women's community development Projects that delivered the STEPS programme. The Project Coordinators were instrumental in the dissemination of this survey between 3rd - 29th March 2022 via WhatsApp and/or email with the survey link attached. Their cooperation is most appreciated.

The questionnaire was divided into four sections: section one provides demographic insight, section two looks at education, section three looks at employment and section four looks at self-development and civic engagement. Questions 15 and 16 were left open-ended for the participants to reflect on their journey and share their story. These themes will be referred to during the analysis. **The survey was taken by 125 STEPS participants.**

It should also be noted that the STEPS programme was delivered between 2017–2022, with the last round of the programme still running when this survey was sent out. This will be reflected in the comments of some respondents, who report still being part of the programme, as well as in the further education and employment data.

RESULTS

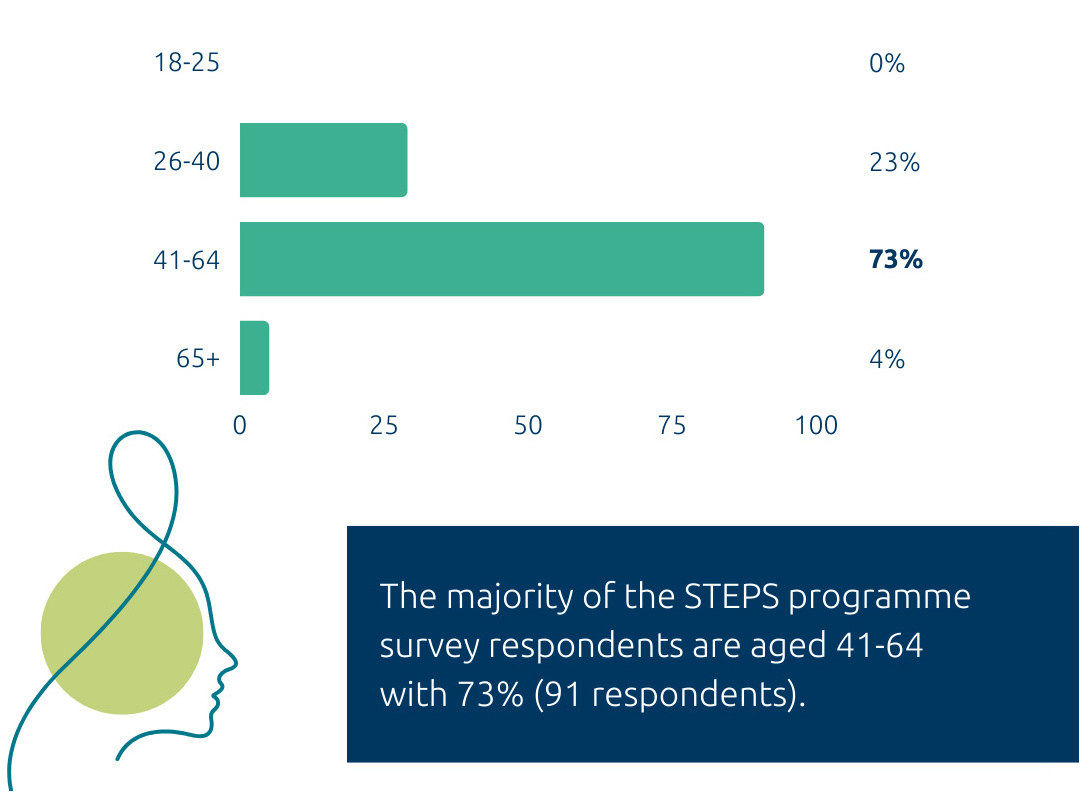
The survey captured 125 experiences of women who took part in the STEPS programme from the period 2017-2022. It is a representational sample of women's experiences, and captured responses from across all the Projects. Due to the limited time frame of the survey, it was not completed by as many participants as anticipated. However, it remains valuable as it provides key insight and results.

