



# **Towards a new National Women's Strategy 2017- 2020**

**January 2017**

**Ibec's main business sectors are:**

**Alcohol Beverage Federation of Ireland**

**Financial Services Ireland**

**Food and Drink Industry Ireland**

**ICT Ireland**

**Telecommunications and Internet Federation**

**Irish Medtech Association**

**BioPharmaChem Ireland**

**Retail Ireland**

**Small Firms Association**

## **Introduction**

Ibec welcomes the opportunity to comment on the consultation for the National Women's Strategy 2017-2020. Ireland has seen significant progress socially and economically over the last number of decades. However, as with many other countries, there is more work to be done if we are to achieve a diverse and inclusive Ireland where every citizen can achieve their full potential and enjoy a safe and fulfilling life, irrespective of their gender.

### **A. What do you think are the issues for women and girls in Ireland that are most important to address over the next four years?**

Many of the challenges facing women and girls in Ireland today are interlinked and have far reaching consequences at different levels of the socio-economic landscape. There is segregation between women and men both vertically and horizontally in the workplace where certain genders are over-represented in certain roles or occupations. However the roots of this gendered segregation lie in the education system and our culture which socialises children into an expectation of certain roles as women's work or men's work, beliefs which can be reinforced consciously or unconsciously by teachers, parents, employers and society. While female labour force participation in Ireland has more than doubled since the early 1980's, gender gaps remain substantial and labour markets and access to economic opportunities across the world remain divided along gender lines. While the imbalance is at its greatest at the top, the problem is widespread with different sectors having leaks and blockages in different parts of the pipeline for varied reasons. The reasons for the gender gap are in part rooted in cultural and social norms but also reflect social and economic challenges and incentives. In addition to issues of equality, this issue has implications for economic growth and competitiveness not least because women represent more than 60% of third level graduates but also when considered in tandem with global challenges of ageing populations and skills shortages. What is needed is a multi-faceted approach to address the challenges across the system and build upon the excellent work that has been done over the last number of decades to ensure equality, social and economic success for all.

- **Stereotypes and attitudes**

A pervasive issue facing women and girls is that of segregation which has its roots in stereotypes and attitudes towards men and women, boys and girls. The interest in segregation arises mainly from the role it plays in gender inequality through its effects in shaping opportunities for women and men<sup>1</sup>. There is a wealth of research which attributes segregation with limiting employment choices, access to higher level jobs and facilitating the undervaluation of female-dominated occupations. However, occupational segregation in the labour market is wholly connected to segregation in education and the way in which children are introduced to learning and opportunities and into the roles men and women often assume around caring responsibilities. Stereotypes about women and men are in place from early childhood and are reinforced consciously or unconsciously throughout school, society and working lives. This can have an impact on the opportunities and challenges facing boys and girls within the education system which directs certain subject choices in single sex schools and encourages the uptake of subject choice, field of study and later career choices.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/documents/150119\\_segregation\\_report\\_web\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/documents/150119_segregation_report_web_en.pdf)

Women dominate certain occupations like education, health and caring professions, although not in as representative numbers at the top, while men dominate technology and engineering professions. Research finds gender stereotyping and social conditioning to be somewhat to blame for this division and as such, the challenge is in getting women to consider careers in particular disciplines or sectors.

Single sex schools often fail to offer “gendered” subjects such as physics or mechanical drawing in girl’s schools or home economics in boy’s schools while career guidance seems to be often lacking in bridging the knowledge gap for career choices and new perspectives for boys and girls. For example, women are underrepresented in apprenticeships in certain industries like engineering or transport and often this career option has not been discussed or the subjects needed for certain apprenticeships are not offered in the school. Where subjects are not available then career decisions may be narrowed at an early stage for students. According to the OECD, the low proportion of women in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) fields of study and employment makes a significant impact because graduates of these fields are in high demand and as a result the related jobs tend to be highly paid. This occupational segregation thus lends itself to a gender pay gap.

