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Social Enterprises: Female participation and leadership

RaISe - Public Finance Scrutiny Unit

This Briefing Paper - commissioned by the Committee for the Economy – considers Social Enterprises and how they may promote female participation and leadership in the labour market. The Paper considers the Social Enterprise sector from a female perspective, internationally and specifically in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland; followed by some concluding remarks.

This information is provided to a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in support of their duties, and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as professional legal advice, or as a substitute for it.

Introduction

This Briefing Paper has been prepared at the request of the Committee for the Economy (CfE), by the Public Finance Scrutiny Unit within the Finance and Economics Research Team, located within the Northern Ireland Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe). It first provides context-setting information, providing definitions and data. Thereafter, it considers female participation and leadership in Social Enterprises, at international, European, national and sub-national levels (United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland). The Paper then addresses the Shared Island Enterprise Scheme; looking at how the Scheme supports female-led Social Enterprises across the island of Ireland; followed by some concluding remarks.

The Paper is presented as follows:

1. [Definitions and Data on Women and Social Enterprises](#)
2. [International Perspectives](#)
3. [Europe](#)
4. [United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland](#)
5. [Shared Island Enterprise Scheme](#)
6. [Concluding Remarks](#)

The Paper's contents should not be relied upon as professional legal advice or opinion, nor as a substitute for either.

1 Definitions and Data on Women and Social Enterprises

[SocialEnterpriseNI](#) – the representative body for Social Enterprises and social entrepreneurs in Northern Ireland - defines “Social Enterprises” as:

Social Enterprises are innovative, independent businesses driven by social and environmental purposes. Their profits are reinvested in their mission. Social enterprise is a more sustainable and ethical way of doing business¹

According to the [Social Enterprise Knowledge Centre](#), 3% of Social Enterprises in the United Kingdom are found in Northern Ireland. In the published [2025 Northern Ireland Social Enterprise Sector Report](#) (dated 30 July 2025), it was estimated that there are currently at least 1,225 Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland. The contribution these Social Enterprises make to the Northern Ireland economy is not insignificant; they have a combined turnover estimated around £932.9 million (m) and are employing around 17,300 people.

Research from organisations, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and British Council, has found that Social Enterprises can help support women into employment and encourage higher proportion of females in leadership positions than traditional for-profit companies. In 2017, the British Council published [Activist to entrepreneur: The role of social enterprise in supporting women’s empowerment in the UK](#). In summary, the report:

... provides further and welcome evidence that social enterprise not only supports women to become economically independent, it offers more leadership opportunities than other sectors and chances to participate in professions that were traditionally closed to them.²

In addition, the report finds that Social Enterprises can “support women’s empowerment” in four ways:³

¹ <https://socialenterpriseni.org/>

² https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/british_council_social_enterprise_and_womens_empowerment_uk_final_web.pdf

³ See footnote 2 immediately above

- *as a source of funding for women's rights*
- *as a means to deliver training or employment opportunities for women*
- *as a way to create economic empowerment for women through micro-entrepreneurship*
- *as a means of providing affordable products and services for women*

The following sections of this Paper looks at Social Enterprises from a female perspective and how they support women's participation and leadership within businesses. Where possible, comparisons are made to conventional firms and the sectors in which female-led and/or female-majority firms operate; first considered at an international and European levels, and then at national and sub-national levels, notably the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland, as well as others in which existing analysis could be found at the time of writing.

2 International Perspectives

The following sub-sections consider analysis of the Social Enterprise environment from the World Economic Forum and British Council which have carried out analysis from an international perspective, including the role of women.

2.1 World Economic Forum

In April 2024, the World Economic Forum and the Schwab Foundation for social entrepreneurship published [The State of Social Enterprise: A review of Global data 2013 – 2023](#). While the majority of the report considers the general Social Enterprise landscape, limited analysis has been carried out in relation to gender and female-leadership.

