

Submission to the National Women and Girls Strategy Consultation

Submitted to Department of
Children, Equality, Disability,
Integration, and Youth

October 2024



Background Information

AONTAS is the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation, a membership organisation representing adult and community education providers, practitioners, learners, and other stakeholders. AONTAS advocates for learners, particularly those most educationally disadvantaged, to engage in inclusive lifelong learning in recognition of the benefits that this opportunity has for individual and social well-being. AONTAS works to these goals through research, communications, advocacy, and capacity building. As AONTAS is driven by feminist values, and is committed to the goal of social inclusion through engagement in learning the opportunity to contribute to the development of the next Strategy for Women and Girls in Ireland is most welcome. This submission is presented in three parts, the first being key considerations for the forthcoming strategy for women and girls, the second being the evidence-based rationale for the policy asks presented, and the third a summary of our position.

Key Considerations for the Forthcoming Strategy

AONTAS puts forward three key asks as part of this submission. These are:

- Promote **parity of esteem** for the adult and community education sector in recognition of the role that this form of informal learning plays in the social inclusion and well-being of diverse cohorts of women across the life course. This form of education is uniquely gendered in terms of its delivery, and learner profile and should be given adequate support and resources to achieve its objectives. This should promote fairer allocation of funding for the sector that is in line with the learner numbers supported in this mode of education.
- Champion the importance of **gender-proofing budgets and policies** in line with **Public Sector Duty** to ensure that resource allocation does not inadvertently disadvantage women from groups at risk of marginalisation in terms of access to education, or the sector that supports their entry into lifelong learning. This should promote female progression and recruitment across all higher education institutions and pathways.
- Promote **collaborative planning** across government departments to prevent inadvertent barriers to participation in adult and community education and ensure policy coherence. This approach is in line with the implementation of the

Sustainable Development Goals and will ensure that the needs of learners for holistic support are met in a whole of government approach to fulfil **SDG 4: Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education**.

Rationale for Submission

According to SOLAS (2021), lifelong learning “encompasses learning at all stages of life and includes all types of learning activities.” The pursuit of lifelong learning is considered personally, socially, and economically valuable by the European Union (2021 in Meyler et al., 2023:34). Individual, social, and economic well-being, equality of opportunity and increased representation were key considerations for the previous National Strategy for Women and Girls (2017-2022). The role of education in achieving these objectives was recognised, and attention was given to the gender disparity in the higher education workforce, enrolments in apprenticeships and trainee programmes, and the importance of intersectional identities when considering access and inclusion in employment, and in training.

However, the role of adult and community education, particularly in its informal modes has not been given the same weight as other modes of education in terms of funding and support, and concerns have been raised about parity of esteem between the sectors (Collins, 2022). This gendered disparity in educational contexts is evident in the statistics reported by the previous strategy regarding the staff profile of formal higher education institutions. In this sector, higher paid positions are held by predominately male staff, for example, 81% for academic professor positions, and 72% of highest paid non-academic staff (NSWG 2017-2020:18). Conversely, the staff gender profile of the Further Education and Training Sector, which funds and supports community education, is 74% female (SOLAS, 2020:7). It is AONTAS’ position that the adult and community education sector has specific relevance for the wellbeing and inclusion of women and girls. It should be given parity of esteem in the forthcoming strategy given the gendered weighting of staff and learners in this model of provision.

Relevance of Adult and Community Education to the Wellbeing and Social Inclusion of Women and Girls

The learner profile of the adult and community education sector illustrates its relevance for women across the life course for the forthcoming Women and Girls Strategy. Community

Education enrolments in 2019 were 77% female with over half of these women (55.8%) in the 55-64 age group, 45% of whom only attained a secondary or lower education. This diverges from the overall population of FET learner enrolments which has consistently been approximately 60% female and 40% male. Most community education learners were enrolled in part-time courses (96,2%) with 89.5% enrolled in social inclusion or thematic learning courses (SOLAS, 2021:4). This illustrates the role that community education plays in social connection and well-being for older women from more marginalised backgrounds.

In the wider FET system, women still accounted for a majority of enrolments at 60%. Gender disparity is still evident in course choices, and there is a higher percentage of women choosing part-time offerings (63%). In addition to this gendered difference female learners not in retirement were more likely to report being in employment (59.2%) (SOLAS, 2021:9). The high levels of women opting for this form of education may be due to a need to achieve work-life balance as the 2022 Census showed that the trend for females to provide higher levels of unpaid care compared with males continues (61% vs 39%) with implications for their engagement in lifelong learning (Census, 2022; SOLAS, 2021:9). This aligns with the Gender Equality Index (2020) finding that there is gender gap in full-time equivalent employment rate (FTE) is much wider between women and men in couples with children than in couples without children. The highest proportion of female learners who reported being engaged in home duties before beginning their FET course were aged 35–44. Dunlop (2020:187) maintains that this could be an indication that FET is a platform to support the upskilling or return to the workforce of women with young families as the average age for first-time mothers in Ireland is 31.3 years.