There is a need to challenge occupational stereotypes by encouraging more women into male dominated industries and investing in careers advice that provides real information and options to students. This means building an awareness of gender stereotyping into teacher training curricula, overcoming the challenges of subject availability and opening up girls’ horizons to broader careers for example as entrepreneurs, in STEM or other technical fields. This requires career guidance, exposure to role models from industry and the availability of work placements in organisations in gender atypical areas.

An example of how this issue is being tackled is in the work carried out by a number of employers and employer bodies to address the stereotypes around girls and STEM careers. Ibec, ICT Ireland, Smart Futures (Science Foundation Ireland), Connecting Women in Technology and the 30% Club along with Silicon Republic’s Inspirefest and Coderdojo have all been working with schools, students, parents, teachers and careers guidance counsellors to address the beliefs held about women and careers in STEM. Various events and workshops have been held to raise awareness and challenge the misinformation around this issue. These events have been supported by employers who recognise the importance of addressing the imbalance of representation of women. However there is a need to roll such local programmes out nationally. Similarly Accenture recently piloted a programme for a small group of trainee teachers to engage in paid internships during the summer to raise the awareness of careers in technology among this cohort of key influencers. This is likely to be rolled out further by other technology organisations in the coming year.

Once in employment gender stereotypes in workplace practices can also consciously or unconsciously hinder the progression of women in certain careers. For example past research has mentioned that women can have a confidence issue that prevents them from progressing their career and putting themselves forward for opportunities. However, it appears that women can be confident in their own abilities to achieve but are less convinced about whether the workplace will nurture their talents and enable them to progress. Stereotypes and attitudes which feed corporate norms about how we do things, for example in the way organisations identify talent and capability or offer developmental moves such as secondments, can be causing this problem. Organisations that

are successfully influencing a change in gender balance have started by examining their policies and practices with a gender lens.

- **Gender balance in decision-making**

While in the past organisations tried to address gender balance from an ethical standpoint, by helping women 'fit in', this underestimated the potential that gender balance offers and treated women like "victims". Today that has changed and the business case for gender balance has been well established with research proving strong links between it and financial performance, innovation, competitiveness, corporate governance and family wellbeing. Many organisations and leaders have realised that gender balance is not a "women's issue" but rather a strategic business issue.

Organisations are engaging in various initiatives to change the culture realising that if they overcome the challenges to gender balance they will reap business benefits and create a competitive advantage for the future. A lot of work is being carried out in organisations with this aim in mind and good practice is being shared. In particular human resource management processes that have an impact on the progression of women's careers i.e. recruitment, performance management and succession planning, are being reviewed to ensure unintended consequences are removed.

Beginning with the recruitment and selection processes, many employers have ensured all involved have attended unconscious bias training while others have removed gender identities from the application screening process. Job descriptions are gender proofed to confirm they contain only essential requirements and that the language is gender neutral. Research tells us that women will only apply for a role that they have 100 percent of the requirements compared to circa 60 percent for men. This means we need to encourage more female applicants but also we need to ensure the language in the job descriptions is gender neutral and the requirements are actually necessary - if it says you need 7 years experience why is that and in reality will you accept candidates with only 5 years? Such subtle changes impact the gender balance of applicants in the first place. Given that often employers attract equal numbers of male and female graduates at entry level yet leak talent at every other level of the pipeline, this is an essential starting point to address imbalance. Further initiatives have included ensuring gender balance on selection panels, mentors and sponsors for high potential women, appropriate developmental feedback, talent development programmes, calibration of performance management outcomes and targets for managers to increase gender balance in teams. Ibec and the 30% Club launched a voluntary code in June 2016 for executive search firms and recruitment organisations who are involved in senior level recruitment. The 25 signatories are committed to supporting and promoting gender balance and working with employers to select the best candidate for the role from 100 percent of the talent pool.

