

The National Women's Strategy



Submission by
The Union of Students in Ireland



January 31st 2017
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"Feminism has never been about getting a job for one woman. It's about making life more fair for women everywhere. It's not about a piece of the existing pie; there are too many of us for that. It's about baking a new pie."

- Gloria Steinem

About The Union of Students in Ireland

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) is the national representative body for the 354,000 students in third level education on the island of Ireland. The USI is a membership organisation – its members are affiliated Students' Unions around Ireland, North and South.

The Union of Students in Ireland has always been a force for the recognition and realisation of equality in Ireland. The USI policy on equality, adopted in September 2012, reinforces this commitment. USI is dedicated to the pursuit of gender equality, along with being a long-time proponent of full reproductive rights and education for women and girls' in Ireland.

USI Equality Strategy

The Equality Strategy 2016-2019 passed by USI Congress in March 2016 places heavy emphasis on the pursuit of tangible gender equality within the third level system and experiences outside of the third level system.

The Equality Strategy has 4 key priorities around gender equality over 3 years:

1. To develop further a 'Women in Leadership' initiative to encourage more women to seek office in their students' unions or college societies;
2. To develop a 'Women in Leadership' training pack, to train current Students' Union officers, to assist in encouraging more women to run for leadership positions;
3. To support the extension of gender recognition to those under 16;
4. Training nationally for officers around unconscious bias in their leadership and decision making;
5. Training in dignity and respect in the workplace for SU officers;
6. Human Resources training for SU Presidents around harassment in the workplace;
7. To pursue the campaign to repeal the 8th amendment of the Irish Constitution;

Membership

The majority of our members are fall with the 18-24 years age bracket, and approximately half of them identify as women, who come from a diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds, experiences, and locations across the country.

We represent:

- Waterford Institute of Technology
- University College Cork

- Cork Institute of Technology
- Institute of Technology Tralee
- Limerick Institute of Technology
- Limerick School of Art & Design
- Limerick Institute of Technology Tipperary
- Carlow College
- Institute of Technology Carlow
- Templemore College of Further Education
- National University of Ireland, Galway
- Galway Mayo Institute of Technology
- Galway Mayo Institute of Technology – Castlebar
- Institute of Technology, Sligo
- Letterkenny Institute of Technology
- St. Angela's College, Sligo
- Athlone Institute of Technology
- National University of Ireland, Maynooth
- Dundalk Institute of Technology
- Trinity College Dublin
- Dublin City University
- Dublin Institute of Technology
- Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design & Technology
- National College of Ireland
- Institute of Technology, Tallaght
- Institute of Technology Blanchardstown

A note on language

We recognise that identifying as a woman is both complex and intersectional. There is no one norm for the ‘traditional female student’ when it comes to experience, ethnicity, family status, age, disability or explicit gender identity.

For the purposes of the National Women’s Strategy, we recognise the binary genders endeavour to target groups in a way that will most benefit them, however we would urge that work is done to encourage more inclusivity in relation to gender fluidity and the particular needs of our non-binary Irish community in its work.

Role of USI in the Implementation of the Strategy

USI very much welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the National Women’s Strategy from 2017. We work with and on behalf of thousands of women every day, and see the impacts, both immediate and long term, on them as they progress through education and graduate beyond college level. Systems, structures, legislation, as well as societal attitude and expectation heavily impact our female members trajectory, and ability to succeed throughout their lives.

USI sees this as a fundamental moment in which the status quo, and the rate of change of mechanisms to advance equality, need to be challenged, improved, and re-energised.

As the largest union in the country, USI sees its role as being integral to developing the National Women’s Strategy, particularly for a key cohort of female-identifying students between 18 and 24, who will have progressed into the working world as the strategy concludes in 2020, and will be heavily impacted by the strategy’s implementation.

USI will continue to advance the views of our membership to influence policy to ensure fulfillment and strengthening of rights for our members.

