

INTO Submission

National Strategy for Women and Girls

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Submission on behalf of the INTO

To Department of Children, Equality,
Disability, Integration and Youth

On the National Strategy for Women and
Girls



Introduction

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the DCEDIY's consultation on the succeeding *National Strategy for Women and Girls*. The INTO, founded in 1868, is the oldest and largest teachers' trade union in Ireland representing over 45,000 teachers at primary level in the Republic of Ireland and over 7,000 teachers at primary and post-primary level in Northern Ireland.

The INTO, as a representative body of a predominantly female profession, is uniquely positioned to advocate for gender equality within the education sector and broader society. The INTO is deeply connected to issues related to gender equality in the workplace, education, and broader school communities, and therefore welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development and implementation of a comprehensive national women's strategy. Gender equality has always been a key ambition within our structures, and the INTO recognises that it directly affects the well-being, working conditions, and professional advancement of our members as well as contributing to a more equitable and just society for young girls in our primary schools and beyond.

The picture of gender representation in education in Ireland is one of complexity. Girls are no longer broadly under-represented in terms of access to education, but disparities still exist, and gender inequalities can shape girls' perceptions of roles and influence their educational experiences and outcomes. Teachers play a critical role in shaping young minds and can influence societal attitudes towards gender equality. The INTO understands the importance of equipping teachers with the tools, training, and resources to challenge gender stereotypes in the classroom and promote gender-sensitive teaching practices. As a trade union, the INTO aligns with the principles of social justice, and gender equality is a key pillar of broader equity goals. The INTO is steadfast in its commitment to addressing systemic inequalities that affect not only the teaching profession but also the pupils they serve.

The INTO also appreciates that teachers often work closely with families and communities, giving them a unique perspective on the socio-economic challenges women face, including domestic violence, poverty, and access to education and healthcare. Teachers in DEIS schools, and specifically Home School Community Liaison (HSCLs), play a central role in supporting



parents, pupils and families who find themselves in particularly vulnerable and complex situations.

The INTO has identified a number of key priorities that must be addressed in the *next Strategy for Women and Girls*.

Marginalised and Under-represented Girls

The successor strategy should endeavour to give significant consideration to the inclusion and empowerment of marginalised and under-represented girls across all facets of Irish society. Minoritised groups of women and girls often face unique challenges and barriers that can hinder their access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities and social justice. Additionally, the strategy should aim to reflect the intersectionality of gender with other factors such as race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, disability, and religion.

For example, Traveller and Roma girls and women are among the most disadvantaged and marginalised in Ireland and their educational outcomes are considerably lower than the general population.¹ This underscores the importance of ensuring that children from all marginalised backgrounds, including and especially Traveller and Roma, are afforded every opportunity and support to enable them to better access and participate in high-quality, early-years and primary education. The INTO acknowledges the targeted supports for children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage through the DEIS programme and in particular through the Supporting Travellers and Roma (STAR) school pilot programmes specifically aimed at retaining Traveller and Roma children and young people in the school system. Notwithstanding these efforts, the INTO believes that there is the capacity to increase investment and expand participation across both of the aforementioned programmes.

Similarly, gender equality cannot be fully achieved without addressing the specific needs and rights of LGBT+ young girls. Excluding them from a national strategy would have the potential to perpetuate inequality and leave them vulnerable to continued discrimination and marginalisation. These young girls face unique challenges that intersect with broader issues of gender inequality, and they must be supported and protected in national policies. Given the current context of curriculum redevelopment, the INTO contends that a national strategy

¹ Department of Education (2024) Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024-2030



should advocate for an inclusive curriculum that reflects an array of diverse identities, including LGBT+ narratives. This can help combat stereotypes, provide role models, and foster a sense of belonging for LGBT+ young girls in the classroom.

Encouraging Girls Participation in STEM Fields

One area where girls remain under-represented is in STEM-related courses, particularly in higher education and professional careers. While there have been numerous initiatives to address this, including government and nonprofit programs to encourage more girls to pursue STEM subjects, the gap persists. The gender divide in these fields has been attributed to a variety of factors, including gender stereotypes, lack of female role models in STEM, and early socialisation that dissuades girls from pursuing technical careers.

It is crucial that girls engagement in STEM is encouraged from a young age to ensure that damaging gender stereotypes are not formed early on in their educational journey. The forthcoming strategy must continue to challenge stereotypes that discourage girls from pursuing careers in STEM and work to dismantle the systemic barriers that preclude girls from engaging with STEM careers. Schools must be adequately resourced to cultivate inclusive and supportive environments for girls to explore an interest in STEM fields, thus, helping to close the gender gap and ensure that all pupils have equal opportunities to succeed. The redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum and the specific introduction of a STEM curricular area provides an ideal opportunity to tackle the barrier that exist.

The INTO concurs with the proposal in a Department of Education report which recommends the need to move away from seeking a change in girls' attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, but rather seeks to change structures, policies and broader representation of STEM in society, to ultimately break down the barriers to more balanced participation.²

Work-life balance and flexibility

Flexible work arrangements should continue to be the cornerstone of the national strategy because they address the unique challenges that women often face in balancing work, family,

² Department of Education (2022) Recommendations on Gender Balance in STEM Education



and personal responsibilities. Advocating for enhanced flexibility in the workplace can promote gender equality, significantly enhance the well-being, economic participation, and equality of women, while also supporting the developmental needs of children.

Teaching is an increasingly demanding job that often extends beyond the classroom. Without work-life balance, this workload can lead to stress, exhaustion, and ultimately burnout. Teachers who experience a good work-life balance are more likely to stay in the profession longer.³ In the current climate of a teacher shortage, enhanced flexible work arrangements has the potential to contribute to higher job satisfaction, reducing the likelihood that teachers will leave the profession.

