

# FEMINIST COMMUNITY UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

## UCD and WCI Ronanstown 25 Year Impact Evaluation Report



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School of Social Policy,  
Social Work & Social Justice



Ronanstown Women's CDP



Women's  
Collective  
Ireland  
Ronanstown



An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,  
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige  
Department of Children, Equality,  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This 25-year impact evaluation report assesses the impact, challenges and future potential of the Women, Gender and Social Justice Community/University Outreach Programme offered in partnership between UCD's School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice and Ronanstown Women's CDP & Women's Collective Ireland (WCI) Ronanstown. It examines the programme's role in widening educational access and participation, fostering personal and professional growth, and building community engagement. The study integrates survey research with graduates from 1999-2023 and focus groups with past participants, educators and community partners. This mixed-methods evaluation captures the multi-layered impact of the programme on personal growth, employment, volunteering, family relationships and community activism.

The evaluation has demonstrated the programme's profound and lasting impact on participants, families and communities. Findings highlight the programme's transformative effects, from increased confidence and career mobility and sustained engagement with higher education to deeper civic participation and activism. The evaluation also identifies structural barriers. These insights inform key recommendations for sustainability, policy integration, and the expansion of inclusive, feminist education models.

### Recommendations

#### Supporting Learners and Creating a Student-Centred Model

- i. Ensure that student voices remain central to programme development, incorporating learner feedback into curriculum design, support services and policy recommendations.
- ii. Strengthen peer mentorship and learner-led initiatives, creating student networks that provide ongoing support beyond the classroom.
- iii. Strengthen flexible learning options, including blended learning formats, childcare support and tailored accessibility measures, accommodating diverse learner needs.
- iv. Expand financial and academic support structures, including tuition assistance, peer mentorship programmes and access to university services, ensuring that students can fully engage with learning without financial or logistical barriers.

#### Institutionalising Outreach Education and Strengthening Educational Pathways

- i. Reduce over-reliance on individual staff members by creating dedicated funding and targeted programme supports within UCD, ensuring institutional responsibility for programme sustainability.
- ii. Promote and activate the pathways (existing and new) from community education to further and higher education through the guaranteed provision of wraparound supports including childcare, laptop loan scheme, one to one mentoring, grant and funding workshops.
- iii. Clearly present information on access and progression pathways and disseminate through a range of multimedia formats to local communities.
- iv. Ensure voices from the community education sector, including the Women's Collective Ireland (WCI), are included in the development of mainstream policies.
- v. Advocate for the formal recognition of voluntary, community-based work and non-traditional learning pathways, ensuring that such experience translates into employment and leadership opportunities.

#### Funding and Resource Allocation for Sustainability

- vi. Work with the Higher Education Authority and relevant government departments to secure long-term state funding, recognising the unique role of feminist, adult outreach education in widening participation.
- vii. Ensure student grants are accessible to those taking courses on a part - time basis in the Further Education/ Higher Education sector.



- viii. Add the level 7 Certificate in Women Gender & Social Justice to the existing suite of programmes currently listed under the Student Part-Time Fee Scheme for Specified Undergraduate Courses.(Susi Grant Scheme)  
[www.susi.ie/funding-for-part-time-undergraduate-courses/](http://www.susi.ie/funding-for-part-time-undergraduate-courses/)
- ix. Develop a funding model for women's community education programmes that offers multi annual funding to ensure it covers the provision of core facilities and resources, and wraparound support.
- x. Ensure funding to enable the recruitment and retention of experienced staff on contractual terms that can support consistent and expanded delivery of effective programmes to women in our community.
- xi. Make provision for free childcare for women participating in community education through a voucher system and or local arrangement to enable them to engage in community education and for their children to access and benefit from the early years curriculum.
- xii. Invest in women's community education settings and the expertise of the staff teams through the provision of continuing professional development opportunities for staff.

## Expanding Access, Participation and Community Engagement

- xiii. Expand access to the level 7 Women Gender and Social Justice Outreach programme through the existing partnership and infrastructure of the Women's Collective Ireland.
- xiv. Maintain and strengthen the community centre-based model, ensuring that learning environments remain holistic, feminist and accessible to diverse groups.
- xv. Expand pre-university preparation programmes, funded through ETBs, ensuring that community learners are adequately supported before transitioning to higher education.
- xvi. Expand the number of students and the diversity of cohorts, ensuring more marginalised communities have access to learning spaces.
- xvii. Increase targeted outreach efforts to engage migrant communities, working-class women, caregivers and disabled students, ensuring that education is inclusive and representative.



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## INTRODUCTION

This 25 year impact evaluation report assesses the impact, challenges and future potential of the Women, Gender and Social Justice Community/University Outreach Programme offered in partnership between UCD's School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice and Ronanstown Women's CDP and Women's Collective Ireland (WCI) Ronanstown. It examines the programme's role in widening educational access and participation, fostering personal and professional growth, and building community engagement. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates survey research with graduates from 1999-2023 and focus groups with past participants, educators and community partners.

Through survey research and focus groups, this mixed-methods evaluation captures the multi-layered impact of the programme on personal growth, employment, volunteering, family relationships and community activism. The findings provide both statistical rigour and lived-experience depth, offering a comprehensive assessment of the programme's significance and future potential.

### UCD Origins - Background and Context

Established in 1996, the UCD Gender & Social Justice Community/University Outreach Programme is widely recognised in the Irish state and voluntary sectors as an innovative model of community and adult education for women. To date a total of 50 University Community partnership programmes have been delivered to approximately 1000 students who graduated with a University Certificate (NFQ Level 7) from these community outreach programmes. The programme has contributed to the development of an innovative model of University/Community Partnerships that is acknowledged as optimal for engaging the most educationally excluded and economically disadvantaged groups in society (Hunt, 2011; HEA 2015). It reflects both UCD and HEA policy on social inclusion and increased participation across previously under-represented student cohorts. It targets women from areas of designated disadvantage through tailored provision in these areas. Described by the HEA as 'deep reservoirs of disadvantage', these communities have experienced systemic, intergenerational disadvantage and neglect. This may explain, in part, the sustained relevance of UCD's Gender and Social Justice Community/University Outreach Programme in the decades since the first programme delivery under the leadership of Ailbhe Smyth, Director of WERRC (Women's Education Research and Resource Centre, UCD). The programme has also ensured its enduring relevance by developing organically as it responded to changing sectoral and socio-cultural contexts, learner and partner needs and embracing new initiatives and innovations within the higher education sector.

Under the Direction of Dr Aideen Quilty since 2001, the programme expanded to include 9 National and 12 Dublin-based Organisations. Ireland's financial crisis in 2008 and the successive years of recessionary policies and politics prompted further change. The crisis impacted the community education, community development and University sectors. It generated an institutional rationalisation process within UCD (2008-2013), which led to the programme being revised to concentrate exclusively on the Dublin catchment area.

The programme title has also evolved. Historically called the University Certificate in Women's Studies, it was renamed the Certificate in Women, Gender and Social Justice in 2016-17 following extensive consultation with our Community Outreach Partners, key stakeholders and students. The programme's curriculum has also evolved, reflecting emerging scholarship and responding to emerging critical social justice issues and concerns. The unprecedented challenges posed by the global pandemic in 2020, which effectively halted the delivery of the outreach programme, prompted another significant programme change. This challenging time opened up opportunities in relation to online programme delivery, paving the way for new forms of accessibility and engagement. Following consultation with the two longest standing community partners, the programme is now fully blended. The three elements involve online weekly lectures delivered by UCD; in-person 'community tutorials' that blend academic, mentoring and emotional support—these are facilitated through the Education Training Board (ETB) structure; and intensive teaching days (Saturday) delivered on campus in UCD. The Level 7 University Certificate structure has evolved from a 2-year 30 credit (ECTs) programme to its current 1-year 20 credit (ECTs) programme.

Two community-based organisations in the greater Dublin area, who exemplify the university/community partnership model that champions access, participation and progression pathways for marginalised and communities of designated disadvantage, have played a central role in shaping so many of these changes referenced above: Clondalkin - WCI Ronanstown (formerly Ronanstown CDP and now part of the WCI - <https://womenscollective.ie/>) and the Loreto Centre Crumlin (<https://www.loretocentrecrumlin.ie/>). Both hold the belief that community education is a catalyst for positive change and transformation in the lives of women. This Impact Evaluation report references specifically the partnership with WCI Ronanstown.

## Ronanstown Women's CDP and Women's Collective Ireland

### Where We Are



## Community/University Outreach Partnership: WCI Ronanstown and UCD

Feminist principles sit at the heart of the Community/University partnership model we have developed and are committed to. One of our longest partnerships is in the Dublin 22 area, Ronanstown Clondalkin. The organisation offers a range of programmes and supports to women within a community setting, which is an ordinary house and garden in a housing estate in Clondalkin.

Ronanstown Women's CDP was originally established as a Company Limited by Guarantee (CLG) running a childcare service and providing community education in the heart of Clondalkin. It is governed by a voluntary Board with representatives who have experienced their own journey through community education. It began in 1985 as a small group of local women striving to improve opportunities and encourage social inclusion within the community. In 1999, Ronanstown Women's CDP invited Bawnogue Women's Development group to discuss the possibility of securing funding to run a third level course in Women's Studies, on an outreach basis in Clondalkin, to ensure they could challenge the reality for many women whose starting point in accessing largely non-accredited community education programme opportunities became their staying point. Building on this momentum in 2002, Ronanstown Women's CDP, Bawnogue Women's Development Group, Rowlagh Women's group and Deansrath Women's groups joined together to establish the Clondalkin Women's Community Education Forum. The local VEC supported the aims of the group. The finances and operational aspects were led by Ronanstown Women's CDP. This forged a strong connection of individual women activists and groups committed to enhancing grassroots women's access to third level education. The success of this initiative in 1999 can be seen in the continuation of the partnership with UCD in the intervening 25 years to deliver accredited third level education opportunities for women.

Ronanstown CDP has continued to develop and grow in response to the ever-evolving needs of the community. In 2011, Ronanstown Women's CDP, along with 16 other women's groups, came together to form a new national feminist informed community education network called the National Collective of Community Women's Network (NCCWN) which has evolved to become known as Women's Collective Ireland (WCI). This further affirmed the culture and ethos of community development, social justice and alignment with the WCI vision of an Ireland where women in all their diversity are flourishing. Like the UCD Gender Studies/Social Justice Programme, they believe in women's feminist community education as a catalyst for change, and change is vital to this community. In 1990, it was recorded in Ronanstown CDP that over 75% of women attending the centre had left full-time education by 15 years of age. Over two decades later, Ronanstown has experienced a significant worsening of disadvantage, poverty and deprivation. Two examples speak to this reality (The Rights Platform 2024 <https://therightsplatform.ie/>):

- Lone parents households in the area are 53.90 % while the national average is 10.71%;
- Third Level Qualification in this area is 7.02% while the national average is 41.85%.

The Programme's sustained relevance over the decades is reflected in the programme aims and objectives that continue to inform and guide the programme.

### Programme Aims

- Widen access to third-level education for women generally and more specifically for those experiencing social and economic disadvantaged and exclusion.
- Empower participants to make further personal, educational, economic and social choices, and to engage actively in a wide range of social, political and cultural activities
- Enhance women's labour market opportunities through the provision of broad educational, intellectual and personal skills
- Transform academic curricula and processes through provision of accessible and participatory third-level education.

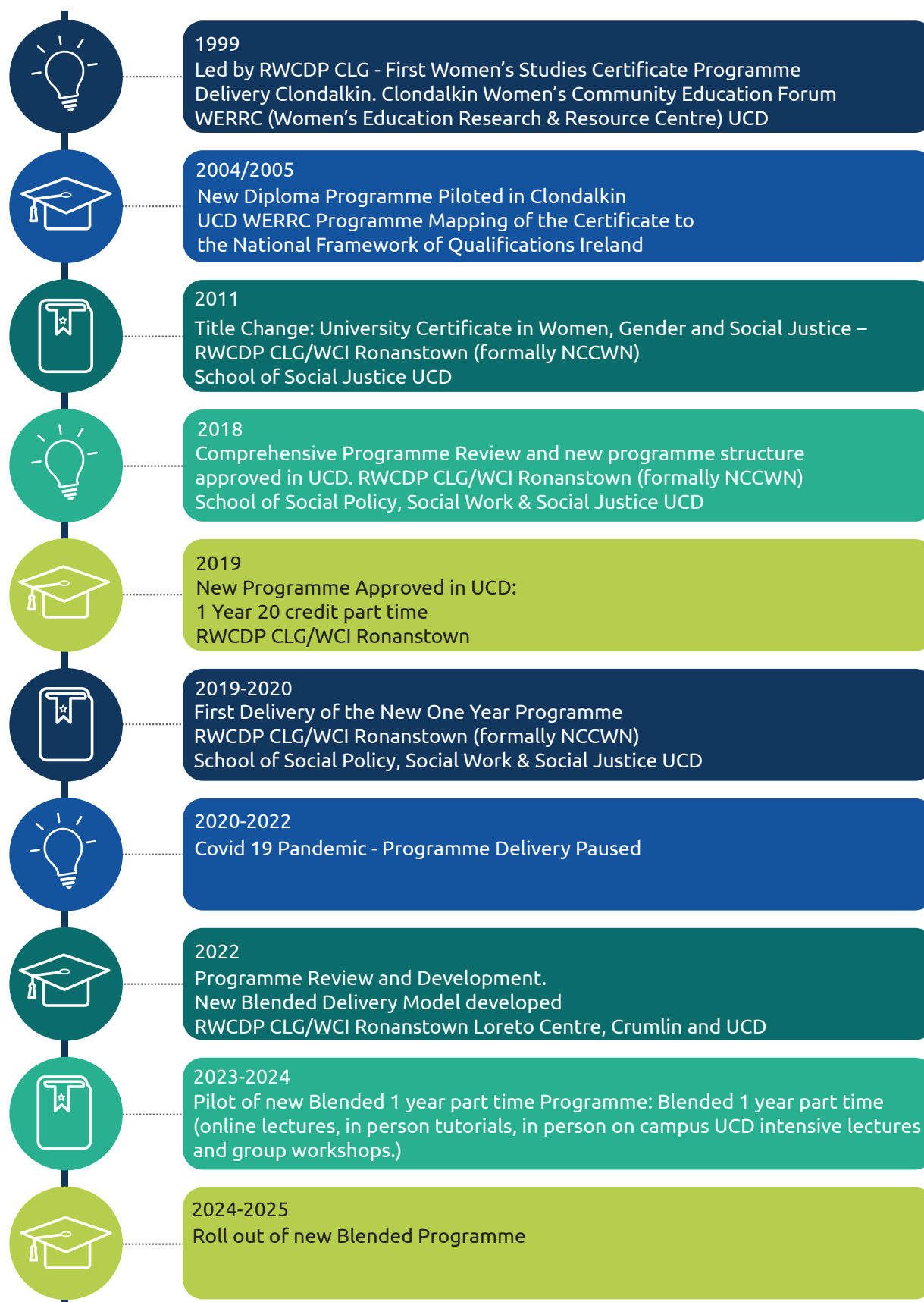
### Programme Objectives

- Develop students' communication, study, critical writing, thinking and analytical skills, enhancing their self-esteem and intellectual confidence



- Provide students with the credentials and skills necessary for further academic pursuits across a range of disciplines and HEIs
- Create learning opportunities for students to think critically about their individual experiences and their relationship to the issues and politics that affect their communities.
- Facilitate students' increased participation in their communities, civil society and public life.

## Community University Outreach Programme Developmental Timeline 25 years - UCD and WCI Ronanstown



## The Partnership Model

These programme aims and objectives reflect the feminist empowerment and critical adult education principles and pedagogies sitting at the heart of both UCD'S School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice and our Community Partner Organisations. They inform the basis of the Community/University Partnership model that underpins both the partnerships and the Programme.

Central to the success of this partnership is the reciprocal relationships between community and university and a commitment to respectful collaboration in all steps of the programme design, delivery, evaluation and ongoing development.

Pedagogically, an important starting point is the acknowledgement that each learner brings knowledge directly linked to their lived experiences to the learning environment from which they can build and extend their intellectual capacities and critical thinking skills. In terms of structure, the programme is developed along a learning continuum, or series of learning blocks, and is aimed at facilitating students' understanding and critical analysis through interactive and dynamic teaching methodologies. Student access, participation, retention and completion are seen as interrelated pedagogic processes which organically inform the programme's content and teaching strategies. Academic assignments are introduced on a phased basis, and study and critical thinking skills are provided throughout to support this process of skills acquisition for third level study.

The partnership can only function successfully with the expert input from both the university and community partner. To complement the academic pedagogic approach, students also benefit from the wrap-around services offered by the community partner including pastoral support and referrals to a range of services including counselling. Practical supports are also key and include childcare, a laptop loan scheme and IT support. Our bespoke community/university evaluation tool functions like a supplemental support system built into the programme structure. Each module is evaluated to assess the effectiveness of both the academic content and community supports. Issues that emerge through group evaluation are dealt with before another module begins. Issues that emerge in the summative evaluations feed into planning conversations for the subsequent module. This evaluative process contributes to the success of the programme and has proved to be an essential tool in enabling women to stay with the programme. Both partners, drawing on the learning from this programme and our interactions with students and stakeholders in Higher Education and the Community Sector, also contribute to and inform policy developments relating to access and widening participation and social inclusion locally and nationally.

Another feature of these partnerships are the multiple progression pathways linked to successful completion of the UCD Level 7 University Certificate in Women, Gender and Society. Progression opportunities are fundamental to access and widening participation principles and reflect both UCD and HEA (Higher Education Authority) policy. Our pathways are fully supported by both UCD and the community sector and guarantee access within UCD to a range of degree programmes in the Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities. Students can also apply as mature students through the CAO to other HEIs leveraging their Level 7 qualification as part of their application.

As an additional support, we also designed a dedicated community-based Pre-Certificate Access Programme preparing students for study at Level 7. We remain committed to ensuring this important Level 7 Certificate Programme is available to all applicants who have the desire to participate and complete. The pre-certificate programme was designed to ensure we do not impose a new set of barriers on students who may apply without pre-existing QQI-FET qualifications. Offered in conjunction with Community Partners and respective Local Partnerships, under the ETB structure, it has been running for 4 years and provides a central role in supporting and empowering women's transition into third-level education.

A total number of 196 women have graduated from the UCD/WCI Ronanstown community/university partnership to date and is outlined in the infographic below.



# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Definitions

The concept of 'university-community partnership' (UCP) is a wide term which can refer to various collaboration efforts between the community and the university, such as community-based research projects, community-based training programs, service-learning activities, or artistic co-production of knowledge (Russel and Flynn, 2001; Strier, 2014; Strier and Shechter, 2015). Hereby, efforts go beyond traditional community outreach models, which are largely based on one-way knowledge transfers on the university's terms, to directly and meaningfully involving the community in the research process (Gaffikin and Morrissey, 2008; Rubin, 1998; Zeldin, 1995). It is important to emphasise the transformative character of these partnerships for both parties involved. Indeed, these efforts are more often than not expressing explicit goals for social impact, such as environmental justice (Hall et al., 2013; Loh, 2016), combating poverty (Howarth et al., 2017; Strier and Shechter, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2018), food security (Hall et al., 2013, Schwartz et al., 2018), community change (Gaffikin and Morrissey, 2008; Schwartz et al. 2018) or feminist goals. In this report, we define UCPs as collaborations between community actors or organisations and higher educational institutions to engage in community-engaged scholarship that is mutually beneficial and strives to achieve explicit goals for social change (Curwood et al., 2011).