66% of the participants report that participating in the STEPS programme has encouraged them in taking other courses, with 48% progressing to other community programmes, 31% in further education and 13% in third-level education. 43% of participants reported getting involved in other activities, such as employment, computer courses, starting their own business and other opportunities. Of the 38% of respondents who reported having increased employment opportunities 33% are currently in part-time (42%) or full-time (34%) employment.

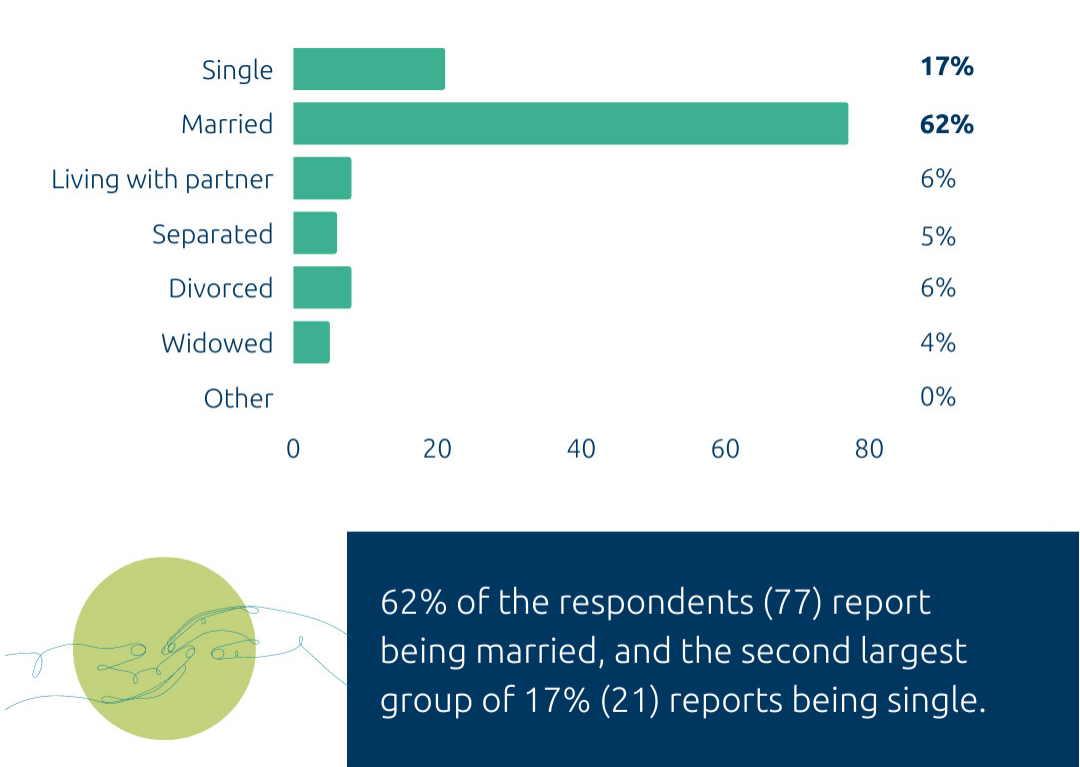


PARTICIPANTS' PROFILE

AGE



STATUS





83% of the respondents reported increased self-esteem after the programme, 76% reported that the programme helped them make new connections and friends and 60% reported developing new skills during the programme.

Respondents report they gained confidence to seek further education and employment through this programme. In the words of one woman, **“Yes it is helping me to apply for jobs. I definitely would not have done this if I had not taken part in STEPS”**.

In answer to the question “How has your participation in the STEPS programme benefited you?”, women reported understanding the needs of their communities better, knowing where to find further educational and employment opportunities, learned about communication styles and how to put their needs first. As one participant said, **“During my time, I was homeless and battling depression at a very low point in my life, this program gave me encouragement and support and a distraction”**.

The impact of the growth experienced by women through participation in the STEPS programme has also had an effect on their families and communities. Women reported getting out more and showing an interest in what is happening in their communities, feeling less alone, more relaxed and happier at home.

