

Published by the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland

# Enabling Equality: Migrant Women in Rural Ireland





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The Migrant Rights Centre Ireland is a national organisation working to promote the rights of migrant workers and their families. Based in Dublin, the MRCI provides direct support to migrant workers throughout Ireland. We also work with migrant workers to become involved in the issues concerning them, and support their inclusion in Irish society. Influencing policy development and campaigning for positive social change are core aspects of MRCI's work. In addition, we are active in supporting locally-based initiatives as well as networks at local, national, European and global levels.

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Edel McGinley

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## Executive Summary

Migrant women are part of the make up of Ireland's increasingly diverse society. They are contributing to Ireland's economic success and to the social transformation of rural communities, both as active participants in the labour market and through family life and community activity.

All agencies have a role to play in addressing migrant women's inclusion, from State services to the community and voluntary sector. County Development Boards are increasingly being mandated through the cohesion process with the coordination of county-wide policies which promote social inclusion. Migrant women need particular consideration in this process.

Given that the UN estimates that half of all migrants worldwide are women and girls, it is important to reflect their lived reality. Women migrating are not the poorest women but are more likely to be educated. Migrant women are not a homogenous group and have ambitions about their own advancement, both economically and socially.

Gender inequalities differentiate the migratory experience for men and women. Gender-segregated labour markets impact on the work that migrant women are migrating to and for. Gender inequality in destination countries, such as a gender pay gap, means that migrant women are structurally disadvantaged from the outset.

Migrant women fill labour gaps and often find employment in jobs that are considered difficult, dirty, or undesirable. Migrant women are recruited into both skilled and essential work categories; many are concentrated in low-status employment and highly-feminised sectors of the labour market, characterised by low pay, long hours and poor progression routes.

Experiences of participants were dependent on age, labour market participation, employment sector, location, language barriers, cultural norms and childcare responsibilities. Specific barriers arose in terms of racism and discrimination. Experiences were compounded by isolation in many rural communities.

Participants identified limited opportunities to participate in decision-making structures. Without specific responses, the legacy of gender inequality in decision-making and positions

of influence will continue, and the barriers to participation will be reinforced rather than addressed. Supporting leaders within migrant communities and building participation and capacity was identified as key to developing the voice of migrant women.

Discussions revealed that opportunities to participate at community level were limited. The need for local communities to reach out in the most isolated areas was identified, as a way to enable opportunities for dialogue, exchange and participation. Lack of involvement in women's groups was also highlighted by participants as an issue. Also identified was the need for women's groups to be inclusive of migrant women.

Participants identified serious issues in reporting and investigating racist incidents. Experiences of racism and discrimination impacted differently on participants and were often dependent on nationality, ethnic background and visibility within the locality.

The issue of gender stereotyping also came to the fore, resulting in some women no longer socialising locally. Labeling and negative stereotyping has in some cases impacted on participants in terms of forming relationships and at societal level fuels discrimination and undermines integration.

Childcare was highlighted as an issue. This is a major concern for Irish women and specifically for marginalised Irish women. For participants, the prohibitive cost of childcare often leaves them at risk of living in poverty. In the context of both equality- and poverty-proofing processes, the impact of caring work on migrant women needs to be recognised.

Further issues were identified in accessing essential services, including relevant information about these services. Language barriers have also impacted on access to services such as social welfare and health services, and on participation with schools and teachers. Particular reference was made to maternity and emergency services due to the lack of interpreting and translation.

Transport was an issue, as it is for many rural inhabitants. For migrant women it compounds isolation and has impacted on access to services and particularly participation in lifelong learning opportunities. Outreach and innovative models were identified by participants as a way to redress this.

Marital breakdown was also a feature of migrant women's experiences. This is particularly salient if immigration status is tied to that of the husband/partner. Migrant women are placed in situations of extreme vulnerability and are at greater risk of becoming undocumented. Vulnerability is further compounded if domestic violence is being experienced.

Migrant women whose primary role is connected to home and who are dependent visas and not yet active in the labour market are particularly vulnerable to isolation and deskilling. Those who work in sectors such as domestic work, the agricultural sector and private cleaning also experience isolation, as workplaces are often located in rural settings and the nature of the work itself is isolating.

## Foreword

I warmly welcome the publication of this report as a unique and valuable contribution to our understanding and analysis of the issues facing migrant women living and working in rural Ireland today. The specific experiences of migrant women living in a rural context, compounded as they are by language barriers, racism and vulnerability in terms of immigration status and forms of employment, have not, until now, been the focus of research or study to any significant degree.

This publication builds on the extensive work undertaken by the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland over the past eight years to raise awareness of, and work for, real change in the way that migrant women are perceived and treated in modern Ireland. It highlights the enormous contribution that migrant women are making to the fabric of Irish society, our communities, our families, our economy and the regeneration of rural Ireland. Strikingly, it bears witness to the strength, vision, skills, and enthusiasm to participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives, which is so evident amongst many migrant women.

However one cannot but be struck on reading this document by the isolation, oppression and exclusion which characterise the lives of so many migrant women and in particular those in isolated rural areas and in poor working conditions. It gives sound testament to the particular forms of exploitation (including trafficking for forced labour and sexual exploitation), violence, racism and sexism to which many migrant women are subjected. It calls upon all of us - from locally and nationally based women's groups to local development bodies, County Development Boards and State agencies, to take up the challenge to respond immediately and appropriately.

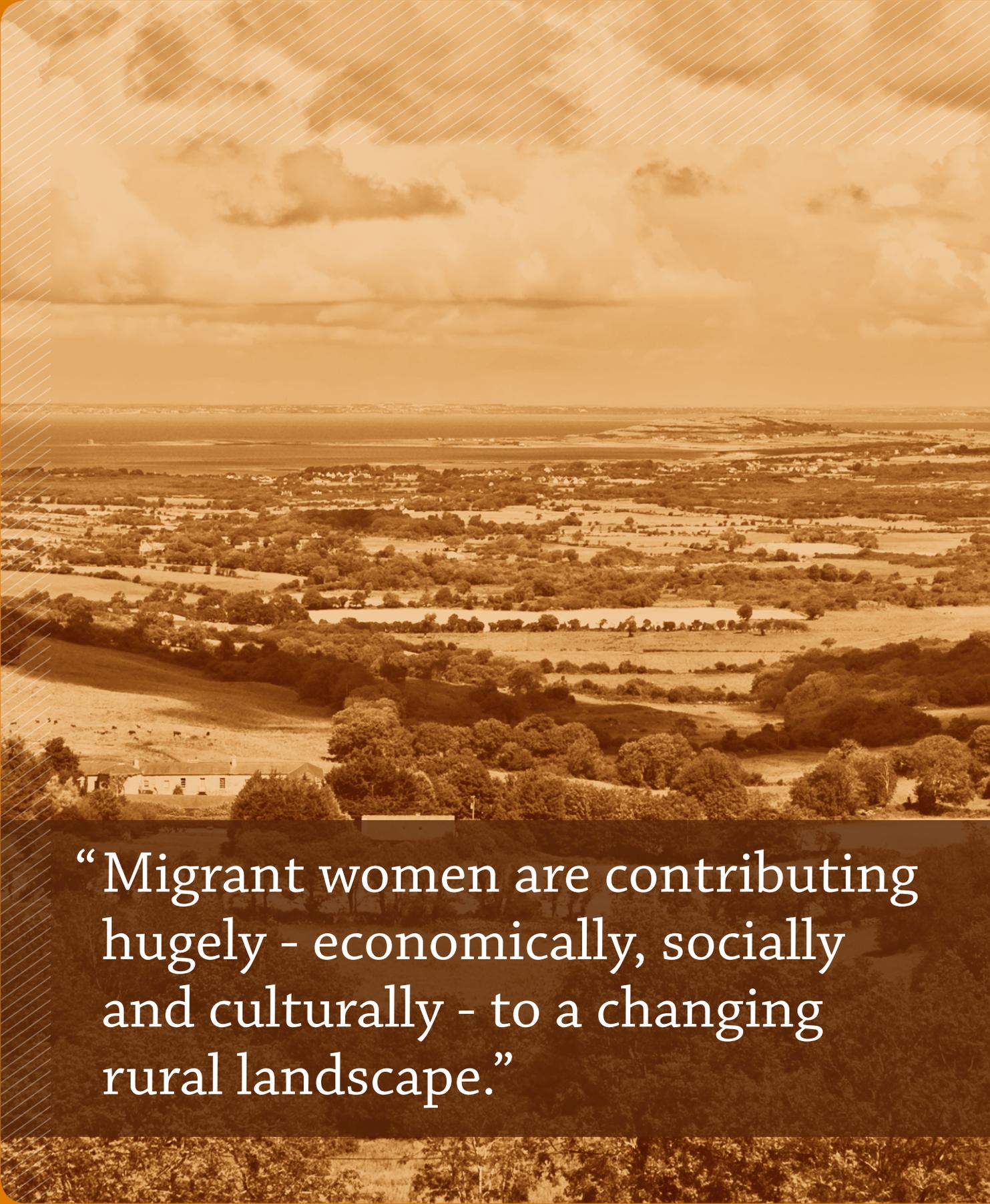
Local decision-making bodies (in particular County Development Boards) are challenged to specifically target and support migrant women. Measures must be taken to enable migrant women to participate as equals within local decision-making structures ensuring that local policies and programmes reflect their concerns and needs. National bodies are challenged to place gender and migration considerations at the heart of all rural policy development, reflecting the changing nature of rural Ireland and the diversity which increasingly exists.

For women's organisations, and in this case rural women's groups, the challenge must be to find appropriate ways of owning the issues that affect migrant women and taking concrete steps to address them, as outlined in this document. Not least of the measures needed from women's organisations is the creation of spaces for migrant women to engage in community development processes, ensuring that their voices are heard and enabling their full participation in decisions that affect their lives.

I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank MRCI for undertaking this project and for all of their work in seeking to influence and bring the experiences of migrant women to bear positively in an ever-changing ever more diverse Ireland.

**Joanna Mc Minn**  
Director  
National Women's Council of Ireland

# 1.0



“Migrant women are contributing hugely - economically, socially and culturally - to a changing rural landscape.”

# Introduction

## 1.1 Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and situation of migrant women at risk of poverty, social exclusion and discrimination in rural Ireland. This is with a view to identifying and developing strategies for their inclusion and progression at a local level. It is hoped that this study will be a practical and constructive basis for action in contributing to the promotion of equality for women.

Addressing migrant women's issues requires recognising them as a diverse group, in the roles they play as well as in characteristics such as age, social status, urban or rural orientation, immigration status, and educational attainment, to name but a few. Although women may have many common interests, the structure of their lives and the choices available to them may vary widely. Consequently, experiences are dependent on a range of factors which can impact positively or negatively on the social, economic, cultural and political spheres of migrant women's lives. MRCI seeks to identify migrant women who are most marginalised, at risk of social exclusion, poverty, and discrimination, and distanced from formal supports, services and decision-making processes, so that a range of innovative interventions and policies are developed to address their specific needs and concerns.

Developing a coordinated, targeted and mainstreaming approach rests in part with the work of the County Development Boards (CDBs). CDBs play an increasingly important role in the coordination and implementation of policies. This study serves to highlight the need for targeted responses from CDBs to ensure the social inclusion of migrant women. Furthermore, targeting migrant women within the cohesion process and through the work of the Social Inclusion Measures (SIM) groups needs to be a key priority into the future. The development of integration plans and Anti-Racism and Diversity (ARD) plans provides key opportunities for the inclusion of this gender dimension. With the support of the Equality for Women Measure, CLÁR strand, MRCI has undertaken this work to highlight experiences as well as actions going forward.