In this sense, UCPs are well suited to be studied from feminist and egalitarian research approaches and principles of transformative pedagogy, which focus on collaborative research endeavours aimed at unsettling inherent power dynamics between the 'researcher' and the 'researched', challenge epistemic privilege by creating access to knowledge production for marginalised communities, and have the explicit purpose of generating social change instead of doing research for the sake of doing research (Ackerly and True, 2020; Hacker, 2013; Naples and Gurr, 2013; Wigginton and Lafrance, 2019).

Feminist and egalitarian research uses participatory methodology and emphasises a collaborative research process to unsettle power dynamics between the researcher and the researched (Ackerly and True, 2020). These approaches recognise that in traditional research, the research process itself holds inherent power dynamics by giving the researcher the power to determine the research design, questions, and the wider ontological and epistemological underpinnings dictating what is counted as knowledge and deemed 'worthy' of being researched (Naples and Gurr, 2013). To limit this imbalance and upset these inherent power disparities, feminist and egalitarian research approaches actively and meaningfully involve the research participants in the shaping, framing, and determining of the research process (Hacker, 2013). Additionally, feminist and egalitarian research unsettles epistemic privilege and unequal access to knowledge creation on a wider social level. Historically, structures of epistemic privilege exclude many from the possibility of creating knowledge, by giving white, heterosexual, middle-class men the access, resources, and authority to carry out research and excluding marginalised groups from the process of knowledge creation, denoting them to objects of study (Hacker, 2013; Wigginton and Lafrance, 2019). Feminist and egalitarian research seeks to address this by encouraging researchers to reflect on their epistemic privilege and the power hierarchies within the process of knowledge creation and to create research that inspires social change (Ackerly and True, 2020). It employs methodology which actively centres the knowledges of marginalised communities, challenging dominant intellectual assumptions and incorporating pedagogies and epistemologies often excluded from research in the global North, such as native American ontologies or embodied knowledges, affirming their value in academia and society (Hacker, 2013).

Transformative pedagogy, as an educational approach, encourages students to critically examine and reflect on social inequalities, existing power structures, and dominant norms and narratives, making social justice a part of the content and curriculum (Lynch and Curter-Smith, 2018). This approach promotes democratic and collaborative learning, where students share their diverse experiences through open dialogue and exchange, as well as active learning, where students are actively shaping their learning process instead of passively receiving knowledge. Consequently, student empowerment and agency, critical consciousness and transformative learning are promoted, giving students the knowledge but also the tools to critically investigate traditional pedagogy and social narratives and become socially responsible citizens contributing to a more just society (Lynch and Carter-Smith, 2018; Tinning, 2017; Ukpokodu, 2009).



While feminist and egalitarian research principles aim to make the process of research and knowledge creation more accessible and emancipatory, transformative pedagogy is concerned with ensuring that the content of education is critically engaged with and informed by marginalised knowledges. Nevertheless, both are concerned with enabling access to marginalised communities in the production of knowledge and promoting social change and are, thus, very useful for the study of UCPs.

Across the literature, there are variations in the terms used to describe the collaboration between tertiary education institutions and the local community, such as civic engagement (Bringle, Hatcher, and Holland, 2007; Costa and Leong, 2012), community-campus partnerships (Schwartz et al., 2016), community-university collaboration (Buys and Bursna, 2007), community service learning (Curwood et al., 2011), or community-university partnerships (Hart et al., 2013; Howarth et al., 2016). Oftentimes, the point of view from which a study or report is written influences the terminology used and which of the two parties is named first. According to feminist research (Tirrell, 2017) and other research on UCPs (i.e. Costa and Leong, 2012), we recognise that language holds power and that the language we use can reproduce power structures. Nevertheless, we chose to use the term university-community partnership (UCP) to reflect the prevalence of this term in the literature (Bhagwan, 2018; Buys and Bursna, 2007; Klein et al., 2011; Strier, 2011; Strier and Shechter, 2015) and to reflect our position as academics writing from the point of view of a university.

## University-Community

Interest in university-community partnerships and projects has increased in recent decades, as has the interest in the analysis and evaluation of the different models and factors that enhance or hamper their impact (Curwood et al., 2011; Ostrander, 2004; Rubin, 2000). This is largely attributed to changing social, economic and institutional dynamics between institutions of higher education and society, with calls for the expansion of the narrow concept of scholarship and a shift in the social perception of universities, from inaccessible ivory towers to vehicles for social consciousness and change (Boyer, 1996; Brown-Luthango, 2013; Fisher et al., 2005; Loh, 2016; Strier, 2014). Gradually, collaborations between communities and universities began to be regarded as a crucial tool for addressing social problems with transformative potential and the possibility to advance social change (Boyer, 1996; Curwood et al., 2001; Nyden, 2009). In the following, we examine approaches to UCPs, various barriers to the creation or effectiveness of UCPs as laid out in the literature and various benefits UCPs can bring the university or community.

The literature examines various approaches and best practice examples of university-community partnerships, in national and comparative contexts. Partnerships vary in regards to the type of higher education institution, the type of neighbourhood, existing relationships between the two, the nature of the social issues addressed and other contextual factors (Rubin, 2000). As mentioned above, most, if not all, partnerships express explicit goals for social change and emphasise the importance of directly, purposefully and meaningfully involving community members in the process of research and knowledge creation. In this section, we examine three different approaches to UCPs, operating at three levels: the methodology of research, the collaboration between the university and the community and the university's innate character and ways of operation.

Researchers increasingly use various participatory methodologies and research approaches to allow for the inclusion of diverse inputs and knowledges and a balancing of power dynamics in the research process, such as community-based participatory research (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2003), empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, Kaftarian and Wandersman, 1996), value-based partnerships (Nelson, Prilleltensky and MacGillivray, 2001), or participatory action research (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991). Strier and Shechter (2015) delve into community-based participatory visual action research, such as photovoice. They argue that one of the main challenges of democratising the research process is "the predominance of the written over the verbal and visual representation" in the academic language (p. 3) and the notion that visually expressed knowledge is inferior and less precise than written academic knowledge (see also Dennis and Eby, 2007). Therefore, they posit community-based participatory visual action research, with its focus on visual data, equal partnerships between researchers and community members and a renouncement of traditional research principles of detachment and objectivity, as a possibility to change unequal power relations between researchers and community members (see also Farquahar and Dobson, 2005; Flicker et al., 2007; Rose, 2001; Thomasa et al., 2009). Strier and Shechter (2015) argue that visual

research methodologies enable members of marginalised communities to express knowledge and experience that can be difficult to describe in words alone and to make them visible to the public (see also Nykiforuk et al., 2011; Kelley, 2011; Wang and Burris, 1997). Therefore, this methodology creates a language that is more accessible to different audiences and less exclusionary.

Schwartz et al. (2018) present three models of UCPs, informed by case studies of poverty-reduction UCPs and aimed at helping the mapping and creation of other successful UCPs. First, establishing a university-based internal round table with community partners, built on personal relationships, open dialogue, adapting to barriers and obstacles, and exchanging resources, while flexibly balancing out power relations. Second, using a broker organisation, such as a community centre, as a mediator between both partners, ensures an equal power relationship and that the community interests are heard and honoured, while also strengthening and stabilising the relationship. Third, electing community and university champions who spearhead initiatives, made possible by previous strong relationships built on trust and mutual recognition, and who could eventually form a separately functioning body, thus institutionalising the relationship between community and university. It is noteworthy that in all three of these models, the authors emphasise the continuous change and adapting of the projects in reaction to complexity, obstacles, and changing interests. UCPs cannot remain static and fixed in their design, but rather need to adapt dynamically and organically to changes in the interests, available resources or composition of the different partners.

Gaffikin and Morrissey (2008) argue for the holistic restructuring of the university at an institutional level to allow for a more democratic co-production of knowledge between the town and the gown. They present the model of the 'engaged' university as an alternative to detached and paternalistic ivory-tower ideas of the university or even the one-way knowledge transfer of the 'outreach' model. They describe the 'engaged' model as being based on "equal exchange between academy and community, rooted in a mutually supportive partnership that fosters formal strategic long-term collaborative arrangement" (p. 102). In addition to systematic outreach by the university, they argue that this model allows 'in-reach' into the university, whereby the community can transform the nature of the institution and its relationship to communities, as well as the process of knowledge production and application. Rather than a model for specific projects or methodologies, this approach is aimed at the transformation of the innate character of the university as an institution and the ways in which it operates. Gaffikin and Morrissey (2008) present the University of Illinois, Chicago (United States) and the University of Ulster's Springvale campus (Northern Ireland) as examples where the model of the 'engaged' university is being attempted to be put into practice.

This section does not come close to examining even a small portion of the plethora of projects and approaches that exist to foster the co-production of knowledge between the university and communities. Indeed, it merely highlights the large variety of projects that exist and their different visions, approaches, goals and levels of operation. However, whether the approaches to UCPs include specific emancipatory research methodologies, examine different collaboration projects situated within the university, or aim to holistically restructure the institution of the university, they all aim to meaningfully involve the community, build lasting relationships and inspire social change.

## Challenges and Barriers to Successful Partnerships

UCPs bring together people from different socio-cultural backgrounds, with different experiences, values, and personal styles. Both the community setting and the university backdrop also bring their unique restrictions, expectations and preferred methods. Consequently, UCPs contain complex processes and often have great potential for challenges and conflict (Ahmed et al., 2004; Appadurai, 2006; Buys and Bursna, 2007; Curwood et al., 2001; Dennis and Eby, 2007; Gaffikin and Morrissey, 2008; Howarth et al., 2018; Nelson, Prilleltensky and MacGillivray, 2001; Strier 2007; 2010; 2011). The literature discusses various challenges and barriers to the development, operation and success of university-community partnerships, from an institutional, community or societal level.

Gaffikin and Morrissey (2008) point to the institutional restrictions that impede the effectiveness or even prevent the development of UCPs. They include tight bureaucratic traditions, poor status of and rewards for community engagement projects, financial incentives to devote resources to more financially profitable research sectors, and the prioritisation of detached theorisation over research aimed at

creating social change. They also argue that the extent to which academics can engage in UCPs, and indeed the 'radicalness' of their design, depends largely on the institutional leadership of the university and its mission, vision, and values (see also Bringle, Hatcher, and Holland, 2007; Loh, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2016). Additionally, social beliefs about knowledge production and biases within the institution of academia can also discourage researchers from becoming involved in partnerships with marginalised communities. These include the notions that community knowledge is inherently inferior to academic knowledge, that researchers are the sole experts, that traditional academic knowledge production and written academic language are more precise than visual or embodied knowledge, that community members are to be seen as research objects rather than partners or that community collaborations offer no meaningful benefits to the university (Ahmed et al., 2004; Buys and Bursna, 2007; Dennis and Eby, 2007; Gray, 2004; Nelson and Dodd, 2017; Strier 2011; Strier and Shechter, 2015).

Strier and Shechter (2015) identify four main challenges from the community point of view in the co-production of knowledge with marginalised communities. First, overcoming community antagonism and a lack of trust toward academic research. Members of marginalised communities tend to feel distrustful of the concept of academic research, which is often seen as a symbol of the elitist academic world that is indifferent to their experiences and lacking its political effectiveness and impact on their social realities (Ahmed et al., 2004; Appadurai, 2006; Buys and Bursna, 2007; Gaffikin and Morrissey, 2008). Second, meaningfully engaging the community in the research process. Members of marginalised communities still experience covert barriers to engaging with UCPs, such as issues of privacy (as the research is often based on deeply personal experiences), fear of stigma (as the research topics are often concerned with stigmatised experiences, such as poverty or food insecurity) and fear of ostracisation from their community (for engaging with the elitist institution of academia or exposing community issues) (Strier 2007, 2010). Third, navigating ethical and practical issues in the process of knowledge dissemination. Even though UCPs strive to utilise non-traditional mediums of knowledge creation and dissemination, the settings where this research is supposed to be presented and valorised, such as academia or politics, often do not accept or recognise these non-traditional methodologies and means of expression, further discouraging members of marginalised communities from even attempting to share their experiences (Banks and Butcher, 2013; Gaffikin and Morrissey, 2008). Fourth, making research matter for social change. Community participants of UCPs may still be sceptical of the impact of their research on social realities, especially when strict bureaucratic processes and a lack of recognition limit the immediate possibilities of research to enact real-world change (Hessels and Van Lente, 2008; Newman 2011). Generally, it is important to remember that the interests and attitudes of members of either the university or the community are not inherently monolithic and that the relationships and dynamics within those partnerships are complex (Gaffikin and Morrissey, 2008). Therefore, conflicting interests within different groups may add complication to the tensions that are likely to occur between partners at various stages of the partnership. Strier especially investigates the tensions inherent in UCPs (2011, 2014) and challenges the notion that UCPs are inherently conflictive or that conflicts harm the spirit of collaboration between the partners. Instead, he points to the organisational paradox theory, highlighting the interrelatedness of conflict and collaboration and challenging binary conceptions of conflict vs collaboratism. However, he argues that participants need to be trained and prepared for the paradoxical nature of the relationship and the possibility of tensions, as they can otherwise present significant challenges for the impact of UCPs.

## **Benefits of Partnerships**

The literature discusses various benefits or goals of UCPs. These are usually evaluated either from the perspective of the university or from the perspective of the community but can also be analysed on a collective level.

Strier and Shechter (2015) posit UCPs as a rich source for academic research, not only providing researchers with easier access to and interaction with the community and real-world groups but also potentially earning them community recognition (Buys and Bursna, 2007; Davis et al., 2006; Howard et al., 2010; Strier and Shechter, 2015). Furthermore, taking into account the local experience in addition to scientific expertise helps with the data collection and analysis process and the development and assessment of theory and intervention programs (Dentato et al., 2010; Lo and Bayer, 2003; Mays et al., 1998; Minkler et al., 2006; Strier and Shechter, 2015). Engaging in UCPs can also bring researchers additional funding and improve the overall quality of teaching and learning (Buys and Bursna, 2007; Davies, 1996; Hollis, 2001).

Collaboration with the university, with its access to immense resources, high social status, and institutional continuity, can offer various benefits to communities. For instance, it enables the transfer of knowledge, skills and technology (Gaffikin and Morrissey, 2008; Medved and Ursic, 2021) and allows marginalised communities to access educational, economic and political resources that are at the disposal of the university (Dulmus and Cristalli, 2012; Medved and Ursic, 2021; Strier and Shechter, 2015). UCPs can also help community members to mobilise and voice their concerns, highlight their experiences, develop collective strength and create dialogical spaces with powerful actors in politics, economics and education to share their experiences (Bolin and Standford, 1998; Farquhar and Dobson, 2005; Strier, 2011). UCPs also allow community members to actively influence applied research to reflect their lived experiences more accurately and tackle social problems more focally (Ferman and Hill, 2004; Gaffikin and Morrissey 2008; Medved and Ursic, 2021).

Collectively, UCPs offer a chance to create more reciprocal relationships and a sense of openness, familiarity, and trust between academia and marginalised communities (Strier and Shechter, 2015; Schwartz et al., 2018). They can bring together knowledge and skills that were not previously combined to create more grounded theories and more targeted community intervention programs that have immediate relevance and direct policy implications (Lo and Bayer, 2003; Mays et al., 1998; Richardson and Allegrante, 2000; Schwartz et al., 2018; Strier, 2011). Seifer and Connors (2007) argue that, when done right, UCPs are transformative on the personal level (i.e. for participants), the institutional level (i.e. for the character of the university and community), and the societal level (i.e. enacting real social change).

## Recommendations for Effective Partnerships

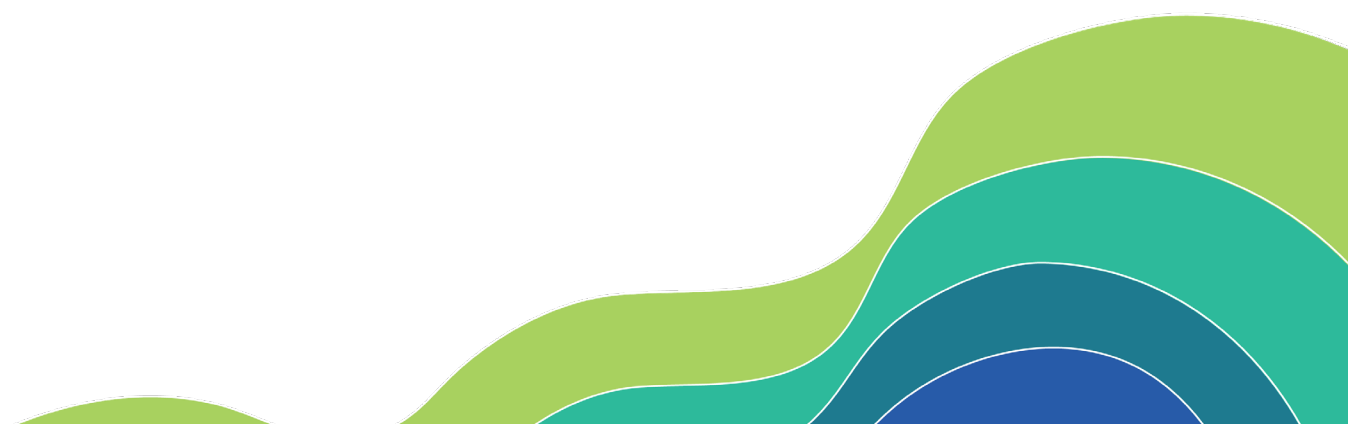
Some of the literature posits specific recommendations to improve the effectiveness and impact of UCPs. As with analyses of other aspects of UCPs, these recommendations are made from various perspectives and targeted at different levels or participants of partnerships.

Some call for the creation of new research methodologies that are attuned to the complex and collaborative data collection and analysis processes of UCPs. Strier and Shechter (2015) reaffirm that knowledge production is still an academic privilege that community members lack access to and resources for (Dumka et al., 2007; Farquhar and Dobson, 2005; Strier and Shechter, 2015). Therefore, universities need to develop and utilise alternative research methodologies which democratise the process of knowledge production and strive to create a more egalitarian and accessible research process and results (Boyer 1996; Gaffikin and Morrissey, 2008; Schon, 1995; Strier and Shechter, 2015). Here, existing emancipatory research methodologies, such as feminist, egalitarian, and de-colonial research, could offer a starting point, but alternative research methodologies aimed and adapted at participatory community research, need to be developed. However, even then, researchers need to take measures to ensure that the social impact and goals of their research are not lost on unfamiliar audiences. For instance, when it comes to visual means of collecting and representing research, Strier and Shechter (2015) advocate for planned audience activities that anticipate misrecognition and misinterpretation that can occur when presenting personal experiences to audiences that come from a different social background than community participants.

