



Submission Towards a National Action Plan Against Racism for Ireland

July 2021

Introduction

Early Childhood Ireland is the leading membership organisation in the early years sector, focused on our compelling vision of putting the child at the centre of our work. Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) has a strong track record which spans over five decades, and we currently have 3,900 members, who support over 120,000 children and their families through preschool, afterschool, and full day-care provision nationwide. Our work includes quality enhancement, communications and publications, advocacy, training, support & information for a sector that employs over 30,000 people.

ECI welcomes the opportunity to feed into the National Action Plan Against Racism for Ireland. We believe that the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) sector is key in promoting racial equity in Irish society. We structure this submission around selected questions suggested in the guiding document.

We put forward three core arguments: first, the ELC/SAC sector is a substantial employer of female migrants, and therefore professionalising the sector is key to improving their working lives; second, the development of ELC/SAC services facilitates the labour market integration of migrant/minority parents; third, and most importantly, an accessible and high quality ELC/SAC sector is central to the cognitive, mental, physical and social development of all children – and especially of children from migrant/minority backgrounds. We also extend the understanding of access¹ to ELC/SAC services for children and families to include children's and their parents' participation in services. We do this: (i) because services are accessible it does not mean that parents will bring children to them or bring them

¹ Irish policy does not define what constitutes an accessible ELC or SAC service for a child. However, a useful definition is; 'Access to early care and education means that parents, with reasonable effort and affordability, can enrol their child in an arrangement that supports the child's development and meets the parents' needs'. Friese, S., Lin, V., Forry, N. & Tout, K. 2017. Defining and Measuring Access to High Quality Early Care and Education: A Guidebook for Policymakers and Researchers. OPRE Report #2017-08. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

consistently, for many reasons, (ii) children have a right not just to access ELC services, but to participate equally in them² and to benefit equally from participation³.

Policy recommendations are discussed throughout this submission, and we conclude by providing a summary list of these.

Are there particular sectors of the labour force where action needs to be prioritised to combat racism?

Female migrant workers face multiple layers of disadvantage in the labour market⁴. The first layer arises because they are migrants, and as such:

- They are prone to individual discrimination, defined as unfair treatment based on race and/or ethnic origin;
- It is more likely that they are not fully aware of their rights, or do not know where to seek help;
- As a general rule, they are never as proficient in the local language as their native competitors. In many cases, their linguistic capabilities are very limited;
- Their professional networks are limited, especially in the early years of migration;
- Qualifications obtained in the country of origin are not always recognised in the country of destination, or the process of recognition is costly and lengthy;
- In the case of non-EU migrants, they do not have the same social welfare rights as locals. One of the main rationales for the existence of social welfare benefits is to protect citizens from exploitative work by ensuring that they have access to minimum means of subsistence. By not having access to the same safety nets provided by the state – and also by families – as locals, migrant workers are much more exposed to precarious and exploitative employment practices.
- Also in the case of non-EU migrants, they might have restrictive employment permits, which for example, limit the number of hours that they can work per week.

The above is a non-exhaustive list of factors which limit the options of employment and impose barriers to career progression. As a consequence, the incidence of minimum wage among non-Irish nationals is over twice that of Irish employees⁵. It is worth noting that Irish nationals who belong to

² Correia, N., Camilo, C., Aguiar, C., Amaral, F. Children's right to participate in early childhood education settings: A systematic review, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 100 (2019)

³ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005. General Comment no 7, Implementing child rights in early childhood.

⁴ International Labour Organization. 2003. Booklet 1, Introduction: why the focus on women international migrant workers. Geneva: ILO.

⁵ Maitre, B., McGuinness, S., & Redmond, P. 2017. A study of minimum wage employment in Ireland: the role of worker, household and job characteristics. Dublin, Ireland: ESRI.

race/ethnic minorities can also face stark labour market disadvantages. The most extreme case is the one of Irish Travellers, a group that faces an unemployment rate that evolves around an astonishing 80%⁶.

The other factor is gender. Women are over twice as likely to earn the minimum wage relative to males⁷. One of the main drivers of the gender pay gap is the phenomenon of horizontal occupational segregation⁸. This refers to the clustering of men and women across occupations, which has been historically dictated by gender norms and carry an associated tendency of female-dominated professions to be more precarious than men's. Childcare is known to be one of the main sources of employment for immigrant women around the world. It is no different in Ireland, despite the fact that the exact proportion is not captured by available statistics; but the ELC/SAC sector in Ireland is also a very precarious source of employment. Therefore, any strategy that aims at improving the working lives of women who belong to racial and ethnic minorities necessarily involve promoting the professionalisation of the ELC/SAC sector.

