



# Policy Submission

## **Women in Poverty**

**A Commentary to the Government's National Report to  
the United Nations on  
the Advancement of Women**

**September 1994**

# **WOMEN IN POVERTY**

**A Commentary**

**to the**

**Government's National Report**

**to the**

**United Nations on the Advancement of Women**

**COMBAT POVERTY AGENCY**

**September 1994**

## WOMEN IN POVERTY

### THE COMBAT POVERTY AGENCY

The Combat Poverty Agency is a statutory body established under the Combat Poverty Agency Act 1986. This legislation lays down four key functions for the Agency as follows:

- \* advising Government on economic and social policy in relation to poverty;
- \* initiating measures aimed at overcoming poverty and the evaluation of such measures;
- \* developing research into the causes, nature and extent of poverty and
- \* promoting greater public awareness of poverty issues and the measures required to tackle them.

### POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Poverty is a process which excludes part of the population from economic and social opportunities. Such social exclusion not only means insufficient income and lack of participation in working life, but also poor access to basic services such as housing, health, education, transport, arts, recreation, cultural and legal services<sup>1</sup>.

Financial poverty is only one dimension of poverty. Tackling poverty is about ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to participate in the ordinary living patterns, customs and activities of society. Poverty is thus as much about social and cultural inequality and exclusion as about economic deprivation.

### WOMEN IN POVERTY

The burden of poverty often falls on women. Their poverty goes beyond the material deprivation of poverty because of the obstacles to social participation resulting from child-rearing or family responsibilities<sup>2</sup>, because of the difficulties of struggling to bring up families on low incomes and in poor environments, because of parenting alone or because women are victims of domestic violence. This commentary is based on the work of the Combat Poverty Agency's research and analysis on women and poverty<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> EU Green Paper on Social Policy - Options for the Union.

<sup>2</sup> Effective Intervention into the poverty and exclusion of women, ENWO & ENOPF, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Toward a Policy for Combating Poverty Among Women, Combat Poverty Agency, 1990.

## WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT

The close correlation between poverty and unemployment is well documented<sup>4</sup> with the probability of being in poverty related to the term of unemployment over the previous twelve months and the extent of unemployment over one's career.

Economic independence remains the most viable route out of poverty. However, only a minority of Irish women - 34% of those of working age in 1992 - are in the labour force in comparison to 70% of men<sup>5</sup>. The difficulties encountered by women in gaining access to adequately paid employment are obstacles to their economic independence. Gender specific factors such as low pay, adequate income and occupational segregation which affect women are added to other obstacles experienced by both men and women in gaining adequately paid employment. Ireland in particular had the highest rate of female unemployment in the EU in 1992. In addition in 1990 Irish women's share of the national active population was the smallest in Europe.

### *Atypical Work Patterns and Poverty*

Female labour market participation is characterised by atypical work; part-time, temporary and broken patterns of work. Although part-time work often suits women best from a logistic point of view, it offers few career prospects and contributes little in the way of long-term advancement.

Part-time work is also highly likely to be low paid. It has been estimated that the majority of part-time employees are low paid<sup>6</sup>. Women not only dominate in part-time jobs but they also predominate amongst low paid part-timers: 85% of low paid part-time workers are women.

### *Unprotected atypical work*

While regular part-time work has been afforded legislative protection and has been integrated for social security purposes other atypical work is not recognised for either purpose. Therefore increasing female labour market participation will not erode unequal access to social security regimes or unequal legislative protection.

### *Atypical work and unequal social insurance status*

Social security plays a central role in anti-poverty strategies. Social security regimes, alongside the dependency status of women in family structures, often exacerbate and contribute to the persistence of women's poverty. The eligibility requirements for

---

<sup>4</sup> Poverty & Policy in Ireland, Nolan B & Callan T, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Labour Force Survey 1992- CSO.

<sup>6</sup> Low Pay: The Irish Experience - Combat Poverty Agency & Irish Congress of Trade Unions, 1990.

work-related insurance regimes are based on male forms of labour market participation such as regular and continuous employment with above minimum levels of earnings. Some improvements were made in this mode of social insurance eligibility in recent months when a scheme of social insurance was introduced for old age contributory pensions. This initiative means that some years of childrearing or caring are disregarded when calculating the average insurance contributions. This scheme however needs to be dramatically extended.

