

Summer Skills Bulletin 2022

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Insights into the changing landscape
of female employment since the onset
of COVID-19

(Q4 2019 - Q4 2021)



1. Introduction

By the end of 2021, the number of females in employment in Ireland had reached unprecedented levels. Despite a significant decline in employment with the onset of the pandemic in 2020, female employment **grew by 93,000 in the two-year period** from quarter 4 2019 and quarter 4 2021, or 9%, to reach 1.18 million. Participation rates in the labour force were higher than ever and the growth in activity far exceeded many European countries.

While many women were severely impacted by COVID-19 in terms of initial economic outcomes, the recovery in employment in recent quarters has far exceeded expectations. There has been significant concern internationally on the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on employment outcomes for females. Many studies have examined the impact of COVID-19 on women, including areas such as increased unpaid care responsibilities (with research conducted by the World Economic Forum, Deloitte and the ILO amongst others). The focus of this Bulletin, however, is on identifying some of the potential factors relating to the increase in employment and how the profile of female employment has changed over the period from quarter 4 2019 and quarter 4 2021. This includes an analysis of the changes by sector and occupation, along with a profile by age, gender, and educational attainment and the prevalence of females availing of home working.

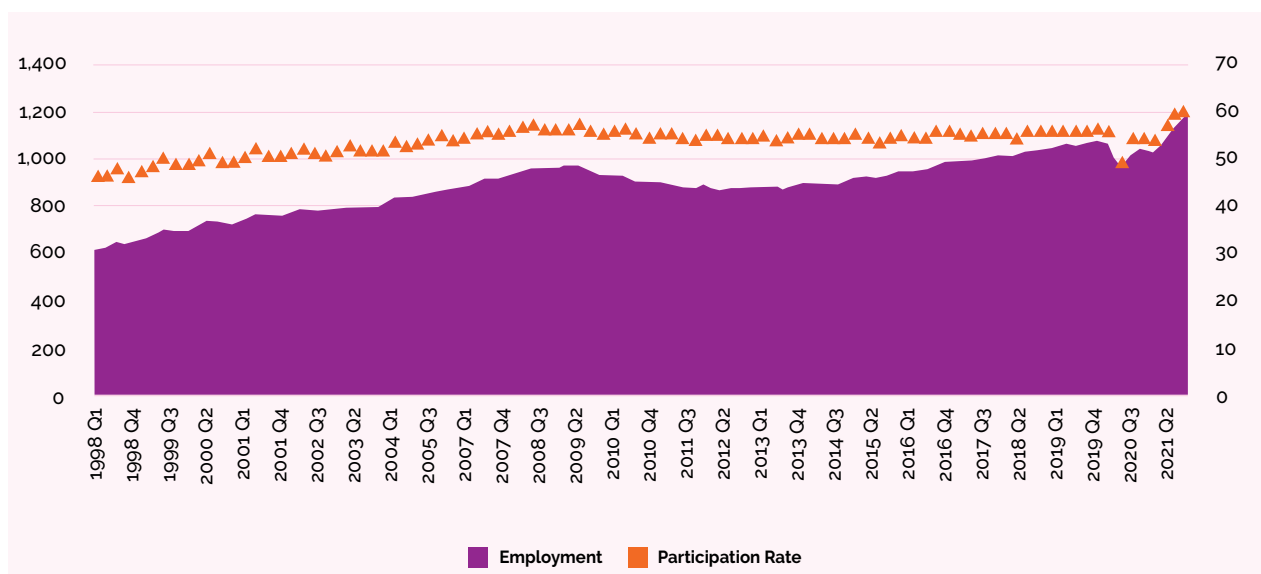
Understanding the nature, components and drivers of this increase will help to ensure that this growth is sustained as Ireland moves closer to achieving gender balance in the labour market and meeting EU targets for employment by 2030.

2. Overall change in employment and labour force participation

At the beginning of 1998, female employment stood at just over 600,000. Since then, there has been an almost doubling of employment for females, reaching 1.18 million by quarter 4 2021 (Figure 1). Over this period, steady growth in employment was observed until the impact of the financial crisis took hold in 2008. It took until 2016 for employment to return to levels seen prior to the crisis, with numbers continuing to grow through to the end of 2019. With the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, the number of females in employment fell drastically with a quarter-on-quarter fall in 2020 of over 115,000 persons. The rebound that commenced in 2021 was both welcomed and unexpected by many observers.

The female participation rate fell to 50.3% during the early COVID-19 restrictions but increased in each quarter of 2021. By quarter 4 2021, the **participation rate had reached its highest level of 60.1%**. This compares to a rate of 46.8% in quarter 1 1998.

Figure 1. Female employment (000s) and labour force participation (%) in Ireland, aged 15 years and over, Q1 1998 – Q4 2021



Source: CSO

3. Factors relating to the increase in employment for females

The increase in the number of females in employment between quarter 4 2019 and quarter 4 2021 relates to a number of factors including demographic changes as well as increased labour force participation and a related decline in the number of females engaged in home duties (i.e. not economically active).