By only focusing on women in the past, organisations have arguably side-lined and alienated a powerful group of stakeholders in most organisations – men. Men worldwide tend to dominate positions of leadership and influence in the workplace and as such are crucial to the gender-balance solution. It is essential that men are engaged in the work of diversity and inclusion and the objectives outlined within the new strategy. It needs to be clear that this is not a situation where we are trying to "fix women" and in fact the status quo often does not fully benefit men's career or work-life balance objectives either. As such men have to be involved in this process, sometimes as drivers for meaningful change or champions, other times as sponsors for high performance females -

encouraging, representing and supporting advancement opportunities and ultimately helping shift the culture to one that is encouraging of all. A number of organisations have rolled out programmes such as Catalyst's Men Advocating Real Change (MARC) programme with great success in changing mindsets around gender balance and the responsibility that everyone has for real change to occur within organisational culture and practice. This type of initiative could encourage real debate and a dynamic response to the challenges discussed if rolled out more broadly.

- **Caring responsibilities**

Of major European countries, Ireland has one of the lowest female employment rates suggesting that there is a structural issue at play. What is interesting is that the employment rates in Ireland are roughly equal until there is a permanent drop off in the female rate between the ages of 29-39, the typical child bearing years. Maternal employment rates are lower than for women as a whole and many mothers would like to work or work more but are constrained by family responsibilities.

The role of women and men in care work, whether child or elder care, and the division of unpaid work in the home has a significant impact on work and working arrangements. Women's ability to participate in the labour market is constrained by the fact that they spend more time on unpaid work, four times as much on care work (time spent to care for a child or another adult) and twice as much on household work, than men, regardless of the employment status of partners<sup>2</sup> making them less available for participation. The likelihood of female participation was found to be reduced by 17-20 percent for those with a pre-school child, while having a child aged 5 to 12 years reduces the probability by 7-9 percent<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand fathers with children under 15 are more likely to be active in the labour market than other men<sup>4</sup>. This Europe wide issue is one which Ibec have covered in detail in the policy paper on the Labour Market Participation of Women.<sup>5</sup>

The population structure in Ireland is changing with people living longer and women having children when they are older. These changes have led to a "sandwich generation" where people will be playing a caring role for both dependent children and elderly parents while also in the workforce. Cultural stereotypes often influence how women rather than men are expected to reduce their working hours or exit the labour market to carry out child or elder care. This can affect career choice, and means that far more women than men work flexibly or on a part-time basis and take more frequent career breaks, which can have a negative impact on their careers, remuneration and pension.

We need greater balance between the number of men involved in child and elder care, making use of the generous parental leave and paternity leave that is provided for in Irish legislation and the acceptability of that in our organisations and society. We need to consider both men and women as having caring responsibilities and not see this as an obstacle to career progression. In fact, assumptions about what women or men want from their careers generally needs to be checked. We need to encourage active fathering and more innovative parental leave models to support working parents to care for their children. To support this, a number of organisations have started to make

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/work-life-balance/>

<sup>3</sup> ESRI (2009). *A Woman's Place: Female Participation in the Irish Labour Market*

<sup>4</sup> European Commission (2014b). *Gender equality in the workforce: reconciling work, private and family life in Europe*. Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, Brussels.

<sup>5</sup> Ibec (2016, October). *Labour Market Participation of Women*. [www.ibec.ie/0/flmp](http://www.ibec.ie/0/flmp)

strides in this field, for example, Arthur Cox and Facebook have launched shared parenting leave policies.

While a myriad of issues can influence an individual's decision to participate in part-time or full-time employment, two issues, less about choice and more about the unintended consequences of childcare and personal tax policy decisions, result in penalties which hamper females with children in the labour market. Childcare in Ireland is a huge challenge (facing women predominantly) due to the lack of affordable, quality care available for pre-schoolers as well as out-of-hours care for those in school. In Ireland as in Europe there is a significant 'childcare gap' between the end of adequately paid leave (maternity or parental) and the start of childcare entitlement or compulsory school age. This issue remains a significant one despite the investment into the childcare sector and the welcome strides made in this area.

