

**September 2024**

NDA Submission to inform the development of the new National Strategy for Women and Girls

# Introduction

The National Disability Authority (NDA) is the independent statutory body with a duty to provide information and advice to the Government on policy and practice relevant to the lives of persons with disabilities, and to promote Universal Design. The NDA has already completed the online survey component of the public consultation on the development of the new National Strategy for Women and Girls (NSWG) and welcomes the opportunity to provide some additional observations for the consideration of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

# Additional Observations

In addition to the comments and responses provided in the online survey, the NDA wishes to highlight the following additional issues and themes for consideration as part of the development of the new NSWG.

## Consultation and engagement with disabled women and girls

Since the adoption of the previous National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017–2022, Ireland has ratified the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The UNCRPD imposes wide-ranging obligations on all Government Departments and public bodies to take steps to realise the rights of disabled people, including disabled women. This includes a requirement to consult and actively involve people with disabilities in decision-making processes concerning issues that affect them, as outlined in Article 4(3) of the Convention.

In this regard, the NDA has published updated guidance, entitled **Participation Matters**, for government departments, public bodies and local authorities on how to effectively engage with disabled people, including disabled women, in decision-making processes.[[1]](#footnote-1) Notably, the guidance document explains how to consult and involve Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs) in line with the approach mandated by the UNCRPD and may be instructive to the Department when undertaking this consultation exercise.

The NDA strongly encourages the Department to meaningfully engage with women with disabilities, through their representative organisations, as part of the consultation on the new NSWG. In particular, the NDA advises that Disabled Women Ireland, a DPO, may have relevant insights to share.[[2]](#footnote-2) Furthermore, the NDA has been assisting the Department with the development of a new National Disability Strategy through a broad comprehensive public consultation initiative. As part of this consultation, the NDA convened a specific focus group with women with disabilities and suggests that this approach could be replicated for the new NSWG.

## Addressing intersectional discrimination and ensuring policy coherence

The NDA has prepared a **briefing paper on Article 6 UNCRPD** relating to women with disabilities.[[3]](#footnote-3) The paper provides an overview of key policies, programmes, services, supports and data that exist in the Irish context connected to women with disabilities. The NDA advises that the Department consider this briefing paper when developing the new strategy.

In addition to the new NSWG, the Department is also developing a new National Disability Strategy. The NDA underlines the importance of coherency and alignment between the forthcoming National Disability Strategy and the new NSWG. This will ensure that intersectional issues faced by disabled women and girls are more comprehensively addressed in policy and practice.

The importance of an intersectional approach in national equality strategies was underscored in a 2022 study by the Centre for Effective Services, which evaluated the implementation of three equality strategies, including the previous National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017–2022.[[4]](#footnote-4) The review found that the development and implementation of equality policies would not be complete without adequate responses to intersectional discrimination and inequality. It also recommended that the Department undertake further research to explore how an intersectional approach can be effectively incorporated into various phases of the policy cycle.

## Sexual and reproductive health for women with disabilities

The NDA was assigned lead responsibility for implementing two actions under the previous National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017–2022, one of which was to undertake further research to guide maternity services and supports for women with disabilities during and post pregnancy. In 2021, the NDA published a report entitled ‘**Experiences of Women with Disabilities in their Journey through Maternity Services in Ireland’**, using data from the 2020 National Maternity Experience Survey to consider the maternity care experiences of women with disabilities.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The report found that there were many similarities between the maternity care experiences of those with and without disabilities. In addition, nearly all of the most and least positive experiences for both groups of women in each area of care and across the entire maternity pathway were the same. However, women with a disability reported less positive experiences overall in their antenatal care, in their care during labour and birth, in their care in hospital after birth, and in their overall maternity care.

The NDA report makes a series of recommendations, including ways in which current or planned quality improvement initiatives can adequately address the needs of women with disabilities or additional care needs. The NDA advises that these recommendations be progressed as part of the development of the new NSWG.