3.1 Demographic factors

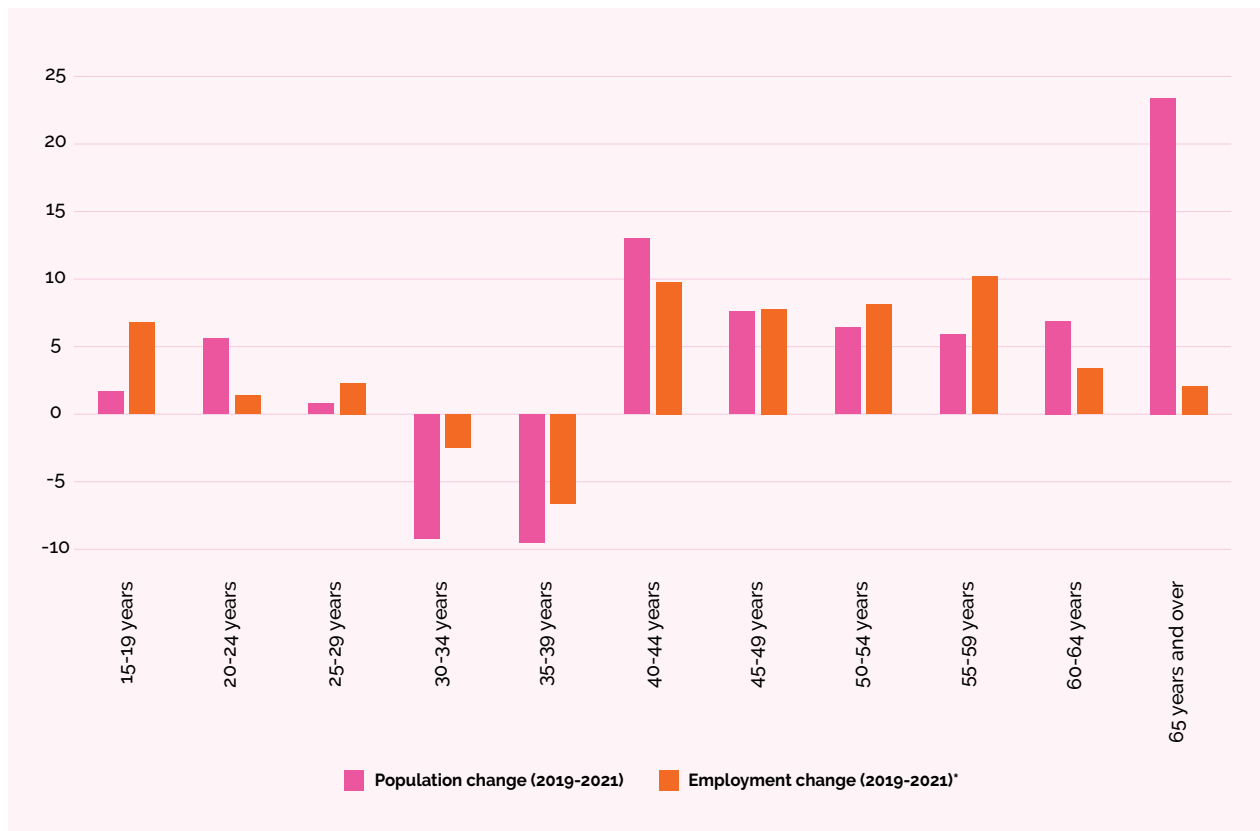
The increase in employment since 2019 can be partly explained by demographic factors. Between 2019 and 2021, there was **an increase of over 50,000 females aged 15 years and older in the population**; of these, 29,000 were of working age (i.e. 15-64 years).

In the younger age cohorts, the employment gains for 15-19-year-olds far exceeded the population gains (Figure 2), most likely related to those in part-time employment; the employment gains were small for those aged 20-24 years, with many in this cohort engaged in full-time education. It should also be noted that the employment data relates to annual averages and does not fully capture the significant recovery in the latter quarters of 2021, particularly for the younger age cohorts.

There were both population and employment declines for females aged 30-34 years and 35-39 years. Combined these age-cohorts saw a population decline of 18,700 persons. Although employment also declined for these age-cohorts, they were not to the same level, indicating a higher participation in the labour force.

Employment gains were most pronounced for those females aged 40-59 years. Those aged 40-44 years had one of the largest employment increases (at almost 10,000), although this was less than the population growth for this cohort. On the other hand, for those aged 50-54 and 55-59 years, employment gains exceeded population growth.

Figure 2. Change in female population and employment (000s) in Ireland by age group, 2019-2021



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO Population Estimates & Eurostat
*Based on annual averages

3.2 Increased labour force participation

The overall labour force participation rate for females aged 15 years and over grew from 46.6% in quarter 4 1998 to its highest level to date in quarter 4 2021 at 60.1%. Figure 3 examines the female participation rates by age group in quarter 4 1998, quarter 4 2019 and quarter 4 2021.

