

Exploring Gender Norms in Ireland

Ireland becomes the first country globally to carry out Gender Norm Research based on OECD Framework

Ireland recently became the first country in the world to apply an [OECD Framework](#) on masculine gender norms to national data. The publication of [Statistical Spotlight No 6 on Gender Norms](#) by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) aims to provide data to measure the characteristics of “restrictive masculinities” and their consequences for women and girls empowerment. It forms part of a wider discussion on the relationships between gender equality and gendered norms in the public and private spheres in Ireland.

This research followed recommendations on norms and stereotypes in education and the media from the Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality, which submitted its report to the Oireachtas in June 2021. A special Joint Committee for Gender Equality was formed by the Oireachtas to consider the recommendations and its report is due to be published shortly. The Citizens’ Assembly’s recommendations included a focus on challenging the remaining barriers and social norms and attitudes that facilitate gender-based discrimination affecting girls and boys, women and men. It included examining the social responsibility of care, and women and men’s co-responsibility for care, especially within the family. The Government has committed to responding to each of these recommendations.

To publicise and raise awareness of this research around masculine gender norms, a webinar was organised by DCEDIY earlier this year. This webinar – entitled “Shifting Masculine Norms to Promote Women’s Empowerment” and moderated by **Cathal Mac Coille** – introduced the OECD Framework and the main findings of Statistical Spotlight no. 6. Featured speakers included thought leaders **Bathylle Missika** from the OECD Development Centre, **Sinéad Gibney**, Chief Commissioner of the Human Rights and Equality Commission and **Orla O’Connor**, Director of the National Women’s Council of Ireland, as well as **Ronnie Downes**, Assistant Secretary, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, **Fergal Fox**, Head of Stakeholder Engagement and Communications for the Health Service Executive Health and Wellbeing programme, and the authors of the Statistical Spotlight report **Nicola Tickner** and **Fiona Corcoran**, Research and Evaluation Unit, Department for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. The webinar was attended by over 130 participants representing civil society organisations, research and academic institutions, trade unions and employer organisations, as well as Government Departments and State agencies. A report on the discussion at the webinar was commissioned by the Department from **Dr Pauline Cullen** of Maynooth University, and can be found [here](#).

OECD “Man Enough” Report

The OECD report “Man Enough? Measuring Masculine Norms to Promote Women’s Empowerment” provided the framework and background data to the Ireland study. This report identifies ten norms, which may be shared by both women and men, that characterise restrictive masculinities. Building an understanding of such norms is increasingly seen as central to promoting gender equality, as it allows us to dis-embed the restrictive elements of norms regarding men’s behaviours while providing opportunities for social transformation towards more progressive and gender equitable norms.

It adds significantly to our understanding of the rigidities that exist and how these can promote inflexible expectations of what it means to be a “real man”. Equally, better data enables policy makers

to understand the factors that influence specific issues such as the low uptake of paternity leave and how to increase female participation in politics and leadership roles.

The framework includes the legal context, attitudinal data and data on actual practices to capture two elements of gender norms – what people think is acceptable and what happens in practice.

“Restrictive Masculinity” Norms

According to the OECD report, the ten norms that characterise restrictive masculinities are divided into two groups, related to either the economic and political spheres or to the private sphere, and can be summarised as follows:

1. Be a breadwinner

This is the belief that the most important role of a man is to earn money and the most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family. While the prevalence of the “breadwinner” norm and its consequences appears less pronounced in Ireland than in many other countries, data from Ireland indicates that a significant proportion of the population does believe in this norm. Women in Ireland are also more likely to be outside the labour force than men, with the majority of those not seeking employment citing reasons related to the care of adults with disabilities/children or other family/personal reasons.

2. Be financially dominant

The belief that men are “financially dominant” and should earn more than women is associated with the belief that women should be taking on a bigger share of the caring and household work. These beliefs can drive women to restrict their career goals by not seeking out higher paid positions and negotiating their pay. These norms can also be internalised by decision makers in the workplace, and can feed into employer biases during hiring and promotion decision-making.

3. A man should work in “manly” jobs

The norm that men should work in “manly jobs” can translate into higher concentrations of men in leadership positions. While approximately one in two people believe that gender equality has been achieved in leadership positions in the workplace and in politics in Ireland, roughly one in six believe that women do not have the necessary qualities and skills to fill positions of responsibility in politics. This belief may be contributing to the low level of female representation in politics, as Ireland had not had a female head of state or head of government over the past 10 years, and was the country with the third smallest share of women in local government in the EU 27 in 2018.