Childcare costs in Ireland are among the highest in the OECD accounting for 53.5% of the average wage in Ireland, compared to an average of 27.6% in other OECD countries<sup>6</sup>. Ireland has a relatively low level State funding for childcare but the second highest direct payments to parents of any OECD country because of child benefit. Unfortunately child benefit reduces female labour market participation whereas affordable and available childcare services increase it. Childcare subsidies have been shown to be a better support for women who wish to participate in the labour market as they reduce the effective tax burden and the relative cost of childcare and incentivise the return to work. Child benefit on the other hand is a lump sum transfer and may create an income effect that decreases a woman's labour supply<sup>7</sup>. Ireland has an infrastructural deficit in terms of quality and affordable care facilities. It is apparent that greater levels of investment are required to fill this deficit and this issue of affordability needs to be addressed from a public policy perspective.

Entry cost effects from childcare and tax burdens reduce the net reward from employment, with childcare costs representing the largest additional costs associated with taking up employment thus acting as a disincentive to work especially for second earners in dual earning couples. Second earners with no childcare costs will only lose 18 percent of their income due to participation tax rates when entering the workforce, compared to 92 percent for someone with childcare needs. A lack of gender proofing has the unintended consequences of married women being taxed in effect more heavily than single individuals across the OECD despite the aim of equal taxation for equal income.

Changing policy for childcare services and subsidies will incur a net budgetary cost despite being partially self-financing due to the resulting increase in female labour market participation leading to higher tax revenues. It does have the added benefit of empowering women and sustaining families out of poverty. There should not be an unfair trade-off between the loss of income and childcare costs.

## **B. Do you agree with the high level objectives proposed?**

In principle Ibec supports the five objectives and the sentiment of the measures intended to contribute to the advancement of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in Ireland. However, there are elements that we believe will fail to achieve the desired outcomes,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibec (2016). *Budget 2017*.

<sup>7</sup> Jaumotte, 2003.

causing instead unintended consequences and failing to address the root causes or challenges therein.

One of the measures suggested under “Advance socio-economic equality for women and girls” is the increasing of paid parental leave. However, we already have parental and paternity leave available beyond that recommended by the European Directives and it does not address the issue of disparity in caring roles as culturally there is far less uptake of leave by men in Ireland which retains the burden on women. While Ireland has one of the most generous leave periods for women with children in Europe, the absence of women from the workplace over time is not without its challenges. Career gaps can result in a “motherhood penalty” occurring<sup>8</sup> due to interrupted employment, detachment from the labour market, possible deterioration of skills and networks, and loss of opportunities for training, promotion and salary increments that would be gained while in employment. These can contribute to a gender pay gap and a lack of gender balance in decision-making roles, with women with the highest qualifications being most severely penalised at a rate of 4 percent for each year out of paid work<sup>9</sup>. Conversely maintaining labour market attachment impacts long-term earnings, supports gender equality and drives economic growth. A number of employers are engaging in “Women Returner” programmes to support women who have taken career breaks with a structured development programme to help navigate the transition when returning to the labour market. Another such model is that of the Software Skillnet programme “Women Reboot” which is aimed at supporting professional women back into the technology industry following a career break. Programmes like this offer support for women to navigate the transition from a career break or maternity leave back to the labour market ideally at a level commensurate with her skills and experience. Also worthy of review is the UK’s model of “keep in touch days” for women on maternity leave who wish to work up to 10 paid days during their maternity leave without impacting their rights to leave or payment but which can be useful for staying involved with the business. They are optional on behalf of both employee and employer but have been very successful particularly in making the return to work after leave less daunting.

