

EXAMINATION OF IR

Introduction

Madame Chair, members of the Committee, I am honoured to present Ireland's statement to the distinguished Committee and on my own behalf and on behalf of my delegation, I look forward to engaging with you in what I know will be a constructive dialogue here today. I am joined on our delegation by our **Mb**

has resulted in the provision of 20,500 childcare places to date and is expected to reach over 36,000 childcare places in total by the end of the programme. As well as boosting supply, Child Benefit payments, which are made directly to the mother, have more than doubled in real terms since 1997. The Government acknowledges that while these developments have had a positive impact on the capacity of women to engage in employment, education and training, more needs to be done. I can assure the Committee that this issue is high on the Government's agenda and that we intend to address the outstanding issues.

Before leaving the issue of employment, I would like to mention the gender pay gap. Ireland has made considerable progress in relation to the gender pay gap with a significant narrowing of the gap in recent years. Statistics produced by Eurostat (the European Union Statistics Body) show an Irish Gender Pay Gap of 16% which is close to the EU average. Recent reductions in the gap are attributed to the following factors:

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made a huge contribution to our subsequent economic success. It is also my view that subsequent changes in the system, including an increased focus on the position of girls has led to the situation today where women make up 52.5% of all entrants to third level courses and constitute the majority of graduates from many fields of study at third level, including Law (65%), Health (82%), Veterinary (67%) and Business and Administration (60%). Girls outperform boys at the national baccalaureate, known as the Leaving Certificate Examinations in Ireland and more girls qualify for entry into third level education. Similarly, 75% of females aged 18 are in full-time education, compared to 60% of boys. The Irish Government believes that the Irish education system should serve all students, boys and girls and that despite the successes of girls, there are areas where further progress is needed.

These include, the number of girls pursuing qualifications in Engineering and Technology, and the under-representation of women in senior management positions in our schools and third level institutions. In relation to the Engineering and Technology deficits, a number of initiatives have been undertaken. A Committee has been established by the Minister for Education and Science to examine relevant research and reports and to make recommendations on strategies and initiatives which might be undertaken to increase the uptake by females of the physical sciences in the Leaving Certificate at second level and to increase the number of females choosing Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) courses at third level. The Committee is due to report to the Minister for Education and Science this Autumn.

Under the Equality for Women Measure, my own Department funded two projects based in third level institutions, aimed at increasing the numbers of women in Science, Engineering and Technology. One provided a mentoring service to female students in the field and the other, a foundation course to facilitate entry to women returning to education. We are currently examining ways of mainstreaming the learning from these two very successful projects.

The under-representation of women in management positions in the education system is being addressed through the Women into Educational Management initiative which provides courses to support female teachers who wish to move into administrative or management roles. The impact of the initiative is currently being examined, including

acutely aware of the many areas of public and private sector decision-making where women's representation is still significantly below what is desirable. In political life, in the most recent local elections in 2004, 19% of those elected were women, up from 15% in 1999, while in the Elections to the European Parliament held on the same day, 38% of those elected were women. Although some progress is being made, the pace is slow, and in relation to the national parliament where just 13% of the Deputies are women, more needs to be done. It is ironic that although there are significant numbers of women involved in politics in Ireland, including at influential levels within Party structures, this has yet to be reflected in electoral politics.

Madam Chair, your Committee's comments in relation to women in politics in Ireland, delivered at the last examination in 1999 were given very serious consideration by the Government. As a result, we decided to introduce a specific strand of the Equality for Women Measure, devoted to the issue of women in political life. Under the Measure funding was provided to three political parties (Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Sinn Féin) to undertake projects to increase the number of women holding decision-making positions in these Parties and to increase the number of female electoral candidates and representatives. Parties have examined the barriers to female participation and have developed action plans to address those barriers. Given that these projects have just been completed it is too early to assess their impact, but I have been impressed by the quality of the commitment shown by the Parties to working to improve the position of women. Speaking for my own party, Fianna Fáil, I can assure the Committee that our Leader has taken a personal interest in the implementation of our Action Plan, which includes specific targets for female participation at all levels in the Party, and I am confident that it will show results in time.