PARTICIPATING IN THE STEPS PROGRAMME HAS (PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY):

Helped me develop new skills 60%

(72 out of 120 respondents)

Increased my self-confidence and wellbeing 83%

(100 out of 120 respondents)

Encouraged me in taking other courses 66%

(79 out of 120 respondents)

Increased my employment opportunities 38%

(45 out of 120 respondents)

Helped me make new connections and friends 76%

(91 out of 120 respondents)



100 OUT OF 120* RESPONDENTS REPORT INCREASED SELF- CONFIDENCE AND WELLBEING AFTER TAKING PART IN STEPS.

* 5 SKIPPED THE QUESTION



49% reported engaging in school boards, committees, sports clubs or other voluntary activities. 48% reported encouraging and supporting others in adult education classes/programmes, to seek further community development programmes. The remaining 26% reported being involved in other ways, such as the local church, walking groups and other activities.

Reflective quotes shared:

"It made my family see I was not just a wife and mother, that I had other qualities that were hidden away."

"I'm earning and [this] makes life easier, and paid for kids to get to college."

ANALYSIS

Community education and community development philosophy support and empower people and communities by acknowledging their individual and collective experiences by valuing and promoting all types of learning (Aontas, 2022 & hooks, 2003). It promotes active citizenship, ensuring engagement and participation using knowledge as the catalyst to create and support change. WCI follows these principles in its actions aiming to address inequalities, focusing on gender, poverty and social exclusion.

The STEPS programme is a tailored programme for women which focuses on self-development and learning. It incorporates the relevant skills required for accessing employment or for those considering further learning. Most importantly, it provides the opportunity for supporting networks to be established and friendships to develop, essential for community engagement and participation to occur.

- **98% of women who took part in the survey said this programme helped them in their learning journey.**

- **83% identified that it helped build their confidence, increasing their self-esteem. This empowered them to explore and learn new skills, participate in future learning, find employment and become active citizens.**



THEMES

EDUCATION

Community education is adult learning which takes place in local community settings across Ireland. It is learner-centred and responds to the needs of the local community. Education has been shown to empower and assist individuals and communities, and plays a significant role in addressing poverty and inequalities (Aontas, 2020). The STEPS programme provides the foundations for future learning to occur. It empowers women to continue the learning trajectory by providing information, skills and support. WCI uses Feminist Community Education to make connections with grassroots women – from first steps to third level programmes.

This survey indicated that the STEPS programme encouraged 98% of women to seek further learning. 48% continued with community programmes and workshops, indicating their importance in the community. These programmes are accessible, inclusive and provide a supportive and enjoyable space for women to learn and develop at their own pace. 44% of the participants continued to further education.

30% continued with accredited QQI courses such as SNA, childcare and computer skills. 13% went on to third level to complete the Women and Gender Studies level 7 Certificate which is delivered as an outreach programme by University College Dublin. One participant continued with a postgraduate Masters. This indicates the impact the STEPS programme has on encouraging and supporting women to continue their lifelong journey of learning.

Reflective quotes shared:

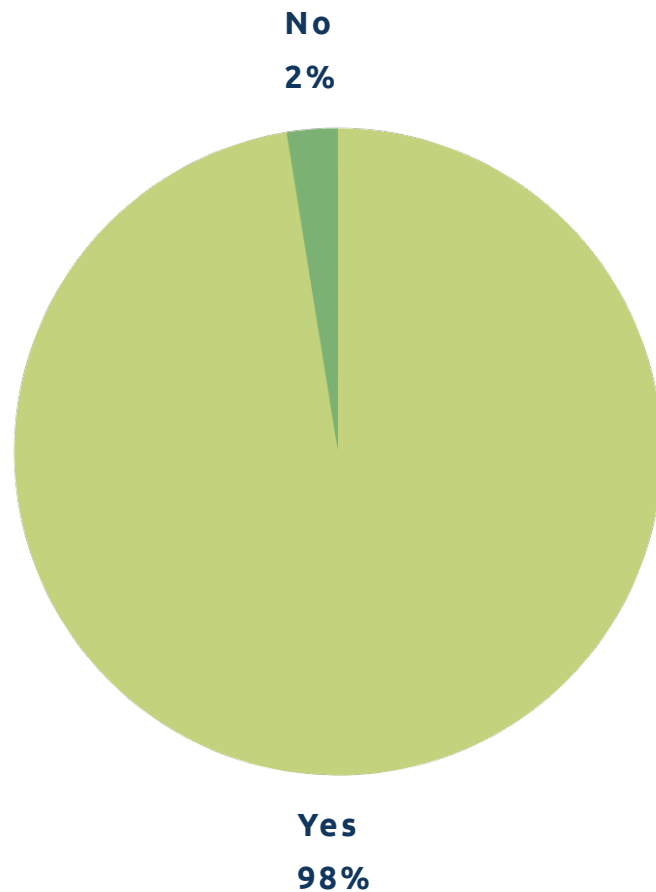
"I went on to do another course getting QQI level 6 and 7 giving me the confidence to do whatever I put my mind to. I had only completed school to junior cert so to go on in my 50s to do a level 7 is a great achievement for me. I am now working part-time doing something I enjoy."

"It provided childcare support and personal development tutoring to allow me to change my career path. It introduced me to Women's Collective Ireland - Ronanstown and was the start of my learning journey in social justice."

"Helped me believe in myself to go out and do further courses."



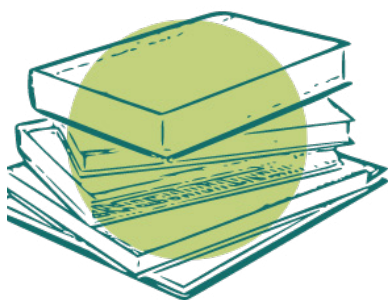
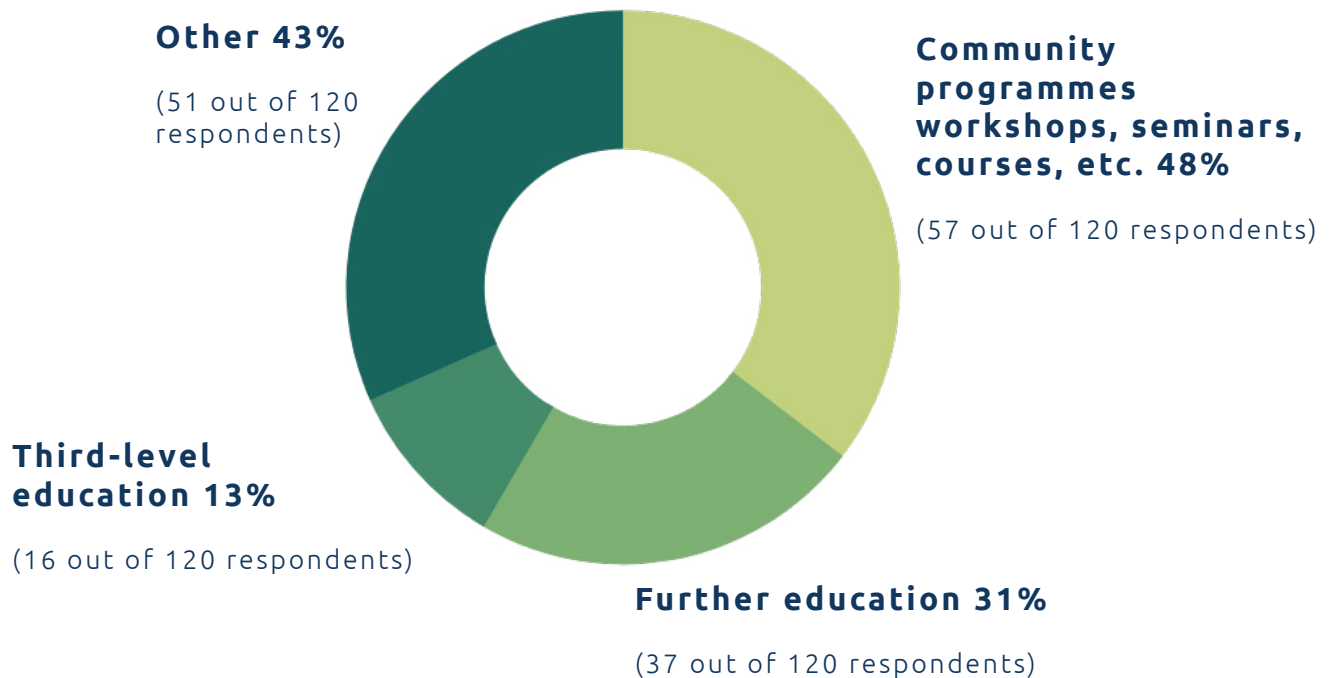
DID THE STEPS PROGRAMME HELP YOU ON YOUR LEARNING JOURNEY?