CLÁR (Ceantair Laga Árd-Riachtanais) is an investment programme set up under the auspices of the Department of Community and Rural Affairs to tackle population decline and disadvantage in rural areas. It was introduced in October 2001, arising from a commitment in the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness to provide a targeted investment programme in disadvantaged urban and rural areas. Parts of eighteen counties are covered under the CLÁR programme.

Significantly, inward migration and migrant workers are now playing their part in regenerating these rural areas. They are settling, raising families and contributing hugely - economically, socially and culturally - to a changing rural landscape. Migrant women are part of this picture and continue to contribute to Ireland's economic and social development as active participants in the labour market and as carers in the home. Ensuring that migrant women are supported and their skills and potential are unlocked is key to ensuring a cohesive and dynamic society into the future.

## 1.2 Methodology

The project was undertaken using a variety of methods including desk-based research and participant focus groups. 49 women participated in these focus groups and their experiences are outlined Section 3. This report also draws on the experience of MRCI and its work with migrant women over the past seven years. Finally, discussions held during a national seminar in December 2007 that brought together representatives of County Development Boards and SIM committees are also reflected in the Recommendations Section.

### 1.2.1 Background of Participants

A total of 49 migrant women were supported to engage with this project. Participants were living in counties Roscommon and Cavan and were from a range of countries: Brazil, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Pakistan, the Philippines and Poland. They were employed in a variety of sectors, and included mushroom workers, workers in the pig and poultry industry, shop assistants, office assistants, kitchen staff, waiting staff, domestic workers with cleaning and caring duties, home cleaners, care assistants in nursing homes, an architect, and women employed in promotions work. Many were spouse-dependant visas holders and stay-at-home mothers, while a small number are engaged in full time study. The majority of women participating in the project had children in Ireland while some had their children in their country of origin. The majority of participants intended to remain in Ireland and some had either secured family reunion or had formed families here. The names of participants were changed in the report.

Roscommon County Development Board, Roscommon CIC, Roscommon Women's Network, Northwest Roscommon CDP, Cavan County Development Board, Cavan Partnership and MRCI's Agricultural Workers Association were central in assisting with this project.

## 1.3 Structure of Report

Section Two describes the global context, as well as looking at the national, local and rural contexts. Using data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO), it identifies immigrant women in counties across Ireland, and this is supplemented by gender-disaggregated data from MRCI case management system.

Section Three analyses the experiences of the seven participant groups of migrant women working or living in Counties Cavan and Roscommon, and draws on MRCI's work with women over the past 7 years.

Section Four presents conclusions and recommendations arising from this study.

# 2.0



“Migration can expose women to new vulnerabilities as a result of legal status, social exclusion and isolation.”

# Migrant Women in Context

## 2.1 Introduction

Complex and layered reasons lie behind the migration of women. History tells us that migration was predominantly male-centred, and women featured only in terms of family reunification. This is perhaps misleading as Jane Freeman (2003) points out; women have always been on the move, the reason for the under-documentation of this is arguably attributable to the fact that many studies were conducted in gender-neutral terms.

Women have always had their own migratory projects, and the importance of documenting the experiences of migrant women is central to making visible and understanding the costs and benefits of this process, while ensuring that policies respond to their needs. Research shows that one of the major influencing factors for women migrating is that of relative poverty. Barbara Ehrenreich (2003) points out that many of the women migrating are not the poorest women but are more likely to be middle class and well educated, and to have ambitions about their own advancement both economically and socially.

## 2.2 Globalisation and the Feminisation of Migration

Given that the UN estimate that half of all international migrants are women and girls, it is important to reflect their lived reality (UNFPA: 2006). Furthermore regional and international studies indicate that migratory movements are comprised to a greater or lesser degree of women whether with or without children. Globalisation is perhaps the most pervasive actor within this process and is characterised by the integration of regional and global markets and compounded by global communication networks (Castells: 2000). These processes have resulted in the restructuring of wage labour and working conditions. The demand for flexible labour with temporary, short term contracts and the rise in outsourcing have implications for national economies and are key 'pull' factors in the migration cycle. This, coupled with demographic changes in wealthier countries

such as lower birth rates, ageing, static or declining workforces along with rapid labour force growth, all contributes to migratory movements. Further 'pull' factors relate to a restructuring in destination countries with longer time being spent in education, a shorter working life, increased life expectancy, greater demand for services and a growing reluctance by native populations to engage in certain occupations (MRCI: 2007). This is a pattern that is evident in all Western nations and the trend is likely to continue despite fluctuations in economic growth rates.

This shift in the Irish labour market from manufacturing to services has impacted on the makeup of the labour force. Migrant women fill many of these labour gaps, and although many are well educated they often find employment in jobs that are considered difficult, dirty or undesirable. While migrant women are recruited into both skilled and lower-skilled but essential work categories, many are concentrated in low-status employment and gendered sectors of the labour market. Sectors such as care, services, the agri-food industry and manufacturing are female-dominated. The implications of this type of work are not difficult to predict. For migrant women, childcare and household work and responsibilities can often be seen in the remittances they send home (INSTRAW: 2005). This plays a key role in the lives of migrant women, as gender norms and roles make them more likely to take on these responsibilities, and therefore more likely to be encouraged to migrate than men (Castles & Miller: 1998). The extent of this rests in some part on cultural norms. Many women are responsible for the financial support of large and extended families, and in some cases whole villages, in their country of origin. Sending home money regularly coupled with working long hours, receiving the minimum wage and in some cases below the minimum wage puts migrant women at risk of living in poverty in Ireland. As research shows, being at risk of poverty reduces life expectancy and has implications for health and well-being. When poverty is crosscut with gender inequality, discrimination and racism a disturbing picture emerges. Furthermore, applying a rural lens throws up new issues such as access to childcare, labour market participation, opportunities to source employment in rural locations and transport difficulties.

## 2.3 Gender and Migration

Active participation of women in the process of migration does not mean that conditions of migration are the same for women and men. Gender inequalities differentiate the migratory experience for men and women. It is therefore vital to include a gender-based analysis when developing policy responses to migration. Gender refers to the socially-constructed roles women and men have ascribed to them on the basis of their sex (UNIFEM: 2004). Gender roles are learned and vary widely within and between cultures. They are not static but are changing and changeable. Gender roles depend therefore

on a particular socio-economic, political and cultural context, and are affected by other factors, including, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation and age.

It is important to note that while Ireland has made significant advances in equality legislation, women still continue to fight for equality across all spheres of society. In the labour force, women often have to compete in a male-dominated environment; at a political level, women remain underrepresented; while at a social level, women continue to have primary responsibility for children and home duties (MRCI: 2005). Consequently, gender-segregated labour markets impact on the work that migrant women are migrating to and for. This, coupled with the gender pay gap in destination countries, means that migrant women are structurally disadvantaged from the outset. The situation of migrant women is therefore inextricably linked to that of women in Ireland, and has to be placed in the context of the existing feminisation of the Irish labour market and its gendered nature (ICI: 2007).

As such, migration can be an emancipating experience, or it can also entrench traditional roles, values and inequalities. Migration can expose women to new vulnerabilities as a result of legal status, social exclusion and isolation (Jolly: 2005). Migrant women, if they have experienced exploitation and especially if they become undocumented, become statistically invisible. They can face stigma, fear, social exclusion and discrimination. Non-economic factors include the desire of women to escape expectations of caring duties within their families, abusive relationships, or being forced to hand over wages. Migration can also be a way of dealing with marriage and relationship breakdown without formal separation. Experience also shows, however, that migration can provide new opportunities to improve and transform women's lives, often changing oppressive gender relations (Ibid). Migration can provide a vital source of income for women and their families and earn them greater autonomy, self-confidence and social status. Social, economic and political aspirations can be realised, new educational opportunities explored and progression routes within the labour market opened up (UN-ESCWA: 2007).

## 2.4 Migration Policies

Entry and immigration status is one of the key determinants of experiences in destination countries for migrant women. Rights and entitlements, such as access to the labour market, supports, services and training are all dependent in one form or another on how a person enters the state. Ireland operates a managed migration system and has a number of different routes of entry. However a paradox emerges within the context of managed migration and globalisation, and just as borders are opened up to financial flows, they are simultaneously closed down to the movement of people. The strengthening of border controls and a more tightly-controlled immigration system

mean that women are particularly vulnerable to physical abuses, sexual assaults and to trafficking for forced labour and sexual exploitation.

Immigration policy in Ireland has developed in response to economic requirements. For those workers from outside the E.U. or E.E.A. (European Economic Area), permission to work in Ireland must first be obtained. This means having a work permit, work visa/authorisation or green card. Skilled workers in higher-wage sectors on work visa/authorisations or green cards are given greater security and have faster access to rights and entitlements such as long term residency and family reunion. The employment permits system places restrictions on entry to certain categories of jobs. Work permits are issued to essential but usually lower-paid sectors such as services, hotel and catering, restaurants, cleaning, agriculture. These are less regulated and often are highly feminised employment sectors. Work permits are issued to a specific job and employer, and it is very difficult to change employers. This lack of workplace mobility in effect leaves workers more vulnerable to exploitation.

Prior to the introduction of the Employment Permits Act 2006, only spouses of work visa/authorisation holders had the right to work. This has now been extended to spouses of work permit holders. According to the Immigrant Council of Ireland (2006) there has been slow uptake of the scheme due to difficulties in securing employment, and lack of awareness of the scheme. This dependent status however represents a loss of autonomy and financial independence, and issues arise if there is marital breakdown or violence within the home (Ibid). Failing to provide independent legal status and right to remain in Ireland can lock migrant women into abusive and potentially life-threatening situations. Particular difficulties have also emerged for significant numbers of women who are non-EU spouses of EU nationals. Non-EU spouses must be resident in another EU Member State before they can successfully apply for residency and have full access to the labour market, a condition which is virtually impossible to satisfy. Other issues arise in terms of access to social supports and Child Benefit, as migrant workers are subject to criteria under the Habitual Residence Condition (HRC) – a set of conditionalities put in place which govern access to social supports. This barrier has had negative implications, with many either being denied or not accessing essential services.

## 2.5 The National Picture

The National Development Plan 2007-2013, states that Irish society will be “fundamentally and irrevocably multicultural by nature. A new dimension in our planning which focuses on integrating our immigrant population is required” (NDP: 2007: p266). This is significant in terms of long-term planning and policy development at both national and local levels. Ireland as a diverse multicultural society has seen strong economic growth. Our new-found wealth has, however, intensified economic and social inequality.

For women the employment rate in 2007 was 60.3% exceeding the Lisbon Strategy goal of 60%. However the National Women's Council of Ireland maintains that a deeper analysis is required to reveal that the proportion of women in atypical, insecure and part-time employment is significant (NWCI: 2007). This has particular relevance for migrant women employed in the less-regulated and more insecure sectors of the economy. The Lisbon Strategy goal to eliminate the gender pay gap is central to creating equality for all women (EC: 2005). The National Reform Programme report 2005 states that Government policy will focus on facilitating access to affordable, quality childcare services for parents and work-life balance. The National Women's Strategy (NWS) 2007-2016 provides a framework which seeks to address key gender concerns at a national level. The actions outlined in the NWS, along with those developed in Towards 2016 (2006) through the lifecycle approach<sup>1</sup>, need to be kept at the heart of local policy development, to respond to Government commitments. The adoption of these principles into policies at a local level is key to the advancement of all women in Irish society.