Notably, the report considers how Social Enterprises can help bridge the gender gap, concluding that “one in two Social Enterprises worldwide [are] led by

women, compared to one in five for conventional enterprises”.⁴ However, the report notes that the figures vary by country, explaining:

*While consistently high across the sample, the average percentage of Social Enterprises with women leaders does vary somewhat by country. Among those with the lowest levels of representation are Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and India, all with slightly less than 25% of sampled Social Enterprises led by women. Conversely, in Latvia, Ireland and Sweden, nearly 70% of Social Enterprises are led by women.*⁵

The report also highlights:

*Social Enterprise Census Scotland, the only longitudinal study available on social enterprise, found an increase in the percentage of Social Enterprises led by women from 60% to 71% between 2015 and 2021.*⁶

More information on the Social Enterprise Census Scotland can be found in RalSe Research Paper [NIAR 36-25](#).

2.2 British Council

The 2017 British Council report [Activist to entrepreneur: The role of social enterprise in supporting women’s empowerment](#) provides a comparative analysis of a selection of countries (Brazil, India, Pakistan and the United States); considering the Social Enterprise landscape for women in each. Table 1 below provides an overview of the findings of the report.

Table 1. Headline findings of the British Council - Activist to entrepreneur: The role of social enterprise in supporting women’s empowerment report

Findings	Country
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⁴ [The State of Social Enterprise: A review of Global data 2013 – 2023](#) (April 2024)

⁵ See footnote 4 immediately above

⁶ See footnote 4

		Brazil	India	Pakistan	USA
Women (% of social enterprise workforce)		55%	25%	37%	65%
Women (% leaders in social enterprise)		25%	24%	20%	55%
Female borrowing rates as a percentage of male borrowing rates for business start-up and growth		50.9%	52.0%	79.0%	64.3%
Social situation of women founding Social Enterprises	Had at least a comfortable standard of living when growing up	76%	61%	69%	60%
	Better off than many in their communities	41%	21%	43%	10%
	Still in education at the age of 21	82%	66%	76%	94%
	Caring responsibilities in the family (child or parent)	35%	73%	60%	45%
	The main wage-earner in their family	6%	33%	19%	50%

Does gender have an impact on the barriers you face in running your social enterprise? Yes	62%	31%	50%	56%
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Source: [Activist to entrepreneur: The role of social enterprise in supporting women's empowerment](#) (2017)

2.2.1 Report recommendations for governments

The report provides a number of recommendations for governments across all the countries analysed. While the social and economic position of each of the nations identified vary significantly, several general recommendations are presented which apply across all countries. These recommendations include:⁷

1. *Governments should bear in mind that any policies to support women into work will actively support the social enterprise sector, which has a disproportionately high female workforce.*
2. *Governments should prioritise eliminating the gender imbalance between caring responsibilities through legislation and financial support for shared parental leave and affordable childcare. The social enterprise sector should also look to address these two issues.*
3. *Governments and Social Enterprises should work in partnership to increase the use of social entrepreneurship education in schools and include a specific focus on addressing gender inequality*

3 Europe

The [EUclid Network - the European Social Enterprise Network](#) carries out a biennial survey-based study on Social Enterprises across Europe. On 3 April 2025, the Euclid Network published a thematic report considering data from the [2021-2022 European Social Enterprise Monitor](#) (ESEM) using a “gender lens” – [Women in Social Enterprise – Observations on the State of the Sector in](#)

⁷https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/social_enterprise_and_womens_empowerment_july.pdf

[Europe](#). This initial 2021-22 report covered 21 countries across Europe, including many European Union member states and other European countries, such as the United Kingdom, Switzerland and Turkey. The thematic report excluded a number of countries (For example; the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland which will be analysed separately at [Section 4](#) of the Paper) from those initially analysed in the 2021-22 report,⁸ as low response rates did not provide sufficient representation.

The findings of the report are summarised in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Findings of the Women in Social Enterprise – Observations on the State of the Sector in Europe Report 2025

Women's Representation & Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Enterprise founders - 52.1% of founders are female (21.7% of ESEM SEs had all women founders, compared to 15.3% with no women founders) • Social Enterprise managers - 55.8% of management are female (25.8% had all women managers, compared to 13.2% with no women managers) • Social Enterprise board members - 50.4% of boards have female representatives (14.7% had all women board members, compared to 9.7% with no women board members) • Overall, 9.3% of Social Enterprises had all women founders, managers and board members
Social Enterprise characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women-led Social Enterprises were generally founded more recently than the study average • While more concentrated in traditional social economy sectors such as health and social work, education and arts, women in and women-led Social