“[STEPS FOR WOMEN] GAVE ME MORE CONFIDENCE TO BELIEVE IN MYSELF THAT IT WASN'T TOO LATE TO EDUCATE MYSELF.”

“ [I] HAD THE CONFIDENCE TO DO COURSES WHICH LED TO EMPLOYMENT.”

AFTER FINISHING THE STEPS PROGRAMME, DID YOU
PROGRESS TO ANY OF THE FOLLOWING (PLEASE SELECT
ALL THAT APPLY):



**MANY OF THE 51 OUT OF 120*
RESPONDENTS WHO SAID THAT THEY
WERE INVOLVED IN OTHER ACTIVITIES
WERE STILL DOING THE PROGRAMME AT
THE TIME OF THE SURVEY.**

*** 5 SKIPPED THE QUESTION**



EMPLOYMENT

The STEPS programme aims to support women to enter or return to the workforce by building self-esteem, and by providing information and the tools required to identify job opportunities or upskilling or training.

21% of the respondents reported still doing the STEPS programme at the time of the survey distribution. 33% of women reported that they are now in employment after the STEPS programme. Many reported that the programme was a step to helping them return to employment. One participant said, **"I'm a doctor but stayed home for a long to take care of my kids. STEPS helped get back a lot of my confidence and start serious steps to get back to work hopefully by the end of the year"**. Another participant said, **"I am a yoga teacher so I am self employed. This programme has helped me in my self esteem and self confidence in getting myself out there and trying new avenues"**. Others reported being in further education to later get into fulfilling employment.

One survey respondent reported starting her own business after the programme. Others reported that the childcare provided as part of the programme helped focus on their personal development and on their path to employment. One respondent reported being registered with an employment agency and waiting on her Garda vetting to be completed.

Another participant, a migrant, took part in the STEPS programme in 2021 and reports pursuing a certification course and getting involved with a Job Club to prepare her CV for employment, feeling positive about her employment prospects.

Reflective quotes shared:

"It gave me back my confidence to go back out into the community and back to work."

"I have changed as a woman from this programme. It helped me to try new courses and get a job."

ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Community development works on the principles of equality, respect, capacity building and participation and collective decision making addressing social issues in communities (Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: A Five-Year Strategy to Support the Community and Voluntary Sector in Ireland 2019-2024). Active citizenship is about “engagement, participation in society and valuing contributions made by individuals, whether they are employed or outside the traditional workforce” (Taskforce, 2007). The STEPS programme values these principles, recognising the importance of empowering women and supporting them in engaging with issues that may affect them and their communities initiating positive action and change.