With this in mind, local policy development needs to reflect national policy commitments. The framework for this work rests in part with the City and County Development Boards (CDBs). Towards 2016 states that the structure of the CDBs will be strengthened to ensure that it can operate effectively as a vehicle for supporting a more integrated approach to service-delivery at local levels. Social Inclusion Measure (SIM) groups, which are part of this structure, will be prioritised by the CDBs to implement Towards 2016. These groups include representatives of local public agencies and local development and community groups. As the vision of the National Development Plan and Towards 2016 is to align local, community and rural development organisations leading to unified, overarching county structures with full county/city coverage, an opportunity exists within this restructuring for gender concerns to be a priority. CDBs are at the heart of this process and as such need to show leadership in the area of gender, with a particular focus on migrant women who often face multiple disadvantages. Through the local development and social inclusion programme there is a long track record of targeting disadvantaged women. CDBs also have important experience and knowledge in the area of equality-proofing. Developing institutional capacity to ensure a gender mainstreaming focus which takes account of the specific needs and barriers faced by migrant women would significantly impact on gender equality.

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<sup>1</sup> The lifecycle approach places the individual at the centre of policy development and delivery, by assessing the risks facing him/her, and the supports available to him/her to address those risks, at key stages in his/her life. The key lifecycle stages are identified as: Children, People of Working Age, Older People, and People with Disabilities (Towards 2016: 2007)

## 2.6 The Rural Picture

Rural Ireland has witnessed immense changes over the past number of years. According to the National Development Plan 2007-2013, “despite continuing urbanisation, Ireland is still a comparatively rural country...as such the economic and social development of rural areas will be a valid and important focus of public investment” (NDP: 2007: p82). This is due in no small part to a restructuring in fisheries, forestry and agriculture. Growth in retail and services and demographic change have all contributed to shifts in economic activity in the rural economy. Construction, a main driver of the economy, has slowed down, while tourism is still a major employer. The pattern of economic activity is in a state of flux. Rural areas close to regional towns or cities have experienced rapid economic growth, and those more distanced from large centres of population struggle to find new economic activities to replace agriculture and other rurally-based activities (NDP: 2007). Commuter towns have become a feature of rural Ireland with more people traveling to work in large towns and cities. Infrastructural development, such as roads, public transport, information technologies and communications, while seeing improvements, still remain a concern not only in terms of economic expansion but also in terms of social development.

Social exclusion remains a concern within rural development. Limited access to resources, isolation and limited networks are contributing factors (POBAL 2006). The White Paper on Rural Development states that ‘the problems of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas have a distinct impact on women. Economic dependency, isolation, unequal opportunity and participation are compounded by the problems of distance from services and amenities. The absence of an adequate transport service and affordable childcare services in many areas make it difficult for women to avail of training and education or to enter into or retain employment’ (DAFF: 1999). The National Women’s Council of Ireland (2006) identifies rural women’s lives as diverse but often invisible. For example, older women living on their own, farm widows, farm spouses, farmers, women who care for their families all their lives, working class women surviving on social welfare, lone parents, asylum seekers and refugees, migrant workers, women from ethnic minority groups, women operating small businesses, women in full-time, part-time or seasonal employment, women with disabilities and women caring for elderly parents, all have different experiences of living in rural Ireland. These groups of women require specific responses, with immigrant women being particularly vulnerable (NWCI: 2006).

The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) signed in 1979 commits the Irish Government to take action towards eliminating discrimination against women in all areas of our society. Article 14 states that States Parties shall take into account the particular problems faced by rural women... and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure the application of the provisions of the present Convention to women in rural areas (UN: 1979). However, rural disadvantage remains a key concern many years on. An increase in the level of inward migration had

contributed positively to demographic change in rural areas in Ireland. Migrant women account for almost half of all migrant workers, reflecting international trends. These changes create challenges for the development of policies to address the needs of new communities and in particular migrant women. Concluding comments from the CEDAW committee 2005 call on the State to systematically monitor and regularly evaluate its performance particularly in relation to vulnerable women, including migrant women. An approach which synergises the needs of migrant women and rural disadvantage needs to be adopted in all policy development at a local level in order to adhere to Ireland's commitments under international instruments.

## 2.7 Data Analysis: Planning and Policy Development

Systematic data analysis is central to any planning and policy development agenda. In order for CDBs and other agencies to be proactive in responding to the issues faced by migrant women it is important not only to develop an understanding of the issues but also to have accurate and current demographic data concerning migrant women as a target group.

### 2.7.1 2006 SAPS Data

The following data is a general overview of the numbers and distribution of migrant women across CLÁR areas. 2006 Central Statistics Office (CSO) Small Area Population Statistics (SAPS) were used to identify the percentage of non-Irish born females as a percentage of the total female population per county.<sup>2</sup> Non-Irish born females represent 8.5% of the total female population in Ireland. This percentage varies from county to county. 12% of the female population in County Dublin is non-Irish born - the highest in the country. 10% of the female population in Counties Leitrim, Galway and Kerry are non-Irish born. In counties Clare, Monaghan, Longford, Roscommon, Cork, Kildare and Mayo, 9% of the female population are non-Irish born. Cavan, Westmeath, Meath, Louth, Sligo, Waterford and Wicklow have slightly lower percentages of non-Irish born females at 8%. (See Appendix for complete figures).

SAPS data was also used to identify the percentage of non-Irish born females living in both rural areas and town areas. In County Leitrim, 80% of the non-Irish born female population lives in rural areas, the highest proportion of any County. In Counties Donegal, Roscommon, Cavan, Longford, Mayo and Sligo a greater percentage of non-Irish born women live in rural areas than in town areas. Approximately half of the non-Irish born females in counties Clare, Kerry and Wexford live in rural areas and the other half in town areas. In Counties Monaghan, Louth, Offaly, Westmeath, Laois, Galway,

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<sup>2</sup> 1% of the total female population filling out the census did not include their nationality on the forms; these numbers are not included in the figures.

Waterford, Cork, Limerick, Carlow, Kildare, Kilkenny, Meath, Wicklow and Tipperary a higher percentage of non-Irish born females live in town areas than in rural areas, although this includes those living in town hinterlands. In Dublin, 92% of non-Irish born women live in town areas.

The CSO SAPS data reveals that a significant number of migrant women are living in each county. In addition, contrary to popular belief, migrant women reside in significant numbers and percentages in rural areas across Ireland, not solely in urban/town centres. Particular attention needs to be paid to the counties that have large numbers of non-Irish born women living in isolated rural settings, in terms of developing targeted plans, amenities, housing, childcare, education and social inclusion measures into the future. There is a need to map the number and distribution of migrant women in much greater detail. This will enable CDBs to develop inclusive plans which tackle social exclusion and put in place the necessary infrastructure which reaches the most isolated migrant women and meets the needs of each county's increasingly diverse population.

## 2.8 MRCI Gender-Disaggregated Data Collection

MRCI is aware of the importance of collecting data, and that this data is gender-disaggregated so as to truly capture the needs of migrant women. To supplement data from the CSO 2006, MRCI's computerised Case Management System (CMS) captures information and data from individual cases. This is then analysed on a regular basis to reveal the trends and patterns that reflect some of the experiences of migrant workers in Ireland. From an analysis of the Case Management System for the period July 2005 to January 2007, it was possible to build an interesting profile of service-users. The service receives people from over sixty nationalities. More than half come from Asia including the Philippines, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, China and Thailand. MRCI's services were also accessed by a high number of EU nationals, including from the accession states, with a significant number of Ukrainians, Romanians and Russians also seeking our support. Further findings are summarised below:

- The split between male and female migrants is largely equal. However, this split differs somewhat according to country of origin.
- Women coming to Ireland using MRCI's support service are generally between 20 to 40 years old. The majority of migrant women are married or in a partnership. Migrants who are single are the next most common status, and the remaining migrants with a known status are separated, divorced or widowed.
- Migrant women using the service are well educated, with more than three quarters having entered third-level education. Many are qualified as professionals and have substantial work experience in their home countries.

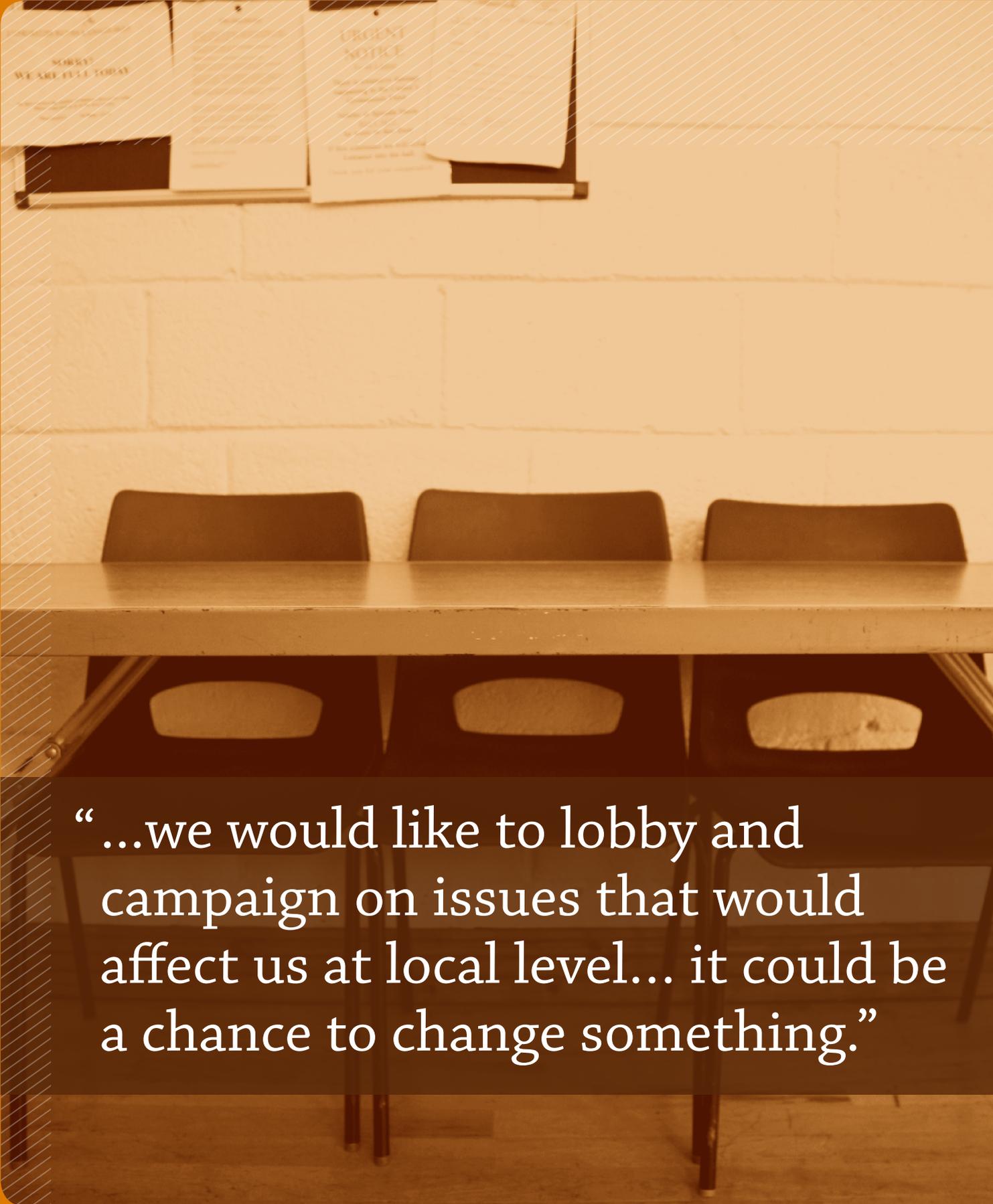
- Migrant women work in a wide variety of sectors. Hotel and catering was by far the most common sector, followed closely by domestic work, agriculture and retail and security services.
- By far the largest group of people seeking support from the MRCI came from outside EEA, entering the country initially on a valid work permit; the second largest consisting of EU citizens.
- Slightly more men (56.9%) than women migrants were undocumented on contacting MRCI.