Over the longer term (quarter 4 1998 compared to quarter 4 2019), the gains in the participation rates were particularly noticeable for those in the older age cohorts. Each of the age cohorts between 45 and 64 years saw an increase of at least 27 percentage points over this period. On the other hand, there were declines in the participation rates for females aged 15-19 years and 20-24 years, primarily related to a higher engagement in further and higher education and training.

Between quarter 4 2019 and quarter 4 2021, despite a significant decline in employment with the onset of the pandemic in 2020, the subsequent recovery resulted in participation rates increasing across all age cohorts, with the exception of those aged 65 years and over. The largest gains over this time period were for those aged 20-24 years and 55-59 years of age with increases of 6.7 and 7.1 percentage points respectively. The increase in the participation rates for 25-34-year-olds (from 78.9% in quarter 4 2019 to 83.8% in quarter 4 2021) is particularly encouraging given that there was an overall fall in the population in this age cohort over the period (as seen previously in Figure 2).

Figure 3. Female participation rates (%) in Ireland by age group, Q4 1998, Q4 2019 & Q4 2021



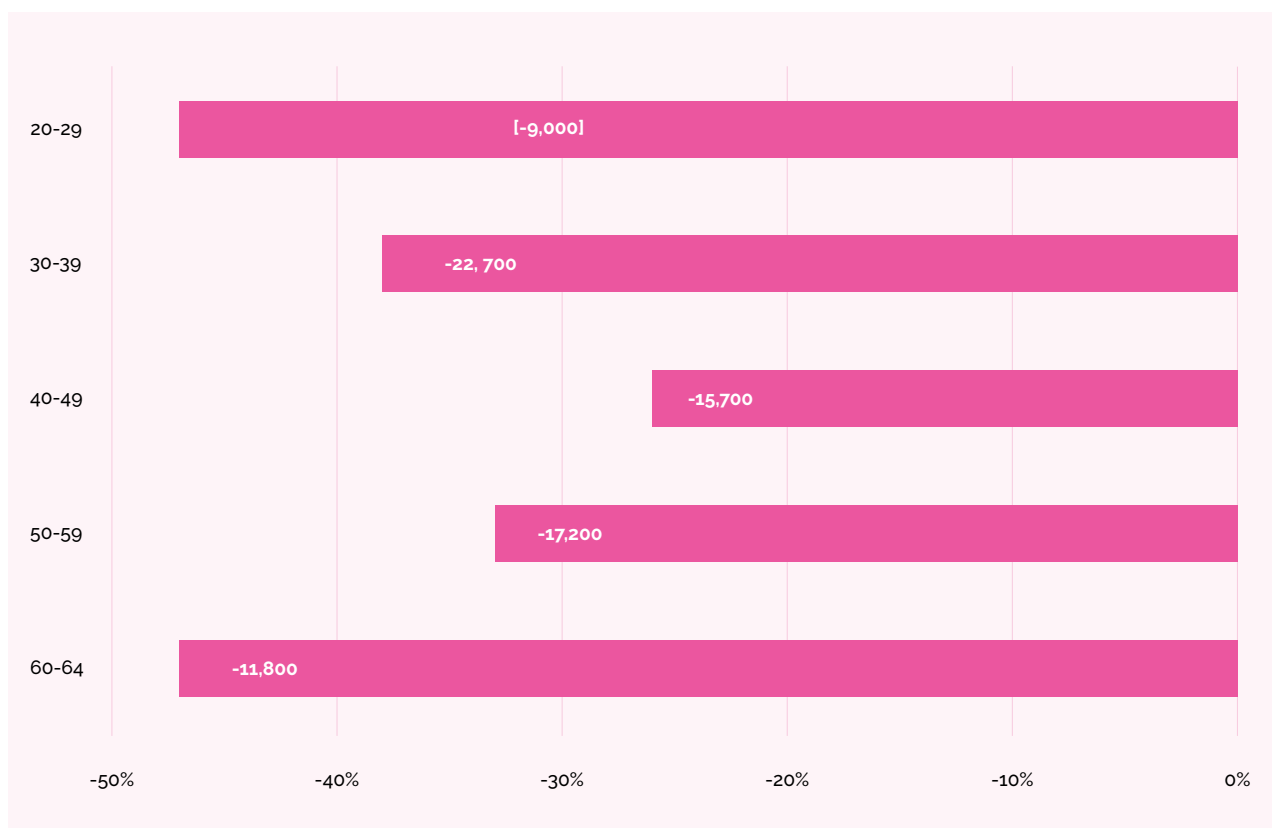
Source: CSO

3.3 Changing patterns for those on home duties (aged 20-64 years)

In quarter 4 2021, there were 139,000 females aged 20-64 years classified as not economically active and on home duties; this is a **decline of over 76,000 females in the two-year period** since quarter 4 2019. There are a number of potential reasons for this decline which go in some way to show the contribution this has made towards increases in female employment. Firstly, the **availability of remote work** may have facilitated some females to return to the workforce. A recent survey by the CSO on remote working found that 75% of respondents who were on home duties would consider a job if it could be done remotely.¹ It could also be argued that some females who may otherwise have left the workforce (e.g. for childcare reasons) may have chosen to remain in employment due to this increased flexibility. The uptake of working from home for females is examined in further detail later in the report.