⁸ Bulgaria, Ireland, Serbia, Slovenia and the United Kingdom were excluded from all cross-country comparisons

	<p>Enterprises were also well represented in manufacturing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women-led Social Enterprises were generally innovative, growing and intending to scale
Social & Environmental Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women/girls, children and individuals with mental illness were the most commonly supported beneficiaries of female-led Social Enterprises • Up to 15% more women-led Social Enterprises focused on creating impact at a local level as compared to Social Enterprises without women in leadership, while up to 20% fewer had pursued international scale
People & Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was a greater concentration of zero paid Full-Time Employees in female-led Social Enterprises and more likely to rely on volunteers
Revenues & Financing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most women-led Social Enterprises had hybrid income (from trading and non-trading sources) but were less reliant on trading. Government grants were the common income source for all women Social Enterprises • The greatest concentration of women in leadership was seen among Social Enterprises with revenues under €50,000. Generally, all women Social Enterprises had lower levels of revenue than Social Enterprises in general • All women Social Enterprises were less likely to have made a profit, but also less likely to have made a loss

Source: [Women in Social Enterprise – Observations on the State of the Sector in Europe](#) (2025)

4 United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland

The following sub-sections will provide more detailed analysis of the Social Enterprise sector from a female perspective in the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. The Sections are presented as follows:

[4.1 United Kingdom](#)

[4.2 Republic of Ireland](#)

4.1 United Kingdom

Figures included in the [State of Social Enterprise Survey 2023](#) (SSES 2023) published by the [Social Enterprise UK](#), compiled by its [Social Enterprise Knowledge Centre](#), give a snapshot of the Social Enterprise sector in the United Kingdom. This biennial report on the sector in the United Kingdom has been running since 2009, in which Social Enterprise UK attempt to provide a “comprehensive national picture of the sector”⁹.

The SSES 2023 found that across the United Kingdom there were an estimated 131,000 Social Enterprises, which were employing around 2.3m people. The contribution businesses make to the United Kingdom economy was not insignificant, with Social Enterprises having turnover of approximately £78 billion (bn) in 2022, which accounted for 3.4% of GDP.¹⁰ While the report covers significant detail on the general landscape of the Social Enterprise sector, the following analysis examines areas of the report in which gender comparison were made.

The headline gender-related figures from the report identified that “59% of social enterprise leadership teams are at least half female”.¹¹ Furthermore, 88% of social enterprise leadership teams include one woman. The research

⁹ <https://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/app/uploads/2023/12/Mission-Critical-State-of-Social-Enterprise-Survey-2023.pdf>

¹⁰ See footnote 9 immediately above

¹¹ See footnote 9

compares women leadership of Social Enterprises to those across small businesses in general, in which:

...59% of leadership teams are majority-led by women and more than half of leadership roles are held by women. In contrast, only 18% of small business as a whole are led by women.¹²

This trend also extends to employment within Social Enterprises with the report commenting that:

Among Social Enterprises with paid employees, 58% report at least half their workforce are women, with 15% reporting that their entire workforce are women. 82% of the very largest Social Enterprises, with more than 250 paid employees, report that at least half their workforce are women.¹³

The report also notes that characteristically Social Enterprises are for-profit organisations, and therefore are registered as limited businesses, co-operatives and trading charities and liable to pay corporation tax. The survey reported that the average amount of corporation tax paid by Social Enterprises in 2023 was £5,430. However, the report also analysed this from a gender perspective and found that:

Female-led Social Enterprises paid £6,200 on average, compared to £4,400 for Social Enterprises led by men¹⁴

This may suggest female-led Social Enterprises were more profitable than those lead by men; however, further analysis would be required to fully explore this finding in-depth.