This analysis illustrates the need for ongoing, gender-disaggregated data collection to reveal trends and patterns, and to reflect the lived reality of migrant women who come to Ireland and contribute significantly to our economic expansion. Without proper systems of data collection in place planning into the future will be under developed and under resourced.

## 2.9 Conclusions

Across Ireland we have seen the benefits of increased investment in cities, towns and villages, however investment in infrastructure alone does not address the need for a cohesive society and the needs of those most marginalised within it. Inward migration has seen a population increase in some of the most depopulated areas of Ireland and is a welcome development, contributing to their regeneration. Globalisation, changing demographics and the restructuring of employment all play a significant role in the lives of migrant women. Issues for migrant women are often compounded by racism and discrimination, gendered labour markets and isolation. While Ireland has achieved much in terms of women's equality, much work still needs to be done in both the private and public spheres of life. As immigration and entry status are key determinants of experiences for migrant women, the development of policies and legislation needs to take account of the impact this has on women. Significantly, non-Irish born females account for 8.5% of the total female population in Ireland. As such, the needs and aspirations of this group need to be taken into consideration. The role of the CDBs is central in this regard to ensure migrant women are identified as a target group within the cohesion process, through the work of SIM groups and through the development of policies at a local level. The development of Anti-racism and diversity (ARD) plans and integration plans provide key opportunities for the inclusion of migrant women both in the development of these policies and as a target group.

# 3.0



“...we would like to lobby and campaign on issues that would affect us at local level... it could be a chance to change something.”

# The Experiences of Migrant Women in Rural Areas

## 3.1 Introduction

This section draws on MRCI's work with migrant women since 2001 and examines the experiences of migrant women living and working in Counties Cavan and Roscommon. The situation and experiences of participating women, including sectors of employment, vary and depend on their location within these counties, on immigration status, language ability, educational background, access to the labour market, local supports and social networks. The sheer breadth of experience, energy and diversity of participants within these counties is very evident. The expression of interest from all the women involved to come together to participate more in their community and the issues that affect them was a clear and recurring theme. These women are vibrant, strong, resilient, resourceful and inspirational.

Experiences vary greatly from the very positive, with high-quality social networks and secure, quality employment, to the very negative where little or no support is available and where migrant women struggle to integrate and experiences of racism and sexism are prevalent. This project further reveals that, while many migrant women are linked into the local community, a significant number have few opportunities to participate at any level in society. Varying degrees of isolation were evident with those on spouse dependent visas and stay-at-home mothers most distanced from any form of social support or alternative outlet aside from the associated responsibilities of family life. In every participant group the women expressed a desire to set up women's groups as a place to meet, share, learn, build confidence, and develop new skills and abilities and to bring their culture and skills to the local community. With support and given the opportunity, this drive and ambition could be harnessed to build the voice of migrant women and women in general. These groups would also act as a conduit to participate in the development and rolling out of policies and actions at a local level. There is a clear opportunity from this project to build on the links developed to channel the energy and expressed desires of the participants. This requires leadership and resources to build capacity and to address the issues which hinder participation.

## 3.2 Key Issues Arising

### 3.2.1 Participation - Building the Voice of Migrant Women

Building participation is key to developing the voice of migrant women. Nurturing leadership skills is central to this process. Support exists in many areas through Area-Based Partnerships, the County Development Boards and women's networks. All the women who participated in the project stated that they wanted to have somewhere to meet and come together. Carla explains:

“I don't like pubs for example... we were talking about it and [it would be good] if we had a group and we do something every month, an event, and get most women together.”

Beata identifies the need to learn and develop:

“... just for some hobby even something that you could go and learn something... that would be better than sitting at home”.

While strong connections existed among migrant women, difficulties arose in taking this one step further to create a women's group. In this respect, the lack of dedicated support and resources was an issue. Some groups had received support. For example the Roscommon Women's Network supported access to dance classes for a Polish women's group. Most women, however, had not been supported due to a variety of reasons, such as not having a formal structure and thus not being visible or connected to organisations that could provide advice and information. The reasons identified for becoming involved in women's groups varied. Many saw it as a space to come together to socialise and to develop skills and showcase their own culture. Some women felt it would be easier to have the same nationality group initially due to language limitations, but felt that down the road it would not have to be exclusively nationality-based, and would like to link with other women's groups once they had built confidence and capacity and a strong identity. Anna explains:

“It could be a space, place where people could gather together. It could be migrants group, woman group... just a space where we can meet and share.”

Issue-based groups have also been a way of bringing women from diverse backgrounds together, as in the case of MRCI's Agricultural Workers Association.<sup>3</sup> Of the seven participant groups, three felt they had no support from the wider community.

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<sup>3</sup> AgWA is a membership organisation set up by MRCI in 2006 to respond to exploitation in the mushroom industry a sector where migrant women are prominent.

Participation in this project was the first time they had come together as women to have a voice and to be listened to. Key leaders were evident in all the participant groups. There was an obvious under-capitalisation of the energy and creativity evident amongst participants. If not addressed, this will be a serious inhibitor to ensuring the long-term voice and participation of migrant women at a local level and to political representation going forward. Collaboration with others was identified as key, so that opportunities for dialogue could be created between indigenous Irish women and migrant women through these groups. There was also an acknowledgement that it can be difficult at times to bring together people who are working long hours. With clear leaders evident, given a little support these groups could easily emerge into strong women's groups and add to the richness of the community.

### 3.2.2 Access to Decision-Making Processes

Without support and commitment to engage migrant women in decision-making structures, the long term implications are that migrant women will not be visible in positions of power and influence. The legacy of gender inequality in decision making and positions of influence will continue and the barriers to participation will be reinforced. In order to develop an inclusive and diverse society, meaningful representation at all levels from all sectors of society is a prerequisite. This must be inclusive of diversity and gender, as after all women make up 50% of the population. While access to these structures is a key concern for indigenous women and Irish society in general, the barriers that exist for migrant women are compounded by issues of racism, discrimination, limited opportunities to engage with the political systems and decision-making processes.

While opportunities for participation in local structures vary, generally they have been limited and feelings of not having the right to have a say in the political process were prevalent. The lack of ownership has led to the underutilisation of the political process and lack of engagement with political representatives. Irma describes how a politician called to her door during the run-up to the national elections in 2007. She was experiencing exploitation at that time, and explains:

“Before the election, the politicians came to my door and asked me if I had any problem and I said I did not have any problem. You always keep in mind that if you complain people will tell you, if you do not like something here, go back to your country.”

Many women stated that they would like to become more involved in decision-making processes within the county and to help shape policy. However many felt that they did not have the right to raise issues as it may be interpreted as ungrateful. This is compounded if the person is undocumented or faces language barriers. Those women who were involved in the Agricultural Workers Association (AgWA) saw their involvement as both social and political. Its members have built an analysis of their situation and saw

the importance of linking their experience to policy change. Significantly, those women who were involved in AgWA were well-informed about the political process and members of this group stated that they would like to have more spaces to gather together so that they could have a voice in wider society. Tatjana states:

“We would like to lobby and campaign on issues that would affect us at local level...that it could be a chance to change something.”

Having a sense of belonging, being free from discrimination and exploitation is a key element to having a political voice. This can only happen from a position of security and when access to decision-making structures engenders feelings of security and belonging. This can happen in a range of ways and at a number of levels. Encouraging involvement is not enough to ensure participation and political voice. Creating the conditions to engage in decision-making processes is crucial to ensure that policies reflect experiences. This means supporting groups to develop a policy agenda and policy skills and addressing barriers to participation. Thus, encouraging and developing a range of mentoring models and supports for capacity building will ensure that migrant women have local political representation in the future. Participation in this way is key to enabling active citizenship.

### 3.2.3 Social Networks and Community Involvement

A number of migrant women have formed social networks within their own communities, among their work colleagues and with local people, and they contribute significantly to their new communities. Many strong and vibrant women are involved in a range of activities at a local level. However this was not the experience across the board. Those who had Irish partners or husbands felt more connected to the local community. There were also differences of experiences depending on age, financial situation, childcare responsibilities and location. Those who are less integrated are women working in the home, those with less English and whose workplaces are in extremely isolated rural areas. Having children meant trying to find babysitters, while living on a low income impacted negatively on what they could attend or be involved in. Many women stated that they would like social outlets that didn't centre on pub culture. All women stated that there was little for them to get involved in in the evenings and on their days off. While many acknowledged that opportunities to participate in the community did exist, they didn't know how to go about becoming involved and stated that they were not confident about approaching organisations or groups who were active within the community. The need for outreach work in the most isolated areas is key to creating connections. This is expressed by Olga:

“There's nothing to do here really, when you have a day off you can just sit home and that's it, that's all”.

Many women stated that they just didn't have the time, and on returning home from work were very tired and just wanted to relax. According to Izabela:

“It's hard to be involved initially. You need to get to know people first and then it will come naturally. You work Monday to Friday so you want to relax”.

Difficulties can arise in relationships between those who are moving to rural areas and long-time residents, as issues of intercultural understanding need to be addressed. Some of the participants stated that misunderstandings had occurred in their local community due in part to not having the opportunities for dialogue and exchange. Some of the participants felt that while older members of the community were very welcoming as they had direct understanding of emigration, it was felt the younger members of the community did not. Participants felt that creating opportunities to meet with the local community so as to dispel myths and misunderstandings would be very helpful, and that this could happen in a variety of ways and should be a two-way process.

### **3.2.4 Racism and Discrimination**

Racism and discrimination are key inhibiting factors to participation, inclusion and cohesion at all levels of society. These multifaceted problems range from acts of name-calling to more structural discrimination and acts of threatening behaviour and violence (DJELR: 2005). There were serious concerns that racist incidents are not being reported and that where they are reported, they are not being adequately addressed. Having a safe space and opportunity to make sense of and voice these experiences is of great importance, so that these issues are addressed and individuals and groups involved are supported and empowered to make complaints. This said, many of the participants had no complaints and stated that they felt very welcomed and got on well with Irish people. Many stated that through work they felt accepted, and that this enabled them to meet people and form bonds and friendships. It is important to note that experiences of racism and discrimination impacted differently for participants and were often dependent on nationality and ethnic background. For example one out of ten European women experienced overt racism, while four out of seven Asian women experienced racism in one form or another. Erlinda states:

“I have been living here four years and I have had to call the Gardaí four times for protection for me and my children. They are local people who haven't been anywhere and they see us as some sort of threat. Our lifestyle and the way I run my family is different. This is a sort of barrier, you know, I can't fit in. It's not nice”.