Demographic factors may also have played a role in this decline. There was a fall in the number of children aged 0-9 years in the population over the two-year period, declining by almost 30,000, potentially resulting in fewer females leaving the workforce for childcare reasons. This is borne out in the data. Figure 4 illustrates that females aged 30-39 years had the largest absolute decline of 22,700 on home duties. The number of females on home duties who had children aged 5 years or younger saw the largest decline, falling by 28,000 (from 74,600 in quarter 4 2019 to 46,600 in quarter 4 2021).

Figure 4: Change in economically inactive females on home duties by age (% and 000s), Q4 2019 – Q4 2021



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO data

*Numbers in square brackets are small and should be treated with caution

1 CSO (2021). Pulse Survey - Our Lives Online: Remote Work November 2021

4. Employment changes for females, quarter 4 2019 - quarter 4 2021

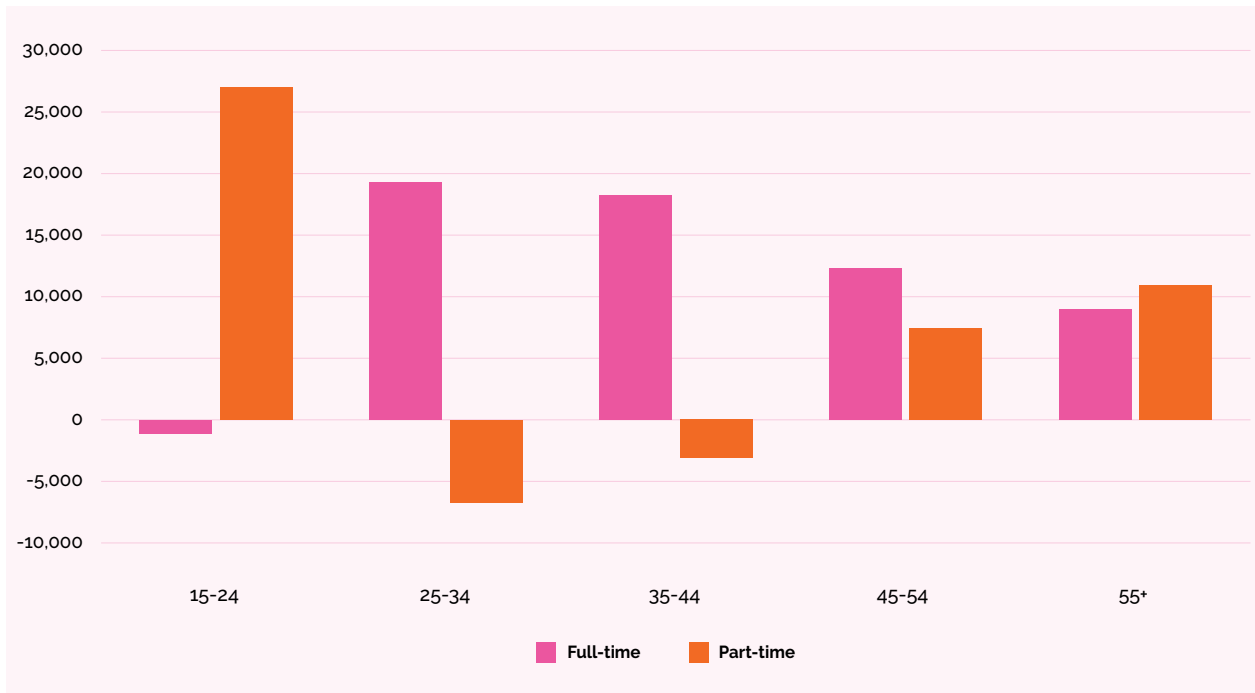
This section examines where the growth in employment for females over the two-year period occurred with an analysis of a number of variables including sector, occupation, age, education, citizenship, region and full/part-time status.

4.1 Age & full-time/part-time

Over the period quarter 4 2019 to quarter 4 2021, the **number of females in full-time employment increased by almost 58,000**, or 8%. There were increases in full-time employment across all age cohorts, except for those aged 15-24 years, with the largest increase for those aged 25-34 and 35-44 years.² Indeed, these two age-cohorts combined accounted for almost two-thirds of the total increase in full-time employment for females.

Overall, there was **an increase of 35,500 females (or 10%) in part-time employment** over the period. Females aged 15-24 years accounted for the largest increase in part-time employment; with an increase of 27,000, these females accounted for almost 30% of the total increase in employment for females over the period. Over three quarters of all females aged 15-24 years employed part-time in quarter 4 2021 were classified as students. There was declines for those aged both 25-34 and 35-44 years, the only age cohorts to experience a fall in part-time employment.

Figure 5. Change in female employment by full-time/part-time status Q4 2019 – Q4 2021



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO data

² These figures differ from the employment figures in Figure 2 as they examine the employment levels in quarter 4 of both 2019 and 2021 rather than the annual averages of each year.