In 2018/2019 the average hourly wage of staff working in the ELC/SAC sector was €12.55⁹. This figure was approximately 47% below the average national wage¹⁰. The sector can also be described as a 'low hours' sector in comparison to others, as over half (54%) work 30 hours or less per week. In addition, contractual conditions are precarious, with the majority of staff being on fixed-term contracts for the academic year. The precariousness is also reflected on the lack of access to basic worker rights – it was estimated that almost 80% of workers do not have sick pay, 90% do not have a private pension and approximately 65% do not have paid maternity leave¹¹.

Moreover, because of the relative underdevelopment of the ELC/SAC sector in Ireland compared to other European contexts, in terms of difficulties of access and overall quality, the informal provision of childcare services is quite prominent in the country. The latest CSO data showed that only 13% of children aged 0-12 attended an ELC/SAC setting. Home-based provision is largely unregulated.

⁶ CSO. 2016. Census of Population 2016 – Profile 8 Irish Travellers, ethnicity and religion. Available from: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8itseh/>

⁷ Maitre et al (2017), op. cit.

⁸ Keane, C., Russell, H. and Smyth, E. 2017. Female participation increases and gender segregation. Dublin: ESRI, Working Paper n. 564.

⁹ Pobal. 2019. 2018/2019 Annual early years sector profile report. Dublin: Pobal.

¹⁰ CSO. 2019a. Earnings and labour costs annual data – 2019. Available from: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/elca/earningsandlabourcostsannualdata2019/>

¹¹ Early Childhood Ireland. 2020. Pathways to Better Prospects: Delivering Decent Terms and Conditions for Early Years Workers in Ireland. A Literature Review. Dublin: Early Childhood Ireland.

Approximately 10% of children were cared for by a childminder, au pair or nanny¹². While the government estimates that there are approximately 15,000 (non-relative) childminders¹³ in Ireland, currently, fewer than 80 childminders are registered with Tusla¹⁴. There are no official estimates on the number of au pairs and nannies. Meanwhile, in countries such as Denmark, informal care outside the family is forbidden by law¹⁵.

Female migrants working in unregulated settings are exposed to another layer of disadvantage, compared to their peers who work in regulated environments. The existing literature provides some accounts of the lived experiences of those who work in domestic settings, with evidence of “high level of exploitation and abuse”¹⁶. Undocumented workers face another layer, as the constant threat of deportation eliminates their power of negotiation.

What measures could be introduced to promote employment and labour market inclusion?

Female employment rate in Ireland (63.7%) is only marginally below the EU average (64.2%), but it is way below the top performing countries. The highest rate is registered in Sweden (75.9%)¹⁷. Ireland also registers the lowest employment rate among lone parents in the EU and the EU’s second highest share of 50–64-year-olds not in paid employment because they are looking after children or incapacitated adults¹⁸.

Many studies have shown that the presence of children in the household is a significant barrier to the participation of mothers in the labour force in Ireland. This is largely due to the high costs of childcare¹⁹. A recent Unicef report that analysed ELC/SAC systems in 41 high-income countries ranked Ireland as having the third least affordable childcare. It was estimated that a couple with two children would have to spend about a third of the average wage on childcare costs – which is only higher in New Zealand and Switzerland²⁰. In 2018/19, the average weekly national fee, per child, for full day provision was €184.36. Other barriers to access also exist. Only 39% of services operate 31 hours or

¹² CSO. 2017. Module on Childcare. Available from: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/q-chi/qnhschildcarequarter32016/>

¹³ A childminder is a person who singlehandedly minds children in the childminder’s own home.

¹⁴ DCEDYI. 2021. National Action Plan for Childminding (2021 – 2028). Dublin: DCEDYI.

¹⁵ Naumann, I., McLean, C., Koslowski, A., Tisdall, K., and Lloyd, E. 2013. Early childhood education and care provision: International review of policy, delivery and funding. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

¹⁶ MRCI. 2012. Part of the family? The experiences of au pairs in Ireland. Dublin: Migrant Rights Centre Ireland.

¹⁷ CSO. 2019b. Women and Men in Ireland 2019. Available from: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-wamii/womenandmeninireland2019/work/>

¹⁸ Sweeney, R. 2020. Cherishing all equally: Inequality and the care economy. Dublin: Tasc, Feps.