The Centre for Disability Law and Policy at University of Galway also undertook work in this area as part of its former **RE(AL) Productive Justice Project**. This project examined the issues experienced by disabled women around fertility, contraception, abortion, pregnancy and childbirth, identifying a range of challenges and barriers including:

* Inaccessibility of services including geographic location, spatial distribution of services, transportation and information.
* Denial of support by health and social care professionals including the failure to provide referrals, to consider alternative options, or to adapt services to meet specific needs.
* Ableism including prejudice, bias and discrimination.
* Invisibility of disabled people along the reproductive journey.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The report also found that sex education for young people is not consistent across schools and does not always include the particular issues that disabled young people may face. It further underlined that sex education for people with an intellectual disability was particularly lacking.

Similar issues were raised during consultations on the new National Disability Strategy, with disabled women participants highlighting a need for inclusive sex education. They said the lack of appropriate sex education contributes to beliefs among the public that disabled people are not fully capable of having relationships or having children. Participants called for schools to deliver inclusive sex education that centres on lived experience and includes discussions around consent and ways of making intimacy and sex accessible to all. In this regard, the NDA notes that Ireland's primary and post-primary school curricula, including as regards sex education, are set by the Minister for Education who is advised by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

There have been recent changes in the sphere of sex education, arising on foot of the publication of the 2019 NCCA Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post-primary schools. The NCCA report recommended the development of a single, integrated curriculum for RSE and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) spanning both primary and post-primary education. Work on new specifications for SPHE have followed, with updated SPHE curricula recently introduced for both Junior and Senior Cycles. Additionally, as part of the redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum, the NCCA recently consulted on the Draft Primary Curriculum Specifications for the curriculum area of Wellbeing, which will include SPHE.

Despite these welcome developments, the NDA advises that students attending special schools may not receive sex education appropriate to their age. Special schools are designated as primary schools, meaning that students – regardless of their age – receive relationship and sexuality education in line with the primary school curriculum. The designated status of special education provision as primary education provision also results in other anomalies and disadvantages, such as a lack of career guidance for students and lack of access to Transition Year. The NDA advises that there should be a fundamental rethinking of how special schools are designated, and that all students should receive age appropriate RSE and SPHE education.

## Violence and abuse against disabled women

Research suggests that women with disabilities are more likely to experience domestic violence, emotional abuse, and sexual assault than women without disabilities. For example, the Fundamental Rights Agency in an EU-wide survey in 2014, found that 34% of women with a health problem or disability have experienced physical or sexual partner violence, compared with 19% of women who do not have a health problem or disability.

In addition, in early 2024, the NDA published a report on the **Experience of sexual harassment and sexual violence by disabled students in Irish Higher Education Institutions**.[[7]](#footnote-7) 70% of disabled survey respondents were women. The findings from this report show notable proportions of students with and without disabilities who have experienced sexual harassment and sexual violence. Students with disabilities (not a mental health difficulty) were more likely to have experienced sexual coercion, having sexual rumours spread about them online and were more likely to have experienced all forms of sexual violence and all forms of perpetrator tactics than those without disabilities. Students with a mental health difficulty were more likely to have experienced all forms of sexual harassment, sexual violence and perpetrator tactics than those without disabilities.

Furthermore, some women who participated in the recent consultations on the new National Disability Strategy shared personal experiences of violence and abuse, including rape and coercive control. Consultation participants voiced concern about the lack of accessible domestic violence supports for disabled women, particularly in rural areas. There was also a feeling that disabled women may be reluctant to report violence or abuse due to fears of not being believed or that their children might be taken from them. Other barriers to reporting abuse or seeking support included lack of economic independence, societal attitudes and a reluctance to use helplines due to privacy concerns.

The NDA advises the Department to take specific actions to tackle abuse and violence against disabled women (including within higher education institutions) and ensure accessible supports for disabled victims and survivors of abuse and violence. In this regard, the Department may wish to be aware that Women’s Aid are carrying out a research project on **‘Disabled Women’s Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence in Ireland’**, which seeks to gain a deeper understanding of intimate partner violence against women with disabilities in Ireland.[[8]](#footnote-8) The NDA is part of the Research Advisory Group for this project.