Social Inclusion

The Government is acutely aware that despite the dramatic improvement in our economic fortunes, there are groups of people in Ireland who continue to experience poverty and social exclusion, and that women feature prominently among these groups.

The National Anti-Poverty Strategy, launched in 1997, sets out to reduce poverty and social exclusion. In 2002, following a broad consultation process, the Government launched a revised Strategy entitled “*Building an Inclusive Society*”. The revised Strategy was itself further developed in the second National Action Plan to combat poverty and social exclusion, produced in July 2003 as part of the EU Open Method of Co-ordination. The National Action Plan set a key global target of reducing the numbers of those who are

I would like to briefly touch on the particular challenges faced by specific groups of vulnerable women.

Lone Parents

The main route out of poverty for lone parent families is employment and better jobs and the Government is focused on removing obstacles to employment in respect of this vulnerable group. The One-Parent Family Payment Scheme is designed to provide income support to parents, generally women, with insufficient means who have to parent alone. One of the objectives of the scheme is to encourage and facilitate lone parents to consider employment as an alternative to welfare dependency while at the same time supporting them to remain in the home, if they so wish. The earnings disregard under the scheme is designed to remove, in part, the obstacles to employment. Up to 60% of recipients of the One-Parent Family Payment are in employment and availing of the disregard.

Ending child poverty is one of ten special initiatives under the current social partnership agreement 'Sustaining Progress'. One of the key tasks in this initiative is to address obstacles to employment for many lone parents. This group is also disadvantaged by low levels of educational achievement. A Steering Group chaired by the Taoiseach's (Prime Minister) Department and involving representatives of the Departments of Finance and Social and Family Affairs is examining how income supports, employment, education and childcare, impact on employment opportunities and family circumstances. This review will shortly be completed and will contribute to concrete proposals designed to better support and encourage lone parents in achieving a better standard of living and a better future for themselves and their children.

Traveller Women

Travellers, as a group, are particularly affected by poverty. Traveller women have a higher mortality rate, lower life expectancy, and stillbirth and infant mortality rates almost three times that of the population of Ireland as a whole. This pattern of ill health is compounded by high rates of illiteracy, poor living conditions and heavy domestic responsibilities.

Under the National Anti-Poverty Strategy, the overall objective is to improve the life experience of Travellers through the provision of appropriate education, health and housing services and to remove any remaining barriers to the full participation of members of the Traveller community in the economic and social life of the country.

My Department has a key role in monitoring the implementation of the recommendations of the Task Force Report on the Traveller Community. While important administrative and legislative measures have been put in place to progress the implementation of these recommendations, much work remains to be done. I am particularly aware of the position of Traveller women in our society and the need to address fully the recommendations particularly where they are concerned. I am personally committed to ensuring tangible progress is achieved in improving the quality of life of Travellers generally and Traveller woman in particular. I have also been asked by our Taoiseach (Prime Minister) to take responsibility for overseeing Traveller policy and I am actively engaged in pursuing a range of initiatives to improve outcomes. In this regard, my Department has established a High Level Group on Traveller Issues which comprises senior policymakers from the key Government Departments and statutory agencies with responsibility for the delivery of services to the Traveller community, with the express remit of exploring best practice in practical service delivery in the short term and working towards eliminating the social exclusion which Travellers experience.

I can assure the Committee that I am fully committed to improving the daily lives of Traveller women, women who in the face of considerable disadvantage, make a huge contribution to their communities. I am working to deliver on commitments we have made to Travellers and to ensuring that they take account of the particular needs of Traveller women. I want to acknowledge Pavee Point's presence at this meeting and to ex

violence against women, as criminal acts. However, the Government accepts that for legislation to be effective, it must be enforced and complemented with supports to victims of violence to encourage them to report crimes and to avail of practical supports.