When reacting to structural issues within the fabric of the university, some scholars argue that to increase partnerships' impact and benefits for the university, a significant transformation of its institutional context is necessary to support academics who are eager to engage in UCPs and to adequately reward them and their projects (Buys and Bursna, 2007; Brown-Luthang, 2013; Curwood et al., 2011; Nelson and Dodd, 2017). Curwood et al (2011) emphasise the importance of assessing a university's readiness to engage in UCPs at the pre-partnership stage and ensure, besides a willingness to engage, an ability to engage from both academics and their institution (see also Bengle, 2015; Foster-Fishman et al., 2007; Goodman et al., 1998). Some go even further and argue that the concept of community engagement needs to become a core value of universities (Buys and Burnall, 2007). Indeed, most scholars emphasise the strong, honest and long-term institutional commitment universities need to make to community-engaged scholarship at all levels of the university, from mission statements and university culture to resource allocation and merit review (Buys and Burnall, 2007; Curwood et al., 2001; Schwartz et al., 2016; Strier and Schechter, 2016).



Additionally, to make the knowledge of the oppressed and marginalised a legitimate source of knowledge, the relationships researchers have with community members need to be built on genuine support and solidarity and go beyond tokenistic involvement (Gaffikin and Morrissey, 2008; Loh, 2016; Strier and Shechter, 2015). Indeed, researchers and the university as an institution alike have to not only value community knowledge but also be ready to share power with community stakeholders. This can sometimes mean that researchers will have to let the community partner decide the direction of the project and ultimately engage in research that may not directly reflect their initial conception of a project or their wider research agenda (Howarth et al., 2017; Schwartz et al., 2016). Honest collaborative spirit and common goals, measurements and agendas, as well as a continuous learning process where plans can be adapted, instead of remaining static, are some of the most prevalent general recommendations (Howarth et al., 2017; Loh, 2016; Rubin, 2000; Schwartz et al., 2016). Additionally, the literature recommends academics to take neighbourhood typology into account and to not shy away from low-capacity or “challenged” neighbourhoods, as they are often most urgently in need of attention and can offer the biggest impact if empowered successfully (Howarth et al., 2017, Schwartz et al., 2016).



## METHODOLOGY

### Impact Evaluation

With partnerships between local communities and tertiary education institutions gaining a more prominent profile, interest in the evaluation of their operation and impact also increases. These impact evaluations are conducted from various perspectives, such as partnership members, outside researchers or government agencies. However, due to the reality of UCPs being inherently complex, ever-changing, and not at all monolithic, categorising and evaluating them with one coherent, measurable theory proves to be difficult (Rubin, 2000). Nevertheless, in the following, we examine two sources that thematise different approaches to impact evaluation.

Curwood et al. (2011) argue that a university's readiness to form effective partnerships with community members is crucial for determining the impact and 'success' such a partnership can have (see also Bengle, 2015; Foster-Fishman et al., 2007; Goodman et al., 1998). They propose a practical framework for evaluating this readiness at the pre-partnership stage to enhance the quality, impact, and sustainability of UCPs. They emphasise particularly the need to assess readiness in terms of mission, values, resources, infrastructure and communication between partners. Informed by reflections and experiences of community stakeholders and university members who had engaged in UCPs, the authors propose a set of initial questions for different levels of the university to consider before and during the crucial stages of partnerships. In this, they emphasise that readiness is not to be understood as a binary dichotomy but rather as a continuum. Neither the community partner nor the university partner will likely be perfectly 'ready' to engage in an effective partnership. Therefore, their questions might also be used to reflect on potential issues and challenges that could arise throughout the endeavour and to ultimately also improve a university's readiness, after assessing it.

Rubin (2000), presents the six most prominent types of evaluations that are conducted concerning UCPs, all operating on different levels. First, individual self-study accounts by participants, usually the staff and students of higher education, detailing the evolution of the partnership and contextualising changes within the university partner (see Dewar and Isaac, 1998; Reardon, 1997; 1999; Rubin, 1995; 1998; Wiewel and Lieber, 1998). Second, more general, local evaluations done by the partnerships themselves, frequently supported through funders, and often intended to be used in the early stages of a partnership to compare progress with plans and adapt the project accordingly (see Davidson, Kerrigan and Agre-Kippenhan, 1999; Lieber and Pinsker, 1997). Third, the discussion and assessment of analytical frameworks for the evaluation of UCPs, such as theory of change, while trying to navigate the complex and varied reality that does not always fit into a coherent, measurable theory (see Connell et al., 1995; Davidson, Kerrigan and Agre-Kippenhan, 1999; Driscoll and Lynton, 1999; Fulbright-Anderson, Kubisch, and Connell, 1998). Fourth, comparative analyses of case studies, usually done by researchers, to identify common themes and categorise various approaches to UCPs (see Fleming, 1999; Maurrasse, 2001; Nye and Schramm, 1999). Fifth, the creation of permanent data systems, compiling documents such as applications, progress reports, reflections, or plans, of various UCPs to enable greater access and universal standards of reporting, as well as facilitate easier analyses of trends and sharing of information between different projects. Sixth, the creation of national evaluations, based on information generated by the previous five approaches, to support local partnerships more systematically (see Urban Development, 2000). In all six models, and indeed in many approaches, outcomes are a critical element but so are purpose, process and reflection (see Davidson, Kerrigan, and Agre-Kippenhahn, 1999).

All of these models of evaluation are built on continuous reflection by community and university partners about the goals they have set out to achieve, how and if they were achieved, how challenges were dealt with and how the relationships have evolved. Rarely did plans, commitments and power relations stay the same, rather they all changed and adapted through growing trust, challenges and complex dynamics. It was also highlighted, time and time again, that the evaluation of a UCP's impact and success cannot only take place after the partnership has been completed. Rather, it needs to be based on continuous reflection and feedback from both parties and a reciprocal transfer of knowledge. Lastly, it was emphasised that a truly successful UCP will not only change and impact the community, but also change and impact the functioning of the university.

## Data Collection and Outreach

This evaluation of the WGSJ Outreach Programme is grounded in feminist and intersectional research methodologies (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991; Browne & Nash, 2010), ensuring that participants' lived experiences remain central to the analysis. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates qualitative and quantitative data to comprehensively assess the programme's long-term impact. This approach aligns with feminist scholars' emphasis on methodological plurality – where statistical data and personal narratives together reveal structural inequalities and transformative experiences (Ackerly & True, 2010; Crenshaw, 1991).

The evaluation consists of two key data collection methods:

1. **Survey Research** – Capturing a broad dataset to assess patterns in personal, academic and professional impact.
2. **Focus Groups** – Facilitating in-depth discussions to explore the nuanced and lived experiences of programme participants.

Low Risk Ethical Approval was granted by the UCD office of Research Ethics for both the survey and focus groups in May 2024.

## Survey Research

An anonymous online survey was administered via SurveyMonkey to assess the long-term impact of the UCD Women, Gender, and Social Justice (WGSJ) Outreach Programme. The survey was disseminated to 142 graduates (1999-2023), achieving a response rate of 68.3%, with 97 participants completing the survey.

The survey comprised 50 questions, structured around four key thematic areas

1. **Personal growth and wellbeing** - examining the impact on self-confidence, mental health and personal development
2. **Employment and volunteering** - assessing how the programme contributed to career progression, skills development and community engagement.
3. **Familial and community impact** - exploring the role of the programme in shaping graduates' relationships, educational aspirations for family members and involvement in local community activities.
4. **Reflections on programme structure** - evaluating satisfaction levels, key learnings and suggestions for the future sustainability of the programme.

The survey design incorporated quantitative (multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and ranking questions) and qualitative (open-ended responses) questions to capture measurable impact and narrative insights.

The survey captured responses from multiple cohorts across different backgrounds, employment sectors and educational histories. Key demographic findings include:

- 30 graduates were first-generation higher education students, demonstrating the programme's role in widening participation.
- Respondents reported working across various sectors, with the State/Public Sector being the most common.
- 65 graduates were actively involved in voluntary work, reflecting the programme's emphasis on community-based activism and leadership.

- Diverse educational pathways were represented, with some participants having only primary education qualifications before enrolling, highlighting the program's success in providing alternative routes to higher education.

## Data Analysis

Survey data were analysed using a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the programme's impact (Ackerly & True, 2010). This dual approach enables both the statistical measurement of key trends and a nuanced exploration of participant experiences through narrative insights.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and comparative statistical techniques to identify trends and relationships between key variables:

- Descriptive statistics (frequency distributions, percentage breakdowns) were applied to summarise participant responses
- Comparative analysis examined relationships across core variables, including
- Changes in confidence levels before and after programme participation
- Employment outcomes and levels of engagement in voluntary work

Qualitative responses were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and insights from participant narratives.

A systematic coding approach was applied, where open-ended responses were categorised into overarching themes. In vivo coding was used to prioritise participants' own words, ensuring that their voices remained central to the analysis.

The key themes emerging from the qualitative analysis are presented in the findings section, including:

- **Increased self-confidence** – Participants described feeling more empowered and articulate post-programme.
- **Enhanced critical thinking** – Many cited improved analytical skills, particularly in relation to gender and social justice discourses.
- **Strengthened community engagement** – The programme was frequently referenced as a catalyst for long-term activism, volunteerism and leadership roles.

## Focus Groups

Following the survey, six focus groups were held between November and December 2024 and comprised 34 women who participated in the WGSJ programme at various points across its 24-year duration. The focus groups included:

- **Participants from different course cohorts**, ensuring a diversity of perspectives.
- **One focus group with lecturers**, including a former student of the programme.



Sessions were held online, in person and in a hybrid format to maximise accessibility and enable participation from graduates across multiple locations.

Focus groups were semi-structured, with discussions guided by open-ended questions designed to elicit insights into:

- Participants' experiences with the programme and its personal and professional impact.
- Unexpected learnings and reflections on the programme's women-centred design.
- Shifts in self-confidence, career development and community engagement.
- Family and community responses, particularly in relation to intergenerational learning.

All sessions were recorded, transcribed verbatim, anonymised to ensure confidentiality and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Thematic Analysis

The focus group data were analysed using a thematic approach to explore participants' experiences of the Women's Studies and Gender Justice Outreach Programme. In vivo coding was employed to capture participants' own words and phrases as initial codes, ensuring their voices remained central to the analysis.

A systematic line-by-line coding process was used to identify patterns and recurring insights, which were subsequently refined and grouped into overarching themes:

- Transformative Learning and Confidence Building
- Empowerment Through Accessibility
- Community and Belonging in a Women-Centred Space
- Employment and Volunteering
- Familial and Community Impact

The analysis also paid particular attention to unexpected learnings, the role of the programme's women-centred design and participants' reflections on personal and collective transformation. This iterative and feminist-informed analysis ensured findings were deeply rooted in participants' lived experiences, challenges and successes, offering both qualitative depth and actionable insights for future programme development.

## Integrating Findings

The mixed-methods approach enabled a rigorous assessment of the Outreach Programme's impact.

- Survey data provided statistical trends, identifying measurable improvements in confidence, career mobility and community engagement.
- Focus group discussions enriched these findings, offering deeper insights into the personal transformations, structural challenges and unexpected learnings experienced by participants.

By combining quantitative measures with qualitative depth, the evaluation ensures that:

- The programme's successes are rigorously documented.
- Challenges and areas for growth are identified.
- Insights contribute to feminist educational advocacy, reinforcing the need for continued investment in accessible, community-driven learning models.

## Limitations of the Study

While this evaluation provides a comprehensive analysis of the Women, Gender, and Social Justice Outreach Programme, several limitations must be acknowledged. As with any research, the findings are shaped by who was able to participate, how data was collected and the broader structures within which this study operates.

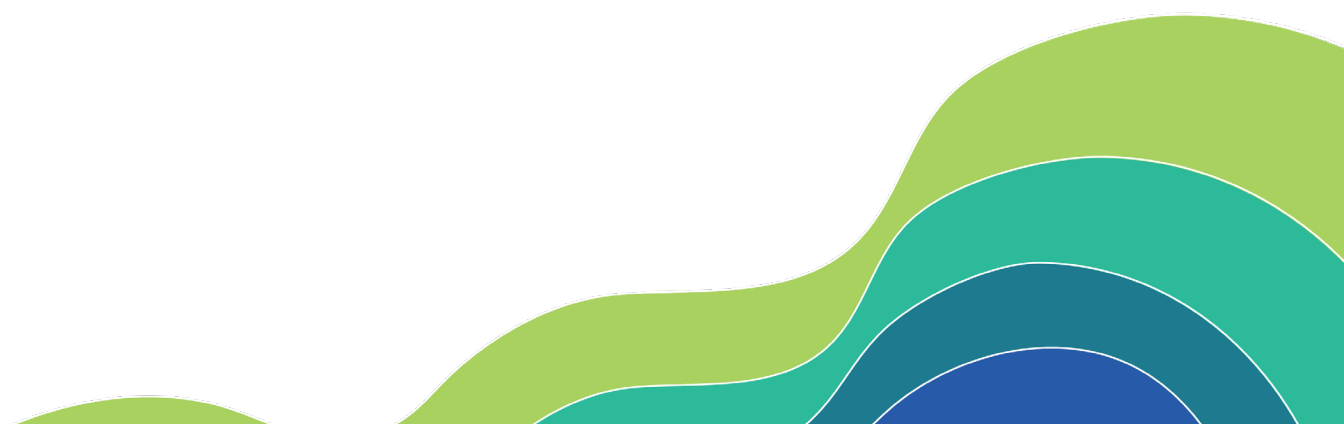
One key limitation is self-selection bias, as those who engaged in the survey and focus groups were more likely to be those who remained connected to the programme. This means that the experiences of those who faced barriers to participation, disengaged, or struggled within the programme may not be fully represented. Similarly, the retrospective nature of the study, spanning over two decades, means that some reflections may be shaped by time and personal transformation, making it difficult to measure the programme's immediate impact on past participants.

The research also highlights gaps in intersectional analysis. While the study captures multiple axes of identity and oppression, experiences of race, disability, migration, and class require deeper exploration. Feminist research has long recognised that structural inequalities shape access to education, and while this programme challenged many barriers, a more targeted analysis could provide a fuller understanding of how diverse identities impact engagement and outcomes.

Variability in data collection methods also presents challenges. The use of in-person, online, and hybrid focus groups expanded accessibility but may have influenced participation dynamics. Not all voices are equally comfortable in digital or group spaces, and this affects whose insights shape the findings. Similarly, while the survey achieved a strong response rate (68.3%), nearly a third of graduates did not participate, leaving gaps in understanding how the programme influenced those who did not respond.

Finally, the measurement of long-term impact presents inherent challenges. While participants report significant shifts in confidence, career progression, and activism, the study relies on self-reported data rather than external validation. Traditional impact metrics often fail to capture the relational, collective, and ongoing nature of feminist education, which extends far beyond employment outcomes or formal qualifications. Additionally, while the programme fosters leadership and activism, it remains an individual burden to enact change, rather than a shared responsibility of institutions to transform the conditions that necessitate such resilience.

Despite these limitations, this evaluation reinforces the critical role of feminist, community-based education in challenging exclusionary academic spaces and creating meaningful social change. Future research must continue to centre diverse experiences, advocate for institutional recognition of outreach education, and push for systemic shifts that make education more accessible, inclusive and transformative.



## FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

### THEME 1: EXPERIENCE OF THE PROGRAMME

#### Survey Results

Graduates provided valuable insights into the programme's structure, accessibility and learning environment, with the majority affirming its effectiveness and relevance while also suggesting areas for improvement.

#### Key findings

- 72 respondents emphasised the importance of maintaining a women-only learning environment, citing its role in fostering safety and solidarity.
- 61 respondents supported the continuation of Saturday classes, highlighting their accessibility benefits.
- 71 respondents identified essay writing as a key academic skill they developed, reinforcing the programme's academic rigour.
- 79 respondents said they would recommend the programme to others, demonstrating high levels of satisfaction.
- 70 respondents stated that the programme fully met their expectations.

#### Participant Perspectives



"This course gave me so much confidence in voicing my opinion, sharing and discussing ideas and opinions with the group, while valuing and learning from other people. It gave me self-belief to go on to third level feeling I could really do it. I loved my BS of SC and enjoyed challenging myself and feel it is a life long journey of learning."



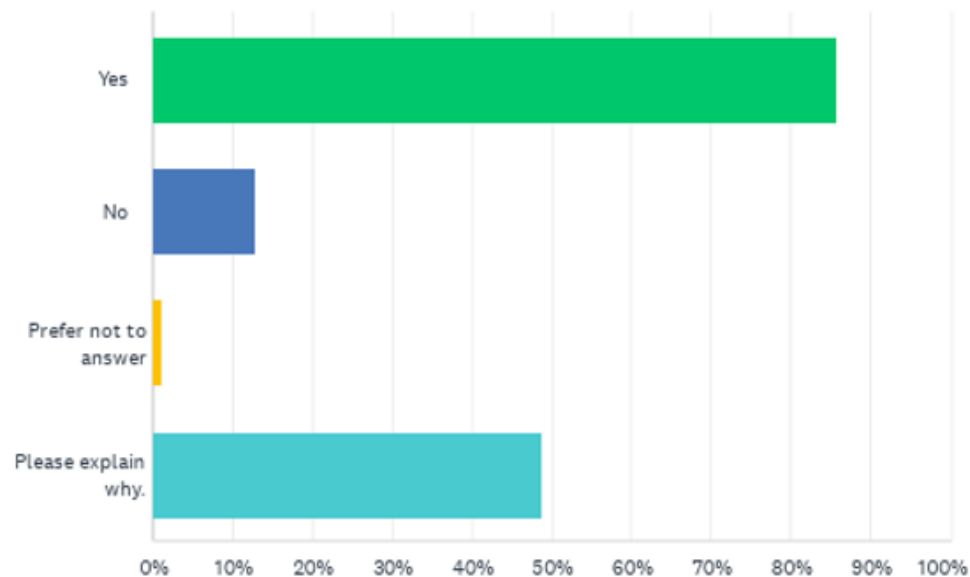
"It [the programme] helped me not to be afraid to ask questions and that it's ok not to know everything but that learning is a life journey and the more you know the more you grow. It also helped me believe in my own ability and that once the support structures and the right environment is provided, the sky is the limit."



"This course changed my life and enriched my relationships with my family. The support I received from UCD and Ronanstown has made BMWs look at life differently. Read authors I would never have considered. I am definitely more of a critical thinker."

## Q15 Was it important that the programme was designed for and delivered to women only learners?

Answered: 84 Skipped: 13



The WGSJ Outreach Programme has had far-reaching and transformative effects on graduates' personal development, career progression, community engagement and intergenerational education advocacy. Graduates overwhelmingly reported high satisfaction, with many attributing life-changing personal and professional transformations to their participation. These findings reinforce the programme's ongoing relevance and provide a strong case for sustained investment and potential expansion.



## Focus Group Insights

Focus groups looked at participants' experiences of the programme, exploring what participants found surprising or transformative about their time in the programme, including personal growth and new perspectives gained. The discussion also looked at how the programme's women-specific design influenced participants' engagement with the material and connections with others.