The previous strategy highlighted the importance of intersectional awareness when seeking to promote the well-being of women and girls. The FET system in general has a diverse learner base, including those with a disability (SOLAS, 2022a), members of the Traveller (SOLAS, 2022b) and Roma (SOLAS, 2022c) communities, groups at risk of socio-economic marginalisation (SOLAS, 2019) and migrants (SOLAS, 2022d). This further underscores the relevance of the sector for the forthcoming strategy for women and girls as these groups have been identified as being at risk of marginalisation and discrimination (Social Justice Ireland, 2021.). The value of the adult and community education sector to the engagement of groups who are at risk of marginalisation, including those with poor mental health, to

social inclusion is also recognised in Future FET: Transforming Learning Strategy (2020-2024:47). This is because this mode of education is an important entry point to further education pathways (Meyler et al., 2023a).

Research undertaken by AONTAS over recent years has revealed that the adult and community education sectors' relevance in relation to social inclusion and wellbeing is due to the level of support provided to learners in this sector (Meyler et al., 2023b; AONTAS 2023b). This finding is amplified by participants in the National FET Learner Forum, research events run by AONTAS with the support of ETBs across Ireland, who highlight the value of the learner-centred approach embedded in the FET system in general for this diverse cohort (AONTAS, 2023a; Meyler et al., 2023a; Meyler et al., 2023b).

This is because disadvantaged learners face barriers to participation in education and training. This cohort includes those with disabilities, older learners, single parents, people living in poverty, and those who did not thrive in the traditional school environment (Meyler et al, 2023a; Meyler et al., 2023b). These barriers include personal factors like unmet needs for support due to the impact of prior life events, a sense of stigma due to circumstances, and a lack of confidence due to prior educational experiences (Meyler et al., 2023b). In the adult and community space, these needs can be met through tailored supports that promote personal development and inclusion. FET learners themselves highlight the positive emotional and interpersonal value of taking a course as a key benefit gained from returning to education. This is a result of access to social networks, particularly for migrants, positive relationships with tutors and peers, an increased sense of self-confidence and access to supportive resources, and the flexible format of courses. This positive environment underpins and promotes learning, while delivering mental health benefits for learners (AONTAS, 2023; Meyler et al., 2023b; Meyler et al., 2023a). However, access to additional support and resources is not consistent across all areas, highlighting a need to ensure the appropriate allocation of funds across different providers and locations (AONTAS, 2023a; Meyler et al., 2023a).

Significant structural barriers can also prevent groups at risk of marginalisation from engaging in adult and community education as evidenced by research and reports that highlight the engagement of low-income individuals in the FET system (AONTAS, 2023). In 2022, SOLAS reported that 31% of learners were unemployed prior to enrolment (SOLAS,

2022). Another survey conducted as part of a study into the participation of marginalised groups found that approximately one in three learners faced financial barriers to participation in lifelong learning (Meyler et al., 2023b). Low-income learners can find it difficult to meet the economic burden of meeting transportation and childcare costs and affordable meals which can hinder learners' ability to participate in their courses (AONTAS, 2023). This is a key concern, as educational attainment is linked to social and economic inclusion, and barriers to education present a real risk of poverty with implications for the well-being of women from groups at risk of marginalisation and disadvantage (AONTAS, 2024; Social Justice Ireland, 2021).

The adult and community sector also faces challenges to the delivery of its vital programmes for marginalised groups. Despite its crucial value to the engagement of female learners from diverse backgrounds across the life course, the community education sector struggles with the impact of low wages, insecure short-term funding streams, and a reliance on multiple sources of funding and grants, that are often aligned to time-bound projects, or tasks (AONTAS, 2024; Cobain et al., 2020). This has implications for the capacity of predominately female staff and organisations to deliver quality education in contexts where women benefit most from the form of learning offered.

At present the community education sector supports approximately 20% of all learners within the Further Education and Training (FET) system (SOLAS, 2020) but receives just approximately 2% of the overall funding budget for FET (SOLAS, 2024). The recent budget saw an increased allocation from the National Training Fund which has accumulated a surplus of €1.372 billion to the development of apprenticeships, and work-based skills training which reach a higher proportion of male learners (SOLAS, 2022d). The issues with funding to the sector have been recognised in the Community Education Framework (SOLAS, 2024), yet an increase in allocation has yet to be seen. This increase in funding would represent parity of esteem for the sector, and a fairer distribution of resources relative to the percentage of learners supported. Moreover, it would constitute a recognition of the role that this form of education plays in supporting the social and economic well-being of women from diverse backgrounds across the life course.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Policy

The value of adult and community education to the social and economic well-being of women from diverse backgrounds across the life course has been discussed in this submission. The realisation of Public Sector Duty for women and girls at risk of marginalisation in terms of access to women and girls means that the governance processes that influence access to, and practice within this sector must be reviewed.