4.1.1 Northern Ireland

On 30 July 2025, the Department for the Economy (DfE) published the [2025 Northern Ireland Social Enterprise Sector Report](#) (2025 NISES Report). The DfE commissioned this report with the purpose of producing research into the

¹² See footnote 9

¹³ See footnote 9

¹⁴ [Mission Critical State of Social Enterprise Survey 2023](#)

state of the Social Enterprise Sector in Northern Ireland. The aim of the research was:

...to provide an up-to-date and in-depth picture of the sector, examining the scale, strengths, challenges, and opportunities of Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland. This will allow the Department to better inform policy development and provide support to the sector in line with DfE's Economic Vision¹⁵

This Report, while providing a more comprehensive overview of the social enterprise sector in Northern Ireland in general (see RalSe Briefing Paper [NIAR 128-25](#)), it also provides some female-specific analysis. The report considers the leadership of Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland, and found that 44% of Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland are female-led. Notably, this was below the levels reported at a United Kingdom level in the SSES 2023. However, the 2025 NISES Report notes that 97% of Northern Ireland Social Enterprises have at least one woman on their leadership teams/boards.

Considering employment within Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland, the 2025 NISES Report found that 82% of those surveyed reported women making up at least half of employees. Over a fifth (22%) stated that their entire workforce was female. The Report concluded that this reflects:

...a relatively high rate of female participation, though overall gender diversity appears slightly lower than across the UK social enterprise sector as a whole¹⁶

The Report then considered these findings in relation to deprivation, stating:

Social Enterprises with a high proportion of female staff are more likely to be located in areas of higher deprivation¹⁷

Statistically, the Report found that:¹⁸

¹⁵ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/2025-northern-ireland-social-enterprise-sector-report>

