

**Presentation to Making our Voices Heard Conference
Limerick Women's Network and Shannon Development
29th May 2009
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I very much welcome the opportunity to be here to-day and on behalf of the NWCI would like to extend a warm thanks to you for inviting us to be present for a discussion which we believe is important, timely and relevant..

Making women's voices heard sounds on the face of it, like an achievable, relatively straightforward vision with few opponents and lots of support.

However, over the many years of striving to achieve this vision , it has become increasingly clear to those involved in working for women's equality including many of you, that this vision while certainly achievable, is not without its opponents and is certainly not straightforward.

Having our voices heard is not the same as having our voices listened to and it is the frustrating experience of many women's groups throughout Ireland North and South that while we are now more likely to be invited by government and other powerful bodies to take part in consultations on matters of public policy, these discussions and debates have rarely led to real change in the lives of women and in particular the lives of those living in poverty.

Why is it that the risk of poverty has increased for women to 23% in Ireland, the highest rate in the EU 25. The for men is considerably lower at 19%). Why is it that considerable gaps in earnings between women and men persist? Women currently earn 15% less than men). Why is it that 46% of lone parents live in poverty and that Ireland has one of the poorest levels of childcare provision in the EU? Why is it that a shocking 18% of women have been abused by a current or former partner? And why is it that despite this level of need, our refuges are overflowing so that in 2007 refuge staff had to turn away two out of three women had arrived on their doorstep because they needed to escape a violent husband or partner . Why is it that at the present time rape crisis centres and other services are experiencing cuts of up to 10% at a time when their services are needed more than ever?

Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that all public decision making institutions in Ireland remain dominated by men. Maybe the position of women in Ireland is still so difficult to move forward because only 13 per cent of our TDs and 19% of local councillors are women and because Irish politics remains a case of "jobs for the boys". Women may have been admitted to some decision-making tables, but they are almost always in the minority, isolated presences.

So women are not there at the tables where decisions are made. But isn't that how it has always been? Why is women's participation so important?

According to the UN NGO Working Group on Women and Development it is because 'In the first place there can be no true democracy, no true people's participation in governance without the equal participation of women and men in all spheres of life and levels of decision making'

Last week, the National Women's Council of Ireland issued a press statement in which we condemned the Government's handling of almost €9million targeted in Budget 2008 at women's equality programmes, which was instead used to fund Garda overtime, covert surveillance operations and other activities.

The money, was a core part of the National Women's Strategy (NWS) and was due to be spent on a wide range of support packages including the Equality for Women Measure, to build women's employment prospects, improve women's access to education and training, enhance women's ability to engage in enterprise development and strengthen women's participation in decision-making.

In May 2008, under the NWS[use full title], Strand One of the Equality for Women Measure (to promote women's access to Employment) was launched. In July 2008 approximately 155 organisations from throughout Ireland responded to the Government's request for applications for 3-year funding under this strand. Despite repeated requests for information, to date, no response has been given to those organisations.

The NWCI learned at a meeting of the monitoring committee of the NWS, chaired by the Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, John Moloney, last week, that most of the money for last year had already been redeployed elsewhere.

No one was consulted. No one was warned. The money was simply taken.

The manner in which this matter was handled, we believe displays a shocking and intolerable lack of transparency, lack of accountability and lack of respect for women's equality. Hundreds of women around the country spent long hours, days and weeks, designing employment projects and putting together funding proposals,

It is clear to anyone concerned with these issues, that women's groups at grass roots level are seeing all kinds of funding being clawed back and that their role and very existence is increasingly coming under threat from a Government which is clearly not setting women's advancement as a priority despite commitments which have been made.

Despite these disturbing events and the facts and figures outlined above it is clear that women are not silent or accepting of our position or of efforts to take back our hard won gains. It is clear from your presence here today that you are calling for change, interested in participating and anxious to ensure that your voices are listened to both here in Limerick and as part of the national picture.

In 1995, the Irish Government at the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing signed up to the Beijing Platform for Action. This document sets out a range of actions to be taken by Governments and other institutions to promote women's equality and recognizes that "The advancement of women and the achievement of equality between women and men are a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and should not be seen in isolation as a women's issue. They are the only way to build a sustainable just and developed society. Empowerment of women and equality between men are prerequisites for achieving political, social, economic, cultural and environmental security among all peoples".

This statement is as relevant to-day as it was 14 years ago and as relevant here in Limerick as it was then in Beijing. The challenge for us is to make women's equality a priority at local and at national levels. A priority which cannot be seen as a luxury, to be disposed of when times are tough, an add on or something which must be dealt with only in order to tick a box or access funding.

These are difficult times for those of us concerned with moving women from the margins to the centre and with addressing women's poverty and building a more equal and just society for ourselves and for the generations to come.

At local level including here in Limerick we are challenged to develop solidarity with each other and to understand each-others concerns regardless of our social or ethnic background, our levels of ability or disability, our sexual orientation, our age, or our religion and to make a commitment to organize and work together as women's groups with a shared vision and a clear set of demands.

We are challenged to work hard and in support of each other to make sure that the decision making bodies, charged with the responsibility of developing strong and sustainable communities, are truly representative of women and are listening attentively to what we are saying.

We need to know the system and learn how it works in order to make our work more effective and ensure that a women's perspective is a part of all local policy development from housing to street lighting, from planning to employment

We must argue and push for resources, people, time and money (in boom times and in bust times) to make our demands a reality. We cannot allow ourselves to be silenced by

talk of economic downturn or sharing the burden. Women's equality must come first. Far too many women didn't benefit from the boom – they must not be asked to pay for its collapse.

We must be willing to be, in a sense, a thorn in the side of those who refuse to listen and strong in our resolve to achieve equality.

We must get the media on board as a messenger for women's equality and an ally in promoting public awareness and generating informed debate.

We need to get political. We need to vote for women who are for women and begin to look at the possibility of standing for election not on our own and not in isolation but as a collective voice, building a strong local women's political movement for change.

Local decision making bodies face challenges too, to seek out women, target them and make sure that they have a clear place at the table. A place that must be resourced, through the provision of childcare, social care and travel expenses as well as the provision of appropriate training to make their participation meaningful and not tokenistic. They of course must act as the listeners and acknowledge and utilize the lived experiences, ideas and creativity of women to create stronger and more sustainable local policies. Policies whose effectiveness must be monitored in terms of the extent to which they have from the perspective of women, enhanced the quality of life of women and families and in particular those who are most marginalized.

I would like to end with a quotation from Maria Torres an adult Literacy teacher from Ecuador “if women remain on the margins of society we only have marginal opportunity for making marginal change”.

It's up to each and every one of us to make sure that doesn't happen – marginal change is no use to us – we want a transformation of Irish society, to make it better for all of us, women, men and children. That can only happen when we achieve equality for women.
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