If this sector is to achieve its goals attention needs to be paid to budget proofing to ensure that decisions relating to resource allocation do not have a negative impact on women and girls at risk of marginalisation in the field of adult education which is, itself a uniquely gendered space. This process should include collaborative planning across all relevant government departments to ensure that there is alignment between policies, and resource allocations to prevent structural barriers to the participation of disadvantaged cohorts in lifelong education so that the value of adult and community education can be realised for all. This should result in the resourcing of wrap-around services and supports for women at risk of marginalisation that will support participation in lifelong education, and the dedication of increased, multi-annual funding streams for the community education sector in recognition of its role in promoting social inclusion and wellbeing.

Identifying policy goals, and the provisions within each department that support or hinder participation in adult and community education is an important part of gender-proofing access to education for vulnerable or marginalised women and realising Public Sector Duty values in practice. This will require cross-sectoral action between the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the Department of Social Protection, the Department of Transport and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth. This will ensure that the holistic impact of diverse policies on groups at risk of marginalisation can be addressed. This issue of policy coherence through collaborative review is already supported in work that aims to promote the integration of the SDGs and will ensure that the needs of learners for holistic support are met in a whole of government approach in order to fulfil SDG 4: Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education.

To support the realisation of this objective, the role of adult and community education must also be given parity of esteem with the wider tertiary sector in the next strategy for women and girls. This would make visible the important role that the sector plays in supporting the

social and economic wellbeing of diverse women, and further promote the value of this predominantly female space and for social development. AONTAS looks forward to integrating the principles and values of the forthcoming women and girls' strategy and striving to achieve its objectives as part of its advocacy and capacity-building activities across the FET system in Ireland. If you require any further information on our position relating to the topics in this submission, or our evidence base please get in touch with our Policy and Advocacy Officer, Rebecca Jackson at rjackson@aontas.com.

References

AONTAS (2023a) *National FET Learner Forum Annual Synthesis Report 2021-2022*. Available at: [AONTAS NFLF AnnualSynthesisReport FINAL.pdf](#)

AONTAS (2023b) *Stepping Stones and Stable Roots: The Versatile and Enduring Strength of Community Education*. Available at: [SteppingStonesStableRootsEventReport AW.pdf \(aontas.com\)](#)

AONTAS (2024) *Who Does it Cost Discussion Paper*. Available at: [WhoDoesItCost DiscussionPaper 280224.pdf \(aontas.com\)](#)

Cobain, E., Dowdall, L. O'Reilly, N. Suzuki, A (2020) *CEN Census 2020: Community Education in a time of Covid*. Available at: [15525 AONTAS CEN Census V12-Sept.pdf](#)

CSO (2022) *Census of Population 2022 Profile 4 - Disability, Health and Carers*. Available at: [Key Findings Census of Population 2022 Profile 4 - Disability, Health and Carers - Central Statistics Office](#)

Collins, T., (2022) *FET in Ireland - Shaping an Identity*. Presentation at the Stronger Together Further Education and Training Conference October 2022. Available at: [collins t 2022 \(etbi.ie\)](#)

Dunlop, S., (2020) *The Social and Economic Impact of Further Education and Training: FET as a pathway that made a difference*. Available at: [YB2020-FET-2.pdf \(irelandseducationyearbook.ie\)](#)

Gender Equality Index (2020) *Gender Equality Index 2020 IRELAND* Available at: [Gender Equality Index 2020: Ireland \(europa.eu\)](#)

Government of Ireland (2017) *National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2022*. Available at: [gov.ie - National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020 \(www.gov.ie\)](http://www.gov.ie).

Meyler, A., Lovejoy, L., and Swan, S., (2023) *Lifelong Learning Participation In Ireland: A focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups*. Available at: [AONTAS LLL Research Report Final Digital Launch.pdf](#)

Social Justice Ireland (2021) *Discrimination in Ireland*. Available at: [Discrimination in Ireland | Social Justice Ireland](#)

SOLAS (2020) *The FET Professional Learning & Development: Statement of Strategy 2020-2024*. Available at: [solas-professional-dev-strategy.pdf](#)

SOLAS (2020) *Future FET: Transforming Learning: The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy*. Available at: [solas fet strategy web.pdf](#)

SOLAS (2021) *A Study into Further Education and Training: Women in FET*. Available at: [iwd-women-in-fet-research-report.pdf \(solas.ie\)](#)

SOLAS (2022a) *This is FET Learners with Disabilities*. Available at: [This is FET Learners with Disabilities 2022 \(solas.ie\)](#)

SOLAS (2022b) *This is FET Traveller Community*. Available at: [This is FET Traveller Community 2022 \(solas.ie\)](#)

SOLAS (2022c) *This is FET Roma Community*. Available at: [This is FET Roma Community 2022 \(solas.ie\)](#)

SOLAS (2019) *Key Insights into the Socio-Economic Background of FET Learners 2019*. Available at: [solas-key-insights-report.pdf](#)

SOLAS (2022d) *This is FET Facts and Figures 2022*. Available at: [solas facts report 2022.pdf](#)