¹⁹ Russell, H., McGinnity, F., Callan, T., & Keane, C. 2009. A woman’s place-female participation in the Irish labour market. Dublin: ESRI, The Equality Authority.

²⁰ Gromada, A. and Richardson, D. 2021. Where do rich countries stand on childcare? Florence: Unicef.

more during term time. In addition, more than half of services operate for 38 weeks or less²¹. It is no coincidence that the countries with the highest proportions of women in the labour market also have highly accessible ELC/SAC systems.

Combining work with caring responsibilities in the context of migrant families is especially challenging. In general, they have reduced access to the networks of extended families, which means that they are more dependent on paid childcare support when parental care is not possible. This added to reduced levels of income compared to Irish families on average make ELC/SAC services even more unaffordable. As a result, a study of second-generation migrant children found that immigrant mothers are far less likely to return to work after having children, compared to nationals. While about 42% of Irish mothers returned to work within nine months of giving birth, only 25% of immigrant mothers did so. This finding is particularly relevant given the high rates of full-time employment among migrant women before having children²².

Therefore, the promotion of a high quality, universally accessible ELC/SAC system necessarily incentivises labour force participation among migrant parents – especially migrant mothers. It is true that childcare choices are determined by a complex combination of factors other than the structure of supply of ELC/SAC services. Cultural norms that reinforce gender roles can have a strong influence on childcare arrangements. But evidence from countries with highly developed ELC/SAC systems show that migrants tend to follow the overall attitudes to childcare of the destination country²³ and are highly supportive of public childcare²⁴. This shows how gender norms are not static – on the contrary, they are very much amenable to the shaping of public policy.

How can we ensure the equality of all children in terms of access to services? What initiatives do you think could help to combat racist stereotypes?

Extensive evidence shows that early life experiences are directly connected to cognitive development, physical and mental health, which impact the person's life in the long run²⁵. This way, all children

²¹ Pobal (2019), op. cit.

²² O'Brien, C. 2014. Immigrant parents less likely to return to work after giving birth, report finds. The Irish Times. Available from: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/immigrant-parents-less-likely-to-return-to-work-after-giving-birth-report-finds-1.1883193>

²³ Seibel, V., and Hedegaard, T. 2016. Migrant's attitudes to childcare: An explorative overview of ten migrant groups' attitudes to formal childcare in the Netherlands and Denmark. ESS Conference. Available from: https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/about/conference/HEDEGAARD_SEIBEL_Child-Care-Attitudes-of-Migrants.pdf

²⁴ Breidahl, K. N., Hedegaard, T. F., Kongshøj, K., and Larsen, C. A. 2021. Migrants' Attitudes and the Welfare State: The Danish Melting Pot. Available from: <https://www.elgaronline.com/view/9781800376335.00017.xml>

²⁵ Britto, P., Engle, P., and Super, C. Eds. 2013. Handbook of early childhood development research and its impact on global policy. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

benefit from access to high quality ELC/SAC services. Moreover, it has been extensively shown that children from certain backgrounds benefit even more from this access. The benefits of early childhood education for immigrant children and children from racial minorities are well established. Early education is especially important in the development of the local language, which supports children as they transition across and through the education system. It also provides comprehensive supports to families and fosters integration in the community²⁶.

An analysis of enrolment rates in Ireland shows that the country has achieved nearly universal access for 3- and 4-year-olds, thanks to the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) programme. ECCE is a universal two-year pre-school programme, which provides access to ELC/SAC services for three hours per day, five days per week during term time, free of charge to parents. Data on enrolment to the ECCE programme by ethnicity shows that white children have the highest levels of enrolment (about 94%). Black and Asian children also register rates which are above 90%. However, there is still space for improvement when it comes to the inclusion of children from the Traveller and Roma communities, as their enrolment rates are 73% and 77%, respectively²⁷. The participation of children from the Traveller community is increasing in absolute terms and relative to the Traveller child population is welcome²⁸. However, there are no policy targets or appropriate national programmes that seek to improve access to and participation in ELC and SAC services for these groups of children, and they are required.

Ireland's high-quality annual national early years profile from Pobal, which provides data on the services and service users whose access is supported through the Department of Children's national funding programmes, monitors data only for Traveller children and families. We need annual administrative data to for policymaking and target setting and monitoring on children's and families' access to ELC and SAC services to understand service access for the groups of children and their families that are of interest to the National Action Plan Against Racism in order to develop any required policy and funding actions.