The proposed transparency measure of published wage surveys is not a useful mechanism for tackling gender pay gaps as it oversimplifies a complex issue. It not only puts an administrative burden on employers but may report a gap where justifiable reasons are at play rather than discriminatory behaviour. The reasons for a gender pay gap can be multifaceted. They include issues already raised regarding a gender-segregated labour market and the challenges of balancing work and family life, the difference in participation of men and women in family responsibilities and the availability of quality, affordable childcare facilities and out-of-school hours care. Women remain overrepresented in part-time roles and in sectors and occupations that attain less remuneration and where having children tends not to negatively impact the number of males in employment it has the opposite effect on females.

Research<sup>10</sup> on gender pay gaps reports that one of the main reasons for the gap is due to the issue of women having a lower level of human capital. While educational attainment is often higher amongst females, it does not offset the loss of work experience. Where females are working reduced hours this ultimately equates to less experience, reduced benefits value (pensions/bonuses which are

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<sup>8</sup> Stewart 2013

<sup>9</sup> Ibec (2016). *Budget 2017*.

<sup>10</sup> ESRI (2009). *The gender pay gap in Ireland*.



usually linked as a percentage of basic salary) and therefore can generate an earnings gap that is greater than their male counterparts. This can lead to disjointed careers, a depreciation of skills, loss of networks, have a negative impact on their career development and promotion prospects leading to lower earnings and with implications for pensions. The debate needs to be focused on the real issues not over-regulating company practices and imposing new obligations on companies which are ineffective. Employers have a key role to play in eliminating unjustified pay inequalities and a responsibility to comply with the legislation on the subject where there is ample redress if discrimination has occurred. However, the cause of gender pay gaps are quite complex and these need to be tackled if we are to see real change in this area.

One of the objectives aims to “Improve women’s and girls’ physical and mental health” however there is no real mention of mental health in the proposed measures. Mental health and suicide prevention services are in crisis yet the investment in this sector is poor. While funding for mental health and suicide prevention has increased in the last decade, Budget 2017 promised €35 million of expenditure yet only €15 million will be spent in 2017. In 2006 following a review of mental health policy, the Department of Health and Children published *A Vision for Change* which laid out a blueprint for mental health services in Ireland. However, today implementation has stalled and we still have a system which is not fit for purpose. While early intervention has been found to have significant success rates for recovery, the current system has not prioritised early psychological interventions at a primary care level leading to real losses for the individual, business and society.

Policy responses continue to emphasise the need to move away from institutional practices, a notion first posited in 1966 and echoed in every subsequent policy report, instead adopting a multi-disciplinary model of community-oriented care, yet full implementation of such a structure is still lacking. The pressing need for 24/7 crisis supports leaves our health systems with a potentially fatal gap in services. Similarly starting with an early childhood approach to health and wellbeing could provide individuals with the tools and resilience from a young age that would benefit them through their lifetime. This needs to be a policy priority for all of Irish society including our women and girls.

While the actions proposed to support the objective “Advance women in leadership” are positive. It would be more important to make a more diverse audience aware of the requirements and the opportunities available on state boards. More generally the provision of board training exercises could be useful for both men and women who wish to become board members.

### **C. What outcomes should we aim to achieve?**

There are a number of outcomes which have been mentioned earlier that we should aim to achieve to redress the balance and achieve equality.

- Increase the uptake of “gendered subjects” by men and women and see positive movement in the gender balance within gender segregated industries and professions.
- Increase the labour market participation of women.
- Develop and rollout an appropriate childcare strategy by 2020 to meet the needs of working parents.
- Engage men in the achievement of diversity, inclusion and gender balance.
- Gender proof public systems and policies such as the tax system and its effects on second earners with children.

#### **D) What actions could be taken to advance those objectives?**

Based on the outcomes that we believe should be achieved the following are some of the suggested actions that could be taken to advance those objectives.