Significant advances have been made, but there are many, many to be worked out and achieved. Now more than ever, we need a strong, committed National Women’s Strategy, one that is bold and courageous in its goals, ambitious in its targets. The rise of right wing leaders both in Europe and the state’s, ones who would seek to diminish or sideline the rights of women and minority women, mean that we must strive to protect advances and solidify rights more than ever.

‘Rights’ and ‘equal rights’ for women don’t mean less rights for another group in society, it’s not a cake. If it was, then the new national women’s strategy should be seen as an opportunity to make a new one.

Female-identifying students in Ireland - the current context

According to data from the CSO¹ and Eurostat², women in Ireland are living longer and are better educated than their male counterparts, and yet, they are paid less across the board. This is one of the most significant obstacles which we face in the National Women's Strategy, but the reasons for it can be found rooted across sectors from casual sexism to lack of access to full reproductive rights.

Its origins are ingrained in policy restrictions around access to contraception, lack of substantial encouragement and support for women in STEM, academia, barriers in access to education like the cost of childcare in Ireland and alignment of resources at second level which encourage women into different subjects and into certain expectations different to their male student counterparts.

Out of 93 elected Students' Union officers, 36 are female, which indicates that 39% of full time elected student leaders identify as female. This figure is only slightly higher than the female representation in the 32nd Dáil. It is clear that a lot of work is still to be done.

USI has particular concerns regarding the future of Higher Level education funding in Ireland, and its impacts on women's attainment and access. Proposals by government of a student loan scheme similar to the UK or Australia would be detrimental in this regard. The gender pay gap which exists sees males being paid more than women for the same job. The possibility of a student loan scheme will see women find a loan much harder to repay than their male counterparts.

Although we have more women represented than ever before in our government, we cannot deny that women are underrepresented. 22.2 % of TD's in the Dáil are female. The number of women TD's is still quite low and is not an accurate representation of gender in our society. The General Election 2016 was progressive for women getting involved in politics as a gender quota was introduced, but again, work to be done is significant. We are far away from a semblance of parity, and this in turn heavily affects not only decision making, but influences the expectations and norms for the 17-24 age group as they progress through education.

¹ <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-mip/measuringirelandsprogress2012/>

² http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Gender_pay_gap_statistics

Consultations

We recognise the consultative nature of the development of the National Women's Strategy beyond 2017, and endeavoured to capture in a more tangible sense, the priorities for our membership on the future of the strategy.

- (a) On the 28th of January 2017, we conducted a special student consultation, with 40 female students participating in a session where the purpose of the National Women's Strategy was identified, followed by group discussions identifying issues which we grouped into 'Urgent', 'Short-Term', and 'Long-Term';
- (b) On the 30th of January, we conducted a survey with our broader membership. The results of this survey, which included 90 responses from students are worked into the spirit of this submission;
- (c) We directly contacted female-identifying Students' Union elected representatives to seek their views and priorities;
- (d) We also actively encouraged our membership and Women's Network to contribute their own written submissions to the National Women's Strategy;

Strategic Objective 1: Advance Socio-Economic Equality for Women & Girls

1. Women and work:

- According to the Nevin institute, over 60% of those on low pay are women, while in the 'CSO Men and Women in Ireland' report found that 50% of women in Ireland were earning €20,000 or less.
- Many sectors where women predominate such as hospitality or retail have been at the frontline of aggressive casualisation and job and wage erosion, with low pay compounded by precarious work and non-fixed hour contracts
- The gender pay gap between men and women in Ireland – a gap which has moved from 12.6% in 2009 to 14.4% in 2013.
- The fact that 16% of those living below the poverty line are in work is one stark indicator that current wage levels are not adequate to meet the cost of living and the deprivation levels provide further insight into the shortfall experienced by many female workers, in particular.
- According to a recent TASC report (p.47)³, across the OECD countries, Ireland has the fourth highest proportion of low paid workers after the U.S., Estonia, and South Korea, and the majority of those on low incomes are women. It has been estimated that young women's wages are 90% of male earnings but for older

³ <http://www.tasc.ie/publications/cherishing-all-equally-2016/>

cohorts this ratio widens. Women aged between 35 years and 44 years earn 71.5% of men's wages and those in the 55 to 64 years age group have incomes that are only 61.4% of those of men. Arguably it is at the time when women age and have greater resource demands in terms of health, care and other life costs, that the cumulative impact of their interrupted employment patterns becomes most punishing.