Flexible work arrangements allow women to continue their careers while managing family responsibilities, enabling them to pursue promotions, leadership roles, and professional development opportunities without having to choose between career and family. These arrangements ultimately contribute to healthier, more resilient families and economies, while addressing the unique challenges faced by women and caregivers in the workforce.

Statistics show that even though women account for the majority of the workforce in education, they are still underrepresented in leadership roles. Figures from the Department of Education indicate that women are, proportionately, less likely to assume principal roles than men.⁴ Systemic, cultural, and personal challenges make it more difficult for women to take on school leadership roles. In particular, women in school leadership roles face greater challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities, which can hinder their career aspirations and progression.⁵ Making school leadership roles more attractive to women involves addressing both systemic barriers and creating a supportive environment that encourages women to pursue and succeed in leadership positions. Reviewing current salaries, equalising allowances between primary and post-primary school leaders as well as extending and enhancing flexible work arrangements would all serve to incentivise women who may otherwise be hesitant to take on leadership opportunities in schools.

³ Miryala, R. K., & Chiluka, N. (2012). Work-life balance amongst teachers. *The IUP Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 11(1), 37-50.

⁴ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c97fbd-teacher-statistics/>

⁵ Iwanicka, O. (2020). *Stereotype threat experience and its influence on the gender leadership gap in Ireland* (Doctoral dissertation, Dublin, National College of Ireland).



The INTO recognises the important role that career break, job share, carer's leave and parental leave plays in enabling female teachers to fulfil their caring roles of both children and elderly dependents. Notwithstanding the current flexibility available, there remains room for improvement. For example, a review of the current parental scheme for teachers is required to explore whether provision could be made within the scheme to permit teachers to take parental leave on individual days rather than the current arrangement which is a minimum duration of 7 consecutive days.

The INTO also advocates for an increase in the amount of parental leave available to sole parents to equal that of two-parent families. Sole parents, predominantly women, often face unique challenges and responsibilities, and providing them with equal parental leave ensures that they have the same rights and opportunities as two-parent families. This equality is essential for promoting a fair and just society.

By making flexible work arrangements widely available, a national strategy can ensure that a broader range of people, including women with caregiving responsibilities, can participate in the workforce. This leads to a more resilient economy, where diverse talents and skills are better utilised.

Female-related health supports

The INTO notes the commitment of the current strategy to advancing the physical and mental health and wellbeing of women and girls. Incorporating women's health issues into a national strategy for women is crucial for promoting gender equality, improving health outcomes, and ensuring that women's unique health needs are addressed comprehensively. In particular, addressing reproductive health and gender-specific healthcare can empower women, improve their quality of life, and contribute to healthier communities overall.

An overarching priority for INTO in recent years has been a campaign calling for access to paid statutory leave from work for women experiencing early pregnancy loss and undergoing fertility treatment. Women are disproportionately impacted by early pregnancy loss and fertility challenges in the workplace due to the physical, emotional, and associated social challenges, combined with workplace cultures that often lack adequate awareness and support for reproductive health issues.



The INTO welcomes the DCEDIY commissioned *PLACES Report*⁶, which recommends statutory paid leave for early pregnancy loss and for those undergoing infertility treatment, as teachers and other public servant workers face obstacles with leave management following changes to the public service sick leave scheme in 2013. The *PLACES* report underscores the unique challenges teachers face with fertility treatments and pregnancy loss. Providing paid leave for fertility treatment and miscarriage is a compassionate and practical approach to supporting individuals during challenging times, promoting gender equality, and fostering healthier and more inclusive workplaces.

Furthermore, the strategy must prioritise legislation for surrogacy leave as a matter of urgency. Surrogacy is increasingly recognised as a legitimate path to parenthood for various individuals and couples, including same-sex couples, single parents, and those facing infertility challenges. The surrogacy journey can be emotionally challenging, and having dedicated leave can help intended parents manage their mental health during this significant life transition. But most importantly, paid statutory leave allows parents to bond with their newborn, which is crucial for emotional development and attachment. By including surrogacy leave, the strategy will recognise, support and reflect Ireland's evolving family structures.

Finally, supporting women in the workplace during menopause and menstruation is central to creating a supportive and inclusive work environment. Menstrual and menopausal symptoms can impact physical and emotional health, but with the right policies and support, workplaces can help women manage these life stages without compromising their careers. The INTO was proud to join the *Stop the Stigma* coalition with ICTU and other leading trade unions in Ireland with the aim of advocating for improved workplace supports concerning menstruation and menopause, and eliminating unnecessary stress from the workplace and women's working lives.

Conclusion

⁶ Kelly-Harrington R, Hennessy M, Leitao S, Donnelly M, Murray C, O'Sullivan M, Dalton-O'Connor C, Nuzum D, O'Donoghue K. *PLACES | Pregnancy Loss (under 24 weeks) in Workplaces: Informing policymakers on support mechanisms*. Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; 2024.



In conclusion, the INTO strongly advocates for a comprehensive *National Strategy for Women and Girls* that addresses the multifaceted challenges faced by women and girls in Ireland. By prioritising gender equality in education, the workplace, and broader society, we can create a more equitable and just future for all. The INTO is committed to working collaboratively with the DCEDIY and other stakeholders to ensure that this strategy effectively addresses the key priorities outlined in this submission, including the empowerment of marginalised girls, increased participation in STEM fields, improved work-life balance, better supports for women in leadership, and enhanced female-related health supports.