This woman is living in local-authority housing with her Irish husband and small children and she stated that she and her family have been sworn at, called names, and threatened with violence over the past four years. She has been vilified on the estate and this abuse had impacted on her physical and psychological health. She also stated that she was fearful in her own home at times, and that the incidents only occurred when her husband was not there. These incidents were reported to the local Gardaí who spoke to the individuals involved and gave warnings. For a short period of time the incidents ceased, before starting again. These incidents were also reported to the local housing authority. However Erlinda feels that the response was entirely inadequate:

“At the housing office they say it’s a Garda issue. The Council did not want to do anything”.

Responses at organisational and institutional levels are often dependent on individual officials. This is evident from the inadequate response from the housing section of the local authority in this case. A transfer was eventually offered to the family, however limited school places in the proposed transfer location prohibited this move. The family therefore remain in this situation. The Gardaí are investigating this further.

A worrying development that came to light in the discussions with migrant women, is that those who are in a position to protect and serve can contribute to reinforcing a sense of alienation and block access to justice and protection. Nahid related an incident and alleges that the local Gardaí, when called to an incident in a local estate, were verbally abusive. Rana related another incident:

“Someone reversed into my car and hit it, but because I had no English I couldn’t prove it. The Gardaí wouldn’t listen to me. I was told by the Gardaí to contact my insurance if I wanted my car fixed, that the other person had nothing to do with it”.

Another incident arose where children from both the Asian and Irish communities were playing together and a window was smashed. The children would not admit to who had done this. The Gardaí were called and allegedly made the Asian family pay for the broken window. This treatment has led to feelings of having no choice but to accept such behaviour as they are in someone else’s country and have to put up with this. Their isolation and lack of connection with institutions, organisations, mechanisms and supports for redress was very evident. One woman stated that she just lost faith in this system and that she did not want to cause trouble. She stated that she wouldn’t go to the house in question to complain and she would not call the Gardaí if anything further happened.

Experiences of being treated differently in daily activities such as shopping were also prevalent, as were feelings of being under surveillance and observed in these situations. Anna explains that:

“The cashier at the till in the supermarket would attend to an Irish woman before me. That happens often in bigger places like Cavan where I am not known”.

Liudvika told of a time previously when she was falsely accused of shoplifting and was stopped and searched. She attributed this to her nationality. Gizela explains about her experience of living in a rural community and being different:

“Usually older people remember Ireland 20 years ago when they used to go to America or somewhere just to earn money, like me and all the girls. But some young people... some who do not understand how its like when you have to leave your county, they have never been anywhere except Athlone or Galway. They [think] you are from Poland and you came here to take my job”.

There are clearly complex dynamics involved in articulating and understanding racism in all its guises. Victims of racism are particularly vulnerable and require supports in responding at an individual and community level. Racism cannot, however, be addressed by promoting ‘cultural diversity’ alone. Tackling racism needs active leadership from all sectors of the community. Positive action means that racism is not tolerated. Without spaces in which to identify and make sense of issues of racism and discrimination these will fester, and migrant women will be problematised instead of being empowered to take action. In order to promote social cohesion clear policies must be in place, and procedures enacted to address issues of racism and discrimination. Roscommon County Development Board, for example, has developed a three-year intercultural strategy which has eleven actions to promote integration and to address racism at a broader level. This plan works from the principles of equality and anti-racism and aims to celebrate diversity and interculturalism, develop support for ethnic minority support groups, promote ethnic representation and develop responses to incidents of racism. Roscommon CDB has shown leadership and vision in this regard, by beginning to address the needs of new communities in its county.

### **3.2.5 Gender Stereotyping and Social Control**

It is generally accepted that gender stereotyping and prejudice lead women to be treated unequally by others, either because of hostility towards women or, less consciously, because popular attitudes about women make it seem appropriate to treat women differently than men. In relation to migrant women this manifests in a variety of ways, the

most insidious being the proliferation of notions that certain groups of migrant women are promiscuous and unworthy and that others are virtuous and thus better citizens and more desirable in our local communities. As these perceptions enter public discourse they in turn become part of the experiences of migrant women. It is important to note that these types of experiences vary and are dependent on nationality, age, visibility within a community and participation in local social and cultural outlets and events. Participants from Latvia, Lithuania and Brazil identified with this issue while those from the Philippines and Pakistan did not. There are a number of possible explanations for this, and it could be linked to a lack of participation and isolation from social life and to racialised and gendered stereotypes.

Issues arose in terms of being sexually objectified. Ona stated that she no longer frequented the local pubs and was not interested in socialising due to the fact that she felt she was perceived as promiscuous and that men had a right to approach her in an inappropriate manner. She stated that she was now uncomfortable in these places and 'chooses' to avoid them. Inga relates her experience:

"I have been here just for three months and I remember once that an Irish man invited me to go for a coffee and after a while asked me to go to a hotel together. He thinks that I am easier to get into bed than Irish women".

Liudvika describes how she was out in a disco with her friend who was wearing a mini skirt and that she was approached and asked if she was a prostitute and how much she would cost. She says that on the occasion they laughed at the ignorance of this man. As this discourse is replicated in the media through sensationalist reporting of migrant women in the sex industry, this only serves to reproduce negative, racialised and sexualised stereotypes of migrant women. The sexual stereotyping of specific groups of women is a growing concern. Maria-Antonia stated that:

"This is a big problem, men look at Brazilians differently. My husband has a lot of friends; they have a lot of jokes about the Brazilian women. The men sometimes look differently at Brazilians to other nationalities".

The reason behind this often relates to perceptions of the country of origin. Carla identifies that when people think of Brazil, they associate it with "football, Pele, woman, sex." These stereotypes often inform how migrant women are perceived within a community, consciously or unconsciously, and can serve as a device for exclusion. These perceptions can even impact on a woman's decision to have children, as Majja attests:

“I have a fiancé but I will never get pregnant in Ireland. They [the Irish] will think that I am pregnant to claim Social Welfare, to stay here or that I am married because I am a foreigner.”

Social control through employment, where work and accommodation are linked, was also an issue, and in some cases this has impacted on women’s movements and their right to form relationships and control their private lives. This often relates to particular sectors of employment which are under-regulated, isolated and invisible, such as the mushroom industry and those employed in the private home as domestic workers. The challenge here is to ensure that there are spaces for migrant women to come together to explore these issues and to confront these stereotypes so as to challenge, educate and change negative perceptions.

### **3.2.6 Childcare and Supports to Young People**

Childcare is an issue for both men and women. However Ireland remains a gendered society and as research shows, the majority of household chores and care of children rests with women - the ‘double shift’ of paid labour and reproductive labour (Orr, J: 1997). Structural inequalities replicate and reinforce these roles, and the issue of childcare thus needs to be addressed in this light. It is also important to state that childcare is a major concern for Irish women and specifically for marginalised Irish women. However, for migrant women experiences are often compounded by isolation, language barriers, difficulties in accessing the labour market and rights and entitlements associated with immigration status.

Many migrant women find employment in sectors of the economy characterised by low pay and poor regulation. As a consequence, many women struggle to reunite with their children. When they do, the costs of childcare often leave them at risk of living in poverty. Those whose children have been born in the State find it easier to access services, as they can access information through contact with, for example, their local health nurse. Those whose children are in Ireland through family reunion often do not have access to information through such links, and therefore remain more invisible and do not avail of services for their children. Not having information about vaccinations and developmental check ups, which the public health nurse carries out, often means that small children’s health needs are not being met. Also impacting on the lives of migrant women is the fact of being distanced from traditional coping mechanisms such as family supports. The high cost of pre-schools and crèches, the lack of places in them and distance to travel to them were identified as particular difficulties in meeting childcare needs. This impacts on participation in both the labour market and society. A recurring theme is the lack of affordable childcare and reliance on informal and ad-hoc arrangements. This also throws up new issues in that those caring for children are often paid very little for this care and are at risk of living in poverty themselves. This group of women also needs to be taken into consideration. Lucina explains this “Catch 22” situation:

“It is too hard to afford a babysitter. We work and get little money to pay babysitter... A child minder charges you €4.00 [per hour], however it is very little for a woman to be working for eight hours to just earn €32.00 per day. It is very little for a babysitter but is all that the woman can afford to pay.”

Access to childcare often opens up new avenues for stay-at-home mothers to come in contact with other carers, mothers or fathers. A very successful mother and toddler group was set up in Cavan, which brings together migrant women and Irish women one morning a week. Key to the success of this group was the involvement of the community worker from Cavan Partnership, who has successfully reached some of the most vulnerable mothers in the home. This was developed through building relationships and trust on a one-to-one basis and in some cases it took many home visits to encourage some of the more vulnerable women to become part of this activity. Also key to participation in this group was the role the community worker played in terms of providing and organising transport. County Childcare Committees have a role to play in responding to these issues going forward.

Not all women wish to have their children uprooted from their country of origin for a range of reasons, including the costs of childcare and the need to work full time, the age of the children, and the fact that for a number of women their intention is to migrate for a short period only. Many women leave their children in the care of their families until they are of school-going age or until they are in a position to afford childcare. Some women had one child with them in Ireland and another being cared for in their country of origin, which presents many difficulties. For older children the desire was to stay in school with their friends in their country of origin. These decisions were also dependent on the distance travelled to reunite with children and the frequency of visits possible. For many, school holidays were a time when children are able to visit Ireland for an extended period. There was a concern however that there was little for the children to do once they came and no information about youth clubs or summer activities in which they could participate. Parents felt that their children’s development suffered because of this. Youth services have a key role to play in this regard and need to be aware that this group of children and young people exist so as to plan for their needs.

### **3.2.7 Access to Schools and Progression**

The majority of participants stated that they had no problems with schools which they found to be generally supportive and inclusive, especially primary schools. Barriers that arose when trying to deal with schools rested in part on language but also on the willingness of the school to support families to engage in their children’s schooling. Yasmin, a teacher herself in her country of origin, explained how, when her child first came to Ireland, she made a recommendation for her son to repeat a year so that he

could improve his English. She had to rely on a friend to act as translator. Her wishes were not taken on board however:

“They wouldn’t keep him back a year. They put him in fourth year and he didn’t have great English so in the end he ended up giving up and working. I explained my case many times but they wouldn’t listen. He was fifteen years old.’

Language barriers impacted on parents’ ability to engage with the school and also to assist with homework. Literacy issues arose as some women had only reached primary level education themselves. A further issue arose with Irish homework and not having the knowledge to assist their children. A major concern arose when it came to parent-teacher meetings and the women’s capacity to enter into dialogue with the school. Some women felt that the school had played no part in helping them to obtain translation or to try to relate how their child was doing in school on an ongoing basis. Some felt they had no understanding of whether their child was doing well or not in school and that it was only on the day of the parent-teacher meeting that they would find out. They expressed feelings of being cut off from the education system and this aspect of their children’s lives. This had implications for their own self-confidence as well as their child’s development and school participation, which in turn leaves them at greater risk of leaving school early.

### **3.2.8 Family Breakdown and Violence Against Women**

A number of women described how their low level of socio-economic participation in society put immense strain on their marriage. The majority of participants stated that they migrated for the good of the family and while they acknowledged that men were similarly motivated, they also felt that men had more personal freedoms, due to gender and cultural norms. Some of the women whose partners or husbands remain in their country of origin reported extra-marital relationships, separation and divorce. This is not only an issue for women but also for men. Anna talks about this issue:

“There is a big percentage of marriages that break. It is just because of distance. The safest way to follow your dream would be to do it together. There are other cases too, that somebody has double [dual] families. Sometimes it is difficult, but you want to be close to somebody. It is natural, so it’s hard on everybody.”