4.2 Sector & full-time/part-time

The health sector accounted for the largest increases in female employment over the period between quarter 4 2019 and quarter 4 2021, with an additional 23,000 persons employed (e.g. nursing, care workers), divided equally between full-time and part-time roles. There were also increases for those employed in professional activities (e.g. accountants, bookkeepers), education (e.g. primary and secondary teachers), industry and the IT sector (e.g. IT professionals).

For both the agriculture and accommodation & food sectors, the increases in part-time employment almost off-set the declines in full-time employment. For those employed in arts/entertainment, wholesale/retail, and administrative services (e.g. cleaners), there were declines in employment for both full-time and part-time roles.

Figure 6. Change in female employment by full-time/part-time status and sector, Q4 2019 – Q4 2021



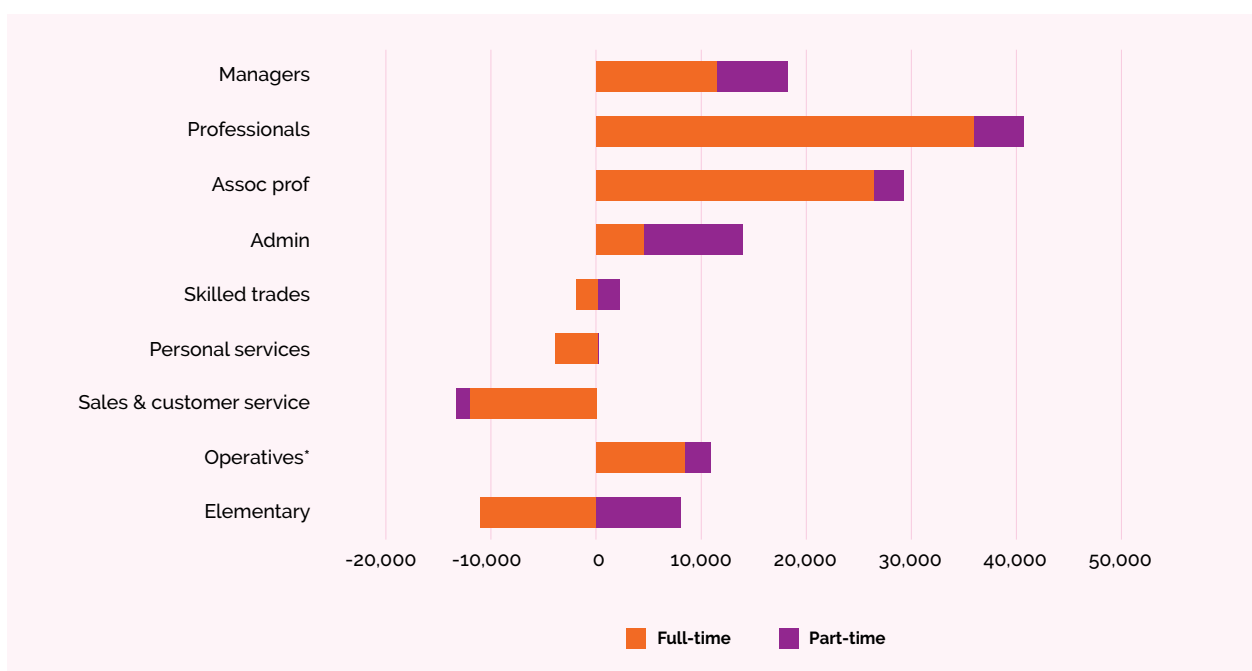
Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO data

*Numbers in part-time employment in IT were too small to report; other sectors with asterisks relate to small numbers and should be treated with caution

4.3 Occupation & full-time/part-time

Females employed in professional roles saw the largest gains in employment numbers between quarter 4 2019 and quarter 4 2021, increasing by over 40,000, primarily related to full-time roles (Figure 7). This was mostly driven by sectors such as health, professional activities, education and IT with growth in occupations such as nurses, accountants, teachers and IT professionals. Females employed in associate professional and managerial roles also saw significant increases over this period. The increases in part-time employment in elementary occupations partly offset declines in full-time employment (e.g. cleaners). For those in sales and customer service occupations (e.g. sales assistants), there were declines in both full-time and part-time employment.

Figure 7. Change in female employment by full-time/part-time status and sector, Q4 2019 – Q4 2021