Both those who have entered employment or further education, report being engaged with their communities. 49% are involved with school boards, committees, sports clubs or other voluntary activities in their community, 48% are engaged in encouraging and supporting others in adult education classes/programmes to seek further community development programmes, 26% report being involved in other community activities - church groups, walking groups, community safety forum, youth leadership in their estates, volunteering at the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre and many more.

While the survey did not request the participants’ nationality or immigration status, one respondent reported, **“I gained confidence in being able to communicate in a foreign country. I realised I was being anxious for no reason on the very first day of the program. The women were friendly, supportive and welcoming. Also realised how similar the life of women is everywhere in the world, all pretty much trying to live up to the same kind of expectations”**.

Five of the 125 respondents (4%) reported to be in the 65+ age category. All five respondents reported feeling more confident and fulfilled, and encouraged and supported others in adult education classes/programmes to seek further community development programmes. One participant in this age group reported going on to third level education, which brought her to be more confident, engage with her community and **“filled a void in my life after my retirement”**.

An important factor, reported by many of the participants, was the participants’ new sense of the value a woman can contribute to their family, community, employers and society.

Reflective quotes shared:

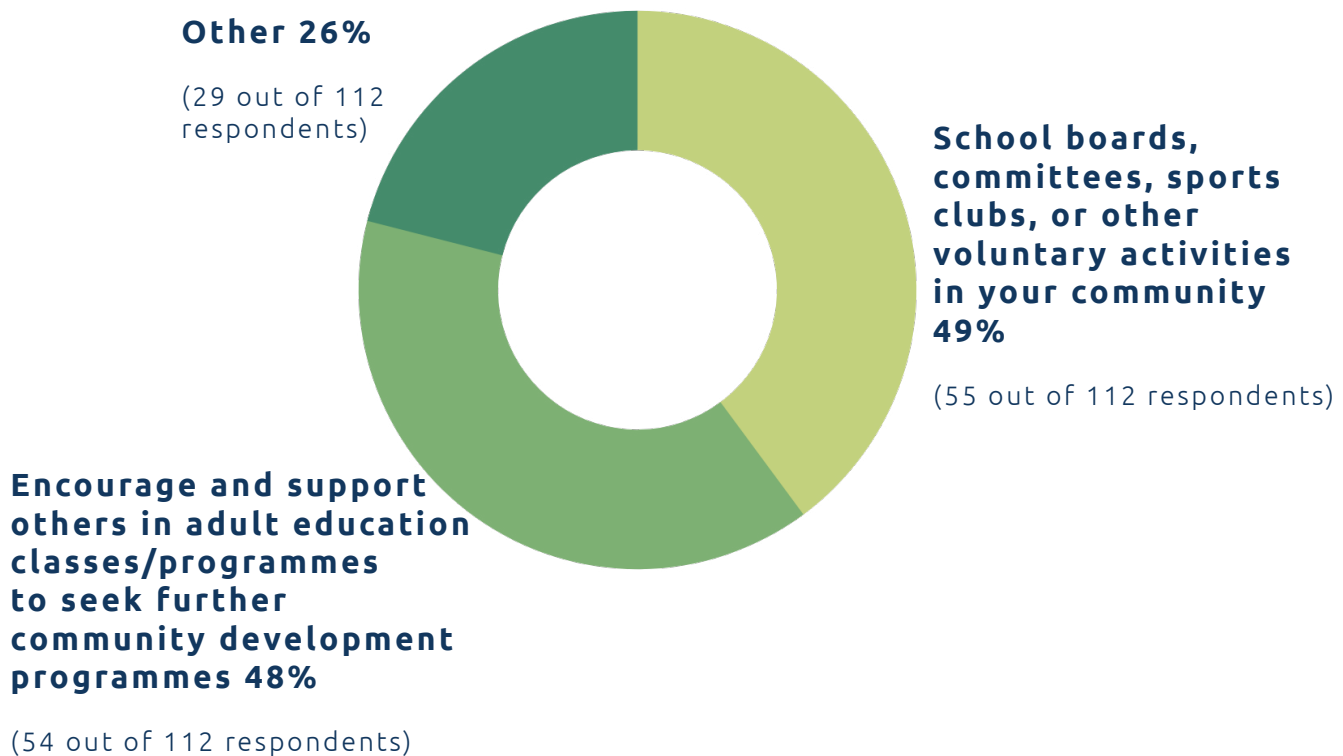
“Helped me to get my family to do courses too.”