## Women and girls with autism

The recently published **Autism Innovation Strategy** acknowledges that there are gaps in data available on autism, including because many autistic people have not been formally identified as autistic, particularly autistic women and girls. The strategy notes that there is evidence that rates of autism identification differ significantly across genders: for example, males are four times more likely than females to be identified as autistic.

Identification of autism can be important in ensuring autistic women and girls receive appropriate supports and interventions, with research demonstrating, in particular, that children with autism benefit from early identification and intervention. The NDA therefore advises that the Department identify appropriate partners to undertake research on the reasons for the under-identification of women and girls with autism in an Irish context.

## Women with mental health issues

Women and girls have specific experiences and needs in terms of their mental health, with young women experiencing greater levels of some mental health issues than young men. As outlined in **Embedding Women’s Mental Health in Sharing the Vision**, a report prepared by the specialist group on women’s mental health to support the implementation of Sharing the Vision, young women (aged 12-25 years) in Ireland have:

* increased levels of anxiety and are more likely to experience bullying and to have reported self-harm, suicide ideation and a suicide attempt than men.
* decreased levels of self-esteem, body esteem, resilience, and other protective factors than males of the same age.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In addition, women are more likely to report emotional, nervous, or psychiatric problems like depression or anxiety than men (8% vs. 4%), with this gender gap increasing with age. The NDA advises that the strategy elaborate measures to enhance the mental health and wellbeing of women and girls, including through implementation of the Women’s Health Action Plan 2024-2025 and the recommendations in Embedding Women’s Mental Health in Sharing the Vision report.

## Disabled women in further and higher education

People with a disability, including disabled women, remain under-represented both in further and higher education. In 2022, Solas figures indicated that there were 12,704 learners enrolled in further education and training programmes who reported having at least one type of disability, constituting 6.8% of all learners enrolled in the same year.[[10]](#footnote-10) Of the learner enrolments that reported a disability, 42.2% were men and 57.8% were women. Meanwhile, AHEAD reported that there were 20,351 students with disabilities registered for disability support services in higher education in Ireland during the 2022-2023 academic year,[[11]](#footnote-11) representing 7.4% of the total student population (no gender breakdown available).[[12]](#footnote-12)

The NDA would recommend a Universal Design in Education approach (UDE) that ensures inclusion is key to achieving the right to education and training as enshrined in the UNCRPD, the first legally binding instrument to contain a reference to the concept of quality inclusive education and training. This clearly articulates the importance of Universal Design as the preferred approach to an inclusive society. The NDA’s Centre for Excellence in Universal Design has prepared a paper which describes the current educational policy landscape in Ireland and proposes a ‘whole systems’ approach to inclusive education.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The **Lifelong Learning project**, published by Aontas, identified several barriers preventing marginalised groups, including people with disabilities, from engaging in further learning in adulthood such as the financial cost, access to childcare, trauma, self-esteem and confidence. A lack of hybrid-learning options, unsuitable home learning environments, and high volumes of coursework were also raised as issues.[[14]](#footnote-14) A report by the Higher Education Authority and National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee on the **Experiences of and Challenges Faced by Disabled Postgraduate Students** highlighted similar challenges, including financial challenges associated with the additional cost of disability, and a lack of part-time study options.[[15]](#footnote-15) Furthermore, the continued reliance on women to carry out the majority of unpaid care was identified as a significant barrier to skills development and participation in employment during a discussion organised by the National Skills Council.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The NDA recommends that the new NSWG include measures to promote the participation of disabled women in further and higher education.

## Gender dimensions of care

Census 2022 revealed that almost 300,000 people are providing regular unpaid care, accounting for 6% of the population. The majority of unpaid carers in Ireland are women, with 61% (181,592) of carers identifying as women and 39% (117,536) identifying as men. Almost two-thirds (64%) of carers were aged between 40 and 64 years.