The experiences of participants under this theme can be grouped into three key areas

1. Transformative Learning and Confidence Building
2. Empowerment Through Accessibility and Support
3. Community and Belonging in a Women-Centred Space

Participants reflected on how the programme challenged their perspectives, boosted their confidence and provided a supportive environment that made higher education accessible and meaningful.

## Theme 1 Analysis

The evaluation affirms that graduates overwhelmingly support the programme's structure and delivery, particularly its women-only model and flexible learning formats. These features were identified as critical enablers of engagement, fostering a safe, supportive and politically conscious space for learning. However, feminist critiques of educational accessibility highlight the need for further adaptations to address evolving learner needs, particularly through an intersectional lens (Acker, 1994).

Despite its successes, systemic barriers remain, disproportionately impacting working-class women and caregivers. These challenges necessitate targeted interventions to enhance accessibility and retention, such as:

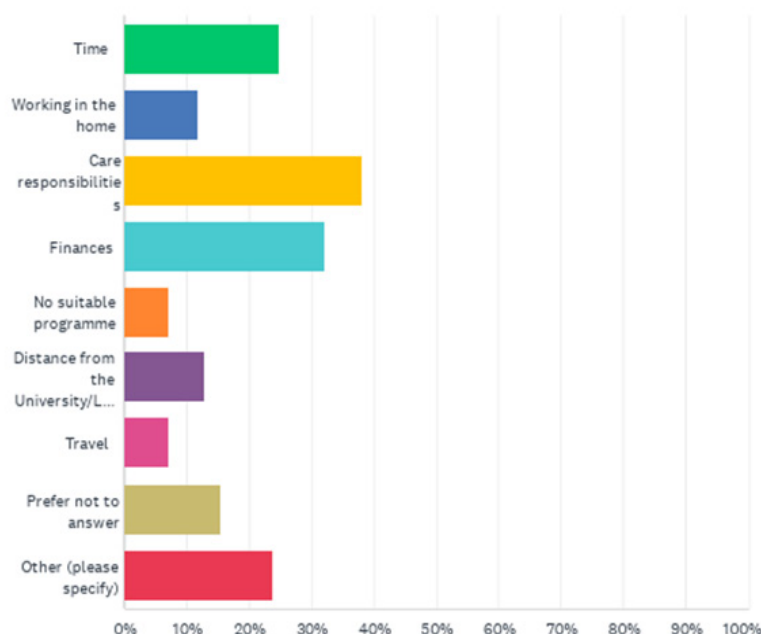
- **Hybrid learning models** that accommodate caregiving responsibilities and part-time work commitments.
- **Financial support mechanisms** (e.g., scholarships, childcare stipends) to mitigate economic exclusion.
- **Sustained mentorship networks** to maintain engagement post-programme and support long-term career progression.





Q21 If progression was not an option for you, what were/are the main barriers you experienced? Please tick all relevant.

Answered: 84 Skipped: 13



These findings suggest that while the programme has demonstrable impact, its sustainability and scalability depend on institutional commitments to feminist pedagogy within higher education structures. Addressing systemic inequalities in education access necessitates strategic policy interventions, ensuring that initiatives like the WGSJ Outreach Programme are not peripheral but embedded within broader university and government frameworks.

## Transformative Learning and Confidence Building

For many participants, the WGSJ Outreach programme was a profound and life-changing experience, fostering both intellectual and personal growth. A key takeaway for several women was the realisation of their own worth beyond societal expectations.

The programme created an environment where participants began to see their value beyond traditional roles and expectations. SP5SD113 articulated this shift in perspective:



"It's not like, 'Oh, how pretty am I!' It's your actual self-worth... That was a big factor for me."

The programme helped participants move beyond external validation, encouraging them to appreciate their intrinsic value and capabilities. SP5AE122 reflected on the unexpected transformation:



"I think for me it was just completely life changing, and like the others, I didn't expect to go on. I've also gone on to UCD and very glad of the opportunity. [I]t's making you look at everything very differently - to think about where information is coming from, to think about the agenda behind certain decisions that are being made.."

For some, the impact was deeply emotional, as described by SP6ME111:



"It was such a personal development for me ...it changed my life dramatically and ...I can't even put it into words. It can kind of nearly make me emotional, the impact it had on my life. And yeah, it's one course I'll never, ever forget as long as I live, in a very positive way. But it made me make massive changes to my whole life."

A significant part of this transformation involved understanding that personal struggles were not merely individual failings but rather reflections of broader systemic issues. A pivotal realisation for many participants was understanding that their individual experiences were deeply connected to larger social and political systems and many repeated their turning point was understanding the concept that "the personal is political" an idea central to feminist thought. This realisation often felt like an "eye-opener," shifting participants' views on their lives and challenges.

SP2BE121 articulated how this understanding fundamentally shifted her worldview:



"I was living in a bubble. I didn't have a clue about anything. And it was only when we were taught that 'personal is political', and then it just opened my eyes. It was like the scales fell from my eyes. I realised what was happening in my own home, patriarchy and all that, and why I was at home minding the kids which I didn't mind, but I was conditioned not to mind um! And my husband was running out the door after maternity leave, and I was crying, please don't go! And then it all became clear as to why he was doing that, and why I was doing what I was doing."

The programme deepened participants' understanding of patriarchy as a system of power that shapes gender roles, opportunities and societal expectations. This insight was often transformative. SP1AL113 described her awakening to systemic inequality



"I learned about misogyny and the patriarchy. And how like, basically, the whole system is set up against women. ...and that women have to try a lot harder to get where they want to go. That we have, like the care penalty, and things like that."

SP5LA112 had a similar experience:



"It was such a personal development for me ...it changed my life dramatically and ...I can't even put it into words. It can kind of nearly make me emotional, the impact it had on my life. And yeah, it's one course I'll never, ever forget as long as I live, in a very positive way. But it made me make massive changes to my whole life."

SP5LA112 had a similar experience:



"For me it was the experience of stepping outside of a bubble that I was in, and learning about what's happening around the world. Something that I kind of just didn't take in ... just never took into consideration. And that was a huge eye opener for me, because once you see something you can't unsee it, and once you hear something you can't unhear it."

The programme encouraged critical thinking, leading participants to question established norms and analyse social structures with a more informed perspective. SP1AY122 shared how her approach to information changed:



"I now would question the news, I would question figures. I would question how, you know, how societal hierarchies are structured. Whereas I never would have really questioned before."

Tutors also observed participants questioning ingrained norms and becoming part of the solution. TP2B126 who was initially a student on the course and went on to be a tutor observed



"When I meet women learners at the introduction, there will be a lot of kind of self critical talk. I couldn't do this. I'm no good at that. I can't write, I can't read. I could never do that. And then when you meet them at the end, they're saying, you know, there's a need for systemic change and it's just so incredible to see how that lens has gone from a critical lens of themselves to a recognition that a system is at fault."

For many, learning about feminism was like discovering an entirely new world. SP3RA123 shared:



"I didn't know anything about feminists or feminism. It was like a light going on, and once the light went on you ...couldn't turn it off again. That was it. The light was on, and I wasn't expecting it. To learn about so much inequalities and just the whole world of patriarchy."

Beyond intellectual insights, the programme helped participants overcome fears of academic engagement, particularly in reading, writing and expressing themselves. Beyond the personal insights, the programme played a pivotal role in developing academic skills and boosting confidence. Many women entered with fears about academic work, only to discover an unexpected joy in learning. SP4K113 described her initial fear and this transformation:



"I had this fear... but to see that I could [read and write], and that I actually liked it and did well - it was just a huge boost."

This growth in confidence translated into aspirations for further education. SP5AE122 shared,



"I had always wanted to do a Master's, but never had that confidence. I know I have the imposter syndrome, anyway, as most women do. ...I think it was the first time that I realised ... I deserved to be there, and I belonged there, and I was good enough to be there."

SP4TA129 echoed this sentiment:



"I went from thinking, 'I can't do this' to 'I belong here.'"

When asked to reveal one surprising learning from the course, SP1AL113 said,



"Mine would be misogyny and the patriarchy. And how like, basically, the whole system is set up against women. ...and that women have to try a lot harder to get where they want to go. That we have, like the care penalty, and things like that."

The programme fostered critical thinking and questioning of established norms. SP5AE122 said,



"It's making you look at everything differently... to think about where information is coming from and the agenda behind decisions."

while SP7PB121 said,



"it's expanded my horizons, and just opening my eyes to so much that is going on around, me that I hadn't really seen, to be aware."

This newfound awareness provided participants with a framework to interpret their lived experiences and empowered them to take action against societal norms and structural inequalities.

## Empowerment Through Accessibility and Support

The accessibility and structure of the programme were crucial factors in enabling participation, particularly for women juggling multiple responsibilities. The programme's localised delivery and practical scheduling ensured that education could fit within the realities of their lives, allowing them to balance work, caregiving and other commitments.

For many, this flexibility was the deciding factor in their ability to participate. SP3J122 commented on the value of the outreach nature of the programme, explaining how it provided a level of support and accessibility that traditional university settings often lack:



"It accommodates women and all the caring responsibilities we have alongside work, commitments and family commitments. Whatever other commitments we have. But I think outreach also offers an awful lot of support that maybe you don't get when you just come in as a student 1st time into a big college environment."

The fact that the course took place locally in an ordinary house was also very attractive to the women as described by SP8TA121



"You know there's the safety of being amongst a group of women, [it] is wonderful, but there's also something kind of magical about it as well. That's just very special and very unique... There's something about being in a kitchen, being in a traditionally female space, but really owning that space and being in an environment of consciousness raising that was very special."

For some, the outreach format was the only reason they would even consider enrolling. SP5AE122 commented on the value to her of this being an outreach programme and the fact that she did not have to go into the University.



"I don't think I would have even ventured on the path if that happened to be [in UCD]. And outreach for start, just that it made it so much more accessible. And I had a few challenges, parents commitments, family at the time. And only for that it was at that time frame that suited, that I could make it here, and I could commit to that Tuesday ...and if it had been any further afield. I know I wouldn't have. I wouldn't have been able to participate, ...that it was time when the kids were in school, which was really significant, I think, for many of us at the time."

By reducing logistical barriers, the programme ensured that women who might otherwise have been excluded had the opportunity to engage fully.

Equally important was the extensive support system embedded in the programme. Participants highlighted the value of tangible resources such as laptop loans, as well as the emotional encouragement provided by facilitators. SP4S122 highlighted the impact of consistent encouragement, describing how it gave her the motivation to continue through moments of self-doubt:



"The constant reinforcement that we could do it... that made all the difference."

For many participants, the WCI was instrumental in their decision to take part, crediting their success to this unwavering support which helped them overcome initial doubts and persist in their studies. For SP5AE122, the fact that it was outreach through WCI encouraged her participation.



"The main reason that I would have felt comfortable enough in undertaking another kind of an outreach program, because steps had already prepared me to a certain extent, and the women there, and the support there, was just so incredible, and the people in WCI were so supportive and encouraging ...For me was a big factor in participating, ...was the encouragement of WCI as an organisation, that they were involved was a big thing for me as well."

Tutors also played a crucial role, providing guidance and motivation while witnessing remarkable personal transformations. TP2BE123 reflected on the location of the course in local centres with other women stating



"It just creates a sense of safety. There's a safe space there. ...It really breaks [the] isolation of experience as well. I think that you know, we can often experience things in isolation and think it's only us, I think, being in that space and discussing issues that impact on women's lives, ...it allows for the breakdown of that isolation and you know, and that's just so good for self-esteem and for confidence, ... in those kind of spaces that women are able to acknowledge some of the challenges that they're experiencing, you know, and I think that's kind of the first step to change."

## Community and Belonging in a Women-Centred Space

The programme's women-centred approach created a unique environment of trust, solidarity, and mutual support. Participants frequently mentioned how this space enabled open discussions on sensitive topics, free from fear or judgment. Many women highlighted the unique value of being in a learning space exclusively composed of other women, where they felt understood, supported and free to express themselves.

SP5AE122 described the freedom this environment provided, particularly in discussing issues that might feel taboo in mixed-gender settings:



"I think there was that freedom to talk about things like the menopause, you know, periods, you know, whatever female issue came up with ...you got the sense that everybody really understood where you're coming from."

SP5CE111 affirmed this shared understanding among women,



"...you can talk freely with women, and we're kind of all on the same page."

This collective understanding fostered deep connections, reinforcing the importance of shared experiences in learning and personal growth. SP3LI127 emphasised the value of the all-women space saying,



"...the fact that it was surrounded with women. I would not have been comfortable in a room discussing the subjects that we did with the honesty that we did if there had been men in the room. So, where it was, the fact that it came out to the community, and the fact that it was all women is probably the only way I would have done it. And then, when I did do it was the only way I could have engaged with the subject matters the way I did."

The sense of community extended beyond the learning environment, fostering collaboration and connection between institutions such as UCD and WCI. Participants valued this partnership, recognising that it helped them bridge the gap between community-based learning and formal academic spaces. SP5AE122 described how the collaboration between these institutions provided a strong foundation for transitioning to higher education:



"For me, the one big thing was the community in UCD and WCI, that collaboration. I came in through Ronanstown here, and I found that they're really very nourishing, very safe space. And so certainly it was a great foundation for UCD. I'm not sure I would have been as well prepared for UCD had I not done that level. 7. So it kind of helps you break a barrier."



Another key strength of the programme was the diverse backgrounds and ages of participants, which further enriched the experience, allowing for an exchange of perspectives that deepened learning. SP4FA121 reflected on how the variety of ages, cultures and experiences deepened her understanding of social structures:



"...The eclectic mix of the group, all different ages and backgrounds and cultures. I learned from that. ...I didn't know their culture, religious background, you know, heard that they had grown up and experienced the patriarchy. So I had my experience but now I've seen it through their eyes as well."

For many, the exposure to different perspectives broadened participants' world views and contributed to a more inclusive and dynamic learning environment. Beyond academic growth, the programme provided emotional support, helping participants navigate personal challenges, academic pressures and moments of self-doubt. The women-only space fostered strong connections, where participants could lean on each other for encouragement and motivation.

SP6ME111 spoke about the value of doing the course with women only and the ongoing support available to her,



"Each and every one of them, and although we didn't have similar life stories, you're still connected, do you understand? And the care that was given, and the support from everybody like, obviously like that. I was an early school leaver as well. So doing something like that, you feel very overwhelmed, anxiety comes up with assignments, the stress that you can build up in your body. And then just having a conversation with another woman, and have receiving the support and nearly being each other's cheerleader as in like you can do it, you've got it. And just, yeah. I don't think I'd have got through it without that."

This sense of collective encouragement and emotional safety was crucial in overcoming self-doubt and academic pressures. SP4PE111 echoed this sentiment,



"the safety of being in a room full of women, allowed stories to flow. And ...I felt I could tell my story, and it was met with understanding, and there was a lot of honesty that I think, if there was anything but women, the stories would have been told differently, because of the conditioning we all have."

Beyond the formal structure of the programme, many women developed lasting friendships and support networks that extended far beyond the classroom. SP3RA123 expressed surprise at the enduring nature of these relationships, *"I wasn't expecting to make lifelong friends, which I have done."*

These bonds not only enhanced participants' emotional well-being, but also created a foundation for continued empowerment and advocacy. SP1AA111 described how the emotional and intellectual connections formed within the group kept her engaged and motivated: ,



"We might have not connected with everybody's life story, but we were connecting with the beliefs and the emotions of the women, do you know? So that connection of the beliefs, emotions and the support that kicked in around that, and we had great fun as well at the time. ...And I think that's what made me stay, you know, it was the strength of the group of women."

## Conclusion

The WGSJ Outreach Programme profoundly transformed participants' self-perception, confidence and aspirations, equipping them with the skills and critical awareness to navigate both personal and societal challenges. Many women entered the programme with self-doubt, particularly regarding their academic abilities, but emerged with a newfound sense of self-worth and intellectual empowerment. Overcoming fears of reading, writing and academic work led many to pursue further education, with some transitioning into leadership roles as tutors or staff at WCI. The programme's focus on feminist thought

enabled participants to recognise that their personal struggles were often reflections of systemic barriers, helping them reframe their experiences through the lens of structural inequalities, patriarchy and misogyny. This newfound perspective inspired action, empowering women to challenge societal norms, develop critical thinking skills and actively engage in social change.

Crucially, the programme was designed to be accessible, ensuring that women balancing caregiving, work and other commitments could participate without disrupting their lives. The localised delivery and flexible scheduling removed logistical barriers, making higher education a realistic possibility for those who might have otherwise been excluded. The informal setting, held in familiar community spaces, fostered a sense of safety and ownership, creating a welcoming and empowering learning environment. Many participants expressed that they would not have pursued education in a traditional university setting, underscoring the importance of the programme's outreach model. Beyond accessibility, the comprehensive support system played a critical role in participants' success. Tangible resources such as laptop loans, alongside emotional encouragement from facilitators and peers, helped women persist through challenges and build confidence in their abilities. The role of trusted organisations like WCI in delivering the programme was also a significant motivator, as their involvement provided reassurance, credibility and a sense of belonging. The programme also broke the isolation of experience, creating spaces for open discussions about personal struggles, which boosted self-esteem and reinforced a collective sense of empowerment. At the heart of this transformation was the programme's women-centred approach, which fostered trust, solidarity and mutual support. Many participants emphasised that being in an all-women space allowed for honesty and vulnerability, enabling them to discuss sensitive topics - such as menopause, caregiving, and gendered oppression - without fear of judgment. This safe and inclusive environment encouraged deep connections and meaningful exchanges, reinforcing the value of shared experiences in personal growth and learning. The collaborative structure - particularly the partnership between UCD and WCI - helped participants overcome barriers to higher education, making further academic progression feel attainable. The diversity of backgrounds, ages and cultures within the group also broadened perspectives, fostering a more inclusive and dynamic learning environment. Sharing experiences with women from different walks of life strengthened personal resilience, while the long-term support networks formed through the programme became an unexpected but invaluable outcome. Many participants described these ongoing friendships and peer networks as essential to their perseverance, providing emotional encouragement, reducing anxiety and offering a collective source of strength.

The experiences of participants illustrate the deep and multifaceted impact of the programme. From transformative personal growth to academic empowerment and the creation of lifelong support networks, the programme provided a platform for women to develop confidence, challenge systemic barriers and build lasting relationships. The structured yet accessible learning environment was crucial in fostering this transformation, ensuring that women balancing multiple responsibilities could participate without disruption. The supportive, women-centred space enabled open discussions on personal and societal issues, reinforcing a collective sense of empowerment and resilience.

Ultimately, the programme equipped women with critical thinking skills and the confidence to engage with broader social issues, inspiring some to pursue further education, leadership roles or advocacy work. The programme's partnership model and outreach nature also played a significant role in breaking down barriers to education, making higher learning feel attainable for those who might not have otherwise considered it.

The combination of structured learning, strong support mechanisms and a deeply connected community made this initiative not only accessible but also profoundly meaningful. The lasting friendships and support networks formed through the programme demonstrate its role in fostering long-term empowerment and collective strength. This underscores the importance of maintaining and expanding such initiatives, ensuring that more women can experience the transformative power of education, solidarity and self-discovery.