“Set up a women’s group in our local community with some other women on the course.”

“One of the biggest outcomes for me was to realise that there are organisations, institutions, groups that truly care for wellbeing and connection between local people. That we all matter and can change, progress, develop. Connecting and sharing thoughts and experiences, making bonds and friendships, knowing that there are places to turn to if in need of any type of support.”

“I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to do this program and I really hope that the programme will continue and grow from strength to strength in the future resulting in thousands of happier, healthier, stronger women participating in and contributing to society as I intend to do in the near future.”

HAVE YOU TAKEN AN ACTIVE PART IN COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES, SUCH AS (PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY):



“[I] ENCOURAGE AND SUPPORT OTHERS IN ADULT EDUCATION CLASSES/ PROGRAMMES TO SEEK FURTHER COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES.”

CONCLUSION

This survey is a national representation of 125 participants that took part in the STEPS programme. It identified the strengths and influences of the program, and its ability to impact and improve women's lives - a much needed examination of the services provided to women. **It demonstrates the self-reported impact of the programme and the benefits of providing and delivering support in a community setting, and how these supports empower individuals leading to added benefits - a growing sense of wellbeing in women's communities.**

The participants were aged 26-64 and come from all marital backgrounds - single, married, divorced, widowed - and across the country, with a large majority reporting on improved confidence, better communication skills at home, skills to seek further education and employment, but also skills to engage in their communities and improve relations at home through self-reflection, different communication styles and a better sense of personal needs.

It is also important to note that many of the participants highlighted the quality of the delivery of the programme, and named and expressed gratitude to the tutors delivering the STEPS programme. Many went on to say that they recommend making the programme more widely available due to its accessibility and life-altering quality.

While concrete examples of changes and improvements in the community can only be measured in the long-term, which requires further study, the data above informs us on the successes of the STEPS programme. In the words of one respondent, “[**STEPS for women**] **Made me aware of my strengths rather than focusing on what I can't do**”.



Journeys happen for a reason.

Life makes you know.

All the seeds you have planted,
all you have to do is watch them grow.

Like a gardener in a garden sometimes
it's all overgrown.

Once you cut back and take the old out
you have much more room to
grow.

As we meet new people something
inside of us knows that without these
special people we meet - it would be
impossible to grow.

So I would like to thank all of you special
seeds of women for helping me to grow
- because without you special women;
the road would have been unknown.

- MICHELLE FOLEY



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Change is a Coming

By Fiona Dowd

A cautious hand reaches out to open the door; she's never really noticed her hands much before but now she does; they look vulnerable, aged by time and life yet strength resides there and she knows it, it pushes beneath the skin. The handle feels cool to touch; what is on the other side is warmth. She is struck by it, they all are, the warmth of a genuine welcome, kind eyes, the careful touch of an arm and a warm drink placed in every pair of hands. For here the minders are taken care of.

Like fingertips no two are the same, yet all are connected, they are all women, all mothers, all minders, all deeper than wells yet like wells there power has been pushed deeper still, they've buried it there. This is a place where with lightness of heart a coin can be hopefully tossed and a wish made.

They've never known such generosity of time, of spirit, of knowledge, perhaps not since they were children at least. And now once again they are encouraged, their eyes have been opened to their own potential. 'Name it, Own it,' Share it', Release it', 'Jinny joe let it go'; all that has held them back. From tears and heartache to heart-mend and laughter, the healing comfort of sharing stories in this safe space, to be seen, understood and empowered. They leave this place with hope and promise, may those who follow in their footsteps know the same journey, the same kindness.