#### *Women and latent unemployment*

34% of the live register are women<sup>7</sup>, however it is likely that this is an underrepresentation of women seeking employment as many women are not on the live register due to lack of entitlement to social welfare payments. This probability is reinforced by the fact that women claiming unemployment payments are significantly less likely than men to be claiming unemployment assistance; 80% of men on the live register claim unemployment assistance in comparison to only 53% of women.

By European standards, Ireland is very poor in measuring the levels of this latent unemployment although it has been estimated that as many as 52% of unemployed women are not registered.

#### *Segmentation of the labour market*

Women's employment is concentrated in the lower sectors of the jobs' hierarchy and consequently in the lower paid sectors. This segregation of the workforce begins far earlier than when people take up employment. The structural causes of women's low pay status are rooted in early gender socialisation and education choices. The problem now is not that women and men are not paid the same when they do like-work but that women and men still tend to do different types of jobs. Women workers represent a category where a multitude of risk factors are aggregated, compounding the probability of low pay<sup>8</sup>.

#### *Women's pay for women's work*

Work is only an escape from poverty when it is adequately paid. Over 60% of low paid workers in 1987 were women<sup>9</sup>. In Ireland women's hourly earnings are

---

<sup>7</sup> Live Register Half Yearly Age by Duration Analysis, CSO, 22 October 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Women and Poverty in the European Community - Pauline Conroy & Niamh Flanagan, European Commission DGV/A.3Doc Ref:V/42/94-EN.

<sup>9</sup> Low Pay: The Irish Experience - Combat Poverty Agency & Irish Congress of Trade Unions, 1990.

estimated to be 20% lower than those of men<sup>10</sup>. The gap between male and female wage rates is accounted for by a number of factors; lower educational qualifications than men, past labour market experience, time spent out of the labour force, differences in hourly rates for part- and full-time work and occupational effects whether caused by segregation or voluntary choices.

### *Outside the labour market*

Almost 646,000 women between the ages of 16 and 64 years are based full-time in the home<sup>11</sup>. While this is a choice for many women, being outside the labour market has very important long-term consequences; the lack of an income makes a woman financially dependant on her partner, her family or on social welfare. Dependance on family members means that a woman has no enforceable right to her own share of income. Moreover, the skills learned at home are not regarded as valuable and one becomes distanced from the jobs market and work-related developments in technology.

### *Lack of childcare facilities - a bar to women's employment*

One of the main barriers preventing women from entering employment, or a key factor in forcing them to leave it, is the virtual absence of childcare services in Ireland. There is no national policy on early education. This is of particular importance for women since they continue to bear the main responsibility for care of children and the home in Ireland. Thus choosing to care for children in the home reduces women's access to an income of their own and heightens their risk of poverty.

Ireland continues to have one of the lowest levels of childcare provision in the EU and this hinders Irish mothers from going into employment, or undertaking further training i.e. from becoming financially independent<sup>12</sup>.

## SOCIAL WELFARE AND WOMEN'S POVERTY

### *The concept of dependency in welfare payments*

The social welfare system continues to assess and pay benefit on the basis of "family payments" where one adult claims for and collects the payment for the other adult and any children. Married women have the right to claim unemployment assistance in their own right if they satisfy the qualifying conditions; however many are not

---

<sup>10</sup> Male-Female Wage Differentials: Analysis and Policy Issues, Callan T and Wren A, ESRI 1994.

<sup>11</sup> Labour Force Survey 1992 - CSO

<sup>12</sup> Report of the Working Group on Childcare Facilities for Working Parents - Report to the Minister for Equality and Law Reform 1994.

eligible because of low participation in the labour force and home duties. As a consequence men usually claim for the family. This means that the adult dependant gets no income in his/her own right and depends on the other partner for financial support. In many cases this may increase the risk of poverty for women.

The social welfare system also continues to treat cohabittees as a married couple so that any woman living with a man is automatically considered his dependant and the payment is a joint one. Conversely, the tax system treats cohabittees as two separate individuals which precludes them benefitting from the married couples tax allowance.

Additionally the rate of payment for the adult dependant is about 60% of that for the main claimant.