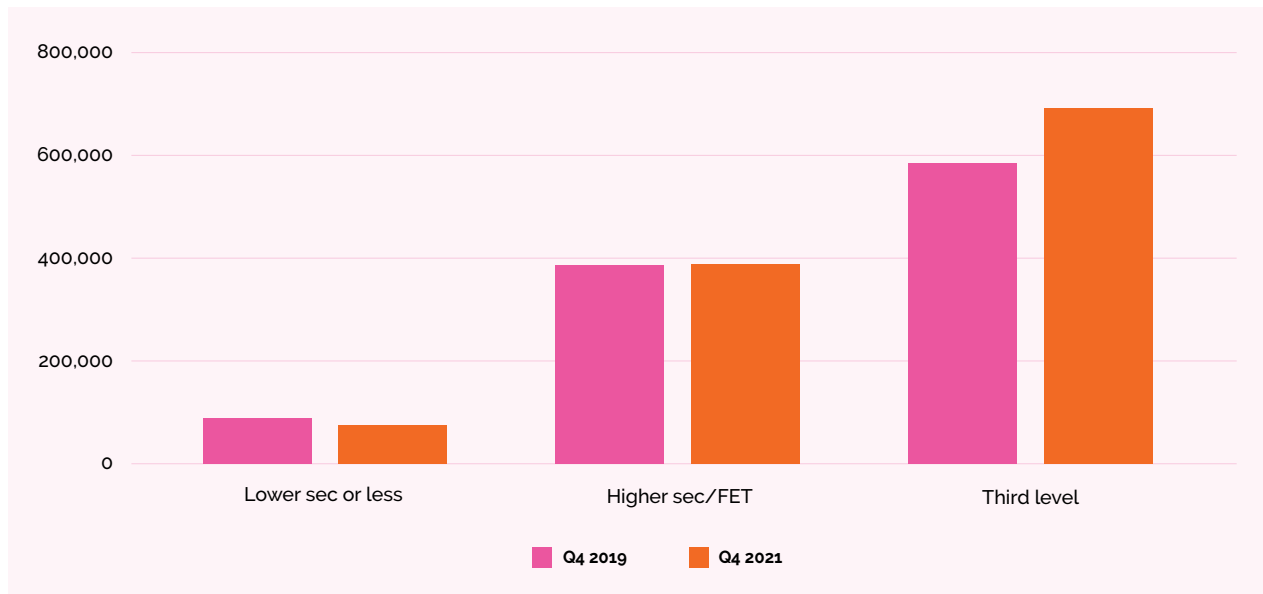
Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO data

*Number of part-time operatives is small and should be treated with caution

4.4 Education level

Overall, those with third-level qualifications accounted for almost all gains in female employment between quarter 4 2019 and quarter 4 2021, with an increase of 108,000 persons. Only small increases occurred for those with higher secondary/FET qualifications and the number of females employed with lower-secondary education declined by almost 13,000 (Figure 8). Those aged 55 years and over accounted for the majority of the decline of those with lower-secondary education or less in employment reflecting a general shift towards greater educational attainment in Ireland, particularly amongst the younger cohorts.

Figure 8. Female employment by education level, Q4 2019 – Q4 2021

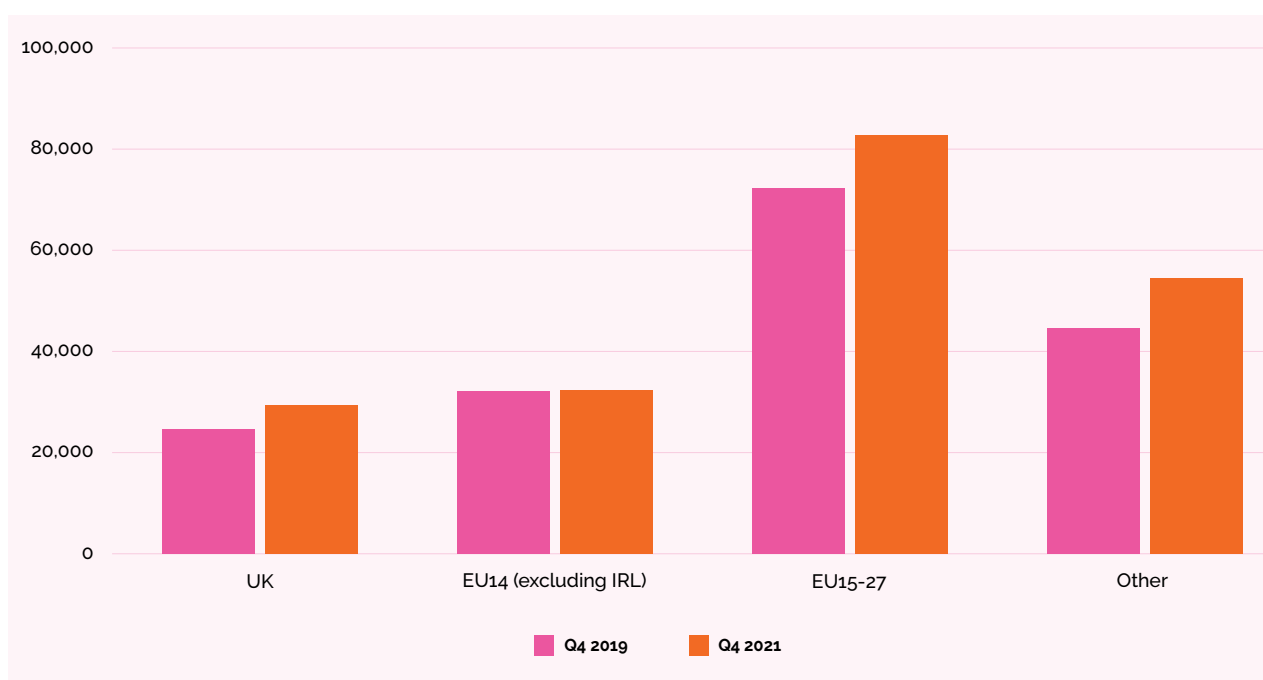


Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO data *
Excludes not stated