Marital breakdown has implications where immigration and residency status is dependent on the husband. Migrant women are at risk of becoming undocumented as there is no guarantee that they will gain independent status. This is compounded if domestic violence is being experienced and can lock some women into abusive relationships.

This in turn has implications for the health and well-being of migrant women. Access to services is often difficult due to lack of information, lack of culturally-appropriate service provision or restrictions in accessing social protections. The vulnerability of migrant women in this situation is further compounded by distance from family supports, language limitations, knowledge, and information. Refugees struggle to keep up with demand generally and the poor availability of these services in rural locations serves to keep those suffering from domestic violence in situations of vulnerability. This cycle of abuse impacts within the family if children are involved, and the lack of supports and information to exit the situation further compound women's vulnerability.

### 3.2.9 Access to Transport

Access to transport has always been a burning issue for those who live in rural Ireland, and has affected the rural population for many years. Investment in infrastructure has seen improvements in roads and services and economic prosperity has enabled many households to purchase, run and maintain a car(s). This prosperity however has not penetrated all of Irish society. Those most affected are those who are often most distanced from the labour market, in receipt of social welfare and at risk of social exclusion, such as older people, one-parent families, and people with disabilities to name but a few. Issues relating to transport also impact on the lives of migrant women. For a number of women, travel outside of their local community was severely limited as work schedules impacted on the amount of time off they had, with the majority only having a full free day on a Sunday. For many, buying a car was said to be too expensive. Most worked locally and did not need one during the week. However work was located in many cases at the edge of the town they were living in and this required a long walk. Monika states:

*“[when she came here first] I didn't earn a lot and I couldn't afford to get a taxi to work. It's really difficult without the public transport.”*

Many stated that they would like to see more of Ireland but opportunities were limited as bus schedules and connections were inadequate. Cost of travel and limited connections and networks for organising lifts all served to impact on the participant's ability to move. Cultural issues also arose for certain groups of women in that there was a perception that they would not be safe if travelling alone with a male driver. Living and working for example on mushroom farms, which are located in very isolated areas with no bus routes, further isolated some women. It was acknowledged that having a car made a huge difference in their lives, but many relied on others within their community who had transport to bring them to health appointments and to go shopping. Some women employed other strategies to pay less for the cost of the journey. Ruta explains:

*“There is just one bus available to city centre at 7pm every Friday. You depend on people who have a car. Not taxis because you have to call a*

taxi from Cavan and it would cost you €20. It is better to pay €5, €10 for a lift.”

This situation impacts on migrant women’s ability to participate not just in leisure activities, but also in day-to-day life. However, some women discussed how living in a rural setting meant that it was important to learn to drive and many have received their driving license.

### 3.2.10 General Health Needs and Issues

Access to health care is often a more pronounced concern in rural areas. Access to hospitals and associated services, access to general practitioners, the public health nurse and medical social insurance remain key issues for rural communities. Women’s health is a concern with the closure of hospitals in central locations, the lack of adequate responses to the needs of women, breast check services in crisis and limited maternity outreach services. These factors all impact on the health needs of women in rural communities. For many migrant women who are away from their families and friends, the erosion of traditional supports and coping mechanisms leaves them in a more vulnerable situation. Starting a new life in a new country which is quite different from one’s own tradition and value systems can cause stress. This can be compounded by experiences of workplace exploitation, discrimination and racism along with economic and cultural barriers. This can cause extreme anxiety and can lead to depression and other health problems.

Local general practitioners (GPs) are struggling to respond to demand. Many women felt that the GPs were very supportive and if they did not have the money for a visit they could pay in instalments. A range of coping strategies were used including (a) waiting until they return to their home countries to receive medical treatment, (b) self medication, (c) getting families and /or friends to send medication from home. Familiarity with medication from the country of origin and understanding the labels is a contributory factor. Gabija states:

“If I know that something it is serious I will go back home because I cannot communicate with the doctor here as I can in my own language.”

While going home is an option for those who live relatively close to Ireland it is not for those whose country of origin is far away or who cannot take sufficient time off work. The reality is that many women do not attend to their own health needs. The majority of the participants stated that they did not have regular health check ups. A factor is the lack of choice in rural towns and villages. Tatijana talks about her local GP:

“The doctor... we used to call him a vet. He has one folder for all foreigners. You feel that you are going to the vet. Now the good thing is

that if you don't ask him how much it is, he won't ask you. If you look very poor, he would say ok €20."

Perhaps the most pervasive barrier facing vulnerable migrant women is one of language. It can be extremely difficult to communicate with doctors and staff within the health service. This is frustrating for both the healthcare providers and patients, and can be potentially life threatening. It was stated that there are now practitioners in Galway and Castlebar hospitals who speak Urdu and Polish and this has alleviated some of the stress of attending hospitals. However it does not respond to the needs of all migrant women. Literacy levels also play a significant role in deterring migrant women from accessing services. Filling out forms and understanding the information provided can be extremely difficult without an interpreter/translator or a person on a one-to-one basis to help with the literature. A specific concern identified was in relation to emergencies. When calling for emergency services the need to give proper directions to the incident could be problematic, especially for those new to the area, but also where language barriers arose. Daina explains:

"For example there was a woman who had her leg broken at 4am while working in a farm. It was a neighbor who helped me to ring the ambulance. The ambulance came, but then we could not explain what was wrong."

Health issues related to employment emerged as a concern for women participating in the study. Ongoing, unprotected exposure to pesticides on mushroom farms was a significant concern in particular. Headaches, nausea, dizziness and vomiting after harvesting tunnels which have been recently sprayed were identified. Participants reported other short-term problems such as eye problems, skin irritation, hair loss, menstrual problems and breathing difficulties. Edita explains:

"Everybody who works in the farm has sore back and legs. The first few months working in the farm, or after long holidays, some woman have no period for a couple of months or even a year. It could be related to change of climate, stress or chemical products. It could be related to the nature of the work, the air, all the chemicals that you are breathing."

### 3.2.11 Reproduction, and Reproductive and Sexual Health

Women and men have different health needs by the very nature of their sex. However gender also plays an important role. Women's working lives, if they choose to have children, are inevitably be interrupted by childbirth and child rearing. Women also tend to provide care for other family members (ICI: 2007). This has far-reaching implications in terms of labour market participation, deskilling and isolation in the home. Other

implications relate to access to quality prenatal and postnatal services, along with regular life-saving check ups through smear tests and breast checks throughout the life cycle of a woman. Regular gynaecological check ups were a rarity for most of the participants except when they went home or if they had given birth. Many did not have any information about available services.

There were mixed experiences in terms of maternity services. Most women with experience of these felt that the midwife and nurses were excellent and provided good services. Other concerns arose in term of information and different criteria in relation to rights and entitlements. One woman stated that she did not really understand what was expected of her. There was also a feeling that responsibility also rested with the individuals to inform themselves on what was to be expected and that it was a two-way responsibility. However a number of barriers were also identified. Felka elaborates:

“It is really important to have someone who will translate for you. They have leaflets about what to expect but they are only in English so it is hard for people who can’t read this. This should be translated into other languages... When my friend was going to hospital for her maternity check they asked her to bring someone with her to translate because she had so little English.”

Follow-up on health-related matters also came to light. Ruta explains:

“I was pregnant and I had a miscarriage. The doctor was very good. They said I had to visit the doctor in Cavan Hospital but because they did not send me any letter... I just went to Lithuania to get checked. People and doctor were kind”.

A worrying aspect of this story is that this woman suspected that the miscarriage may be related to her employment in the mushroom sector and the use of chemicals. She has subsequently left this sector to recover and is now seeking alternative employment due to health concerns.

### **3.2.12 Access to Support Services and Information**

Access to support services and information is central to ensuring social inclusion and participation within society. People cannot make decisions about how to improve their situation if they do not have the proper information (MRCI: 2007). Access to information was dependent on where women were located. In big towns such as Roscommon and Cavan participants had good infrastructure and information especially through the Citizens Information Centres. As a result, women here did have access to information

about their rights and entitlements. In more rural village settings where the majority of the participants lived they did not have access to information and found it difficult due to location, poor transport and long working hours. The main means of accessing information was through informal social networks, with people communicating information to each other about rights and entitlements. Specific issues arose in terms of information, but also employers meeting their responsibilities, in relation to PRSI and tax contributions, as Inga explains:

“No we didn’t know about that [PRSI], but even we knew it, it would not have made a difference. First of all we need to find somebody who will pay our PRSI.”

A general problem identified was the lack of accurate knowledge regarding rights and entitlements by frontline providers, such as social welfare staff. In particular there was confusion in relation to the Habitual Residence Condition and its relationship with the Job Seeker’s Allowance and Supplementary Welfare Allowance. Irma and Olga explained that they were refused social welfare because of this. Irma went on to say that problems also arose due to the fact that frontline staff would not accept phone translation. Additionally, with regard to FÁS employment services, many felt these had little or no relevance to them and they were generally unaware that they could access this service. Some of those who were eligible to register felt it did not meet their needs. For those from outside the EEA, access to job-seeking services is limited.

Planning within services needs to reflect the diversity of its client group, especially in relation to gender, immigration status, geographical location and language barriers. Strategic planning of how services will be administered and developed in rural areas needs priority. Taking account of training for frontline staff and support for migrant workers would ensure a focus on equality of access and outcome. An example of good practice is Roscommon CIC, which opens every Tuesday evening to meet the needs of migrants who are in work during the day. It has also recruited volunteers from within communities to assist with translation and interpreting.

### 3.2.13 Undocumented Migrant Women

Exploitation in the workplace was the main contributing factor to becoming undocumented. The reasons for this varied, including an employer not renewing the work permit, being made redundant close to the expiry date of the work permit, or becoming undocumented through exploitation. Participants in this study who had become undocumented talked about their invisibility and fear. Claudia stated that it was the worst time of her life:

“I think that when you move here you are lost. I think myself, I was illegal for a while, you carry on, you put your head down.”

Jasmine stated that:

“The Gardaí are getting more strict now and you have to be careful. I like the Gardaí but if you are illegal it is a nightmare.”

A number of the participants in this project were undocumented at the time of the interviews. Some had overstayed tourist visas and others were undocumented for reasons beyond their control. Difficulties also arose for the spouses of work permit holders whose status depended on their partner's, as when the husband became undocumented they did too. For some, getting back into the system will be impossible without policy or legislative change and they will remain in a state of limbo. Those who entered on tourist visas did so to join family members who were already here. With few prospects back home and having spent their savings to get here, they felt they had little option but to remain. These women are extremely vulnerable to exploitation, social exclusion and at greater risk of living in poverty. They do not have access to services apart from emergency services, and feel they have very little alternative but to subsist, working odd jobs to survive.

Difficulties also emerged in relation to the way Gardaí administer immigration duties. One group of women described the discriminatory way in which one Garda operates, and how such practices have led to them becoming undocumented for periods of time. Not having consecutive permission to remain stamps has implications for long term residency and citizenship, as residency stamps cannot be backdated. Many have substantial gaps in their residency status as a result of such practices. This leaves not only women but also households in extremely vulnerable situations, often with little or no information about how to seek redress.<sup>4</sup>

### **3.2.14 Isolation & Deskilling**

Women whose primary role is connected to home, and those on spouse-dependent visas and not yet active in the labour market, are vulnerable to isolation and deskilling. Women from the EU had greater access to the labour market and often worked part time jobs from time to time, as they did not have restrictions on their employment. This said, many women from the EU face severe language barriers and can be restricted to the home because of this. Lana speaks about a friend of hers:

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<sup>4</sup> MRCI has assisted this group to lodge a formal complaint to the Garda Ombudsman and extra administrative supports have been put in place to help deal with the situation in the meantime.