### *Unequal share in income payments*

There is evidence that the family income, be it from social welfare or employment, is not shared equally between husbands and their wives. In recent research<sup>13</sup> the division of expenditure responsibilities follow traditional gender-based patterns in which the wives take primary responsibility for day-to-day essentials and the husbands for larger recurrent expenses such as rent. Husbands are consistently more likely to have access to money for their own entertainment and to have more money to spend on leisure. Women's incomes are largely devoted to family rather than personal expenditures. In families of school-going children there is an apparent shift from personal spending to spending on the children.

Among households receiving Child Benefit, 58 per cent of women have no other source of income; in 10 per cent of households employment or another interest provides an income which on a weekly basis is less than what Child Benefit provides. Women's earnings exceeded Child Benefit in only 32 per cent of households. Child Benefit continues as the one source of state income support that is paid directly to the mother.

There is also evidence<sup>14</sup> that child support payments continue to fall short of the minimum costs associated with the upbringing of a child. Families relying on social welfare payments as their only source of income are left with a severe financial shortfall, with families headed by a single parent or a parent claiming long-term unemployment benefit particularly affected.

---

<sup>13</sup>The Distribution of Income within Households, David Rottman, Combat Poverty Agency, 1994 (forthcoming).

<sup>14</sup> The Cost of Child, Claire Carney et al, Combat Poverty Agency 1994.

## POVERTY AND DEBT

Research on moneylending<sup>15</sup> identified that serious money management problems in families were, in part, the result of the husband not sharing the income with his wife. Most of the households borrowed on the basis of ongoing inadequate income and the burden of the loan responsibility usually fell on women.

## WOMEN, POVERTY AND HEALTH

Ill-health is one of the most widespread consequences of poverty<sup>16</sup>. The following are the main known adverse health effects experienced by women on low incomes, in comparison with other women<sup>17</sup>.

- Shorter life span: Although women's life span exceeds that of men by five and a half years, all those living on low income are more likely to die at a younger age than those in other income brackets.
- Greater risk of illness: Both women and men in the lower income groups are also more at risk of illness throughout their lives.
- Mothers more likely to have insufficient diet: A study of the nutrition in a Dublin suburb revealed that mothers will reduce their own food intake to ensure that their children have adequate diets<sup>18</sup>.
- Higher risk of depression: Women have an especially high risk of depression<sup>19</sup>. The trauma of unemployment along with poverty have been found to

---

<sup>15</sup> Moneylending and Low Income Families, M. Daly & J. Walsh, Combat Poverty Agency, 1988

<sup>16</sup> See also Telling it like it is, Cathleen O'Neill, Combat Poverty Agency, 1990.

<sup>17</sup> Women and Poverty, M. Daly, 1989 pp 82-96.

<sup>18</sup> Lee P and M Gibeny Patterns of Food and Nutrient Intake in a Suburb of Dublin with Chronically High Unemployment, Combat Poverty Agency, 1989.

<sup>19</sup> 'A study of depression among women - implications for preventative mental health' Anne Cleary, paper presented to the international conference on Mental Health Education, Dublin September 30, 1986.

increase mental stress among women<sup>20</sup>.

- Violence in the home: Research on women in a poor community in Dublin found that 30% had experienced violence with depression as one of the consequences<sup>21</sup>. It has also been reported that violence is stress-related, linked to such problems as financial and relationship difficulties and unemployment<sup>22</sup>.

- Higher birth rates: Women from poorer backgrounds have more children than those from other income groups, perhaps in part due to the fact that women on low incomes have a more limited choice of contraception.

- Low birth weights: Medical research reveals that the health of mothers and new born babies, especially their weight, are influenced by socio-economic factors. As infant mortality rates fall and standardise, birthweight may become the new health factor distinguishing between advantaged and disadvantaged women. Low birth weight babies enter this world at a health disadvantage and risk developmental problems.

#### *The connection between Poverty and ill-health*

The connection between poverty and illhealth, both physical and mental has been attributed to a number of factors<sup>23</sup>;

- the unrelenting pressure of managing the household budget on an inadequate income and the tension it creates;
- living with fear that something will happen to upset the delicate balance between barely managing or deep financial trouble;
- the gruelling steps involved in obtaining social welfare;
- lack of money for basic necessities creates tension;

---

<sup>20</sup> Employment, unemployment and the health of women: Impact of own and spouse's employment status. J. Cullen et al, Research Memo 1, Health Care and Psychosomatic Unit, St. James Hospital, Dublin, 1984.