4.5 Citizenship

The number of females with Irish citizenship in employment increased by 7% (or 68,000 persons) over the period quarter 4 2019 to quarter 4 2021. There was **an increase of 25,000 females who were non-Irish citizens in employment** over this period, representing an increase of 15%. As such, non-Irish females accounted for more than a quarter of the overall employment increase. Female employment grew by 10,000 persons for both those from EU 15-27 countries and outside of the EU (and the UK) over the period (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Non-Irish female employment by citizenship, Q4 2019 – Q4 2021



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO data

4.6 Region of employment

The number of females in employment increased across all regions, albeit at different rates. The largest relative increase in female employment over the period quarter 4 2019 and quarter 4 2021 was for the Midland region (an increase of 20%) followed by the Mid-West region, rising by 13.6%. In absolute terms, the largest increase was for the Dublin region with an additional 26,700 females employed. The West, Border and South-West regions experienced the lowest relative increases over the period, at between 4% and 6%.

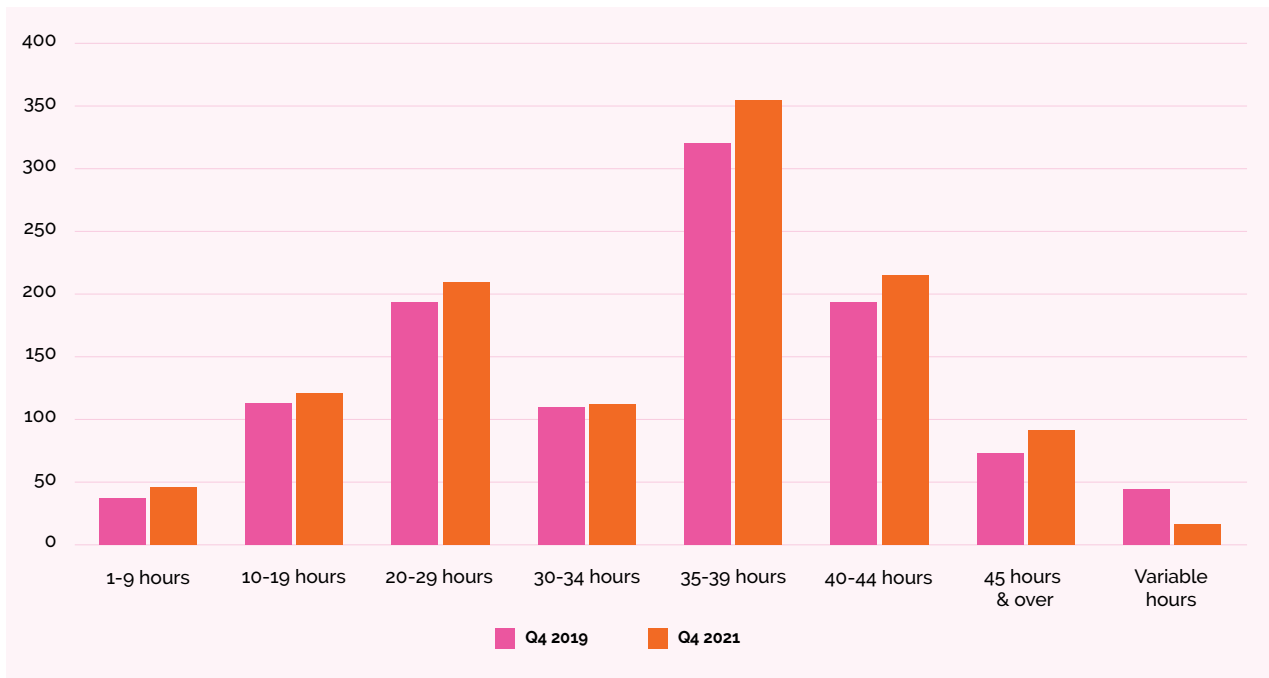
Figure 10: Change in female employment by region (%), Q4 2019 – Q4 2021



4.7 Average hours worked

With the growth in the number of females in employment, particularly for full-time roles, the usual hours of work for females also rose. Between quarter 4 2019 and quarter 4 2021, the number of females employed in each of the categories in Figure 11 grew. The largest increase over the two-year period was in the number of females in employment usually working 35-39 hours, with an additional 34,000 persons.