## THEME 2: EMPLOYMENT AND VOLUNTEERING WORK

### Survey Results

Graduates credited the programme with improving their career prospects, expanding their skill sets and fostering a commitment to volunteerism and social change. Many respondents indicated that their participation provided them with the confidence and professional competencies necessary to re-enter the workforce or transition into new roles.

### Key findings

- 72 (86%) respondents stated they would participate in the programme again, highlighting high satisfaction levels.
- 55 graduates strongly agreed and agreed that the programme directly helped them secure employment, citing increased confidence, skills and qualifications.
- 66 respondents engaged in volunteer work in their communities, with 29 currently in active volunteer roles.
- 58 respondents attributed their stronger communication and listening skills to the programme, noting its impact on both professional and personal relationships.

### Participant Perspective



"WGSJ broadened my scope in volunteering. I now focus on my privilege and how I can use it, rather than my disadvantages and the injustice of it."



"Confidence and skills to progress into paid employment, networking and making connections, clarified direction for employment and helped advance me in employment."



"I am more opinionated but with empathy. I moved upwards in my employment because of the Diploma."

The findings suggest that the programme plays a critical role in both economic empowerment and civic engagement. Notably, graduates are not only securing jobs but are also reinvesting knowledge and skills in their communities through volunteering and mentorship.

### Focus Group Insights

This section of the report looks at theme two, Employment and Voluntary Work. The findings are captured under the headings:

1. Confidence, Skills, and Career Progression;
2. Community Engagement and Recognition; and
3. Systemic Barriers and Challenges.

Participants reflected on how the programme challenged their perspectives, boosted their confidence and provided a supportive environment that made higher education accessible and meaningful. The focus group discussions illustrate how the programme has empowered participants by validating their existing skills and equipping them with new knowledge to navigate professional and voluntary environments. Many participants shared experiences of overcoming self-doubt and developing enhanced communication abilities, which contributed to their increased confidence. A consistent theme from the discussions is the programme's profound impact on participants' self-perception, career progression and sense of purpose. Beyond skills development, it encouraged them to take on leadership roles, engage in advocacy and transform their communities. Participants articulated how the programme validated their skills and empowered them to advocate for themselves in both professional and voluntary settings.

## Theme 2 Analysis

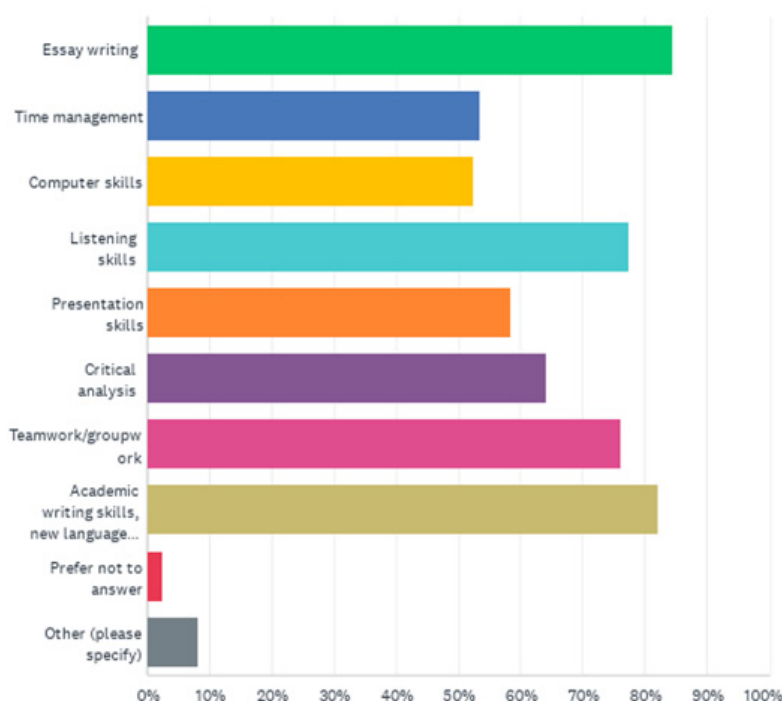
The programme does not operate in isolation from material realities; rather, it intervenes in structural inequities by equipping graduates with skills, confidence and networks necessary for economic participation. The findings align with Nussbaum's (2000) capabilities approach and Sen's (1999) development as freedom, both of which position education as an essential mechanism for economic agency and social justice.

The programme's emphasis on feminist leadership and advocacy training ensures that graduates not only enter employment but also challenge exploitative labour conditions and contribute to the broader socio-economic landscape. The curriculum, structured around critical feminist thought, engenders competencies beyond technical skill acquisition – it nurtures critical awareness of workplace inequalities, facilitating active intervention in gendered labour hierarchies.

The programme's impact extends beyond individual employability. It fosters a culture of civic participation that underscores the interconnectedness of personal empowerment and structural change. The respondents' testimonies reflect the dialectic between economic empowerment and feminist activism – the programme's success cannot be measured solely in employment outcomes but must be understood within a broader framework of economic justice and collective agency.

### Q18 Has the WGSJ Outreach Programme helped you to learn any of the skills below?

Answered: 84 Skipped: 13



## Confidence, Skills, and Career Progression

Many participants highlighted how the course provided them with the confidence to actively participate in conversations and decision-making processes within their various roles. For some, the lack of formal education had previously left them feeling uncertain or hesitant in their roles. However, engaging with the course expanded their knowledge and strengthened their self-assurance.

SP6ME111 described overcoming self-doubt through the course, allowing her to feel more capable and engaged in her professional environment:



"Sometimes in your role, beforehand, you feel like you don't have the education to be doing what you're doing... Doing the course, I gained more knowledge, and it gave me more confidence. I feel like I can be part of conversations now, whereas before I probably would have been a lot quieter."

Similarly, SP5CE111 noted how the programme increased her confidence:



"I don't think I view my role any differently, but I feel more confident within it."

Participants spoke about how the programme enhanced their communication skills and ability to articulate their ideas effectively which in turn built their confidence. SP5LA112 described how the programme expanded her vocabulary, giving her the confidence to enter conversations she previously might have avoided:



"Your vocabulary grows, so you're entering those conversations that you may have shied away from before. And also you have more knowledge now entering those conversations, so it definitely gives you that extra confidence."

This theme of increased vocabulary and critical thinking skills was reinforced by SP5SD113, who shared: "I learned how to word things better. It was a game-changer."

The intellectual growth fostered by the programme also extended to participants' broader perspectives. SP2SN111 described how it helped her think more openly:



"From doing the course, it actually opened my mind again—to think a bit more broadly and openly... It's given me the opportunity to be much more open-minded."

This demonstrates the course's impact beyond employment, fostering intellectual curiosity and lifelong learning. For many, the programme acted as a gateway to new career opportunities, helping them gain qualifications, change jobs and take on leadership roles. SP1AA111 reflected on how women's studies shaped her professional trajectory:



"You never lose what you get in women's studies—that empowerment and ethos of wanting the best for women. It gave me a career I never anticipated."

She elaborated on how the programme led her to further education and eventually a role within the organisation where she currently works. For others, the programme helped instil a newfound sense of self-belief necessary to make bold career changes. SP2MT112 shared how the course gave her the courage to leave an unfulfilling job and pursue a career she truly loved:



"I was given the courage from those courses to step out of somewhere I wasn't happy, and into somewhere I absolutely loved and love still."

Several participants credited the programme's formal credentials as a key factor in securing jobs or advancing their careers. SP5LA112 explained how the programme equipped her with formal credentials required for her current role:



"I wouldn't be where I am in my position without that program. I've gone through many roles in [names organisation], and for this particular job, they've asked for a third-level qualification."



Others shared similar experiences of career advancement directly linked to their participation in the programme. SP4KN113 credited the programme with helping her secure a job in community development:



"I actually got a job in community development... I would never have gone for that job had I not completed the women's studies course."

Similarly, SP5SD113 further reinforced this point on how the programme laid the foundation for her career, expressing gratitude for the opportunities it created:



"Still to this day, I'd say that women's studies was my foundation to get where I am, even career-wise. I never dreamt of being where I am now."

For many, the programme acted as a gateway to new career opportunities. Beyond employment, the programme also reinforced the value of community engagement and voluntary work. Many participants recognised that the knowledge and empowerment they gained had broader social implications, inspiring them to give back and contribute to change.

SP3LE111 reflected on how the programme helped her recognise the power of community education, even in small but meaningful ways:



"I haven't changed the world, but I may be a small ripple out there for people's hidden potential... I've benefited immensely from community education."

This sentiment was echoed by SP1AL113



"It completes a circle of women who want to make a difference. The women who go ahead of us... inspire us."

This suggests that the programme fosters a continuous cycle of mentorship and inspiration, further reinforcing its long-term value. Some participants saw the impact of their personal transformation extending into their families and communities. SP4FA121 shared how her husband was so inspired by her journey that he decided to sponsor female education abroad:



"He saw what education did for me and now he funds women's education abroad."

This demonstrates how personal transformation and growth can lead to broader advocacy and tangible societal change, showing that the impact of the programme extends beyond individual participants.

## Community Engagement and Recognition

The analysis of focus group discussions reveals that the WGSJ Outreach Programme had a profound impact on participants' relationships with their communities, fostering a deepened sense of engagement and recognition. Many participants described experiencing a renewed sense of purpose, confidence, and validation, which, in turn, encouraged them to inspire and support others in their communities. The programme challenged societal norms about education and lifelong learning. Many participants noted that the programme broadened their perspectives, deepened their critical engagement with societal issues and enhanced their desire to advocate on behalf of others.

The programme nurtured an increased awareness of social justice issues and encouraged proactive community involvement. SP4PE111 highlighted how this broadened perspective translated into more empathetic and effective community work:



"It gave me a better understanding of society and the different layers that women are faced with... I was able to put down any baggage I had, get rid of judgment, and have [an] understanding of the multi-layers of women."

This comment suggests that the programme not only provided knowledge but also cultivated an ability to navigate and address social complexities with greater empathy and awareness. Many participants attributed their increased involvement in volunteering and community engagement to the programme. Some had been involved in activism prior to the course, while others found new motivation and tools to make a meaningful contribution.

The recurring theme of the "ripple effect" demonstrates how the programme extended far beyond individual participants: fostering a culture of empowerment, activism and lifelong learning. Many participants felt a responsibility to "pay it forward," mentoring others and encouraging more women to join. SP2HR113 described this growing cycle of empowerment,



"Everyone who did it was so encouraging... pulling more women into it because of the empowerment that you got."

For many, personal transformation through the course had a profound ripple effect on those around them. SP3LE111 spoke about how her experience inspired others to pursue education,



"I'd be more of a ripple effect person... I've spoken to people about my experience in women's studies and the fact that I only did a PLC and was able to manage this level of education."

She humorously added, "A lot of people call me a mosquito, so yeah, I bang on and on" emphasising her persistence in raising awareness and inspiring change.

The impact of the programme also extended to participants' families and communities, inspiring intergenerational change. SP3EA121 described how her return to education challenged societal norms about learning being limited to younger age groups:



"It showed my children that it doesn't matter what age you are, you can go back to education."

Similarly, SP4S122 reflected on how her transformation directly impacted her daughters:



"Before my marriage broke up, I was a Stepford wife for sixteen years. Now, my daughters don't see that woman anymore. They see me going to college, having a career, sharing out the housework. It's a complete shift."

This shift in family dynamics highlights the long-term impact of the programme, influencing future generations to break free from traditional expectations.

Beyond personal and familial changes, the programme also encouraged community engagement. SP1AL113 noted how her involvement inspired others around her,



"It's not just us, but it's our families that impact as well. My daughter volunteers, too."

Through empowerment, activism and lifelong learning, the impact of the programme continues to spread, fostering a cycle of transformation that extends far beyond those who took part.

Some participants took their engagement even further, advocating for transparency and accountability in local governance. SP2MT112 emphasised how the programme encouraged her civic participation and commitment to local governance,



"I volunteer in the local policing forum and the Community Safety Forum... I want transparency for the money that they have spent."

Similarly, SP4CL112 further reinforced this theme, stating,



"I'm more aware now of people all around me, and I'm more confident to go and ask them, 'do you need help?'"

This comment reflects how the programme not only provided academic knowledge but also instilled a heightened sense of social responsibility and compassion.

SP5SD113 talked about such change:



"The course made me think differently. Now, when I see issues in my community, I feel like I can actually do something about it."

Participants highlighted how their increased knowledge and confidence enabled them to take on leadership roles within their communities, advocating for social justice and women's rights. SP3EA121's comment illustrates this change:



"I always volunteered in the community. I still do, but it [the course] helped. I run a women's group on a Thursday morning. And it [the course] helped me to have a safe open space, to make sure that this space was safe for them, to make sure that they could feel comfortable in it..."

Her journey from participant to leader demonstrates the programme's role in empowering women to take on active roles within their communities. SP2MT112 described how she actively encouraged other women to pursue education: "It was great to be able to invite women into the room, encourage them to do the courses and to go on and do Women, Gender, and Social Justice with UCD." This demonstrates how graduates became advocates for education, furthering the programme's positive impact within their communities.

While many participants felt inspired to take action in their communities, some also acknowledged the emotional toll of increased awareness. SP3MM112 shared how the programme made her more attuned to injustices, which sometimes became overwhelming,



"It made me very aware of all the problems around me... it upsets me more when I see what's going on around me."

Similarly, TP2B126 spoke about the transformative impact on her worldview:



"It gave me a new lens to look at my life and my relationships."

The programme enhanced participants' credibility within their communities, positioning them as sources of knowledge and guidance. SP4S122 described how her learning experience led others to seek her opinion on important issues



"I have friends and family getting in touch with me over elections, asking who I was voting for, because they knew I'd do my research."

For some, their educational achievement shifted family dynamics, challenged traditional perceptions of women's roles and fostered greater respect and recognition. SP6NL121 described how her family's perception of her had changed;



"They don't speak to me the way they used to... there's more respect from them."

Similarly, SP1AY122 noted how discussions within her home and social circles have expanded to include feminist issues, indicating a broader impact of the programme:



"Even my children's friends joke, 'Oh, sure, your mom's a feminist!' But through those jokes, awareness is spreading."

SP1AE121 described the broader social recognition she experienced:



"Other people would notice these things in me and approach me... it enabled me to give back to society in a positive way."

This suggests that the programme's impact extended beyond individual growth, encouraging a wider cultural shift towards community engagement and recognition of women's contributions.

## Systemic Barriers and Challenges

While the programme had a profound impact on participants' relationships with their communities, fostering a renewed sense of purpose, confidence and validation, many still encountered significant systemic barriers that limited their ability to fully utilise their newfound knowledge and skills. Despite their personal development and increased self-belief, external structural inequalities continued to hinder career progression, employment opportunities and systemic change.

For some participants, the restrictions imposed by government policies and institutional structures were a source of deep frustration. SP6CL113 reflected on the disconnect between her potential and systemic limitations imposed on her:



"I kind of impressed potential employers... but we're still held back by the restrictions governments impose on us."

She further emphasised how this lack of opportunities resulted in wasted potential, preventing women from fully contributing their skills and knowledge



"It angers me so much... There's so much potential wasted. There are so many women like us who could contribute so much more."

Despite the programme fostered empowerment, this highlights broader issues of external structural barriers that continue to limit women's opportunities for professional advancement. A recurring challenge was the difficulty of translating educational achievements into career progression. While participants gained new skills, knowledge and confidence, these were not always recognised or valued within professional settings.

SP3LE111 shared a particularly disheartening experience, describing how her efforts to apply her learning in the workplace were dismissed:



I tried to manoeuvre within [her workplace] to incorporate what I'd learned, but it wasn't recognised. That kind of knocked the stuffing out of me."

This disconnect between personal growth and formal acknowledgment in workplace or professional environments makes it difficult for participants to leverage their learning and education for career advancement.

Similarly, SP5CT121 voiced frustration over the lack of career opportunities available to women post-programme, stating,



"You come out of something like this ready to go, but the opportunities aren't always there."

This underscores the gap between educational achievement and accessible employment pathways, reinforcing the need for stronger career support for graduates.

Another persistent issue was the undervaluation of women's unpaid and voluntary work. Many participants felt that, despite making essential contributions to society, their efforts remained unrecognised in formal employment settings. Additionally, the challenge of balancing multiple roles – education, work, caregiving and advocacy – also emerged as a major challenge. SP6NL121 expressed frustration at the lack of institutional support for women trying to navigate these competing demands:



"They expect you to do it all. The system doesn't make it easy for women to advance."

This comment reflects the ongoing expectation that women shoulder disproportionate responsibilities without adequate structural or policy support. It also highlights the urgent need for policies that better support women juggling multiple roles. While the programme deepened participants' understanding of social issues, it also intensified their frustration at the barriers preventing meaningful change. This frustration was particularly evident in advocacy work, where participants often found themselves fighting against rigid institutional structures.

SP4KN113 described feeling unsupported in her efforts to push for systemic change:



"We do the work, we push for change, but sometimes it feels like you're shouting into the void. The structures aren't there to support the work we want to do."

This underscores the emotional toll of advocacy work and the lack of institutional mechanisms to translate grassroots activism into concrete policy changes.

## Conclusion

The Women, Gender and Social Justice Outreach Programme had a profound and transformative impact on participants' confidence, skills and career trajectories. The programme validated their existing abilities while equipping them with new knowledge and tools, allowing many to step into leadership roles, engage in professional and voluntary work and advocate for themselves with greater confidence.

Many participants credited the course with helping them overcome self-doubt, enhancing their communication skills, and broadening their critical thinking abilities. These newly developed skills



enabled career advancement, with participants gaining formal qualifications, securing employment and making career transitions they had not previously considered possible. Beyond professional growth, the programme reinforced the value of lifelong learning and mentorship, fostering a cycle of empowerment where graduates went on to inspire and support others in their networks.

The programme's impact extended beyond employment, encouraging active participation in voluntary and community work. Many participants described a renewed sense of purpose, taking on roles in volunteering, leadership and activism. A strong "ripple effect" emerged as a key theme, where participants encouraged others - family members, friends, and broader networks - to pursue education and civic engagement.

The intergenerational impact was particularly significant. Many participants challenged societal norms around education and gender roles, demonstrating to their children and communities that learning and achievement are possible at any stage of life. For some, this transformation enhanced their credibility within their communities, positioning them as trusted voices in social and political discussions. As participants became mentors, role models and advocates, their transformation extended far beyond their personal experiences - fostering a culture of empowerment, collective learning and community-driven change.

Despite the programme's profound personal and community impact, systemic barriers continued to limit participants' ability to fully utilise their newfound knowledge and skills. Many expressed frustration at restrictive government policies, a lack of career progression opportunities and the persistent undervaluation of voluntary and unpaid work.

Participants struggled to translate their education into professional advancement, with some encountering workplace resistance to recognising their achievements. Balancing education, employment and caregiving responsibilities remained a significant challenge, with limited institutional support exacerbating these difficulties.

Additionally, participants engaged in advocacy work often felt unsupported, reinforcing the gap between individual empowerment and systemic transformation. These challenges highlight the urgent need for policies that create clear career pathways, formally recognise voluntary contributions and provide better support for women balancing multiple responsibilities.