I would like to pay tribute here to the many organisations that provide support to women who are victims of violence, including rape and sexual assault. Women's Aid, which has produced a Shadow Report for your Committee, and which is represented here today, provides an excellent service to victims of violence as well as advocating for improvements in our systems. The Rape Crisis Network and the Rape Crisis Centres throughout Ireland also deserve mention for the valuable service they provide to victims of sexual violence at a time when such victims are most in need of help and support.

In relation to rape and sexual assault, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform has provided funding for comprehensive research into attrition rates in rape cases in Ireland. The research, which is entitled "The Understanding of Attrition, Early Withdrawal, the Trial Process and Identifying Possible Changes to Support Complainants in Rape Cases", is being carried out by the Department of Law at the National University of Ireland Galway and the Rape Crisis Network Ireland. The research will take three years to complete. This research should provide a

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It is essential that awareness raising campaigns such as these continue to be undertaken and both my Department and the National Steering Committee are working on the development of a new awareness strategy. The intention is to move from planning awareness initiatives on an annual basis to a more overarching strategy for the next few years.

Details on the specific supports provided to victims of violence are included in our Reports

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the Refugee Applications Commissioner. This is particularly the case where a female applicant presents a claim which contains gender specific issues. If the matter reaches appeal, this practice continues in the Refugee Appeals Tribunal — where practical and possible, a female Member of the Tribunal is assigned to consider and decide the case. All staff working in the Offices of the Refugee Applications Commissioner and Refugee Appeals Tribunal complete appropriate training under the guidance of the UNHCR and are aware of the importance of treating all applicants for asylum with respect and sensitivity and with full awareness of cultural differences.

The increase in the number of immigrants in Ireland has raised concerns about the potential for racism to raise its ugly head. In 2000, the Irish Government approved a National Anti-Racism Awareness Programme. Know Racism was a 3-year public awareness programme to address racism and to promote a more inclusive intercultural society, aspects of which have been incorporated into the National Action Plan Against Racism 2005 -2008. The National Action Plan seeks to be inclusive of multiple forms of diversity and discrimination, with reference to the nine grounds covered by the equality legislation.

Finally, I should say in relation to immigration generally that Ireland values the contribution that migrants make to our country and the Government will do everything in its power to ensure that they enjoy the same rights as Irish citizens.

Equality Framework

I would now like to deal with the provisions of the Irish Constitution insofar as it relates to equality and in particular, equality between women and men. Article 40.1 of the Constitution provides that all citizens shall, as human beings, be held equal before the law. The Review Group on the Constitution, which reported in 1996, recommended that Article 40.1 be amended to explicitly prohibit discrimination against a person on any grounds including gender. The All Party Oireachtas (Houses of Parliament) Committee on the Constitution is now studying the fundamental rights provisions of the Constitution and in due course it will study the provisions of Article 40.1 and make recommendations to Government. I am very aware that other provisions in our Constitution need to be looked at, in order to more accurately reflect

the reality of social and economic changes in Ireland in recent years and Article 41 which deals with the family and the position of women comes to mind in this context. The All Party Oireachtas Committee will be considering this issue in the light of submissions and oral hearings arising from a public consultation on the family held earlier this year. I look forward to the Committee's deliberations and recommendations on this and other Articles in due course. Notwithstanding the widely acknowledged need to rephrase the Constitution to better reflect the reality of modern Ireland, I am satisfi

foundations are no

Evidence-based policy making must become the norm and insofar

future Reports under CEDAW, it will be drawing

we have made significant progress since we last met, but as ever, there is always more that can be done. We are committed to making Ireland a place where women and men enjoy true equality. We value the input of your Committee in helping us to achieve this ambition, particularly this year, as we prepare our National Women's Strategy. We welcome advice from whatever quarter on how we can improve the position of women in Ireland.

I look forward to having a fruitful dialogue.

Thank you.