4. A man should be the “ideal worker”

The “ideal worker” norm appears less prevalent in Ireland than in many EU countries, however, there is some evidence that it may be contributing to the low rate of paternity benefit uptake. While the vast majority of the population approves of a man taking parental leave to take care of his children, almost half of all eligible fathers did not use their paternity benefit in 2018. The ideal worker norm may also be encouraging longer weekly working hours and years of working life among men. Men in Ireland work an average of 7.5 more hours a week in their main job than women, and an average of 6.6 more years during their working life. These gender gaps in hours and years worked were among the highest in the EU in 2020.

5. A man should be a “manly” leader

This norm dictates that men in leadership positions should be “manly” leaders, in order for their leadership qualities to be taken seriously. Men are considered natural leaders, leading to widespread social norms questioning women’s ability to lead. Women who do achieve leadership positions are also often expected to emulate men to prove themselves as leaders, and often have to take on a higher burden of work than male leaders to gain the same recognition. This can contribute to the under-representation of women in leadership positions and reinforce the belief that men make better leaders.

6. Not do unpaid care or domestic work

The norm that a ‘real man’ should not do unpaid care and domestic work upholds unequal divisions of household labour, which can present barriers to the participation of women in the paid labour force and hinder their economic empowerment. The OECD Report notes that although women have taken on more paid labour since the start of the 20th century, the contribution of men to unpaid care and domestic work has not increased enough to compensate for this change. There are also clear gender divisions within unpaid work, with men more likely to engage in less frequent tasks such as gardening and repair work, and women more likely to engage in more regular tasks, such as cooking and cleaning.

7. Have the final say in household decisions

The norms of restrictive masculinities also dictate that a ‘real man’ should have the final say in household decisions, giving men disproportionate influence over the family affairs, relationships and activities of other household members. The OECD Report notes that this norm can translate into domestic violence if men feel that their decisions are not respected by other household members, in order to preserve their position of power in the household.

8. Protect and exercise guardianship

This norm dictates that a ‘real man’ should protect and exercise guardianship over women in the household. This can lead to control over women’s behaviour and personal choices, such as how they dress, what activities they engage in outside the home, when they can leave the home and who they can spend their time with. This can also extend to control over which paid professions women are allowed to engage in, which further restricts the access of women to the labour market, particularly to traditionally male-dominated occupations.

9. Dominate sexual and reproductive choices

This norm relates to the expectation that ‘real men’ can dominate the sexual and reproductive choices of women. It includes the denial of a woman’s right to refuse sexual intercourse with her spouse, as well as the expectation that men should have the final say over the use of contraceptives and choices about family size and birth spacing. This can undermine a woman’s sexual health, and can force women to have more children than they otherwise would have wanted, which can increase the burden of unpaid work on women and further restrict their access to the labour market, particularly to full-time and higher paid positions.

10. Control household assets

Restrictive masculinities also prescribe that a ‘real man’ controls household assets and finances, which is key to preserving control in the private sphere. According to the OECD Report, this includes exercising decision-making authority over household expenditure, such as spending on necessities such as food and clothing, as well as long-term financial investments, large purchases

and savings. This can also include preventing women in the household from owning, administering and making decisions over land and other non-financial assets. Men are also more likely to pass on their assets to sons than daughters, leading to even great economic inequality between men and women. Where women internalise these restrictive gender norms, they may defer financial decision making and underestimate their own ability to manage resources.

Statistical Spotlight report (Ireland)

The Statistical Spotlight research – carried out by the Research and Evaluation Unit in DCEDIY – examines where Ireland stands under the OECD framework and draws together data on this topic to highlight trends or patterns. While data on masculinities can be unevenly available and incomplete, information on a number of indicators is already in the public sphere in Ireland and thus easier to collate. Where data is unavailable or unattainable this has been highlighted in the report and substitute data offered.

The work by DCEDIY's Research Unit suggests some progress has been made in Ireland towards some gender-equitable norms of masculinity. Attitudinal data points to changes in gender stereotypical views. However, it also includes data that indicates the persistence of some of the above-mentioned gender norms associated with restrictive masculinity. There remain sticking points in relation to low uptake of parental leave, gender imbalance in unpaid care work and strong support for male breadwinner roles. In relation to parental leave in particular, while in 2016 the vast majority of the population approved of a man taking parental leave to take care of his children, almost half of all eligible fathers did not use their paternity leave in 2018.