2. The Gender pay gap:

- The Cassell's Report which was published in July of last year recommended a student loan system may be introduced to help with the high cost of education. This will affect many of our present and future members. USI organised a national demonstration which seen 12,000 people join us to oppose the possibility of student loans.
- Females were one group which the government failed to think about was how the introduction of a student loan scheme would affect. A recent study by Morgan McKinley found that women earn twenty percent less than males. This is roughly €12,500 per annum.
- The possibility of a student loan scheme will see women find this loan harder to repay than their male counterparts. For example, in America, a woman with a MBA will earn \$7,000 less than her male classmate. This gap will continue to rise. Women will find this loan more difficult to pay off than their male classmates because of the gender gap.

3. Childcare:

- The proportion of women who access the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) on the basis of Childcare is significantly higher than that of males at college level.

4. Female-dominated professions:

- Nursing - More support is needed for nurses and student nurses in placement and payment, who are increasingly under pressure and more and more incidents are occurring relating to bullying the workplace;
- Early Childhood education - Currently there are 4,600 Early Childhood services (including full daycare, sessional and out of school provision) in operation, 40% of which are community-based, with the remaining 60% located in the private sector. More than 25,000 people (99% female) are employed in the sector. Most employees working in this sector do not earn a living wage⁴. A typical contract in the sector offers €10 an hour for a 15 hour week, working only 38 weeks year as dictated by ECCE payments. The way contracts are constructed, as influenced by the ECCE scheme, mitigates against a living wage for those working in the sector.

⁴ <http://www.lowpaycommission.ie/consultations/early-childhood-ireland.pdf>

Strategic Objective 2: Improve Women's and Girls' physical & mental health

1. Reform of Sexual Health Education

- USI undertakes a national 'Sexual Health and Guidance' week campaign with our member organisations every year, but it remains a fact that we are attempting to educate students too late when it comes to sexual health and positive relationships. A reform is immediately needed of the content in sexual health education at second level when they begin to be sexually active.
- Recommendation: A review and reform plan is implemented which heavily involves students in the sector feeding into it with regard to content and presentation of content that is most appropriate for their age and experience.
- Emphasis on consent: We heavily recommend that resourcing is allocated to ensuring young people are educated from a much earlier age on healthy relationships, as well as a clear educational framework regarding consent. Our USI members have reflected time and time again at the significant affects lack of education and awareness around consent, as well as 'safe' and healthy relationships has on young women in particular at third level as they leave home and do not have parental supervision as readily in their everyday lives.
- Recommendation: Organisations like the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre (DRCC) and Smart Consent, NUIG require the support of a strategic plan to resource them to embark on wider training programs for both college level students and second level students around consent.
- Recommendation: Any reforms or additions to sexual health education at second level must be cognisant of gender fluidity and sexuality, and strive towards best educational practice in the area, rather than keeping education on the issue to the bare minimum, and expecting students to seek out such information from parents or guardians. The reality is that young people are turning to search engines and peers for guidance, which is much less than ideal. We must acknowledge this. We would also recommend that extensive feedback is received from students about the content, rather than evaluations restricted to teachers.
- Recommendation: More support is required for National Awareness campaigns to educate young people about consent, gender-based violence and healthy relationships, this can be done in conjunction with the Irish Secondary Schools Union (ISSU) on second-level appropriate content and the USI in targeting 18-24 year olds.
- Recommendation: Sexual Health education should not vary across schools due to the ethos or 'value system' attached to that school. It should not be taught as part of a religious education module, which inhibits open discussion around various aspects of sexuality among other restrictions, and it should not be taught solely as part of science/biology, as this restricts discussion to being purely biological and neglects consent and emotional attachment in its curriculum.