Despite the success of the ECCE programme in promoting access, the free entitlements are limited, both in terms of number of hours and age. The analysis of other indicators suggest that families are very dependent on the free entitlements. Regarding intensity of participation, it is estimated that

²⁶ Matthews, H., & Ewen, D. 2010. Early education programs and children of immigrants: Learning each other's language. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

²⁷ DCEYI. 2020. Improving Access to ELC & SAC. Online Workshop, 1st session, 13 October 2020.

²⁸

Early childhood education has a key role in shaping and changing those racial norms from the very beginning of the individual's social development, helping to form a society with critical and well-informed citizens, and ultimately, to form a more equal society. It is also key in combating more 'tangible' manifestations of discrimination. A vast literature details how discrimination can be experienced by children in educational settings, which include both individual and structural forms of discrimination. The former includes, for example, negative interactions with staff and peers, low educational expectations and devaluation of native languages. The latter includes not having access to high quality services due to the geographical segregation of disadvantaged neighbourhoods and low engagement with parents due to linguistic and cultural barriers³⁷.

Currently, all key documents and pedagogical guidelines in early childhood education in Ireland give central importance to the theme of diversity. The main ones are the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework Aistear, quality standards Síolta and the Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers and Practitioners. They contain principles that are sensitive to cultural diversity in settings, identify potential issues and strategies of response. These principles draw heavily on an anti-bias approach to early childhood education, which can be defined as:

*"Anti-bias approach views children from an early age as active meaning-makers and agents who learn about the surrounding norms and prejudices through socialization, but with the right support of adults they may be equipped to critically think and challenge attitudes and practices that are harmful or unjust to themselves and/or others"*³⁸

Despite the quality of the guidance documents, the successful implementation of anti-bias pedagogical practices strongly depends on practitioners. The overall quality of an ELC/SAC system is intrinsically linked to the quality of the workforce. This brings us back to the importance of actively promoting the professionalisation of the ELC/SAC sector. Qualification levels of ELC/SAC staff have been consistently improving in recent years. In 2019, the total staff with qualifications at NFQ Level 5 or higher corresponds to 94% of all staff working directly with children. A quarter of staff had a qualification of Level 7 or above³⁹. But reaching the policy goal of having a graduate-led workforce, as set by First 5, is only attainable if working conditions in the sector are substantially raised and if professionalisation in its multiple dimensions is fostered.

³⁷ Adair, M. 2015. The impact of discrimination on the early schooling experiences of children from immigrant families. Washington, DC: MPI.

³⁸ Janelidze, A. 2014. Experiences and perspectives of practitioners in culturally diverse early childhood education and care centres in Ireland (page 22). Master's dissertation, Dublin Institute of Technology.

³⁹ Pobal (2019), op. cit.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

- Currently, the ELC/SAC sector is severely underfunded, as the Irish government is the lowest spender in the OECD⁴⁰. Increased investment is a pre-condition for an expansion of centre-based services and for a progressive formalisation of home-based services, improving affordability and accessibility;
- Development of awareness campaigns on childcare rights and programmes, targeted at migrants/minority networks, in multiple languages;
- Introduction of institutional arrangements that channel the increased investment to wages and work conditions. We believe that the best arrangement is the introduction of a public ELC/SAC system, in which private providers are given the option to enter partnerships with the state. The specific design of those partnerships should be based on intensive stakeholder engagement;
- Addressing aspects of professionalization other than pay and conditions. This includes the creation of a professional body, and promoting appropriate initial professional education and continuous professional development (CPD);
- Creation of publicly accessible databases that track information on the racial, ethnic and socio-economic background of workers and characteristics of employment. This would allow for stakeholders to monitor the overall quality of employment and quality differentials according to race/ethnic origin;
- Currently, there is no monitoring of access to ELC and SAC services by children and families in the social groups in Ireland most at risk of experiencing racism and discrimination. This requires annual measurement and monitoring.
- Once work conditions in the sector are significantly improved, settings should have access to mechanisms to retain foreign workers, such as visa sponsorships. This would allow for a reduction in turnover rates. Promoting stable and nurturing relationships is very important from the point of view of children's development;
- The final National Action Plan Against Racism requires the publication of a time-lined implementation plan and a clear budget amount and budget line.

⁴⁰ Early Childhood Ireland. 2021. *Rising to the Challenge - Investing in Our Future. Budget 2021 Submission*. Available from: <https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Budget-2021-Submission-WEB.pdf>