

**REMARKS BY THE TÁNAISTE
JOAN BURTON T.D.
AT THE “WOMEN AND GIRLS IN SPORT IN IRELAND” CONFERENCE
28th October 2015**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

I'd like to welcome everybody here this morning and say how pleased I am to see this timely and important conference taking place on women's participation in sport.

It may seem a bit odd then to start by mentioning the men's Rugby World Cup.

But a couple of weeks ago, during TV3's coverage of the quarter-finals of the tournament, they featured Fiona Steed as part of their panel to analyse one of the key games.

Fiona describes herself on her Twitter account as “mother of three, wife, chartered physiotherapist, ex-international and rugby coach, occasional co-commentator and rugby analyst and now under-10 camogie coach”.

I think every woman here today will immediately appreciate the multi-tasking involved there.

I think every woman here will welcome the fact that Fiona was on that TV3 panel.

And I think every woman here will look forward to the day when such an event is routine, and no longer an item newsworthy in itself.

The purpose of today's conference is very simple.

We want to increase the number of women and girls participating in sport.

For physical wellbeing and health reasons.

For community reasons – because participation is a wonderful way of fostering community spirit.

And for confidence reasons – because we know the confidence that stems from getting involved, learning a new skill, and building friendships along the way.

We know that for girls in particular, that is critically important, given today's celebrity-obsessed culture and the very real peer pressure that young people come under to look a certain way or conform to a certain image.

I know the many excellent speakers here today will give a thorough overview of the state of play in women's sport in Ireland right now.

Ministers Ring and O'Ríordáin will outline what the Government is doing, for our part, to drive participation.

We're making progress, but we've much more to do.

I want to mention just one crucial element in that respect – participation in our schools.

The evidence is overwhelming that physical activity is good for children’s development – both physically and mentally.

It’s recommended that children get 60 minutes of physical activity a day.

But research has shown that roughly half of boys aged 11 do so and the figure drops to considerably less than half for girls.

Those figures get progressively worse as children become older, and that’s our challenge.

That is why, in recent weeks, my colleague, Education Minister Jan O’Sullivan, pulled together almost 100 different initiatives into one comprehensive circular for schools focusing on the health and wellbeing of schoolchildren.

Physical activity is at the centre of it, and Jan will be actively promoting this critical message in the weeks to come.

In the same vein, our continued economic recovery is allowing us to increase investment in new schools and facilities, and that includes sporting facilities right across the country.

Indeed, one of the very important innovations under this Government – driven by Minister Ring – was to allow schools apply for funding jointly with local sports clubs under the Sports Capital Programme.

This innovation ensures that facilities are available to local clubs and local communities for at least 30 hours a week throughout the year.

It places schools at the centre of communities, where they belong, and places physical activity at the centre of communities, where it belongs.

You’ll hear further from Minister Ring now on this and related topics.

I hope the conference proves very informative and generates productive debate.

I look forward to your feedback.

ENDS