“My friend for example, she stays in the home. She is scared, because she doesn’t speak English – nothing. There are many like this.”

For those women from outside the EEA who are granted residency on spouse-dependent visas there were a variety of issues. During one group discussion many of the women identified feelings of isolation. They felt invisible, and without opportunities to develop new skills, when they had been in Ireland for over four years. Language barriers, childcare issues and access to the labour market were identified as inhibiting factors to their economic and social development.

There was a genuine desire from participants on spouse dependent visas to become active in the labour market and to become financially independent. Asma explains:

“I’d like to go out as well to work and stand on my own two feet”.

Some women expressed a desire to start their own business which would draw on their experience. This means having the supports to access training and assistance with starting the business. Isolation and the underutilisation of their skills and experience had fostered a sense of being redundant to and in Irish society. Sheeza states:

“I was a teacher, a primary school teacher but I find it hard after 25 years of teaching [to] just sit inside. It’s hard to stay at home all day, there’s no interaction.”

Ludiviika further explains:

“You can’t go out, you can’t fill in a form, I don’t know... You lose your tongue when you come to a foreign country and you can’t speak the language.”

Isolation becomes so debilitating that it impacts on every aspect of life, on physical and psychological wellbeing and on socio-economic participation. Women in this situation stated that they wanted to have a social outlet to participate in, such as a coffee morning where they could gather and also maybe learn English at the same time.

Isolation is not only confined to those who have primary responsibilities in the home or who face language barriers. Employment sectors and location are also factors. Those who work in isolated areas and sectors such as domestic work, the mushroom and the pig industry also experience this, as Inga states:

“It is more or less our own world where we are living. Things that happen outside do not affect us. We don’t feel that we are connecting with community. We are carrying on with our own world. If we went to Latvia we could go to a reality show and live in a house for a month and we would not go mad.”

Access to training, opportunities for community participation and local supports would all contribute to alleviating this sense of isolation. The absence of dedicated resources to target the most vulnerable will ensure that these experiences are replicated into the future. Using a community work approach would create the conditions for participation and enable spaces for the most isolated to come together to upskill, gain confidence, build capacity and give those currently invisible a space and a voice in Irish society.

### 3.2.15 Personal Development and Lifelong Learning

Opportunities for advancement and progression through lifelong learning are key to ensuring the social inclusion and empowerment of migrant women. Due to the heterogeneity of this group there was a range of needs and issues, thus requiring a variety of actions and responses. Having opportunities to participate in training was a high priority for the majority of women. Some women had already accessed support and training through the Local Partnership in Roscommon - including a Start Your Own Business course and community development training, and through Cavan Partnership - pay roll and accountancy and tax courses. English language courses were also made available through the VEC in both Cavan and Roscommon and a willingness to do outreach was evident. Barriers arose for some of the participants however, particularly for older women, and the methodologies employed coupled with a lack of confidence among those taking the classes, made it difficult for them to learn. Some felt embarrassed at their level of English. Claudia explains:

“It is very difficult to practice in front of people and if they are a man it would be worst. Everybody has different problems and demands (...) A small group could be much better.”

This lack of confidence impacted for a number of women, as Nahid explains:

“I think it’s more confidence building. I think once I got out there I’d be alright. I want to be able to speak the language properly first because I feel let down if I can’t say something. I’ve been in situations where I can’t explain myself, when I have been called to schools when things are sent out and I don’t know how to read [in English], I don’t know what to do.”

For some women there was no access to language training. For others it was not possible to attend classes due to work constraints, as their only free time was on a Saturday and Sunday. They felt that if there were weekend classes in their small town this would be very useful. Also evident was the lack of opportunity to upskill and develop and in general all the participants wanted to progress within the labour market through training. Maria states:

“English - I have some words. I need more, to learn more English. Now, I clean houses but when I was in Brazil I worked in a bank, I had a good job. If I have more maybe I can have good job here. If I don't learn English I will just clean houses, what I never thought I would do in Brazil.”

Izabela explains, “I really miss school here, when it's my off time, I'm sitting home cooking and cleaning”. The sense of deskilling was a key concern for women but many had little information about how to go about redressing this. A key challenge is reaching those who are the most isolated and invisible and responding to their particular circumstances. Personal development was also identified as a key factor to support confidence-building and empowerment. This should go hand in hand with English language training and not be an end in itself.

### 3.3 Conclusions

Migrant women are contributing enormously to Ireland's economic growth and prosperity. However they are often on the margins in terms of accessing services and supports. Key influencing factors in the lives of migrant women include age, family situations and family formation, the impact of religious and cultural norms, immigration status, employment opportunities and conditions, access to information and significantly, the apparent hierarchy of nationality. Migrant women, if economically active, are often concentrated in less-regulated and more feminised sectors of employment. While many migrant women had positive experiences, those not active in the labour market and most distanced from formal supports are most at risk of social exclusion. Some participants were isolated in their local communities and their ability to engage with services, institutions and organisations was diminished due to language barriers. The lack of transport, concerns around health needs, the lack of family or care networks while at the same time dealing with inaccessible and/or unaffordable childcare, leaves many women in a very difficult situation. The lack of support services for those experiencing marital breakdown, domestic violence or trafficking for forced labour or sexual exploitation is a further concern, and responses rest in part on the good will of Community Welfare Officers and community and voluntary groups.

It should be emphasised that the women who participated in this project were strong and vibrant, and had much to contribute. Their ability to overcome difficulties and to adapt to new situations points to their strength and skills. Many have taken significant steps to improve their lives, to upskill through training and become involved in their local communities. All the participants identified the need to come together and form or become part of women's groups. As such, there is a clear opportunity to harness this drive and energy and to work towards developing the voice of migrant women. Strong and natural leaders were also evident, and working to their strengths and building their capacity to engage at a political level is key to developing cohesion within and across the counties of Ireland. Not responding to these opportunities not only does participants a disservice but also deprives the counties and the rural communities in which they live of their skills, experience and spirit. Building the capacity and voice of migrant women to participate fully in the issues that affect their lives needs leadership and support through targeted measures, and dedicated resources and energy.

# 4.0



“All agencies have a role to play in addressing the inclusion of migrant women, from State services to the community and voluntary sector.”

# Conclusions and Recommendations

## 4.1 Conclusions

Migrant women are contributing enormously to local rural economies and communities, which are being rejuvenated by the diversity and skills which migrant women bring. Migrant women are working, setting up homes, raising families and becoming active citizens. Despite a projected economic downturn, the reality is that there will be an ongoing demand for migrant workers to fill essential jobs, particularly in highly feminised employment sectors, such as cleaning, agriculture, care work and domestic work. This is consistent with all western developed countries. Many of the issues highlighted in this study affect the majority of indigenous rural women. However for migrant women, these issues are compounded by racism and discrimination, language barriers, access to the labour market and immigration status. All agencies have a role to play in addressing the inclusion of migrant women, from State services to the community and voluntary sector. The inclusion of migrant women in policies at a county level both as a target group and within decision-making arenas needs to be a priority of the work of the CDBs if the creation of an equal, cohesive society which values diversity is to be achieved.

## 4.2 Recommendations

### 4.2.1 Institutional Commitment and Capacity

Responding to the needs and concerns of migrant women requires commitment, leadership and capacity. CDBs are a critical structure in providing this institutional leadership. There are a number of ways in which commitment can be built and strengthened:

1. Strengthen and mandate SIM groups to identify targets and actions in response to the needs of migrant women, which would then be resourced on an annual basis.
2. Be proactive in generating evidence-based data to inform the work of the CDBs and relevant agencies.
3. Build capacity and understanding within CDBs through training staff, Board Members and SIM group members on the particular situation of migrant women.

#### 4.2.2 Enable the Participation and Empowerment of Migrant Women

Research and experience has highlighted the significance of participation and empowerment as an essential element in addressing exclusion and enabling effective institutional and policy responses. There are three key ways in which migrant women's voice and participation can be enabled:

1. Prioritise a social inclusion and equality focus, including migrant women, within the context of the cohesion process underway at the community level.
2. Advocate for the resourcing and support of community development organisations concerned with the inclusion and participation of migrant women.
3. Develop initiatives targeting the empowerment, leadership capacity and active citizenship of migrant women.

#### 4.2.3 Integration and Anti-racism Policy

CDBs have been mandated to develop county-wide integration, anti-racism and diversity plans. In developing these plans there are three core recommendations:

1. Ensure gender and equality proofing is built into the process from the design and implementation stage. CDBs have important experience and knowledge in the area of equality proofing and this needs to be strengthened within the context of integration, anti-racism and diversity plans.
2. Pre-development and development work should place an emphasis on isolated and marginalised migrant women. Such pre-development work should be orientated towards participation of migrant women to develop skills and confidence but not be an end in itself. An emphasis should be placed on issue-based and sectoral groupings of migrant workers, e.g. migrant women in agriculture. A nationality-

based approach will not necessarily capture the views, concerns and needs of migrant women who may also experience inequality and marginalisation both within the geographical community they live in and within the country of origin group.

3. An ambitious approach to addressing both the structural and overt forms of racism should include a focus on policy, provision of services, schooling and employment.

#### **4.2.4 Equality of Access to Services**

Central to a quality of life consistent with human rights standards is being able to access basic services in a manner that ensures dignity and equal treatment. CDBs are important stakeholders in ensuring services are responding to the needs of the community they are targeting. Three core recommendations are:

1. Ensure translation and interpreting within services, particularly emergency services and maternity services.
2. Strengthen childcare supports and services to enable labour market participation for migrant women.
3. Support the progression of migrant women within the labour force. Educate employers on their responsibilities to employees. Organise migrant women workers in less regulated sectors of the economy.



“The U.N. estimates that half of all international migrants are women and girls... it is important to reflect their lived reality.”

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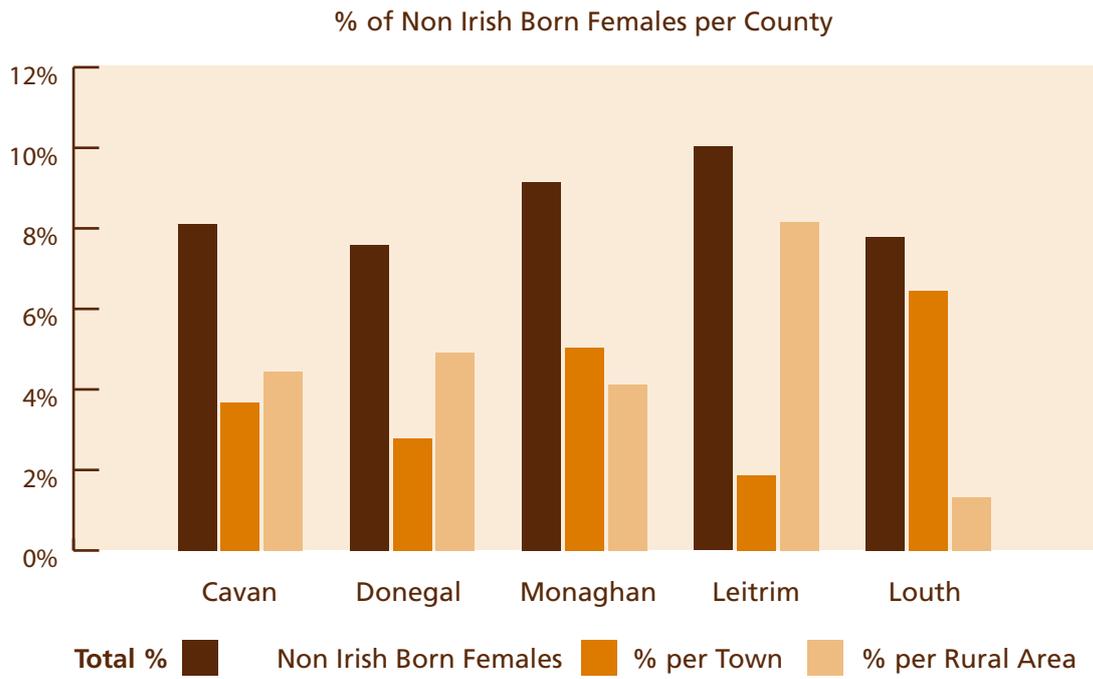


“Entry and immigration status is one of the key determinants of experiences in destination countries for migrant women.”