<sup>21</sup> "A study of depression among women- implications for preventive mental health" Anne Cleary, paper presented to the international conference on Mental Health Education, Dublin September 30, 1986.

<sup>22</sup> Report of Second Commission on the Status of Women, 1993.

<sup>23</sup> Telling it like it is, Cathleen O'Neill, Combat Poverty Agency, 1992.

- worrying about keeping children in school and out of trouble;
- inadequate or second-rate public services for example add to stress and isolation;
- poor housing and a bleak or decaying physical environment a negative physical and psychological impact;
- living in poverty leads to a feeling of powerlessness which undermines self-confidence, creates a sense of dependence, alienation and hopelessness and belief that there is no escape;
- poverty leads to isolation from family, community and society;
- poverty puts enormous pressure on women because all the evidence shows that in our society it is women who typically have to cope with and manage the consequences of living in poverty, especially when there are children concerned.

### *Growing Social Class Differences in Health Care*

Cutbacks in public health care provision have placed an added burden on the primary care health providers and carers, women. Cut-backs in health services often increase women's unpaid work as carers.

## **HOUSING**

Owner-occupation rates in Ireland are amongst the highest in Europe and home ownership is much more prevalent than public housing. Far fewer women than men own their own homes<sup>24</sup>. Given the predisposition towards home ownership many people are helped to buy their homes by tax relief on mortgage interest payable to private financial institutions. A mortgage is often beyond the reach of those on low incomes. Material poverty and the lack of affordable reasonable standard housing affect the housing options for women who are forced to or want to leave their existing accommodation. Emergency accommodation for women fleeing violence in the home remains insufficient.

Many women with children live in public housing estates in "low demand" areas in cities which have poor shopping, recreational and public services. Fewer shops mean higher prices and the problems of isolation are compounded by inadequate public transport or leisure facilities.

---

<sup>24</sup> Women and Poverty, M Daly, 1989.

## WOMEN IN MINORITY GROUPS

### *Lone parents*

The vast majority of lone parent families are headed by women. Research suggests that these households, particularly those headed by young women, experience higher risks of poverty<sup>25 26</sup>. There has been rapid growth in this group in recent years. A greater proportion of lone mothers in Ireland are economically active in comparison to other mothers<sup>27</sup>. The Lone Parent Allowance provides income maintenance for parents who are primarily on home duties. As such the Lone Parent Allowance is not an unemployment payment. This status means that lone parents are not on the live register and are therefore not eligible for many employment and training opportunities.

### Loss of Welfare Payment

Lone parents on social welfare can be affected by 'poverty traps' i.e. if they are to lift themselves out of welfare dependancy they must earn an income that will cover the loss of their welfare allowance and the costs associated with working such as childcare, transport and work clothes. Since July 1994 there has been an increase in the earnings disregard for Lone Parent Allowance recipients; while this represents an improvement, nonetheless the loss of welfare payments remains a deterrent to those seeking paid employment.

### Loss of Benefits

A further barrier to financial independence is the loss of benefits such as the medical card and differential rent allowances on taking up a paid job or having an earned income.

### Barriers to Training

Some Lone Parents on social welfare experience further barriers to employment in the form of restricted access to training, reductions in benefits and unavailability of childcare while on training programmes<sup>28</sup>.

---

<sup>25</sup> Poverty and Policy in Ireland, Nolan B and Callan T, 1994.

<sup>26</sup> Lone Parents Poverty and Public Policy in Ireland, Millar J et al, Combat Poverty Agency, 1992

<sup>27</sup> Roll (1992) special tabulations from the 1989 Labour Force Survey.

<sup>28</sup> Barriers that exist for women in CEDP/CE Schemes, P Quinn, E. O'Neill, Women's Support Project/Parents Alone Tallaght, 1994 (unpublished).