Overall recommendation to the NWS:

- All young women have the right to receive the highest quality sexual health education, along with their male peers, without influence on content from religious institutions.
- Emphasis needs to be put on reform of current content to ensure open discussion is allowed between peers in an accessible environment

2. Access to Contraception

- There is significant work to be carried out in this area, despite general views that access to contraception is currently sufficient. It may be much more accessible than it was, but it is certainly not at an acceptable level.
- Geographically and regionally, there is difference in the provision of contraceptive services. Particular issues related to access contraceptive services lie in the stigma attached to attending a pharmacy, and the lack of confidentiality or privacy around this service in the first place.
- A massive issue is the prohibitive nature of the cost attached to accessing emergency contraception
- Our recommendation is that barriers to access are immediately redressed in favour of the young woman who requires it.

3. Targeted Sexual Health for minorities

- Young women from minority ethnic backgrounds need to be targeted in particular by resources around access to contraception and education in that area and to break stigma around the use of services.

4. Defining Consent:

- There is a strong belief among the membership of the USI that 'consent' urgently needs to be defined in Irish legislation when it comes to sexual intercourse and interactions.

5. Women in sport:

- In 2015, Trinity College Dublin awarded over sixty sports scholarships to athletes who had achieved outstanding ability in various sports. Out of these sixty scholarships as few as one in four sports scholarships were awarded to women. More transparency and support to develop women in sport is needed.

6. Mental Health:

- Women are four times more likely than men to suffer from stress-related mental health disorders. Women are also more likely to suffer from an eating disorder. A woman with an undiagnosed eating disorder could be left to suffer for more than

ten years before being given a diagnosis, and especially where anxiety features are prominent, it is more likely their symptoms will be dismissed rather than diagnosed or treated. The reasons for this are entirely environmental, societal and cultural.

- Women require further and targeted support around mental health and in particular, at a community level.
- Mental health services in colleges need to be strengthened significantly more than at present given the increasing demand.

7. Body shaming, peer pressure, social media:

- Social Media has changed rapidly in recent years, with your appearance being an enormous part of everyday life. Your online persona has just as high expectations as your real one. USI strongly believes that there are many issues relating to social media that are causing body shaming and a false sense of perfection which stems from peer pressure. This has huge knock on effect in terms of confidence and can lead to many issues such as mental health, eating disorders and personal development.
- In particular, women are increasingly the victims of a culture of ‘revenge porn’, which is increasing among college-age social media users. Legislation in the area needs to be immediately looked at, as well as education to social media users about their online presence and safety.

8. Access to smear tests:

- Access to smear tests is proving a worrying issue for students. USI believe that students have a the right to a smear test when they present with symptoms relating to their abdomen, or menstrual cycle. Anyone who is concerned should be afforded the opportunity to have a smear test. The age needs to be lowered below 25 for an initial smear test to ensure that any issues can be caught in the initial stages.

9. Repeal of the 8th Amendment

The Union of Students in Ireland has a strong, long-standing commitment to the advancement of reproductive rights for young women and girls in Ireland. As it stands, Ireland has one of the strictest, most restrictive health systems in the world when it comes to reproductive rights and access to abortion services, seen in Article 40.3.3 of the Constitution.

Due to the way the 8th amendment has been interpreted throughout Irish law, it permeates through the policies of our healthcare system, for instance within the HSE Consent policy⁵, which

⁵ To quote the HSE Consent policy page 41, Section 7.7.1 ***“because of the Constitutional provisions on the right to life of the unborn [Article 40.3.3] there is significant legal uncertainty regarding a pregnant woman’s right to [consent]”***. This section of the policy allows the HSE to apply for injunctions from the High Court which

removes the right of consent from those who are pregnant in comparison to non-pregnant adults. This element of 'consent' is often missed when we think about the impacts of the 1983 amendment.

We campaign for choice in the full knowledge that choice is not 'flippant' or 'casual'. Any decision to end a pregnancy is a difficult decision, one that is not taken easily or 'on a whim' by those who make it or travel from our shores for procedures in the UK or elsewhere.