¹⁶ See footnote 15 immediately above

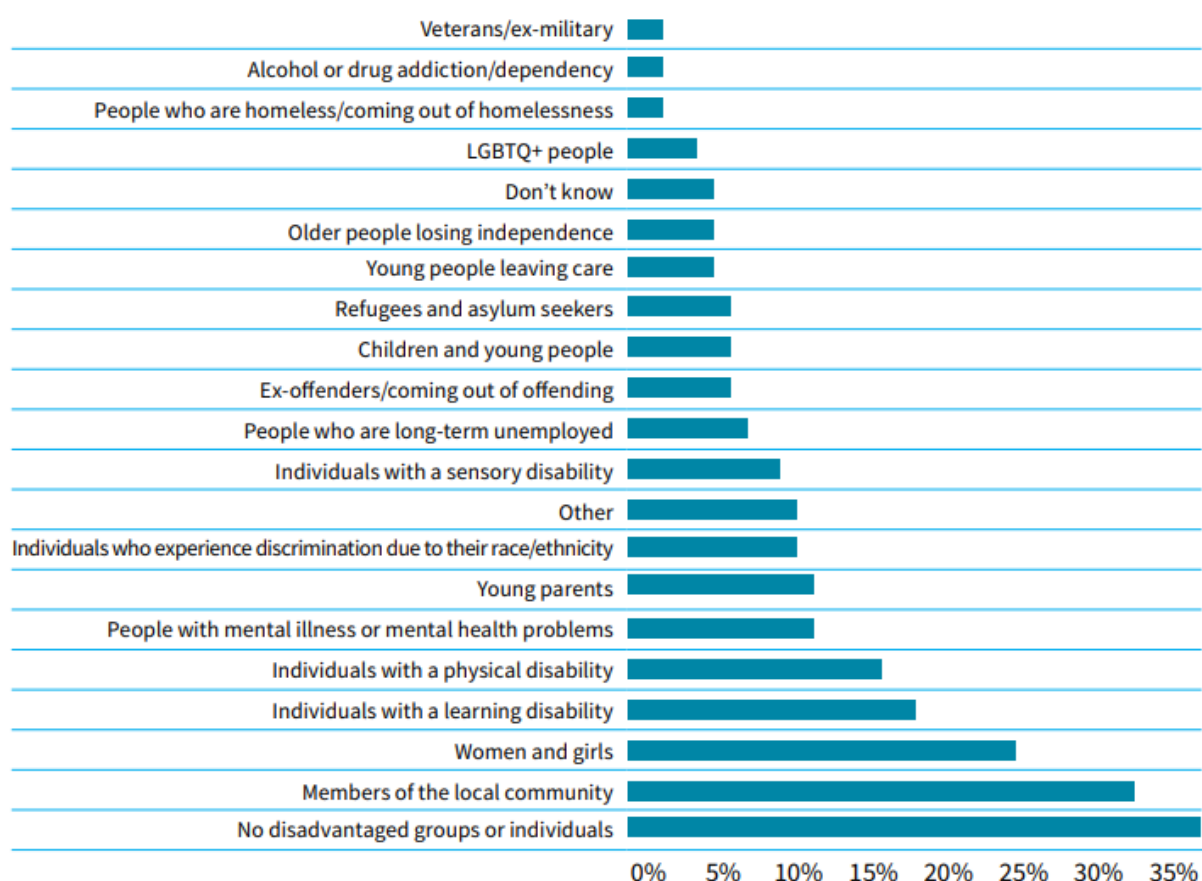
¹⁷ See footnote 15

¹⁸ See footnote 15

- *50% of those with at least 50% female staff are based in the most deprived quintile, compared to just 21% in the least deprived*
- *Among those with an all-female workforce, around a quarter operate in the most deprived [areas]*

As part of a Social Enterprises mission, the Report notes that Social Enterprises in Northern Ireland “...trade to achieve social and environmental goals rather than to maximise profit.¹⁹” Therefore, some Social Enterprises may put a focus on supporting women and girls. Figure 1 below shows that of those surveyed for the 2025 NISES Report, around a quarter were seeking to employ women and girls specifically. However, it should be noted that all other target groups listed will more than likely include females.

Figure 1. Groups Social Enterprises seek to employ



Source: [2025 Northern Ireland Social Enterprise Sector Report](#) (2025)

¹⁹ See footnote 15

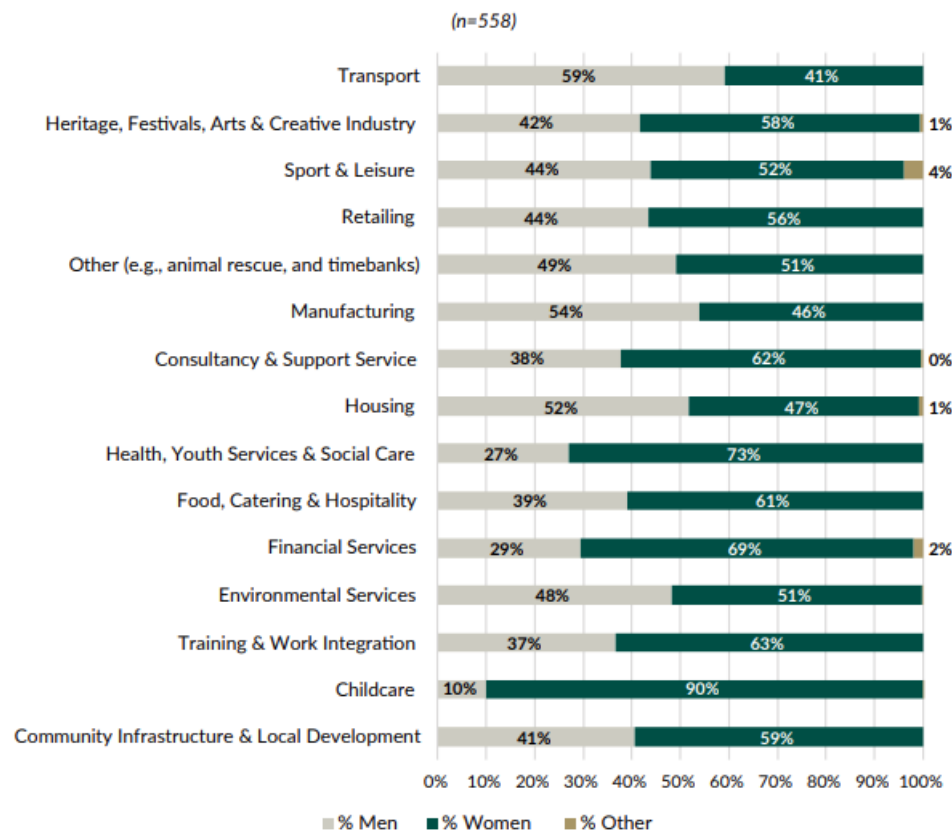
4.2 Republic of Ireland

In 2022, the Department of Rural and Community Development commissioned a consortium to conduct a Baseline data gathering exercise of Social Enterprise in the RoI. This was in partnership with the Social Enterprise sector, an online survey was developed and published. Over 800 Social Enterprises completed the survey. The results of the survey give a snapshot of the Social Enterprise sector in 2022. The final report, [Social Enterprises in Ireland – A Baseline Data Collection Exercise](#), was published on 25 May 2023. Some of the report findings detailed female participation in the Social Enterprise sector in the Republic of Ireland. The following sub-sections address those findings in terms of gender – specifically female participation.