### *Women with disabilities*

The pattern of discrimination against women is generally replicated between women and men with disabilities thus creating a 'double disadvantage'. Research has shown that women with disabilities are<sup>29</sup>:

- less likely to be in employment than their male counterparts;
- less likely to be in receipt of training for employment;
- likely to be poorer than men with a disability if relying on welfare benefits;
- likely to be earning half as much as men with a disability if in paid employment;
- less likely to be receiving emotional or physical support.

It is clear therefore that there are not only difficulties associated with disabilities but gender specific difficulties associated with disabilities. In addition disability has consequences not just for the individual but for the whole family. Where adequate support systems do not exist the disability impacts on the freedom of all family members.

### *Lesbian Women*

Lesbian women are also faced with the double disadvantage of gender specific difficulties and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

### *Traveller Women*

Travellers, as a group, are particularly affected by poverty. They have little access to education, health care, decent living conditions and experience widespread discrimination and prejudice.

Traveller women suffer many if not more of the problems of ill health associated with poverty in that traveller women have a higher mortality rate, lower life expectancy and a stillbirth and infant mortality rates almost three times that of Ireland. This pattern of ill health is compounded by extreme deprivation and disadvantage characterised by high rates of illiteracy, poor living conditions and heavy domestic responsibilities. Even those who opt for life off the road in a the settled community

---

<sup>29</sup> Report of the Second Commission on the Status of Women  
1993

are disadvantaged through discrimination and isolation<sup>30</sup>.

## TACKLING POVERTY

### *Recognition of community development and women's groups*

Community development and women's groups have a key role to play in tackling poverty. Adopting a participative approach, they provide immediate support and advice for women and assist in them gaining more control over their lives. They also provide opportunities for women to reflect on their own situations, identifying causes and solutions to the problems and needs they experience.

The Department of Social Welfare's Community Development Programme and grants scheme for locally based women's groups provides important resources to disadvantaged communities. Unlike groups in the Community Development Programme, however, women's groups receive funding on a once-off basis leaving little room for staff recruitment or long-term planning and development.

---

<sup>30</sup> Report of the Second Commission on the Status of Women, 1993.

## Bibliography

EU Green Paper on Social Policy - Options for the Union.

Effective Intervention into the poverty and exclusion of women, ENOW & ENOPF, 1993.

Toward a Policy for Combatting Poverty Among Women, Combat Poverty Agency, 1990.

Poverty & Policy in Ireland, Nolan B & Callan T, 1994.

Labour Force Survey 1992 - CSO.

Low Pay: The Irish Experience - Combat Poverty Agency & Irish Congress of Trade Unions, 1990.

Live Register Half Yearly Age by Duration Analysis, CSO, 22 October 1993.

Women and Poverty in the European Community, Conroy P & Flanagan N, European Commission DGV/A.3 Doc. Ref: V/42/94-EN.

Male-Female Wage Differentials: Analysis and Policy Issues, Callan T and Wren A, ESRI, 1994.

The Report of the Working Group on Childcare Facilities for Working Parents, Report to the Minister for Equality and Law Reform 1994.

The Distribution of Income Within Households, Rottman D, Combat Poverty Agency, 1994 (forthcoming).

The Cost of a Child, Carney C. et al, Combat Poverty Agency, 1994.

Moneylending and Low Income Families, Daly M & Walsh J, Combat Poverty Agency, 1988.

Telling it like it is, O'Neill, C, Combat Poverty Agency, 1990.

Women and Poverty, Daly M, 1989.

Patterns of Food and Nutrient Intake in a Suburb of Dublin with Chronically High Unemployment, Lee P and Gibney M, Combat Poverty Agency, 1989.

'A study of depression among women - implications for preventive mental health' Anne Cleary, paper presented to the international conference on Mental Health Education, Dublin September 30, 1986.

Employment, unemployment and the health of women: Impact of own and spouse's employment status. J. Cullen et al, Research Memo 1, Health Care and Psychosomatic Unit, St James Hosptial, Dublin 1984.

Report of the Second Commission on the Status of Women, 1993.

Barriers that exist for women in CEDP/CE Schemes, Quinn P and O'Neill E, women's Supprot Project/Parents Alone Tallaght, 1994 (unpublished).

Lone Parents Poverty and Public Policy in Ireland, Millar J et al, Combat Poverty Agency, 1992.

