

Ministers Speeches



ADDRESS BY SÉAMUS BRENNAN T.D.

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TO

WELLA INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY LUNCHEON

THE CONRAD HOTEL, DUBLIN

TUESDAY, 8TH MARCH 2004

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Today is an occasion for celebration and for recognition. We gather to join in the global celebration of International Women's Day. It is an opportunity to salute the contribution, here in Ireland and around the world, of ordinary women as makers and shapers of history.

As you know, International Women's Day had its origins in the turbulent years of the beginning of the 20th Century. Campaigners at the start of the last century were not looking for anything we'd consider revolutionary - just the right to vote, the right to work and underpinning these rights, the right to a full education.

Today, also affords us the opportunity at this particular function to recognise and acknowledge the vital role organisations like An Cosán play in providing educational opportunities for women in disadvantaged areas. An Cosán is the home of The Shanty Educational Project that began almost two decades ago as a single course for women living in Tallaght West, one of the most disadvantaged areas in the country. It began in the home of two remarkable women, the founders of the organisation: Dr. Ann Louise Gilligan and Dr. Katherine Zappone.

An Cosán means ***the path***. And through the vision and determination of these two women, and the many others who over the years have contributed their expertise and support, a path to learning, leadership and enterprise has opened up that has enriched the lives of many, many women.

I want to salute that achievement and assure you, as has been evident in the past, of the continued support of the Government.

Today we stand in the doorway of the 21st Century. It is a good time for us here in Ireland to look back at what has been achieved by women and for women. However, the past is not our potential. It is now time to look forward to the opportunities, and challenges, that lie ahead.

I think it is fair to say that in Ireland the gender equality landscape has altered for the better in recent years. Women, rightly, now have many more legal entitlements and protections - equal pay for equal work, maternity legislation and so on. Women can aim for, and expect to achieve, top jobs that were formerly the preserve of males.

In the professions, business, the arts and many other areas, the consistently increasing representation of women is impressive:

- at the end of last year women comprised 33% of the membership of State boards;
- twenty of the top 50 Irish companies have women directors, according to surveys;
- the number of women in the judiciary, from Supreme Court to District Court, continues to increase.

In my own profession of politics, women, for whatever reason, are not featuring to the extent we would all like to see. There are exceptions, of course.

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We now have our second successive woman President. The European Elections last year saw the number of women candidates increase, as did the number of women elected. There has been progress, but there remains a need for increased representation of women at national political level. The reality is that 51% of the population are women, but just 13% of TD's are women.

If you compare the numbers of women climbing the ladder in business and the professions generally with the numbers for those that are prominent in politics, you could reach any number of conclusions. The one that my four daughters have reached is simply that women are too smart to bother with the world of politics.

Margaret Thatcher had, as one would expect, fairly forthright views on gender influence in politics: "In politics, if you want anything said, ask a man. If you want anything done, ask a woman".

As Minister for Social Affairs, my Department has a pivotal role to play in looking after the welfare of women. I am talking of women who in many cases are particularly vulnerable and feel marginalised in our society. It is my Department's responsibility to deliver welfare supports and entitlements that raise living standards, provide security and offer some degree of empowerment.

I would like to take this opportunity to briefly share with you some thoughts on some of these issues.

The movement of women out of the home and into the paid labour force has been one of the most dramatic social changes in recent decades. The number of women in employment has grown from 483,000 in 1995 to over 770,000 in 2004.

This is a particularly welcome trend.

On the other hand, the number of women with anything near adequate private pension cover for their retirement years is totally inadequate. It is a cause of serious concern that I am determined must be urgently addressed.

Old systems and attitudes on women and work have left their mark. Despite increasing recognition of the legacy of inequality, not enough has been done to erode the historical injustice. The figures speak for themselves.

In 2004 there were more than 766,000 women in the workforce. Out of that total, it is estimated that just over 358,000 had made any provision for private pensions for their retirement. The remaining 407,000 did not have any private pension plan. That means that less than 50% of women in the Irish workforce have pensions. When you take away those on public service pensions, then that falls further.