Participation in the programme significantly enhanced individuals' confidence, visibility and leadership roles within their communities. Many participants gained recognition as trusted voices in civic and social spaces, leading to greater involvement in advocacy and voluntary initiatives. However, while community-based work was deeply fulfilling, some expressed frustration that their skills and contributions remained undervalued in formal employment settings.

This underscores a key insight: while the programme successfully fostered personal and collective empowerment, a gap remains between informal contributions and tangible career progression. To ensure lasting impact, stronger institutional recognition of community-based experience in professional and policy spaces is necessary.

In summary, the WGSJ Outreach Programme had a transformative impact on participants, equipping them with confidence, skills and leadership capabilities that enhanced their professional and community engagement. However, systemic barriers - such as limited career progression opportunities, undervaluation of voluntary work and structural challenges - continue to hinder full recognition of their contributions. While the programme has empowered individuals, cultivated leadership and fostered a culture of advocacy and lifelong learning, bridging the gap between personal transformation and systemic change remains crucial for ensuring sustained and long-term impact. Addressing these barriers through policy reform, institutional recognition, and enhanced career pathways would further solidify the programme's role in driving both individual and societal transformation.

## THEME 3: PERSONAL LEARNING AND WELLBEING

### Survey Results

The programme has had a profound impact on graduates' self-confidence, critical thinking and mental wellbeing. Many respondents described how exposure to feminist and social justice education enabled them to develop agency, articulate their experiences and navigate personal and professional spaces with greater confidence.

### Key findings

- 68 respondents stated the programme influenced their personal growth and development “a great deal” (58) and “a lot” (10).
- 88% of respondents reported an increase in self-confidence, attributing this to their exposure to critical feminist discourse and peer learning.
- 84 graduates provided qualitative reflections on their enhanced confidence, critical self-awareness and ability to advocate for themselves and others.
- 26 respondents expressed interest in sharing personal statements or video testimonials to describe the impact of their participation.

### Respondents' Reflections



“The WGSJ course gave me clear direction, helped me find my voice and honed my purpose. I am very clear about the Why of the work I do. It is to support driven women in overcoming limiting beliefs to create an impact with their expertise.”



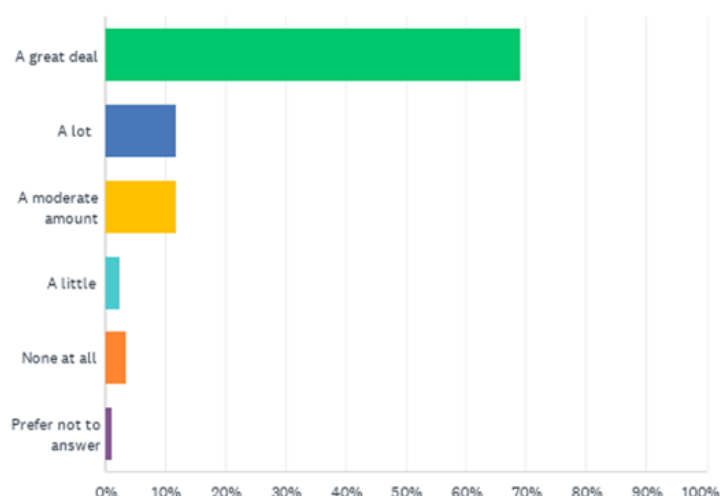
“It helped me tackle my imposter syndrome and believe I can now do a Master's Programme.”



“I was a single parent. I had no confidence, and with the help from the program I continued on to the college program and learned new skills.”

Q39 Has your participation in the WGSJ Outreach Programme impacted your personal growth and development?

Answered: 84 Skipped: 13



These findings highlight the programme's transformative power, particularly for women who had previously lacked access to higher education or confidence in their intellectual abilities. The overwhelmingly positive impact on self-confidence and personal agency suggests that feminist education is not only an academic exercise but a form of empowerment that enables women to redefine their self-perception and future trajectories.

## Focus Group Insights

This part of the research project explores the impact of the outreach education programme, on personal learning and wellbeing. It reveals the depth of the programme's impact on self-awareness, emotional resilience and empowerment. The results are captured under the headings:

1. Moments of Transformation: Gaining Awareness and Confidence
2. Challenging Perspectives and Reframing Beliefs
3. Self-Care and Personal Growth: Finding One's Voice

The testimonies of these women reveal how the programme not only fostered academic and intellectual growth but also empowered them to challenge societal conditioning, reframe their beliefs and embrace self-care as an essential part of their journey. The outreach programme served as a catalyst for profound personal transformation, allowing participants to redefine their relationships with self-care, personal boundaries and confidence.

## Theme 3 Analysis

### Moments of Transformation: Gaining Awareness and Confidence

The Women, Gender, and Social Justice Outreach Programme was more than an educational initiative. It was a catalyst for self-actualisation, confidence-building and critical consciousness. Rooted in feminist and community-driven education, the programme provided participants with the tools to interrogate their lived experiences, challenge internalised oppression, and reimagine their socio-political agenda. Survey respondents describe the programme as a transformative space where they could critically interrogate their lived realities, shifting from passive acceptance of structural constraints to an active engagement with feminist knowledge production.

These survey respondents articulated this shift and the course's impact on their confidence and awareness:



"The course significantly boosted my confidence in a number of ways. Knowledge and awareness: I gained a deeper understanding of how systematic inequalities affect various groups. I also learned about the struggles and triumphs of women. Learned critical thinking and analytical skills and engaged in discussions. Made me think about my own identity and self-awareness; understanding the experience of others fosters empathy. Overall, this course provided the tools, knowledge and inspiration to navigate and challenge societal structures, fostering both personal and collective confidence."



"I was able to express myself and learnt that Society oppresses Women and by nature we are taught to be subordinate. I went from being a shy Young Woman to a Fierce, Fabulous Feminist. I'm not afraid to challenge and walk away if I'm not treated with respect. I was a door mat before and used to allow people to use me. Having lovely women around me and transformational tutors also helped."

For many participants, this empowerment was particularly significant, as they had previously been excluded from formal education. Their re-engagement with learning highlights the efficacy of feminist pedagogies in challenging dominant epistemologies and enabling new forms of knowledge production. Across multiple focus groups, participants described their engagement with the outreach programme as profoundly transformative. For many, the experience not only reshaped their confidence but also fundamentally altered their self-perception, their understanding of societal conditioning and their ability to navigate academic and personal challenges.

SP4PE111 articulated this shift, describing how she became aware of: “the invisible conditioning that I [had] been conditioned with all my life,” emphasising how the course allowed her to step back and critically examine both her personal and professional life.

Similarly, SP3LE111, who had initially been skeptical due to generational differences, found herself unexpectedly affected:



“I couldn’t believe how much was going on in the world around me and how complicit I was in aspects of it.”

For some, the course led to deep personal reflection. SP1AA111 recounted how an assignment comparing her life to her mother’s provided a significant awakening:



“It got me to understand my mother’s behaviour... and the lack of support around mental health.”

This newfound awareness fostered a greater sense of empathy and understanding, reshaping her perception of her mother’s struggles and the societal structures that influenced them.

For many participants, completing assignments became a pivotal moment of transformation. SP5LA112 described the empowerment that came with overcoming academic challenges:



“When you come into this without having done anything in years... the confidence that that instills in you. To say I’ve completed that, like I struggled through it, but I completed it.”

For others, balancing education with personal responsibilities was a struggle, but one that ultimately strengthened their resilience. SP1RA112, a single parent juggling work and study, shared,



“It was a struggle... but I felt very proud of the fact that I completed it.”

Similarly, SP2MT112 also noted how the course built her confidence in a way she had never previously experienced:



“I hadn’t got the confidence... until I started that course. It built my confidence to ask questions.”

The experience of learning, writing and receiving feedback became a catalyst for participants’ growing self-belief. The ripple effects extended beyond the classroom. SP2MT112 proudly shared how her personal growth influenced her family:



“Not only did I personally grow, but each and every one of my children have just aced anything they’ve touched.”

SP5AE122, reflecting on her working-class background, described how education had once seemed out of reach and the experience of stepping into a university setting after a lifetime of being told it was unattainable was deeply significant:



“I’m from a very working-class family... the expectation was that I would go straight out to work when I was sixteen, seventeen. I had to fight to do my Leaving Cert. So college was off the agenda. And then in UCD, Aideen said, ‘It’s here for you. If you work, it’s here for you.’”

This moment marked a reclamation of an opportunity she had long been denied, demonstrating the programme’s role in breaking down educational barriers.

For many, the programme served as a catalyst for self-expression and self-advocacy. SP1AL113 recalled a defining moment when she was required to present in class:



"I used to literally shake. I used to not even be able to talk to people when I joined Ronanstown, because I was just that shy, and I came out of my shell."

Over time, she gained not only confidence in public speaking but also the ability to advocate for broader community issues:



"I contacted people in the EU about where funding for community development was going. I found out that they were siphoning off money from community education. That's when mine [her defining moment] happened."

Similarly, SP6CL113 described the course as an affirmation of her strength and independence:



"When I was growing up, my mother was very ill and always told me, 'Stay strong. Get your education.' This course reaffirmed that part of me—the feminist part of me. It reminded me that I am allowed to be a strong woman."

For others, confidence stemmed from increased awareness of societal structures and their own capacity for empathy. SP5SD113 reflected on how the programme made her more conscious of people's circumstances:



"We can be quick to judge, and I'm as guilty of this as anyone. But this course made me more aware. Not everyone is in the same boat. People have different stories, different backgrounds."

This shift in perspective and awareness shaped how participants understood others, fostering empathy and social awareness that extended beyond the classroom.

## Challenging Perspectives and Reframing Beliefs

The focus groups revealed how the programme provided participants with a space to critically examine their existing beliefs, challenge ingrained societal norms and reframe their perspectives. Through exposure to new ideas, historical contexts and diverse viewpoints, many experienced intellectual and personal growth, often describing the journey as deeply impactful and transformative.

Many participants began the programme with preconceived notions about particular topics, only to find their views dramatically altered. SP2SN111 initially dismissed a module on women in art, expecting it to be "beyond boring." However, her perspective shifted entirely by the end: "It was brilliant learning... I absolutely loved it." She valued the experience of being "positively challenged," as it encouraged her to re-examine and refine her views.

For some, the programme facilitated deep reflection on personal identity and social structures. SP6ME111's engagement with women's representation in art and the historical role of the Catholic Church led to a powerful reckoning with her own past:



"I was a young mammy in the Catholic Church, and... had my parents believed in what the Catholic Church was saying, I could have well been in the Magdalen laundry."

She likened the learning experience to a complete shattering of her previous worldview, saying:



"It's like if somebody actually came in and literally got a hammer and shattered my life, really... by the learning."

For SP6ME111, the programme became a process of "relearning" who she wanted to be, a journey both daunting and empowering.

For some, academic learning translated into political and social action. SP5CE111 described how the programme gave her the confidence to engage in political activism:



"TDs are knocking at the door... [these] issues obviously meant something to me, but I genuinely wouldn't have been able to do it without finishing the course."

The programme instilled in her a sense of agency, giving her the belief that she had the right to question authority and push for change:



"I actually felt like I had the right to question things, to push for change in ways I never thought possible."

Exposure to different perspectives and feminist thought not only expanded knowledge but also had profound emotional effects. SP4CL112 recounted how the module on sexuality reshaped her worldview at a critical moment when a family member was transitioning:



"That really opened up a world to me... I learned so much about that."

This newfound understanding strengthened her ability to support her relative during a difficult period. SP2MT112 highlighted the emotional challenges of intellectual growth:



"There were times I cried... but then, just listening to everybody debating in the classroom, writing my notes in my own language, and then looking back... handing them in, I was so happy."

This experience underscores how intellectual struggle, though often accompanied by frustration, ultimately led to personal validation and confidence. Similarly, SP1RA112 discovered the importance of setting boundaries and prioritising her well-being:



"I learned that it was okay to say no to certain things and to be able to do things that make me feel good, not just to make other people happy."

This learning extended beyond academic development, instilling a deeper sense of self-awareness and autonomy. For SP4KN113, the programme provided a lifeline during a period of profound grief. Having lost her youngest daughter just months before starting the course, she described herself as *"a shell of a human."* The programme offered her a community and a sense of belonging:



"It wasn't about the academic side for me; it was about the tribe. Being surrounded by people who understood, who listened, was what carried me through."

Her experience highlights the programme's role in emotional resilience and healing, reinforcing the power of shared experiences and community support. The programme also encouraged participants to challenge societal norms and traditional gender expectations, prompting participants to re-evaluate their identities and roles. SP4FA121 recalled how an art class shifted her worldview:



"[The tutor] showed us different paintings and said, 'If one appeals to you, even if you don't know why, lean into that and say why?' There was an image of Alice Maher's 'Cassandra's Necklace'—a cow's tongue necklace. Most people were repulsed, but it attracted me. When I learned about it, it was all about women's voices. That moment was fundamental to the work I do today."

SP7PB121 discovered the freedom of academic expression, saying how she painted a picture for an assignment instead of writing an essay.



"That was a lovely way of realising it hasn't always got to be academic. There are other ways of expressing yourself."



The course also helped participants break away from childhood beliefs about women's roles. SP1AE121 described her childhood in a male-dominated household and how the course helped her reclaim her voice:



"I come from a big family in the west of Ireland. There were three boys and five girls, and girls didn't matter. The lads got the best of everything. I had no voice. That's the way life was. But I have learned to overcome all that. I tell my nieces and nephews to look after themselves and be proud of who they are."

This reframing of personal history reinforced a newfound sense of self-worth and pride, breaking intergenerational cycles of silence and submission. For many, exposure to feminist literature and historical movements provided a framework for understanding and articulating their beliefs. SP3JE122 reflected on the impact of discovering feminist thinkers:



"I loved being exposed to Bell Hooks and Adichie... When Bell Hooks died, it was like I had lost a friend. Their words have lived with me, and I kind of breathe them now in my everyday life."

The programme not only deepened her knowledge but also empowered her to embrace an identity she had previously resisted:



"I never could name that I was a feminist... because it was, to me, like the burning of the bras... It's not about anything like that... I probably lost myself a little bit, I'd say, just being at home... So it gave me that confidence and self belief for myself again, you know, which was really important."

The historical struggles of women's activism also resonated deeply. TP1D126, a tutor, described how in teaching a political history module, she too was impacted by how the students received the information. Her observation of the moment of realisation by the women in the class about the resilience and political struggle of women who had come before them, was **"really meaningful and worthy"** and underscored the ongoing relevance of historical movements in shaping contemporary perspectives.



"One of the women last year, when we finished the lecture, she turned around and said, 'Oh, my God! They were so brave, like they were such fearless women.' And I actually just nearly started crying. I still think about it and she was dead right."

These findings demonstrate that the programme encouraged participants to challenge perspectives, reframe beliefs and foster emotional resilience. Through exposure to new knowledge and feminist discourse, the participants articulated significant shifts in their worldview, stating that they developed critical thinking skills, personal confidence and a renewed sense of identity. Many gained the courage to question societal norms and advocate for change, both in their personal lives and in broader political contexts.

## Self-Care and Personal Growth - Finding One's Voice

The WGSJ Outreach Programme provided participants with a space to find and strengthen their voices, fostering confidence, boundary-setting, and the significance of self-care. The experience led to a profound shift in their perspectives and daily lives, reinforcing the importance of structured learning environments in promoting personal development, self-validation and community support. Many described the programme as a pivotal moment in their lives, one that enabled them reshape their perspectives and prioritise their well-being.

Participants reflected on the significant transformation in how they expressed themselves, both personally and professionally. SP6ME111 described how the course had a life-changing impact, helping her develop a more confident and constructive voice:



"It completely changed my life... It's changed who I am as a person."

Having undertaken the course during the COVID-19 pandemic, she found that its lessons continued to guide her through life's challenges:



"Something just from the course comes back into my mind, and I suppose it kind of made me find my voice in a more confident, constructive way."

For others, the programme encouraged them to embrace public speaking and share their experiences. SP4FA121 reflected on this shift:



"I set out to find my voice more. Now, I'm an associate member of the Professional Speaking Association of Ireland. That moment in the programme was pivotal for me."

For SP3LE111, the programme was a complete reframing of her worldview, making her more attuned to societal issues she had previously overlooked:



"It reframed everything that was surrounding me... It was a constant eye-opener. I started noticing things I had always overlooked, things that suddenly seemed impossible to ignore."

A recurring theme was the recognition of self-care as a necessity rather than a luxury. Many participants recounted how the programme helped them reassess the importance of personal well-being and implement meaningful changes.

SP1AL113 shared how she had historically struggled with setting boundaries, often prioritising the needs of others over herself. The course helped her redefine her approach to self-care:



"I used to be a pushover. I used to take on other people's problems and not be able to say no. It took me two years to implement what I learned, but now I have self-care. I put in my boundaries. I tell people, 'I need to put myself first.' It's not about being mean; it's about survival."

For others, self-care took on different forms, including reconnecting with friendships and allowing time for relaxation. SP4CL112 discovered the importance of nurturing friendships:



"I now take time out for my girlfriends... I kind of stop now and say, you know, I want my women's time."

SP2MT112, who had long prioritised family and work, found joy in simple acts of relaxation and self-care:



"What I do for myself now is chill out—feet up, remote control, Netflix, and a nice takeaway."

While some participants acknowledged that they still struggled with self-care, others found that the programme planted seeds for reflection and change. One participant noted how even small changes were impactful:



"Even just taking those two hours on a Tuesday morning to do the essays and the reading—that time was for myself. It reminded me that the time is there, and I need to take it."

Several women discussed how the programme helped them challenge traditional gender expectations and step back from the pressures of household management. SP1AY122 reflected on how she redefined responsibilities within her home, linking directly to self-care,



"Not taking on all the responsibility, like gendered kind of roles... that's all shifted. And I would really link that to self-care."

Similarly SP4SE12 embraced a new mindset, relinquishing the pressure to manage everything alone:



"I've taken a back step there, and it starts here, and I don't care, and it's fine."

For some, self-care was about rediscovering personal identity outside of motherhood or caregiving. SP3JE122, who had previously left her profession to raise her children, described how the course helped her reclaim a sense of self:



"I was originally a nurse, but after my second child, I had given up that identity. I probably lost myself a little bit just being at home. This course gave me something that was important to me, something I could identify with again."

For many, the programme provided much-needed validation, especially for those whose daily lives lacked opportunities for recognition. TP2BE123 described the significance of receiving positive feedback on her written work:



"It was probably the most validating thing I'd experienced in years. Because I was just at home with three small kids and there was nothing hugely validating in that experience... but having someone external say, 'Yeah, this is really good. You're really good at this,' that was huge for me.... really made a difference to me in terms of self-esteem and belief in myself."

Now a strong advocate for self-care, TP2BE123 has integrated this perspective into her own teaching,



"And when I teach the introduction, half of it is focused on self care because I am just so aware of the challenges and the pulls on all of these women as learners. All the different needs that they're trying to meet in their lives. So I really try and get them to focus on how they can improve their self care and allow themselves the best possible chance to participate as fully as they can with the programme."