4.2.1 Gender representation in the workforce

The report finds that women represent 68.8% of the Social Enterprise sector workforce. Breaking these results down by sector of activity find that women compose the majority of the workforce (more than 50% of the workforce) in each sector. The sectors with the highest proportion of women were in the fields of Childcare (90%), Health, Youth Services and Social Care (73%) and Financial Services (69%). Figure 2 below provides an overview of key findings.

Figure 2. Social Enterprises gender distribution according to sector of activity

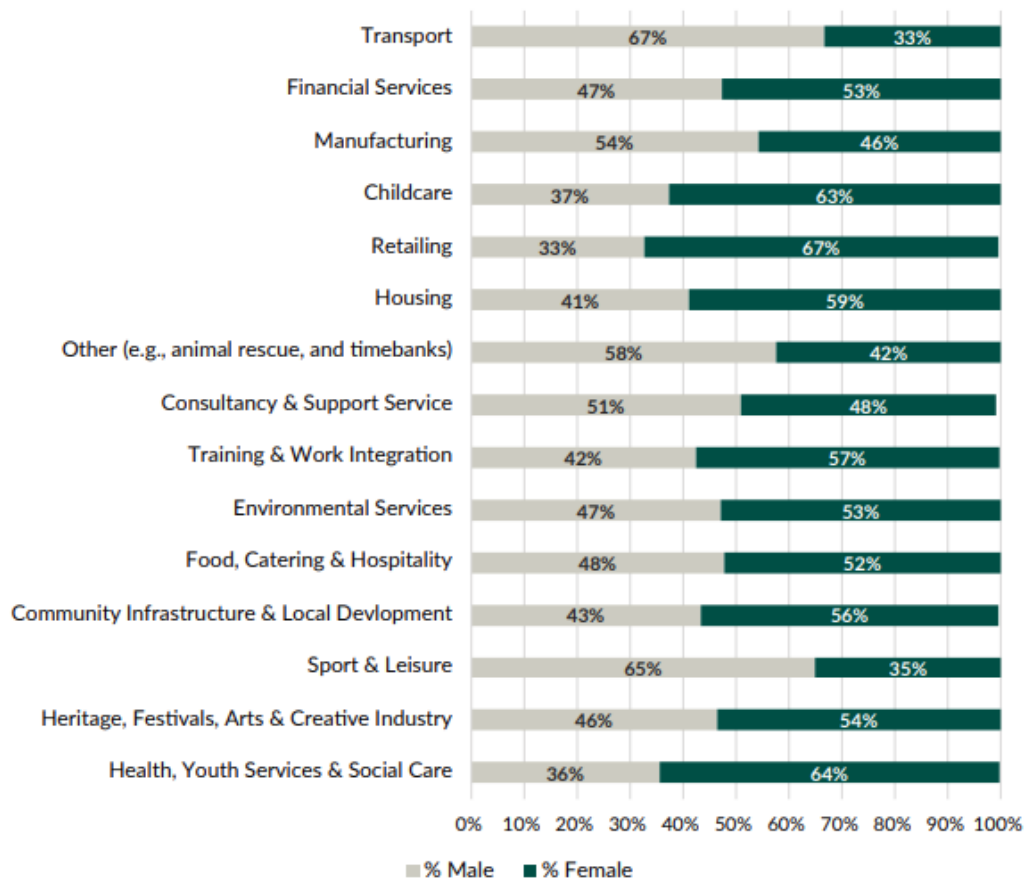


Source: [Social Enterprises in Ireland – a baseline data collection exercise](#) (2023)

4.2.2 Volunteers

Volunteering is a noted aspect of Social Enterprise sector. In 2022, 44,501 active volunteers participated in RoI Social Enterprise sector. In terms of gender, over half (54%) of volunteers are female. The largest sector of activity is retail, with women comprising 67% of volunteers in the sector, this is followed by Health, Youth Services and Social Care (64%) and Childcare (63%). Figure 3 below provides an overview of the findings.