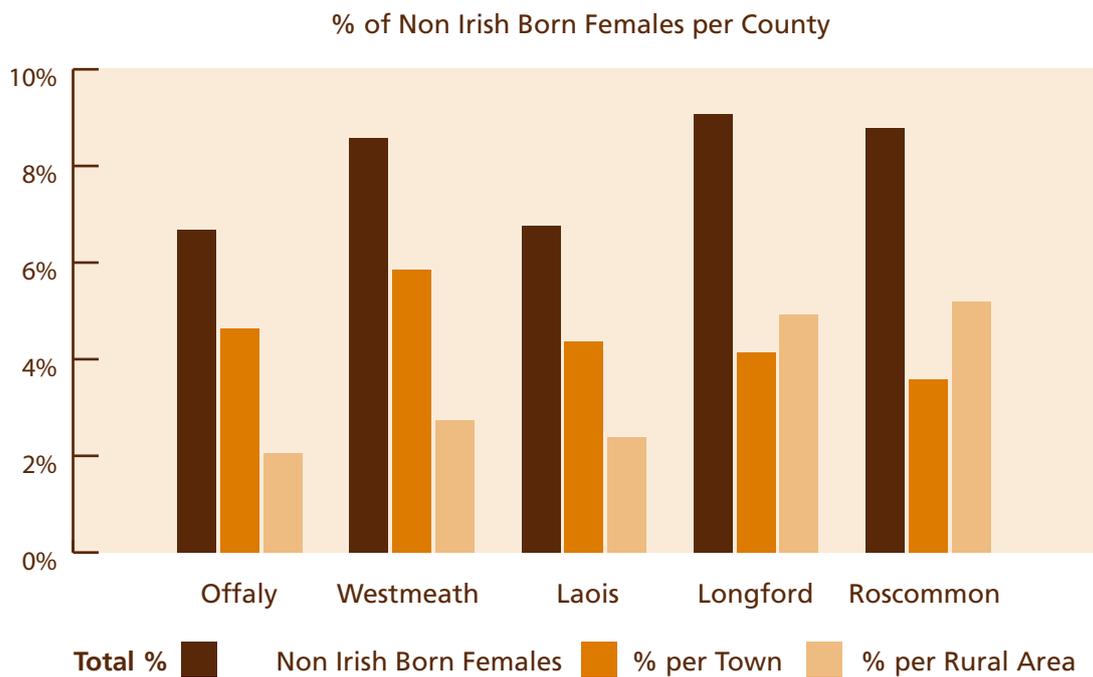


# Appendix

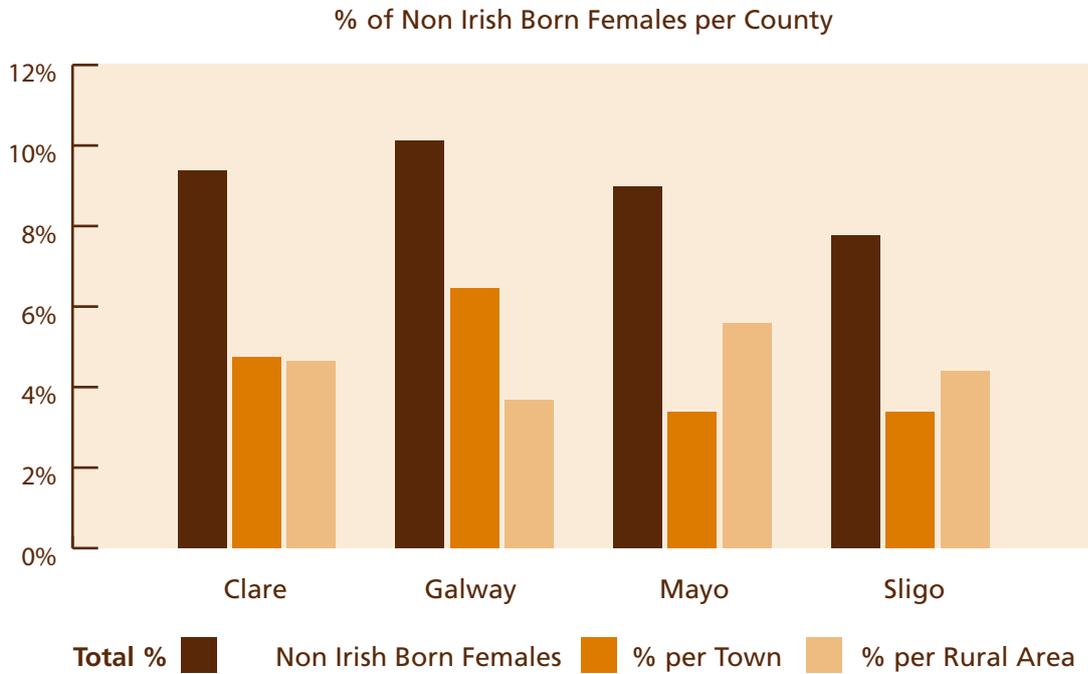
Graph 1 - the Border Region:



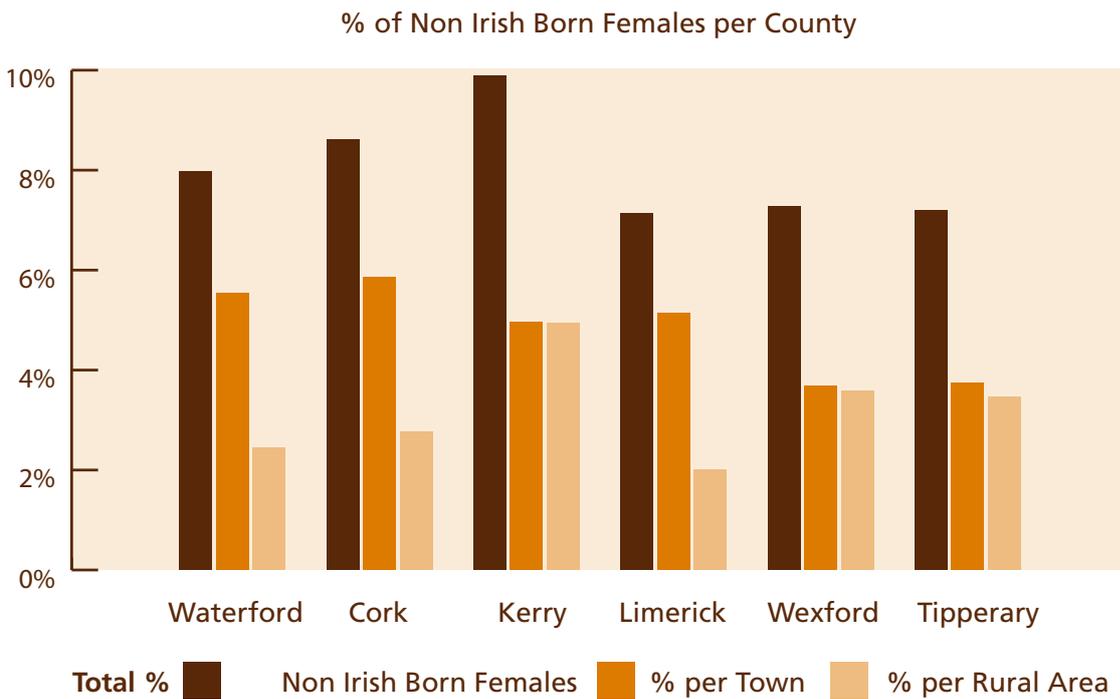
Graph 2 - the Midlands Region:



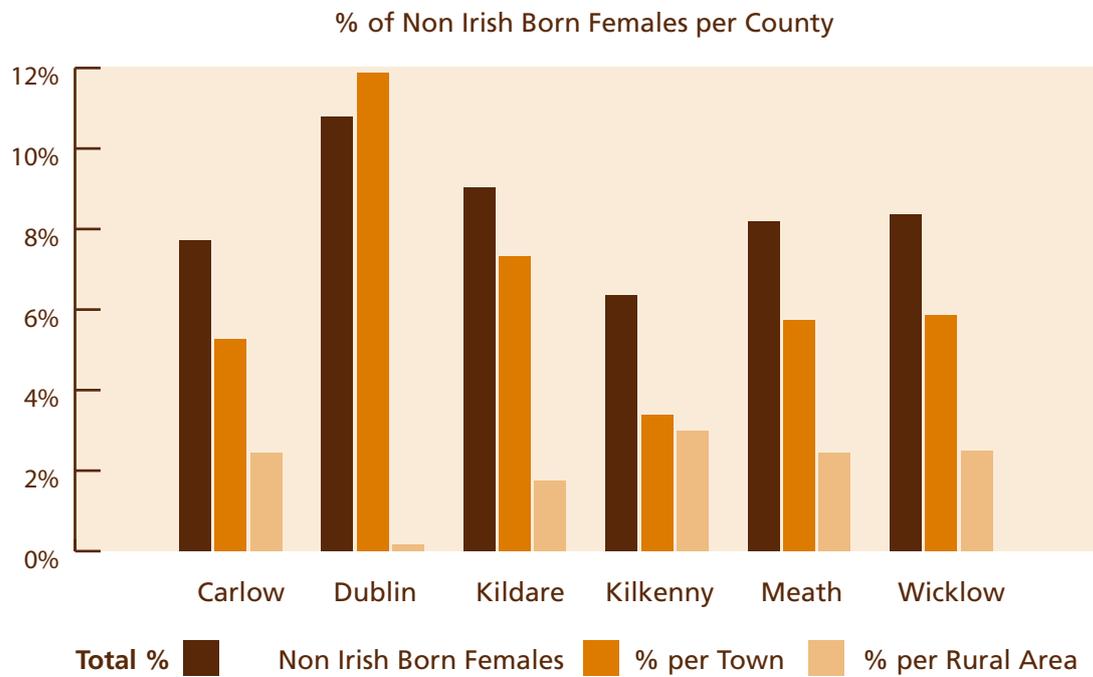
Graph 3 - the Western Region:



Graph 4 - the Southern Region:



Graph 5 - the Eastern Region:









DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE, EQUALITY AND LAW REFORM  
AN BUREAU NA GAIRÍ, COMHOIBREAN NA GAIRÍ, AGUS AN OIBREAN NA GAIRÍ



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