Opening Statement to Joint Committee on Children and Equality - *Gender Equality, family rights and expanding inclusion policies for families. November 2026.*

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Introduction

One Family welcomes the opportunity to address the Joint Committee on Children and Equality today. Our organisation believes that there can be no gender equality without equality for all families. Every child should have the same opportunity to thrive and should not have fewer rights, opportunities or security because of the family structure they are born into. Too often, the challenges faced by lone parents are treated as individual failings, rather than understood in the context of systems that fail to adequately reflect their caring responsibilities and circumstances.

Ireland has a shameful history of how we treated unmarried mothers and their children, a history rooted in misogyny, stigma and institutionalisation. We rightly speak of how far we have come as a society, but have we really moved beyond the inequalities that shaped that history, or have we merely improved our rhetoric without adequately addressing the structural barriers that remain.

One Family sees these barriers affecting the thousands of families we support every year, preventing them from providing for their children and reaching their full potential.

Today we will focus on Pathways to Sustainable Employment; and Parental Leave and Childcare.

Pathways to Sustainable Employment

Education can play an important role in addressing child and family poverty. Lone parents need targeted, tailored and meaningful support to overcome barriers to education and progress beyond social welfare into sustainable employment, secure careers and financial independence.

However, housing costs, inadequate childcare and social welfare policies that prioritise a 'work first' approach continue to make employment financially and practically difficult, particularly for lone parents.

One Family's New Futures Employability Programme demonstrates what is possible when we invest in parents through a tailored, supportive approach. New Futures is an eight-month bridging programme for lone parents on social welfare and has an average 75% progression rate for graduates into education, training or employment. Despite these outcomes, a lack of sustainable Government funding limits national access to the programme.

Investment in New Futures means investing in gender equality, reducing economic inequality and ensuring that women, particularly mothers, are not disadvantaged in the labour market because of their caring responsibilities. Meaningful equality requires addressing the structural barriers preventing them from participating fully in economic and social life.

Parental Leave and Childcare

Current parental leave entitlements focus on individual parents rather than children's needs within their family circumstances. Where leave cannot be transferred between parents, children in one-parent families have less paid time with their parent than children in two-parent families. We ask this Committee to examine how leave and benefits can be designed to prevent this inequity, drawing on EU examples that go beyond minimum requirements. Gender equality must also mean supporting fathers to care for their children, while recognising that not every child has two parents available to share leave.

Affordable, accessible childcare is equally essential to enabling lone parents to work, increase their hours or pursue education. Without it, caring responsibilities become a direct barrier to economic independence, reinforcing poverty and inequality in one-parent families. We leave the detailed consideration of childcare barriers to our colleagues in the National Women's Council.

Existing strategies, including the National Strategy for Women and Girls and the Roadmap for Social Inclusion recognise the need to address barriers to women's labour-market participation, promote a fairer share of care and tackle poverty among lone parents and low-income families. Achieving the Programme for

Government's Child Poverty Target requires a focus on one-parent families, where child poverty is most prevalent. We await the Department of Social Protection's Pathways to Work to see how these commitments will be translated into properly resourced services and programmes that support lone parents into sustainable careers. The challenge is to deliver meaningful change that reflects the diversity of family life in Ireland today, rather than paying lip service to equality.

Ends

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