Figure 11: Number of females in employment (000s) by usual hours of work per week, Q4 2019 – Q4 2021

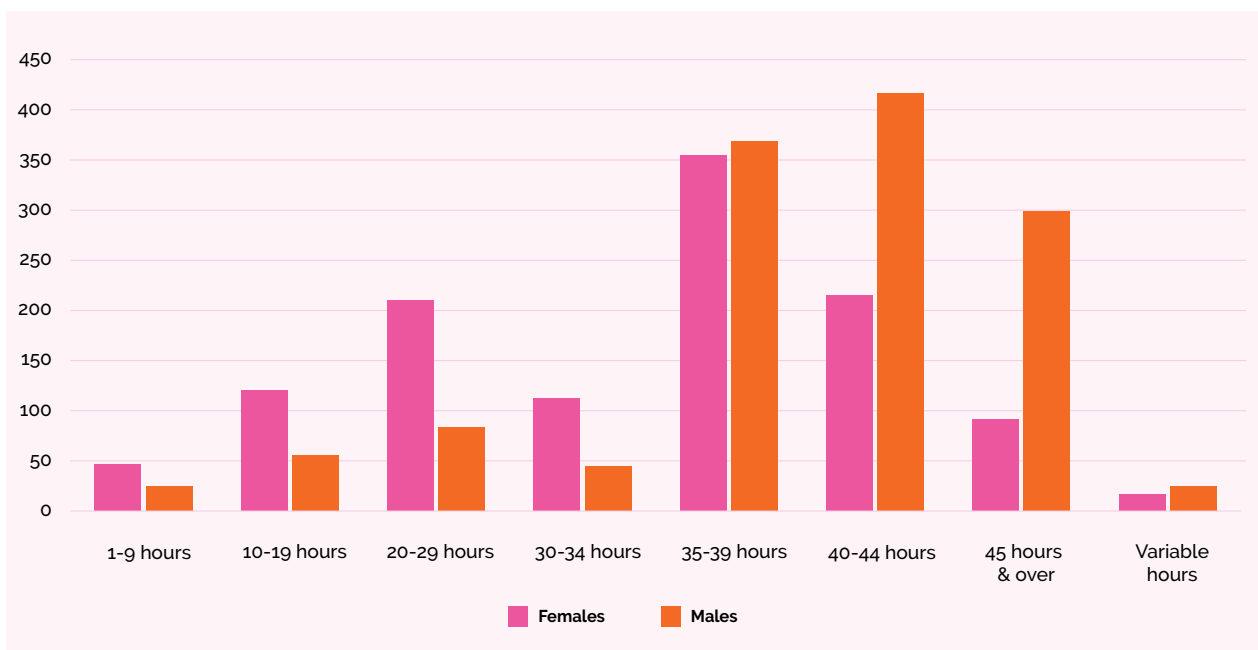


Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO data

* Persons for whom no usual hours of work are available are included in the 'Variable' hours category.

It is still the case, however, that in the main, females are more likely to work shorter hours per week when compared to their male counterparts. However, the number of females and males working 35-39 hours is broadly similar (with an additional 14,400 males employed in this category compared to females). Males are more likely to be employed in roles in which they are usually working 40+ hours per week (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Number in employment (000s) by usual hours of work per week and by gender, Q4 2021



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO data

* Persons for whom no usual hours of work are available are included in the 'Variable' hours category.

4.8 Home working

There were **340,000 females in employment usually engaged in home working in quarter 4 2021**, accounting for 29% of total female employment. This compares to a total of 77,000 in quarter 4 2019, or 7% of the female workforce, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and 310,000 in quarter 4 2020. The professional activities sector accounted for the highest number of females availing of home working and also for the largest increase in females availing of home working since quarter 4 2020. The sectors with the largest number of females availing of home working were, for the most part, those that have also seen significant increases in female employment since quarter 4 2019, such as professional activities, IT and public admin and defence (PAD). This may signal that the availability of home working may have contributed in some way to the increase in female employment.

In addition, females in employment who were usually working from home in quarter 4 2021 were primarily in high skilled roles and held third level qualifications, in line with previous research in this area undertaken by the SLMRU.³

Figure 13: Number of females in employment (000s) usually availing of homeworking by selected sectors, Q4 2020 & Q4 2021



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO data

* Excludes sectors where the numbers usually home working were too small to report

5. Summary

The significant increase in female employment and the growth in the labour force participation rate for females is encouraging, particularly in light of how COVID-19 has disrupted the economy in recent years. Demographic factors played a key role in the increase, both in terms of an increase in the number of females of working age and potentially fewer females with childcare responsibilities (a contributing factor to the fall in the number of females classified as on home duties). The increased uptake of working from home, even since 2020, points to another potential factor in both encouraging those who would have otherwise left the workforce to remain and also enticing females outside of the workforce to return. Again, to note that the sectors with the largest increase in the number of females working from home were also the sectors that have seen the largest growth.

Overall, young females accounted for a significant share of the growth in part-time employment, with many in these roles also classified as students. However, the change in part-time employment varied across sectors and occupations with declines in roles such as cleaners. Whether those who left part-time roles gained full-time employment or indeed moved to part-time employment in other sectors is unknown.

Those with third-level qualifications accounted for almost all gains in female employment, with the largest share of employment growth for high skilled roles. In order to ensure that this growth in employment for females is sustained, it will be imperative to ensure all females, including those with lower levels of educational attainment, have the key skills (including digital skills) to continue to access opportunities in the labour market. For some, this may involve upskilling in areas of employment growth and to encourage more females to enter into roles more traditionally associated with males (such as engineering and construction).

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