She reinforced the idea that women often carry disproportionate burdens and need to reframe the narrative of constant caregiving,



"... this huge draw on women's resources—mothers, daughters, sisters, workers. I think it's huge for women to learn to reframe the narrative of being all-loving, all-giving, and all-nurturing, you know, and redirect some of that back into themselves."

The strength of the peer network within the programme played a crucial role in sustaining well-being. SP7PB121 highlighted the importance of mutual support and how the group dynamic created a support system that helped women stay on track,



"We'd have a support group here that need to make sure we were all on the same page. ...so we would check in with each other. So the space was made for that as well, that you weren't going off alone to do the assignment, and you were maybe on the wrong track."

The sense of community was, for some, the most healing aspect of the programme. SP4KN113 noted,



"What really made the difference for me was the people. It's one thing to read and learn, but it's another thing to have a group of women supporting each other through it."

## Conclusion - Personal Learning and Wellbeing

The Women, Gender, and Social Justice Outreach Programme was a deeply transformative experience for participants, fostering personal growth, intellectual expansion and self-empowerment. By challenging societal conditioning, building confidence and providing structured academic engagement, the programme enabled participants to redefine their capabilities and assert their place in the world.

Many participants experienced pivotal moments of self-realisation, recognising the impact of long-standing societal norms on their self-perception. Completing assignments and engaging in academic work became significant milestones, instilling a sense of achievement and self-belief. The cascading effect of this transformation extended beyond individual participants, positively influencing their families and communities. Increased awareness of social structures and inequalities enhanced their ability to engage in self-advocacy and contribute to social change. The combination of structured learning, supportive environments and critical engagement led to lasting impacts on participants' personal, academic and professional lives.

The programme also profoundly challenged participants' preconceived beliefs, fostering critical thinking and intellectual growth. Exposure to diverse perspectives, historical contexts and feminist discourse led to significant shifts in worldview, with many describing the experience as deeply transformative. Some re-examined deeply held assumptions about gender, art and social norms, while others found empowerment in political and social activism. This process was often emotional and challenging — fostering resilience, self-awareness and a renewed sense of identity. The importance of community and shared experiences was also highlighted, with participants supporting each other through personal challenges such as grief, self-doubt and social isolation.

A key theme that emerged was the rediscovery of self-care as a necessity rather than a luxury. Participants found their voices, redefined priorities and learned to set boundaries, particularly in challenging traditional gender roles and expectations. For many, the course was the first time they had experienced external validation for their skills and contributions, leading to a renewed sense of self-worth. The peer support network played a critical role in this process, reinforcing the power of collective encouragement and shared learning. These findings underscore the programme's role in fostering empowerment, resilience and a renewed sense of self.

Beyond academic and intellectual development, the programme provided a platform for personal reflection, self-expression and agency. It encouraged critical reflection, pushing participants to confront difficult histories, question deeply held beliefs and engage with feminist and social justice ideas. In doing so, it played a crucial role in challenging perspectives and reframing beliefs, expanding participants' understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Ultimately, the programme was not just an educational experience but a catalyst for lasting personal transformation. It empowered individuals to navigate personal and societal challenges with confidence, equipping them with the skills, knowledge and self-belief to engage with the world on their own terms. More than an academic journey, it was a deeply personal and collective experience that fostered resilience, empowerment and a lifelong commitment to learning and advocacy. These transformations will continue to shape participants' lives and inspire future generations, reinforcing the programme's enduring impact.



## THEME 4: FAMILIAL AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

### Survey Results

Beyond individual benefits, the programme has had intergenerational and community-wide effects. Many graduates reported that their participation inspired family members to pursue education and fostered a stronger commitment to community engagement.

#### Key findings:

- 30 respondents were first-generation higher education students, demonstrating the programme's role in widening educational accessibility and participation for non-traditional learners.
- 73 respondents encouraged family members to pursue third-level education, illustrating the programme's intergenerational impact.
- 21 respondents stated that the programme had positively supported their family's financial and educational aspirations "a great deal."
- 54 respondents became more active in community activities, engaging in local initiatives, policy advocacy and women's rights projects.

### Participant Perspectives



"I never did well in school. I came from a single-parent family with poverty and addiction. I never enjoyed learning before and was not supposed [to]. My confidence grew each week with my brain growing at the same time. I am so happy to be a good example to my two girls."



"My studies gave me a better understanding of myself and others also within society, community became very important to me."

These findings reinforce the programme's broad social impact, particularly in fostering a culture of lifelong learning and civic engagement.

### Focus Group Insights

For this section of the focus groups, participants were asked: has your participation in the outreach programme led you to encourage family members to think about education or other opportunities differently? What changes, if any, have you noticed in how people in your community respond to your involvement in local activities or discussions? The following is the analysis of participants' responses.

The findings are captured under the sub headings:

1. Encouraging Family Members to Pursue Education: Impact of the Outreach Programme
2. Shared Learning and Strengthened Family Bonds
3. Community Response and Wider Impact

The programme has had a profound impact on participants, extending beyond individual growth to influence families and communities. Participants shared how their involvement encouraged family members to view education as a lifelong opportunity and a means of personal transformation. Many described the course as leading them to inspire their children, spouses and extended networks to pursue further learning, challenge traditional perceptions of education and foster a culture of shared knowledge. The programme has strengthened family bonds and enhanced community engagement. Participants found themselves not only learning but also supporting and encouraging others to do the same. Their experiences sparked meaningful conversations on topics ranging from gender roles to social change, reinforcing the idea that education is a collective journey. This section explores the ripple effects of the outreach programme, demonstrating how individual empowerment can lead to broader social transformation.

## Theme 4 Analysis

Findings suggest that the programme generates intergenerational and community-wide impact, reinforcing the Freirian concept of praxis — where learning extends beyond the individual and into families and social networks. Participants frequently articulated how their participation in the programme catalysed educational aspirations among their children and broader kinship networks, substantiating the claim that feminist education disrupts cycles of exclusion.

This ripple effect aligns with literature on feminist intergenerational learning, which posits that community-driven educational models facilitate structural transformation beyond immediate participants (NALA, 2020; Quilty et al., 2016; Tett, 2006). One respondent illustrates this:



“Widened by personal horizons. It gave me my first insight ever into 3rd level education and how my children could access it. 5 kids now graduates, also my granddaughter. All first ever in the family. And my own achievement was such a wonderful private victory for myself. A thousand thanks to all at UCD/RCDP.”

By embedding critical feminist education within community-led learning models, the programme empowers individuals and actively challenges socio-cultural barriers to education. The implications of such transformation are vast, reinforcing the necessity for sustained investment in non-traditional educational pathways that prioritise the needs of marginalised learners.

### Encouraging Family Members to Pursue Education: Impact of the Outreach Programme

The outreach programme had a profound intergenerational impact, influencing participants’ families, friends and wider social networks. Many participants found that their return to education directly influenced their children’s perceptions of learning and their aspirations—inspiring them to pursue further education and view lifelong learning as an accessible and valuable pursuit. By challenging traditional attitudes toward education, the programme demonstrated that learning is not confined to a specific stage in life but is an ongoing journey of growth and self-improvement. For many participants, their return to education redefined how their children viewed learning and ambition. SP3LE111 reflected on how her journey challenged traditional notions of education in her household and how she encouraged her children to see education as a flexible and lifelong process:



“I’ve told them about, ‘Oh, look! Your mother was able to go back, and I did a diploma, and you know, the same thing. There’s no one way to do it.”

Similarly, SP1AA111 echoed a similar sentiment, reflecting on how her return to education transformed the family dynamic, influencing her children’s aspirations:



“I think it changed everything I did in the family home for all the years that I was studying.”

She humorously recalled the running joke in her house:



“They’d come in, and they’d say, ‘Is dinner ready?’ And I’d say, ‘Yeah, collect it, it’s in the chipper.’”

Despite the challenges of balancing education and family life, she proudly shared that her younger two children, who had seen her struggle and persevere, went on to become teachers. For some participants, graduation was a milestone not only for themselves but for their families as well. SP2SN111, witnessing her journey through education was a powerful experience for her children and helped shape her children’s perspectives. She was particularly proud that they attended her graduation:



“I’m so proud that they got the opportunity to see me in education.”



She shared how the experience sparked discussions at home, particularly with her son's initial skepticism toward feminist ideas,



"He used to call himself a 'meninist' because he was like, 'this feminist shite,' you know? But it's amazing... even last night he came into the room and said, 'Mom, you have to listen to this guy about men and young men and mental health.'"

Similarly, SP6ME111 found that her dedication to education set an example for her daughter, ultimately influencing her to return to education, "She saw the struggle was real. But she also saw that it was achievable."

She emphasised that setting an example is more effective than simply giving advice, stating



:"It's not 'tell me what to do' but 'show me what to do', and I think that happened in my family."

Despite their encouragement, some participants found that their children still faced systemic challenges in education.

SP4PE111, who had prioritised education from an early age, expressed frustration that her son struggled to stay in university despite her efforts,



"I placed huge importance on education from the time they were small."

Similarly, SP6ME111 highlighted how the lack of academic support structures can prevent students from succeeding in higher education,



"Without the supports, they can't get the grades, and the Leaving Cert doesn't guarantee them to go through the whole college process."

These reflections emphasise the need for stronger support structures to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds can successfully navigate the challenges of higher education.

Many participants observed a shift in how their children viewed education after seeing their parents engage in learning. SP2MS112 shared how her own journey had a ripple effect within her family:



"Then I did the course. And then all of a sudden, they're all doing courses."

She recalled how family members supported each other through their educational challenges:



"It's like running, making tea, coffee, and throwing biscuits in while, 'Mom, I'm struggling,' or whatever. And I'd be going, 'I'm struggling' and supporting one another."

For SP5LA112, education became a non-negotiable expectation in her home:



"For me now, not going to college is not an option in my house. And I think, so it's not a conversation anymore—what you're going to do. I know he's able to go to college, so it's not a conversation. He's going to college, and he's just on board with that now, because that's just how it is."

The intergenerational impact of education was evident in SP1RA112's story, as her daughter followed her lead by enrolling in the same women's studies programme:



My daughter ended up doing women's studies as well, and she [now] works for [names organisation]. And so she followed in my footsteps. I didn't really realise I was encouraging her to do it."

For SP4SE12, pursuing education later in life provided a powerful model for her daughters,



"My Leaving Cert was rubbish and I never went to college... they never saw me studying, barely even reading a magazine. So now they see this new me. Now it's normal for them to come home, do their homework, study—no fight about it. As I carry on in UCD, my daughter will be doing her 1st year in college somewhere. I think that'll be great, and she thinks it's great as well."

The programme also helped break down preconceived notions about academic achievement, particularly for those who had previously been excluded from traditional education pathways. SP5AE122 shared how this influenced her children to see education differently, particularly her son, who has complex needs,



"This has shown my children, and I keep saying there's other pathways... it has definitely affected my conversation, and even my attitude to them and my daughter, educationally."

She wanted her children to understand that academic success is not solely dependent on traditional routes, "the Leaving Cert is not the be-all and end-all."

Similarly, SP3JE122 reflected on how education became a tool for breaking cycles of disadvantage in her family. She described how her own parents had left school early but instilled in her the value of learning and then she in turn did the same for her own son, helping him to navigate the education system despite initial reluctance.



"When I started the outreach, the level seven last year. You know I had a lot of conversations with him about education and doors that can open up, and he wasn't ...really ready to hear. But I think, seeing me going back to education again, out of choice like. ...So he did do a PLC in social studies. And now he's gone into college to do social studies."

Her experience highlights how education is not just about career pathways but about expanding possibilities and changing mindsets across generations.

Beyond immediate family, participants' involvement in education also inspired friends, peers and broader social circles to pursue education. SP4KN113 shared how her decision to return to education influenced her best friend:



"I don't know about my community, but my best friend is going into her third year of a community development and leadership degree... she saw that I did it... And now she's three years in, and she wants to go and work in community development."

SP8TA121 actively encouraged family and friends to connect with the Women's Community Initiative (WCI):



"I have encouraged family and friends to connect with WCI and to do the course. My mom attends one of the groups in [names place], and a friend of mine is on the level seven course at the moment as well, and she's really, really enjoying it."

For many, this encouragement extended to mentoring and supporting others in their educational journeys. SP3EA121 emphasised the importance of outreach in spreading awareness:



"I would definitely encourage people that I meet to either start an education or re-enter education. Particularly the women in the group that I run. I advertise whatever WCI is doing within my group. A lot of them didn't even know there was still a WCI."

Her proactive efforts ensured that more women could take advantage of available opportunities. SP3JE122 commented on how she noticed changes in her husband's outlook:



"Even I think I've been an influence on my husband, who in turn, even influenced his own social network... I hear his conversations change and what he won't tolerate anymore."

## Shared Learning and Strengthened Family Bonds

Participation in the outreach programme was not just an individual journey for many of those who took part—it became a shared experience that deepened family connections and broadened perspectives within their communities. The stories shared illustrate the transformative power of education, not only in individual lives but also in how it fosters mutual encouragement, support and understanding within families.

For some, education became a rare and special bonding experience. SP5CE111 reflected on the unique opportunity she had to study alongside her daughter, something she never imagined possible:



"I was actually very lucky. I did the women's and gender studies with my daughter. It would never have been possible without the outreach programme. One, with money, or two, who wants to go to college with their mother?"

Despite initial doubts, she described the experience as "something special," highlighting how this journey together strengthened their relationship. Others found that their engagement in education reshaped how their families viewed their potential. SP3LE111 shared how studying Women's Studies helped her recognise her own capabilities and, in turn, inspired her children,



"During the Women's Studies, I realised my own capabilities, and I've shared that with my two boys."

Similarly, SP6ME111 emphasised the role of lived experience in inspiring others, particularly her children, reinforcing the importance of perseverance



"She [her daughter] saw the struggle was real. But she also saw that it was achievable. And I've already ...reached out to help ...and give that to support. I mean, you can't buy it, you know. ...We just need to bottle it."

Many participants credited family encouragement as a key factor in their ability to persist in education, especially during moments of self-doubt. SP4CL112 admitted her initial doubts about her ability to complete the course, but the unwavering support from her family was instrumental in her perseverance,



"When I started the course, I really didn't think I was going to be able for it. Like the support that came from your family to try and encourage you was amazing."

She also emphasised the importance of tutor support in helping her build confidence:



"The support from the tutors, and how down-to-earth they were to bring it along, to make you feel that your worth is there—you just can't buy that."

For many, their involvement in education not only boosted their confidence but also shaped how others perceived them. SP5MM121 reflected on how her academic journey shifted expectations within her community,



"I would recommend friends or people I know to come and just see what's on, start with a taster of things. I do some voluntary work anyway, so I suppose people maybe expect a bit more from me now. Maybe they realise I can do a bit more than I was."

Similarly, SP1AL113 shared how her involvement in advocacy work was recognised in ways she had not expected:



"I did advocacy in the community... I didn't think that people noticed, because I'd just be doing little things but... In 2018 I won awards for my work, so the volunteering and things I do."

This external recognition validated her efforts and reinforced the importance of everyday contributions to the community. The academic achievements became a source of pride for their children and families. SP1AY122 shared how her children took immense pride in her academic achievements:



"They were so proud... two years in a row I won an award for academic excellence, and they were telling all their friends."

Despite their own academic journeys, they recognised her success as particularly significant,



"I was kind of shocked by that because my older son was in university at the time, and my daughter was doing her Leaving Cert and then went to university as well. So they were already in that environment, but they still saw my achievement as a big deal."

The programme also created new spaces for discussion and intellectual exchange within families. SP5LA112 spoke about how academic exchanges she had with her daughter, who was studying law, enriched their relationship,



"My assignment was on repeal the 8th, but obviously it came from like a community perspective, and [names daughter] was doing law. So hers came from a legal perspective. So like, there was a lot of comparisons there, so that was lovely."

This cross-disciplinary discussion enriched their studies and deepened their familial connection. For some, education also opened up new conversations that had previously been avoided within their families. SP4SE12 recalled discussions with her elderly aunts on topics like gender and trans issues,



"I was talking about gender recently, and trans issues, and they were like, 'We don't get what it's all about.' But by the end of it, they were saying, 'Oh yeah, that makes a bit of sense.'"

Even previously taboo topics, like menopause, became part of everyday family discussions,



"They never would have spoken about it before, but now they do."

The impact of education extended beyond the home and into casual, everyday interactions. Many participants naturally shared their learning experiences with their broader communities, leading to greater visibility and interest in lifelong learning. SP3RY123 described how her education became a regular part of her interactions with friends, neighbours and even strangers:



"Friends, neighbours, family, and the woman at the shops, more or less, when you're on the way home from the course. 'Where were you?' 'Well, I was doing this course.' And the feedback that I was getting from anyone ... 'Oh, wow! How are you able to do that?'"

She used these moments to explain the outreach programme, encouraging them to consider pursuing the course. Similarly, SP1AE121 echoed this, actively encouraging others to take part:



"I encouraged others to come along and do the tasters. I know of two that did it and went on the full way. Just by encouraging them and telling them what I got from it."

Encouragement was not always about formal discussions and grand gestures but often found in the simplest acts and smallest moments of support. SP6CL113 emphasised the value of small affirmations:



"I always encourage, and I always—even something as simple as complimenting a woman, you know, her hair or her dress, or whatever... The joy it brings. And that's a very simple thing of supporting and acknowledging somebody."

For some, overcoming self-doubt and stepping into an educational space was a courageous act, and having this recognised by others reinforced their sense of belonging. SP1CA123 reflected on how a friend acknowledged her courage in returning to education:



"It takes a great deal of courage to actually come to a place that you don't feel that you belong, to actually walk in the door."

She also found that her past influences, such as listening to feminist voices on the radio growing up, had unknowingly shaped her path to women's studies:



"Growing up, we'd listen to a lot of the radio in our house, with Olivia O'Leary and Nell McCafferty, and all of those women. I just remember being very interested in it all... but I didn't necessarily realise it until I did the women's studies program."

## Community Response and Wider Impact

The outreach programme has had a profound impact on participants, not just at an individual level but also within their communities. Many participants described how their engagement with education and outreach led to increased involvement in community activities, activism, and volunteer work. Their experiences highlight the programme's role in expanding access to education, creating support networks and fostering a culture of shared learning and empowerment.

Several participants reflected on how their education journeys allowed them to better support others in their communities. SP6ME111, who works in a women's organisation, spoke about the knock-on effect of her own learning:



"Most of the women that come to us are looking for support, and I've been able to guide them because I've been through it myself."

She emphasised the invaluable nature of shared experiences, stating that, "you can't buy that kind of support." Similarly, SP2SN111 shared how her studies in gender and politics had transformed her engagement in family and community discussions:



"We have fantastic conversations about current topics, politics, and feminism. It's had a huge influence on me and my little family."

Participants also described feeling more empowered to contribute to local initiatives and engage in volunteer work as a result of the programme. SP4CL112 expressed how her newfound confidence had motivated her to give back:



"It definitely makes you a better person in the community. It really does. I'm going to try to do some voluntary work. I've applied to the Hospice. And because I am a good listener and kind of a caring type person, I'll probably go down that road now."

She credited key community members for their support, adding: "SP5SD113, Aideen was just amazing, and I'm very grateful for that."