Choice can only exist when the person directly affected, the person who is pregnant - has ownership over the decisions they make. The 8th Amendment does not allow for that ownership. It doesn't respect the right of an individual to make decisions regarding their pregnancy.

USI's involvement in this debate in the past as seen in cases through the courts since the 1980's (eg. *SPUC v Grogan*) led to change of legislation so that information about abortion could be distributed freely in the state. This is because that information is not only sought after, but necessary. Students in campuses across Ireland walk into students' union welfare officers every week needing support and information due to unplanned pregnancies, for a myriad of reasons. They deserve to know all of their options regardless of their situation. They are owed that much, and we fought through the courts to let them have it. We shouldn't have to fight for information regarding healthcare.

USI continues to **campaign for access to free, safe and legal abortion services** when a person's life is at risk, including from suicide or if a foetus has a fatal abnormality and cannot survive.

USI also has a **clear mandate since our National Congress voted in 2009 to campaign for the repeal of the 8th amendment of the Irish Constitution**, allowing for legislation to be made to allow for accessible abortion rights in Ireland.

No other body parts are governed by our constitution in the manner that wombs and ovaries are. This no doubt sends a message to our society about the way in which we set apart those who have wombs and those who do not, by dictating their decisions once they are pregnant. This is inherently discriminatory and lends significantly to the treatment of women and girls in particular in Ireland - around their expected reproductive role and place in the Irish state. This cannot continue.

The UK Department of Health releases statistics each year on the number of women and girls who present addresses from the Republic of Ireland at abortion clinics in England and Wales. These statistics show that approximately one quarter of women who provide Irish addresses are aged between the ages of 18-25, the average age of our student population.⁶

The failure to provide services in Ireland creates considerable psychological, physical and financial hardship for those who are either forced to travel outside the country for abortion or forced to

compel pregnant women to receive treatment where they do not consent to proposed treatment plans, whether these are in line with international best practice or not.

⁶ <https://www.ifpa.ie/Hot-Topics/Abortion/Statistics>

carry an unwanted pregnancy to term because of restrictions imposed upon them. No one, student or otherwise, should have to face these hardships.

Recommendations:

- Immediately move to repeal the 8th amendment of the Irish constitution, without creating legislative barriers to access, or proposing anything else to take its place within the constitution, a referendum to the people must be part of the strategy for 2017-2020.
- Remove entirely the criminalisation of women, which completely infringes on a sense of dignity and agency of decision-making about bodily autonomy
- In the meantime (up until a referendum) much more effort and resources must be put into post-abortion care and support for those who have travelled - many of them students.
- The lack of access to abortion disproportionately affects women in the 17-24 age cohort, who have much less access to (a) support networks (b) the cost of travel (c) the cost of the treatment
- We need to accept, as part of the new national women's strategy, that abortion is a reality in Ireland, and that we need acknowledge it and support women who undergo that procedure. Every woman should have the right to the best quality health services without criminal sanctions.
- We need to enact laws providing for access that is free, safe and legal, in line with best practice.

Strategic Objective 3: Promote women's equal and active citizenship

1. Women and education

The USI works closely with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Department of Education on the promotion of access to third level. At European level, the Bologna Process emphasises the objective of strengthening the drive for social inclusion and ensuring that higher education is more representative of the whole of society – including men and women, urban and rural dwellers, and members of all socio-economic groupings.

While Ireland has made significant strides around female participation, our focus group consultation revealed that women still felt extremely affected by the lack of female role models (particularly in STEM subjects), as well as an environment at third level which often showed comfort with sexism and sexist remarks by male counterparts and lecturers.