Family Carers Ireland noted previously that the vast majority of recipients of the three care-related social protection schemes (Carer’s Allowance, Carer’s Benefit and Carer’s Support Grant) are women, suggesting that the bulk of fulltime caring work is undertaken by women. The June 2021 report of the Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality echoed this point, reporting that 98% of full-time carers are women.[[17]](#footnote-17) The Citizens’ Assembly report also highlighted additional challenges experienced by carers, including the costs associated with caring and lack of access to adequate pension cover for family carers (predominantly women) when they retire. The Citizens Assembly proposed a range of recommendations to improve models of care and supports for carers and disabled people, covering pensions, social welfare payments, respite provision and supports for independent living.

The NDA also notes that during the consultation on the new National Disability Strategy, participants from the Travelling Community expressed the view that the burden of care is even greater for Traveller women, especially for older Traveller women, given Traveller women are more likely to be homemakers than settled women and as there are higher levels of illness and disability in the Traveller Community.

The NDA advises that the new NSWG outline measures to address the highly gendered nature of caring, including by implementing the recommendations of the Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality.

# Conclusion

The NDA welcomes the opportunity to input on the consultation to inform the development of the next National Strategy for Women and Girls. We would be happy to engage with the Department on any of the points raised in this submission.

1. The NDA’s Participation Matters guidelines can be accessed at the following link: <https://nda.ie/publications/participation-matters-guidelines-on-implementing-the-obligation-to-meaningfully-engage-with-disabled-people-in-public-decision-making> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. More information on Disabled Women Ireland is available on their website: <https://www.disabledwomenireland.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The NDA’s Article 6 UNCRPD briefing paper can be accessed at the following link: <https://nda.ie/publications/series-of-papers-on-individual-united-nations-convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-uncrpd-articles> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The study is available at the following link: <https://www.effectiveservices.org/journal/realising-the-promise-of-equality-policy> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The NDA report is available at the following link: <https://nda.ie/publications/experiences-of-women-with-disabilities-in-their-journey-through-maternity-services-in-ireland> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The final RE(AL) Productive Justice report is available at the following link: <https://www.universityofgalway.ie/centre-disability-law-policy/research/projects/completedprojects/real/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The NDA report is available at the following link: <https://nda.ie/publications/experience-of-sexual-harassment-and-sexual-violence-by-disabled-students-in-irish-higher-education-institutions> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. More information on the Women’s Aid research project is available at the following link: <https://www.womensaid.ie/get-informed/advocacy/research-projects/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Embedding Women’s Mental Health in Sharing the Vision report is available at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/5f65e-embedding-womens-mental-health-in-sharing-the-vision/> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Solas ‘This is FET – Learners with Disabilities 2022’ report is available at the following link: <https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/dfa32cd975/disabilities-fet-report.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The AHEAD report is available at the following link: <https://www.ahead.ie/news-participationrates2022/3> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. These figures should be considered within the context of 22% of the Irish population reporting a disability in the 2022 Census. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The paper is available at the following link: https://universaldesign.ie/publications/universal-design-in-education-and-training-policy-landscape-in-ireland [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The Aontas report is available at the following link: <https://www.aontas.com/learner-stories/lifelong-learning-research> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The HEA and NDPAC report is available at the following link: <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2023/12/ONLINE-v2-NDPAC-2.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. A summary of the National Skills Council meeting discussing the challenges facing women and people with disabilities accessing the labour market is available at the following link: [gov - National Skills Council discusses barriers facing women and persons with disabilities in accessing the labour market (www.gov.ie)](https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/2f06b-national-skills-council-discusses-barriers-facing-women-and-persons-with-disabilities-in-accessing-the-labour-market/) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The report of the Citizens’ Assembly is available at the following link: <https://citizensassembly.ie/previous-assemblies/assembly-on-gender-equality/report/> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)