In other words, it is quite possible that only one third of working women outside the public service have pensions and many of these have pensions that are far from adequate. We all know that women are now living longer than men. However, unless circumstances change, they may live longer but many may also live poorer.

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The State pension is increasing annually and edging closer to the Government's commitment of €200 a week by 2007. But it has to be said that even at €200 a week, a full State Contributory pension will hardly keep you in the lifestyle to which most Irish women have rightly grown accustomed.

Despite all the incentives and all the good work, I regret to say that overall the coverage figures achieved is disappointing. I have now asked The Pensions Board to complete a review of pensions by the middle of this year, more than a year ahead of the original scheduled date.

We must look at alternative solutions, devise new products and fundamentally change the pension's landscape. I can assure you all that I will act on proposals that offer practical and innovative solutions that would be easily understood and send out a clear and simple message.

It may come as a surprise to some that the Department of Social Affairs is the biggest spending department in the State. This year the budget is over €12.2 billion. It means that for every €3 the State spends, €1 goes on welfare supports and entitlements.

Week in, week out, my Department delivers payments to over 970,000 people. When dependants are taken into account the payments directly benefit more than 1.5 million men, women and children.

But I want to stress that my Department is not just a mechanism for paying money and buying our way out of the problems of Irish society. I am determined that we must look behind the payments and tackle the underlying problems.

Lone parents are one example.

Today I want to debunk some of the myths about lone parents. This is essentially pub talk, coming from the high stool experts. I want to state some facts and put the record straight.

Of lone parents, 84% are women, 16% are men. In reality, less than 3%, 2.8% to be exact, of lone parents are teenagers. The notion that there is an army of teenagers is not accurate. In fact, 75% of all lone parents are over 25 and the average age is approximately 27 or 28, one third of lone parents are in their 30s.

The other myth is that lone parents have a multiplicity of children because there is great money to be had from the system. This is also inaccurate, as 60% have one child and 25% have two. In other words, 85% of lone parents have two children or fewer.

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Lone parents tend to be older than pub talk suggests and tend to have one child. This gives the lie to the myth that somehow there is a racket going on as the figures show clearly this is not the case.

Lone parents have genuine pressures and our job is to meet those pressures.

The best way to do so is to encourage people back into education and back to work, a philosophy that many of you here today share. Joined-up Government is required in this area as it affects a range of Departments.

An interdepartmental group is examining how the system can be changed to encourage lone parents back into education and work. I am determined to garner advice from wherever we find it so that we can improve social policy in this area.

Carers are another valued group that needs increased support. Of those in receipt of Carers Allowance, 79% are women, 21% are men. I am determined that carers receive the recognition they so thoroughly deserve.

The last Budget went some way towards properly rewarding carers and that emphasis will continue and I am determined that it will be accelerated.

Childcare costs is another issue. Adequate childcare provision is a crucial element in any package of measures to help parents reconcile employment and family care. And, of course, it is a central plank in increasing employment participation of women, in general, and lone parents, in particular.

The Government is investing €500 million to create 33,000 new childcare places. To make policy in this area effective requires a seamless, co-coordinated approach from Government. And that is precisely what is now emerging.

There are many other areas I want to see reform so as to reflect and take account of the Ireland of the 21st century.

For instance, the absurd situation that creates adult dependants and disallows spouses or partners from qualifying in their own right for entitlements has no place in a modern society.

In conclusion, if there is a message on this International Women's Day, it should be that much has been done to raise the status and economic power of women in our world, but much more remains to be done.

Globally, new employment opportunities have pushed the female participation in the workforce to a new high of 39%.

However, overall trends tend to reinforce the tendency for women to remain confined to lower paid, sexually segregated jobs. And the curse of extreme poverty continues to hold women in its grip.

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It is estimated that 70% of the world's 1.3 billion poorest people - that is living on less than 1 Dollar a day - are women.

Yes, today is a day to celebrate progress and achievement. But it is also a day to remind ourselves that we must not to be lulled into a self-congratulatory complacency.

Changing attitudes and structures will continue to be an uphill struggle.