Figure 3. Ratio of male and female volunteers within each sector of activity

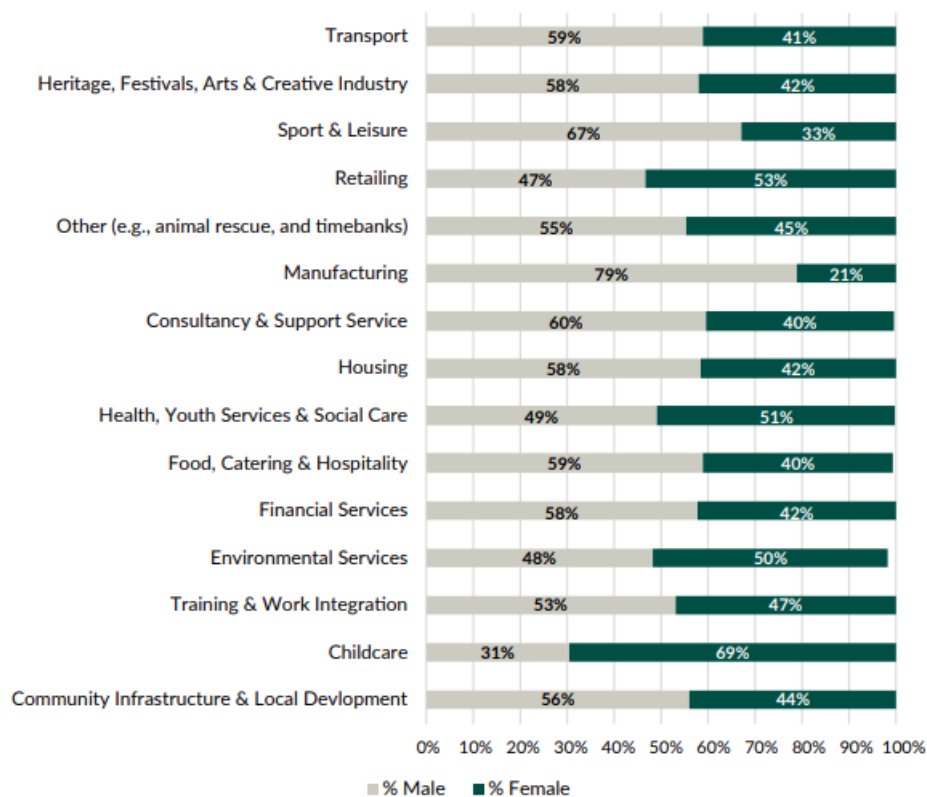


Source: [Social Enterprises in Ireland – a baseline data collection exercise](#) (2023)

4.2.3 Board Membership

However, when considering the composition of management boards of Social Enterprises in Ireland, the inverse is found when compared to volunteers - 54% of board members were male. The report also found that most activity sectors had male majority boards. The notable exception to this was Childcare, which reported 69% of board members being female. Only Retail (53%), Health, Youth Services & Social Care (51%) and Environmental Services (50%) had a ratio of half or more female board members. Figure 4 below provides an overview of the findings.

Figure 4. Ratio of male and female board members within each sector of activity



Source: [Social Enterprises in Ireland – a baseline data collection exercise](#) (2023)

4.2.4 Report conclusions

The Social Enterprises in Ireland – A Baseline Data Collection Exercise report's conclusion notes:

The social enterprise sector presents a workforce represented mainly by women. Besides contributing to women's employment creation, the sector also provides work opportunities to vulnerable groups using activation labour market programmes (especially in rural areas) and through enterprises whose main aim is work integration. It remains for future exercises to analyse the implications of an apparent dependency on these labour market activation supports.²⁰

²⁰ <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/social-enterprises-in-ireland-a-baseline-data-collection-exercise.pdf>

Despite the opportunities the sector presents for female employment, the report suggests there are challenges and disparities for females especially in decision making within Social Enterprises. It concludes:

... the work provided by Social Enterprises shows a high proportion of part-time employment, especially significant in the case of women. Moreover, while women represent the majority of the Social Enterprises' workforce, this is not translated into strategic decision-making roles (boards), mainly occupied by men, especially those aged 50 years or more. This disproportionate number of men and older people on boards represent a challenge for the social enterprise sector.²¹