1. Increase awareness of gender stereotypes and the importance of a gender neutral approach to school subjects in teacher training curriculum.
2. Ensure that key influencers such as career guidance teachers and parents are aware of the career paths and options in gender atypical areas.
3. Increase the availability of subject choices particularly in single sex schools. This may involve cooperation between neighbouring schools to achieve economies of scale in terms of numbers taking the subject.
4. Promote the availability of industry role models to bring to life non-stereotypical career opportunities for girls.
5. Increase awareness and promote good practice in gender proofing policies and practices in the workplace, in particular examine human resource management processes that have an impact on the progression of women's careers i.e. recruitment, performance management and succession planning.
6. A childcare strategy to provide quality and affordable childcare and out of school hours care to enable women to have the choice to remain in or enter the labour market. To help achieve this:
  - Child benefit payments should be means tested so that they remain the same for low income households but taper off gradually for higher income households with the savings redirected into childcare services.
  - The Early Childhood Care and Education scheme should be extended to include children aged 1 to 3 years and to increase the duration to 4 hours to facilitate the gap between the end of paid leave and the start of childcare entitlement or school. This could enable mothers to remain closer to the labour market through part-time work or return to the workplace at an earlier stage.
  - A formal out-of-school hours care system should be implemented to address the needs of working parents and the atypical work day.
7. Culture change to see greater numbers of men participating in child and elder care, taking parental leave and engaging in flexible working arrangements.
8. Building on the examples of good practice in a number of organisations (e.g. PwC, Vodafone) who have targeted women returners and supported their re-entry to the workplace with a structured development programme. Such a programme could be run through Intreo or supported by the LEO's.
9. Review of the tax treatment of second earners and the unintended consequences faced typically by women caused by the current Participation Tax Rates and the Marginal Effective Tax Rates.

#### **• Benchmarks**

The scale and underlying causes of the situation facing women and girls, while somewhat quantifiable at the senior levels of organisations are generally difficult to judge as Ireland has a dearth of robust, comparable data on gender balance in Ireland particularly by sector and on the detail of interactions between work and non-work lives.

Closing the gender gap is a win-win for everyone but to do so and to quantify what success looks like requires a baseline to benchmark against. While pockets of data exist in different areas, what is

needed is robust cross-sectoral research in employment and in society that identifies the real situation for women and girls. For example, details of subject uptake, career choices and occupational outcomes; the number of women underemployed and the reasons for this; what options suit work-life balance and what particular challenges or choices determine participation. This would allow us to understand what people want and what obstacles cause major impediments rather than surmising the level of engagement wanted in work and non-work lives and the actual representation cross-sectorally. It would also offer a benchmark against which to measure success.

10. Robust, cross-sectoral research to be carried out to benchmark across industry, education and in society what the real situation for women and girls is. This would allow us to understand decisions made and what obstacles cause major impediments rather than surmising the level of engagement wanted in work and non-work lives and the actual representation cross-sectorally.

## **Conclusion**

Ibec fully supports and promotes gender equality and the vision of “an Ireland where all women enjoy equality with men and can achieve their full potential while enjoying a safe and fulfilling life”.

Despite the progress made over the last few decades what is still missing fully from the lives of women and girls is choice. Many things are espoused to be their choice but in reality are not; given there is no other viable option available. This submission focuses on where reforms are needed to bring choice back to women and girls regarding the various aspects of their lives and work from their education and occupation, ability to progress in their career, manage their work-life balance and engage in decision-making. The challenge in developing the new Strategy objectives and achieving desired outcomes will be to have due regard not to be too prescriptive as to remove options and decision-making from individuals and families, while still being far reaching enough to ensure that real choice exists.

Today more and more employers are active in promoting the advancement of their male and female employee’s careers. Many have engaged in a range of supportive measures aimed at increasing the gender balance and have seen improvements in the makeup of their workforce. For the new Strategy to build on the great work achieved in Ireland over the last few decades it is now time to fully address the cultural values and expectations that we have as a society and apply policy interventions and supports from the classroom through to the boardroom.

Ibec looks forward to working with the Department and the National Women’s Strategy Steering Committee to help realise these aims.

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