Gender equality rankings for Irish universities: 2015

Rank	University	Senior posts % female	Professor % female
1	Limerick	33%	31%
2	Trinity	32%	16%
3	UCD	30%	19%
4	Maynooth	28%	23%
5	DCU	28%	17%
6	Cork	27%	16%
7	Galway	21%	14%
All universities		29%	19%

Source: Higher Education Authority

Recommendation: USI recognises the financial barriers which affect women in particular when it comes to accessing third level education due to childcare and caring costs predominantly left with them. The NWS should encourage third level institutions to engage in community partnerships so that an increased number of rural-based women and mothers can pursue higher level education. Similarly, those currently enrolled in part-time courses cannot access student services and student assistance funds in the same way as full time students, despite the fact that part-time courses may be the only possibility for them (if they have children, dependents, or a disability for instance). This needs to be addressed.

4. Women in leadership in education

- As seen in the above graph, the stark reality at third level is that women are not progressing at the same rate as their male peers when it comes to higher level academic positions.
- We urge the NWS to propose and support bold measures to affect gender balance at senior positions in Academia.

5. Women & Disability

- USI eagerly awaits the ratification of the UN Convention on the rights of people with disabilities, but monitoring must include a gendered lens.
- Recommendation: Immediately ratify the UNCPRD, to include a gendered focus

6. Women in the Travelling Community

- USI recognises with regret the recent removal of a dedicated staff member in Pavee Point to deal with issues of Education & access to education, and notes that not enough resources are being attributed to the sector to ensure young traveller

women stay in school and have access to FE and Third level opportunities in education. Like in any minority group, it is the women and young girls who are found to suffer most when it comes to educational attainment and accessing other state services.

- Recommendation: That the NWS sets out a key aim of recognising the Travelling community as an ethnic group

7. Article 41.2: Women's duties in the home

- The presumption of 'natural' sex differences, specifically relating to a female's duty to be the primary personal responsible for raising a family and running the home and duties relating to such, is quite specifically set out in our constitution.
- Not only does this significantly impact societal attitudes towards females, but it explicitly apportions the duty of raising children and the requirement to remain in the house to females rather than to their partners (if such a partner is male).
- The pervasion of this as an oppressive patriarchal structure which restrains females and their opportunities for advancement, and with a constitutional footing, prohibits the equality of women's access to social and political circles which inhibit their progression as leaders and economic actors;
- While it is important to recognise caring work, this should not be done on a gendered basis as it is at the moment.
- Recommendation: To include in the strategy a strong commitment to using gender neutral language in the constitution and to remove or amend the article which indicates that a woman's place is in the home.

Strategic Objective 4: Advance Women in Leadership

- Programmes need to be designed and resourced via the NWS 2017-2012 which encourage more women at third level to consider leadership positions. Positive measures need to be put in place to address areas of concern for women (eg. confidence, public speaking, negotiating etc) which have already been identified;
- The USI will roll out any such training program across colleges in Ireland.
- A ring-fenced allocation should be dedicated by the Department of Justice and Equality to develop a national leadership program for third level female students around political leadership and citizenship;
- Participants in the USI consultation identified the lack of visible female role models in business and public service as an area needing attention. The number of female voices on radio has been a focus of work for Women on the Air in recent years. USI believes the introduction of a comprehensive, highly visible, role model campaign targeted a young girls is needed. Such a campaign should be created by women and girls for girls to ensure it is on message and relatable.

Strategic Objective 5: Embed Gender Equality in decision making

- USI recommends that equality proofing is applied in a much more systems-based approach to government proposals and budgets rather than as a separate, once-off piece of analysis.
- Guidelines for gender-proofing policy proposals and initiatives need to be created and made available to policy developers in public office and the private sector.

Additional Proposal: Ending Gender-Based Violence & Harassment

- We would contend, along with the National Women's Council and others, that the area of gender-based violence, and violence against women, is significant insofar as to incur its own set of strategic objectives.
- The timeline is urgent, and it is a growing problem, one that we are not sufficiently applying adequate resources, supports, training or education to.
- We have outlined some of our recommendations regarding this under our proposals for consent education at second and third level, as well as further education and campaigns around 'safe' and 'healthy' relationships, which needs to start even earlier than the college system.
- Much greater resourcing needs to be allocated to support services such as the DRCC and domestic violence shelters and centres around the country.