The research also considers where gender norms fit into the goals of advancing sustainable development and wellbeing in Irish society, and suggests a number of practical actions which would encourage gender-equitable gender norms and counter restrictive gender norms.

Way Forward

The DCEDIY study shows that even in a country like Ireland where significant legislative and policy measures to promote gender equality have been implemented in recent years, more work can be done to tackle some of the hidden attitudinal drivers of inequality. Moving from restrictive masculinities to gender-equitable masculinities has positive consequences for women's wellbeing and allows men to take on diverse role and behaviours, which in turn is positive for their wellbeing.

While the report provides a baseline against which our progress in society can be measured, there are gaps which need to be addressed and additional data is required to indicate if Ireland as a country is making progress to address these drivers of gender inequality. The report does not include policy analysis or recommendations, but can be used to inform that purpose, and will inform the Government's approach on a number of issues, such as paternity leave, boosting female participation in politics and leadership roles, and health care policy.

The webinar discussion highlighted some areas in which practical short-term actions could possibly work. These include policies that make sharing of parental leave mandatory; the removal of barriers that deter fathers from taking time to care; designing programmes that promote flexible and gender equal workplaces; developing targets to promote equal access to occupational sectors currently dominated by either gender; awareness raising through well-resourced and comprehensive "fact-based" public

campaigns to dispel myths about gender equality; and a systematic review of data gaps with a specific focus on the private sphere.

Many of these are areas which have seen significant activity in recent years, and which can be built on. For example:

- The suite of family leaves available to parents and guardians with caring responsibilities has been expanded and now includes not only maternity leave, adoptive leave and parental leave, but the expansion of paternity leave and benefit and the introduction of non-transferable parent's leave and benefit. It is proposed, under draft legislation currently before the Oireachtas, to introduce a right for parents and carers to request flexible working arrangements. This, and increased investment in the National Childcare Scheme, encourages greater sharing of caring responsibilities between women and men. Proposals are also being advanced to introduce maternity leave for local authority elected members and for members of the Oireachtas, which reflect changed assumptions about the profile of politicians.
- The recently-launched "Zero Tolerance" Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based violence aims to pursue a five year programme of reform to achieve a society which does not accept domestic, sexual and gender-based violence or the attitudes which underpin it. Key elements of the programme are the implementation of updated secondary school curricula at junior and senior cycle to include consent, domestic violence, and coercive control, and awareness raising campaigns focusing on attitudes among men and boys and on consent.
- Targets for gender balance in the leadership and senior management of Irish business, promoted by the Balance for Better Business Review Group, has produced a visible change in the makeup of the boards of Ireland's largest listed companies with almost three quarters of ISEQ20 listed companies now having three or more female Board members.
- The introduction from 2022 of gender pay gap reporting obligations for large employers will prompt employers to examine the reasons for gender pay gaps in their organisation as well as taking measures with a view to reducing those gaps.
- One stark example of occupational segregation is the apprenticeship sector, where only 6% of apprentices in Ireland are women. There are currently 41 apprenticeship programmes that are predominantly male and one apprenticeship programme which is predominantly female (hairdressing). The Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025 includes measures to reduce gender imbalances in the sector, such as the gender-based bursary scheme for the employers of apprentices on any national apprenticeship programme with greater than 80% representation of a single gender.
- Since 2016, the higher education sector in Ireland has been pursuing measures to address the underrepresentation of women among staff, particularly at senior levels, with key milestones including the establishment of the HEA Centre for Excellence in Gender Equality, implementation of the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative, and adoption of the Athena SWAN Charter. Through its funding processes the Irish Research Council is delivering gender balance in the share of awards made to women and to men, and is seen as an international leader in this field. Similarly, Science Foundation Ireland has tracked its grant applications and published its SFI Gender Dashboard since 2011.

Work is also underway on the development of a National Equality Data Strategy. It is intended that the Strategy will be in place from 2023 and that it will provide a general approach for identifying current

gaps in Equality data and guidance on how to fill those gaps, as well as developing standard practices in classification.

The Government has committed in the Programme for Government to developing and implementing a successor to the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2021, which has provided a whole-of-government framework through which women's empowerment is being advanced. As this commitment is progressed during 2023, the issues raised in this study and webinar will be among those which inform future priorities.