For others, community involvement was something that continued across generations. SP1RA112 reflected on her long-term participation in community activities:



"I was involved in the local football club when the kids were younger, cause they played football. And so I still do get involved in the local community. I've got grandkids now, so I thought it was finished. Well, but I'm back on it for them. But I suppose it just keeps coming around, doesn't it?"

The outreach programme also fostered greater civic engagement and advocacy, with some participants receiving unexpected recognition for their voluntary work. SP1AL113 shared an anecdote about how her behind-the-scenes contributions to the community were acknowledged,



"It turned out one of the judges, which is quite funny, knew me from when I worked years ago... And I helped her daughter at one stage as well. So she knew that I actually do behind-the-scenes help people when I can."

Participants also highlighted the importance of accessible education and their role in encouraging other women to participate. SP2HR113 described how she actively promoted outreach education



"But certainly in terms of anyone who could access education through an outreach programme that wouldn't have considered they could, then I have a hundred percent encouraged people to participate in it."

She noted that once participants joined the programme, they formed strong support networks, describing them as a "family of women." However, participants also emphasised that access alone is not enough support structures are critical to success. SP4PE111 reflected on this reality,



"...it's not just a matter of going to college. There's so many supports that are needed when there isn't a history of going to college with kids."

Many participants took an active role in promoting educational opportunities within their networks. SP2BE121 spoke about her role in advocating for outreach education among women in her local group:



"If I'm talking to other women, if I know that they have capacity, that they'd enjoy it, I'll tell them about it. I'm part of a women's group on a Tuesday night, but a lot of those women are older and a bit too entrenched, and they're not that interested in going back to study. But they do take part in the WCI stuff because I get the communication, I bring down the brochures, and they attend those."

Similarly, SP2MT123 shared her pride in encouraging others to participate in outreach education:



"When we used to have conferences and go down to Áras Chrónáin, I would talk to women that would never, like, even be in my sphere, about women's studies outreach. And a lot of them actually came on board, which I am so proud of."

The programme's impact also extended to health and well-being, with some participants highlighting how education acted as a form of social support. SP7PB121 described how social prescribing—referring individuals to non-medical, community-based supports—helped many participants



"As part of our work, and doctors do it as well now, we do social prescriptions. So, we're doing so. I've sent loads here up the road. There's the brochure. Look! And someone who was a client actually took part in the course. Because as soon as she walked in the door, I just saw it over her head, do you know what I mean? And got her to come to the classes, build up her confidence, and then she went down to do it."

She emphasised how community engagement was often more beneficial than medical intervention



"They kind of go, 'This is what I needed. I didn't need antidepressants. I really didn't. I just needed to be in the company of women again, to build up confidence.'"



The outreach programme also inspired participants to become more involved in activism and community conversations. SP3JE122 described how her educational journey influenced her community,



“My friends in the community are the same... they come to events with me, and the conversation starts. They’re delighted. They bring their daughters or sons, and so on.”

However, not all responses to their education were positive. SP1AY122 acknowledged that some women were resistant to supporting one another,



“I know I said earlier there was some negativity... not all women are rooting for women. I was quite shocked at that.”

Despite this, she remained focused on the broader trend of lifelong learning



“We’re of an age now where a lot of women have a renaissance, retrain, re-study, and change route. It’s nice to be one of those people on that train.”

Some participants were curious about how younger generations perceive community roles and gender dynamics. SP6CL113 posed a reflective question about shifting societal expectations,



“I would love to know where women, 20 years or 30 years my junior, how they feel about their role in the community, how they feel about patriarchy and everything else. Do they feel it’s shifted and changed a lot or not?”

SP2EE122 reflected on changing educational landscapes:



“Back in the early nineties, I was aware that going to college was a privilege, because a lot of my friends didn’t... now, I see that shift in my own sons and their friends, as they navigate different paths, and education isn’t just a one-time thing anymore.”

## Conclusion

The Women, Gender, and Social Justice Outreach Programme had a profound and far-reaching impact, extending well beyond individual participants to influence families, strengthen communities and foster civic engagement. By challenging traditional views on education, gender roles and personal growth, the programme created a culture of lifelong learning and empowerment, inspiring participants to encourage others - within their families, friendship circles and broader networks - to pursue education and community involvement.

Across all focus groups, participants shared how their return to education reshaped family attitudes toward learning. Many demonstrated that education is not a linear path, inspiring their children and family members to view learning as an ongoing journey rather than a one-time achievement. As a result, many children of participants pursued higher education or returned to learning, having witnessed their parents' perseverance.

For some, education became an expectation in their households rather than an optional pursuit, fundamentally shifting how younger generations viewed opportunities for personal and academic development. Parents studying alongside their children formed unique educational bonds, strengthening relationships and fostering shared intellectual growth. Encouragement from family members also played a crucial role in participants' persistence, boosting their confidence and reinforcing their sense of self-worth and determination.

The programme extended beyond individual achievement, fostering meaningful intergenerational and cross-generational discussions. Participants engaged in dialogues with their children, parents and extended family members on topics that had previously been unspoken or taboo, such as gender identity, feminism and social justice. Through these exchanges, participants bridged generational gaps, broadened family perspectives and challenged preconceived beliefs.

For many, education became a means of breaking cycles of disadvantage, helping their children and relatives understand that there are multiple pathways to success. The programme provided a model of resilience, with participants demonstrating that learning can happen at any stage of life and that persistence in education leads to transformation not just for individuals but for entire families.

The ripple effect of the outreach programme extended beyond the home, fostering greater community participation, civic engagement and volunteerism. Many participants actively encouraged friends, neighbours and community members to explore educational opportunities, whether through direct mentorship, informal conversations or structured outreach efforts.

Participants also leveraged their experiences to guide other women who were seeking education, personal development or social support. The programme fostered a strong sense of belonging, with participants becoming more active in volunteering, social initiatives and advocacy. Many felt a renewed sense of responsibility to uplift others, using their own educational journeys to help break down barriers and make education more accessible to those who might not have otherwise considered it.

The programme also played a role in strengthening social cohesion, with many participants noting that their involvement in learning encouraged broader discussions on evolving gender roles, shifting educational access and changing perceptions of lifelong learning. Participants described how their engagement in learning created stronger community connections, increased their confidence and positioned them as trusted voices in civic and social spaces.

For some, participation in education had a direct impact on mental health and well-being, with many highlighting that community engagement and knowledge-building provided a sense of purpose and belonging that was often more impactful than traditional medical interventions. The ability to engage in structured learning, participate in discussions and contribute to community conversations helped participants develop resilience, agency and a stronger sense of self.

While the programme empowered individuals and strengthened social networks, participants also identified challenges that remained, particularly in terms of educational access, systemic support and recognition for community-based contributions. Many participants successfully influenced their families and communities, yet some faced obstacles in encouraging children with academic struggles, highlighting the need for stronger educational support systems and community resources.

Similarly, while the programme encouraged civic engagement, participants acknowledged that systemic barriers still exist in translating community activism into formal policy influence. These reflections underscore the need for continued investment in outreach education, accessible learning pathways, and institutional recognition of community-driven educational initiatives.

The Women, Gender and Social Justice Outreach Programme was not just an academic experience. It was a catalyst for lifelong transformation, both within families and in the broader community. By fostering a culture of empowerment, shared learning and social responsibility, the programme demonstrated the power of education to create meaningful and lasting change.

Participants emerged not only with enhanced knowledge and self-confidence but also with a renewed commitment to advocating for education, supporting others and challenging systemic barriers. The impact of the programme will continue to resonate, shaping future generations and reinforcing the importance of accessible education as a tool for both personal and societal transformation.

## FINAL CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Women, Gender and Social Justice Outreach Programme has been a transformative educational initiative, equipping participants with the confidence, skills and critical consciousness to navigate personal, academic and professional challenges while fostering broader social change. Rooted in feminist pedagogy and community engagement, the programme provided accessible, structured learning opportunities that empowered participants to challenge societal conditioning, advocate for themselves and others and contribute meaningfully to their families and communities.

The findings align with the theoretical foundations of transformative pedagogy and university-community partnerships (UCPs). According to the literature, UCPs are designed to bridge the gap between academia and communities, ensuring that learning is co-produced, inclusive and socially impactful (Curwood et al., 2011; Strier, 2014). The outreach programme embodies these principles by prioritising collaborative learning, participatory research and feminist knowledge production, which aligns with the egalitarian research principles that seek to unsettle epistemic privilege and democratise access to knowledge (Ackerly & True, 2020; Hacker, 2013).

**The programme's impact was multidimensional, spanning four key areas:**

### 1. Personal Transformation and Academic Empowerment

- a. Participants gained self-confidence, developed critical thinking skills and overcame long-standing self-doubt about their academic abilities.
- b. The programme fostered resilience, with many participants continuing to pursue higher education or leadership roles in community initiatives.
- c. Learning was not passive knowledge acquisition but an active, self-actualising process, consistent with Freire's (1970) pedagogy of liberation, which frames education as a tool for self-determination and collective empowerment.

### 2. Reframing Beliefs and Expanding Worldviews

- a. Exposure to new perspectives, historical contexts and feminist discourse led to a reassessment of personal and societal beliefs.
- b. Many participants described their learning experience as an "awakening," enabling them to challenge oppressive structures and reframe personal experiences within a broader social justice context.
- c. The programme created a space where previously unspoken topics, such as gender identity, reproductive rights and intersectional feminism were openly discussed, facilitating critical dialogue within families and communities.

### 3. Strengthening Families and Community Networks

- a. Participants inspired their children, spouses and extended networks to value education as a lifelong, non-linear journey rather than a one-time achievement.
- b. Education became an expectation rather than an option in some households, breaking cycles of educational disadvantage and shifting intergenerational attitudes toward learning.
- c. Participants actively encouraged and mentored others, fostering a ripple effect that extended the benefits of the programme beyond individual participants to broader social networks.

### 4. Fostering Civic Engagement and Social Change

- a. Many participants became more involved in advocacy, volunteer work and community-led initiatives, using their knowledge and confidence to engage in civic discussions and policy debates.
- b. Some translated their learning into activism, social prescribing and support work - particularly in women's organisations, educational outreach and community development.

- c. The programme demonstrated that education is not just about personal advancement but is a tool for collective liberation and systemic change, reinforcing its alignment with UCP models that prioritise co-produced knowledge and participatory action (Gaffikin & Morrissey, 2008; Strier & Shechter, 2015).

While the programme was successful in fostering personal and social transformation, systemic barriers persist - including limited career progression opportunities, the undervaluation of voluntary work and a lack of formal recognition for community-based learning. These challenges underscore the need for stronger institutional frameworks to ensure that the benefits of outreach education translate into tangible, long-term impact.

## Recommendations

The evaluation of the Women, Gender and Social Justice Community/University Outreach Programme has demonstrated its profound and lasting impact on participants, families and communities. The programme has transformed learners' confidence, expanded access to education and strengthened civic and activist engagement while also highlighting systemic barriers to sustainability, institutional recognition and long-term financial support. To address these challenges, a multi-tiered approach is required - one that secures institutional stability, funding resilience and policy integration while reinforcing the programme's feminist, community-led foundations.

These recommendations directly respond to the findings of the evaluation, ensuring that the transformative potential of outreach education is not only preserved but also expanded. By engaging multiple stakeholders, the programme can continue to break down barriers to education and build pathways for lifelong learning, leadership and social change. Ensuring dedicated funding, structural support and policy advocacy will be critical to embedding community-based feminist education within higher education learning systems. Strengthening learner participation, community partnerships and institutional commitments will allow the programme to remain a powerful force for empowerment, collective knowledge production and systemic change.

### Supporting Learners and Creating a Student-Centred Model

**Rationale:** Ensuring students remain at the centre of the outreach programme, additional efforts are needed to enhance learner support, improve financial access and create student-led initiatives

#### Recommendations:

- i. Ensure that student voices remain central to programme development, incorporating learner feedback into curriculum design, support services and policy recommendations.
- ii. Strengthen peer mentorship and learner-led initiatives, creating student networks that provide ongoing support beyond the classroom.
- iii. Strengthen flexible learning options, including blended learning formats, childcare support and tailored accessibility measures, accommodating diverse learner needs.
- iv. Expand financial and academic support structures, including tuition assistance, peer mentorship programmes and access to university services, ensuring that students can fully engage with learning without financial or logistical barriers.

### Institutionalising Outreach Education and Strengthening Educational Pathways

**Rationale:** To ensure the long-term viability of the outreach programme, it is critical to embed it within higher education structures, ensuring that community-based learning is formally recognised and valued. Currently, the programme relies on the commitment of a small number of individuals within the University context, making it vulnerable to institutional level change and weakening its long-term sustainability. In addition, the long-term success of the outreach programme depends on policy recognition and structural support at national and local levels.

Currently, community-based higher education models are often overlooked in mainstream education policies, limiting their sustainability and growth.

#### **Recommendations:**

- i. Reduce over-reliance on individual staff members by creating dedicated funding and targeted programme supports within UCD, ensuring institutional responsibility for programme sustainability.
- ii. Promote and activate the pathways (existing and new) from community education to further and higher education through the guaranteed provision of wraparound supports including childcare, laptop loan scheme, one to one mentoring, grant and funding workshops.
- iii. Clearly present information on access and progression pathways and disseminate through a range of multimedia formats to local communities.
- iv. Ensure voices from the community education sector, including the Women's Collective Ireland, are included in the development of mainstream policies.
- v. Advocate for the formal recognition of voluntary, community-based work and non-traditional learning pathways, ensuring that such experience translates into employment and leadership opportunities.

#### **Funding and Resource Allocation for Sustainability**

**Rationale:** Sustaining and expanding the outreach programme requires a diversified funding approach that ensures financial resources are available for students, staff and community learning spaces. Investing in community education settings, located in the heart of the communities with bespoke wraparound supports, is required to augment the demonstrated benefits of engaging in community education and to deliver positive outcomes for policy areas such as social inclusion, health and wellbeing, child poverty and progression to paid or improved employment.

#### **Recommendations:**

- vi. Work with the Higher Education Authority and relevant government departments to secure long-term state funding, recognising the unique role of feminist, adult outreach education in widening participation.
- vii. Ensure student grants are accessible to those taking courses on a part - time basis in the Further Education/ Higher Education sector.
- viii. Add the level 7 Certificate in Women Gender & Social Justice to the existing suite of programmes currently listed under the Student Part-Time Fee Scheme for Specified Undergraduate Courses.  
(Susi Grant Scheme) [www.susi.ie/funding-for-part-time-undergraduate-courses/](http://www.susi.ie/funding-for-part-time-undergraduate-courses/)
- ix. Develop a funding model for women's community education programmes that offers multi annual funding to ensure it covers the provision of core facilities and resources, and wraparound support.
- x. Ensure funding to enable the recruitment and retention of experienced staff on contractual terms that can support consistent and expanded delivery of effective programmes to women in our community.
- xi. Make provision for free childcare for women participating in community education through a voucher system and or local arrangement to enable them to engage in community education and for their children to access and benefit from the early years curriculum.
- xii. Invest in women's community education settings and the expertise of the staff teams through the provision of continuing professional development opportunities for staff.

#### **Expanding Access, Participation and Community Engagement**

**Rationale:** To increase participation and ensure that outreach education remains accessible to diverse learners, it is important to expand student engagement while maintaining the programme's community-centred model.

## Recommendations:

- xiii. Expand access to the level 7 Women Gender and Social Justice Outreach programme through the existing partnership and infrastructure of the Women's Collective Ireland.
- xiv. Maintain and strengthen the community centre-based model, ensuring that learning environments remain holistic, feminist and accessible to diverse groups.
- xv. Expand pre-university preparation programmes, funded through ETBs, ensuring that community learners are adequately supported before transitioning to higher education.
- xvi. Expand the number of students and the diversity of cohorts, ensuring more marginalised communities have access to learning spaces.
- xvii. Increase targeted outreach efforts to engage migrant communities, working-class women, caregivers and disabled students, ensuring that education is inclusive and representative.

## Final Reflection

The Women, Gender and Social Justice Community/University Outreach Programme stands as a powerful example of the transformative potential of outreach education, demonstrating how accessible, community-driven learning can reshape lives, strengthen families and contribute to broader social change. By fostering confidence, expanding worldviews and creating pathways to lifelong learning, the programme has empowered participants to navigate personal and societal challenges with resilience and agency.

However, to sustain and build on its impact, there is a critical need for ongoing investment in outreach education, stronger institutional recognition and systemic policy support. Education must be recognised not just as a means of personal advancement but as a collective tool for empowerment, liberation and structural change.

The literature on transformative pedagogy and UCPs (Curwood et al., 2011; Gaffikin & Morrissey, 2008; Strier & Shechter, 2015) reinforces that education must be participatory, inclusive and socially engaged. The success of this programme exemplifies these principles centering lived experiences, fostering mutual learning and challenging exclusionary academic structures.

Moving forward, it is imperative that higher education institutions, policymakers and community organisations work together to institutionalise, consolidate and expand outreach education, ensuring that future generations continue to benefit from the same opportunities for growth, empowerment and social change.

Ultimately, the programme has demonstrated that education is more than knowledge acquisition - it is a catalyst for transformation, solidarity and collective liberation. By continuing to invest in feminist, community-driven education, we can ensure that education remains a force for justice, equity and empowerment for all.





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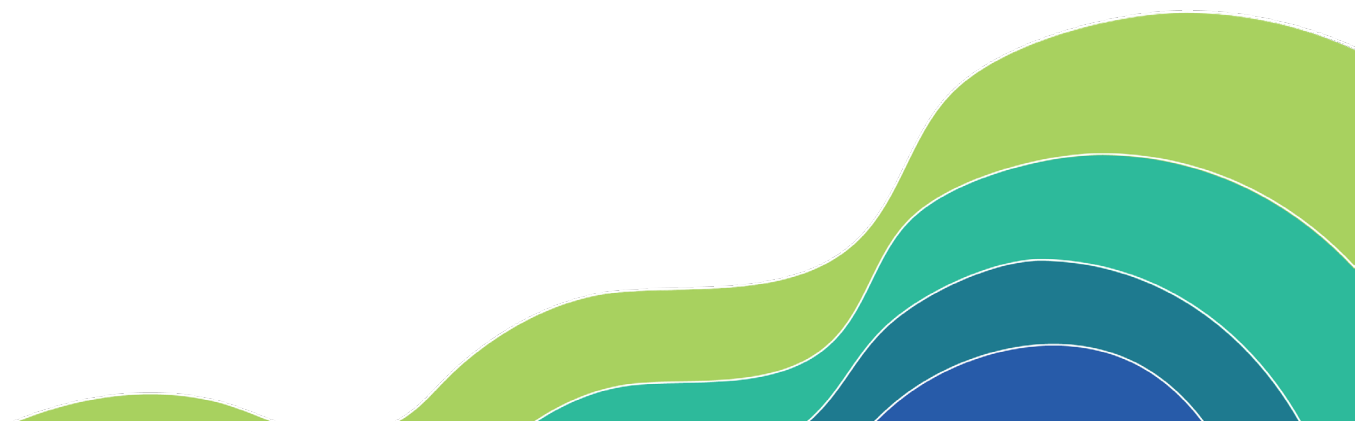
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