5 Shared Island Enterprise Scheme

As noted in the conclusion of the report on the Social Enterprises in Ireland – A Baseline Data Collection Exercise, Social Enterprises have “an apparent dependency on ...labour market activation supports”²². An example of such available support for the sector, in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, is the [Shared Island Enterprise Scheme](#) (SIES), and is noted in the [Trading for Impact: National Social Enterprise Policy 2024-2027](#) as an initiative to support the sector. In February 2024, the Irish Government [announced](#) €800m of funding for Shared Island priorities, including €30m towards the establishment of SIES, which is to be developed by [InterTradeIreland](#), [Invest Northern Ireland](#) and [Enterprise Ireland](#)²³.

The SIES is an all-island programme aimed to support three broad areas:

- Women Entrepreneurship
- Clusters and Networks
- Green Investment

²¹ See footnote 19 immediately above

²² See footnote 19

²³ <https://www.investni.com/support-for-business/shared-island-enterprise-scheme>

5.1 SIES – Women entrepreneurship

The Women Entrepreneurship area of the SIES is a dedicated initiative to support women's entrepreneurship, with support delivered on an all-island basis. An initial pilot was launched in the Autumn of 2024 and concluded in June 2025. The pilot programme included:

- Deal Leader Training, delivered by [AwakenAngels](#)
- Angel Investor Masterclass, delivered by [AwakenAngels](#)
- Spark It, delivered by [Women in Business](#) and [Network Ireland](#)
- Grow It, delivered by [Women in Business](#) and [Network Ireland](#)
- Innovation Labs, delivered by [TechFoundHer](#)
- Engage, delivered by [Alinea](#)
- Evolve, delivered by [Alinea](#)
- SheScales, delivered by [AwakenHub](#)

While none of the above programmes targeted exclusively for Social Enterprises, the eligibility criteria does not exclude such organisations. Rather, all enterprises - both social and conventional - can apply if they meet the specified eligibility criteria. In general, for participation in a programme, the requirement is that the business has a woman founder or partner or director. Beyond that, the requirements take the form of, for example, stage of business development, turnover and length of time the business has been trading. From available information at the time of writing, it seems to date that some participant businesses in the programmes have a social element to their operations, despite not explicitly referring to themselves as a Social Enterprise.

6 Concluding Remarks

A variety of reports considered in this Paper indicate Social Enterprises can support female participation in the workforce and have a higher percentage of females in senior management roles when compared to conventional businesses. The findings suggest that Social Enterprises can support women into employment or may have a specific social mission that provide other supports to address issues affecting women.

Research findings in this Paper further suggest Social Enterprises do have a higher proportion of females in the workforce and leadership positions than those in traditional private sector organisations, but that can be disproportionate, depending on the business sector in which the Social Enterprise operates. Notably, that observation was evidenced at a European level in the report [Women in Social Enterprise – Observations on the State of the Sector in Europe](#) and in the Republic of Ireland in the report on the [Social Enterprises in Ireland – A Baseline Data Collection Exercise](#). Both found women-led Social Enterprises are predominant in traditional social economy sectors, such as childcare, health and social work, and education.

While identifying specific support for female-led and/or female majority workforce Social Enterprise has been challenging, it is evident that general support for female entrepreneurs and support for female employment provided by governments will impact Social Enterprises. The information considered in this Paper suggests the female rates in leadership positions and employment in Social Enterprises are generally higher than conventional businesses. Therefore, it seems Social Enterprises may be in better position to benefit from available female targeted support programmes. As noted in the 2017 [Activist to entrepreneur: The role of social enterprise in supporting women's empowerment](#) report:

...any policies to support women into work will actively support the social enterprise sector, which has a disproportionately high female workforce.²⁴

As such, one example of such support, which is not specific to Social Enterprises, but Social Enterprises could apply in Northern Ireland is the SIES. Notably, in terms of support for women, the women entrepreneurship strand of the SIES could be applied to by female-led Social Enterprises. To apply, Social Enterprises would need to meet the eligibility criteria, which in general for participation in this programme would require that the enterprise has a woman founder or partner or director in the business dependent on the programme.

²⁴ [Activist to entrepreneur: The role of social enterprise in supporting women's empowerment](#) (2017)