

Presentation to ICTU Women's Committee & ICTU Executive Council
Networking Roundtable Event – 25th May 2010
presented by Clare Treacy Chairperson of the Women's Committee

The ICTU Women's Committee developed a number of aims and objectives towards the end of November 2008, following a day long planning event. The day involved over 20 participants, with Gay Cunningham giving a keynote note address.

A number of key areas were identified as areas for further development, including, older workers – we discussed areas such as discrimination legislation, the ageing workforce, health issues in ageing and pensions. A number of unions are looking at the ageing workforce, the ESBOA is doing significant work in this area, and the INMO have recently published a paper about ageing nurses.

We also discussed the engagement of women in unions, the results which will form part of our submission to the recently constituted Trade Union Commission. Of significance to today was the discussion on strategic communications, where it was identified that it was extremely important for the Women's Committee to build up a relationship with the Executive Council of ICTU, with our own Executive Council's, and with other organisations, such as; the National Women's Council, Migrant Council of Ireland, Women's Resource Centres and Universities, as well as newly formed groups, Equality Rights Alliance.

Any person observing this training day and others through LIFT and LINK would be struck by the wealth of engagement and debate that took place in all the forums. It is absolutely essential that these women are heard both within the broader ICTU and within their own trade union.

For those of you that may not know, the ICTU Women's Committee celebrated its 50th birthday this year, with Afternoon Tea at Aras An Uachtarain. The Women's Committee is the only committee formed under the ICTU constitution that certain privileges and responsibilities exist. Each year we have either a conference or a seminar rotating North and South, and in the past number of years the attendance and participation has dramatically increased. In addition, the attendance at the Women's Committee meetings which are generally held on a monthly basis has also increased. More and more trade union Executive Council's/Boards, are getting a report from the ICTU Women's Committee, and ensuring that it is distributed via union magazines etc. I think there is no doubt that the profile of the Women's Committee is increasing, so the challenge that lies ahead is to continue to make the Women's Committee more relevant, and for it to be seen as a source of information for all trade unionists, who recognise the need for a gender perspective on all trade union activities.

Let us briefly look at some of the issues that are on the agenda for the Women's Committee, but are equally as important for our Executive Council, and/or trade unionists. The first issue that must be mentioned is that of childcare. This issue is consistently raised and has been so for many years, at every forum, be it Women's Conferences, ICTU Conference, yet there has been no significant

change in the provision of childcare, in fact from a European perspective the situation has got worse.

Childcare is essential if women are to have equal access to the labour market. The European Commission in a 2008 report on EU countries' performance in terms of childcare found that Ireland recorded the fourth highest score across 25 EU Members States in terms of the negative impact of having children on female labour force participation. (Female labour force participation rates dropped by 20% for women with children). The European Commission's report also indicated that Ireland scored lowest of 21 European countries, (including Norway and Iceland), in terms of public investment in childcare as a percentage of GDP. Public investment in childcare represents just 0.2% of GDP. It is not possible as yet to predict accurately what impact the recession will have on the labour force participation of women with children, however, if childcare costs outstrip wages, that may lead to a decline in female labour force participation for women with young children. Also it is patently unfair that when parents are put onto a three day week, many still have to pay full time fees to their childcare facility to retain their place.

Secondly, we must look at the recession and recognise that the role and impact of this downturn on women is likely to be markedly different from past recessions, not least because women now count for a much greater portion of the labour market. Women's greater integration into the labour market makes us a more central player to the contribution to house hold incomes, with an increasing percentage of women fulfilling the role of sole or main bread winner. Indeed the

growth of dual earnings means that many more households rely on two incomes for economic viability. The ramifications of increased unemployment, cutbacks in public expenditures, including social welfare and increased economic and social vulnerability will have a differential impact on women and men. It is important to therefore ensure that where women are differently affected to men, these differences are addressed by governments, North and South, and by our own trade union movement. However, I think it is fair to say that little attention is being given to ensuring that gender is taken into account, in formulating policy responses to the current economic downturn. Certainly, there appears to be limitations in the gender sensitivity of our existing policy makers. Funding cuts under the National Women's Strategy by the government do not inspire confidence on this issue.

Equality is important to the whole of society and not just those who appear to be negatively affected. A book published last year titled "The Spirit Level" by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett highlights in very simplistic terms the strong link between equality and the health and well being of society. They point out that in countries where there is a big gap between the rich and the poor, mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, obesity and teenage pregnancies are more common, the homicide rate is higher, life expectancy is shorter, and children's education performance and literacy scores are worse. What Wilkinson and Pickett are saying is, it is not only the poor that suffer when a society is unequal, but the majority of the population suffer the effects of inequality/societies with large income inequality become socially dysfunctional. In essence, they have made a business argument for equality by proving that everyone, not just the

poor in society benefit from a more equal society. I think this is a key message that we should all be aware of when we see the dismantling of our equality infrastructure, and recognise that everybody is affected by an unequal society, not just the poor and disadvantaged.

So what are the areas that are important for us to pursue in a collective sense via the Executive Council. Obviously we have various motions from both the Women's Committee and from our BDC, and I think it important that we try to identify one or two areas that we can pursue and make progress on. This year at our Women's Conference, we addressed for the first time the crime of trafficking of women for sexual exploitation and labour exploitation. Monica O'Connor, co-author of a book which researched the extent of trafficking in Ireland, presented to the Women's Conference and confirmed that Ireland was a country of destination for victims of trafficking. In effect, they identified that at any one time over 800 women are available in Ireland via various websites. 97% of these women are trafficked into the country, where usually their passports are taken from them, they are kept as prisoners and their families back home are threatened. This issue was raised briefly at an Executive Council during the report back from the Women's Committee, and it was proposed that it would be a key item to be taken up by ICTU Executive at the next Biennial Conference. Currently there is a campaign co-ordinated by the Immigrant Council of Ireland, with the National Women's Council and other groups participating to try to change the law in Ireland, so that women that are trafficked are treated as victims of trafficking, rather than as illegal immigrants, and that those who buy sex from trafficked women are prosecuted.

I think the power of the ICTU Executive standing behind and supporting a campaign such as this, would be extraordinarily positive for the campaign, and I believe a campaign within ICTU, the Women's Committee, Global Solidarity, the Youth Committee and the Equality Committee could all work together to achieve a result. The gender issues must become more and more part of the trade union movement and should not necessarily be seen as different.

Finally I want to say a brief word about our own structures. Ensuring that our own structures genuinely reflect the diversity of our membership is not only the right thing for us to do as a movement but also something that can unleash a wave of creativity and ideas that can greatly benefit our trade unions. Initial results from our equality audit find that women are only 15% of general secretaries and regional secretaries, only 22% of deputy general secretaries, and 33% of trade union officials. In contrast women are 85% of those providing administrative support to trade unions across the country. These figures show that we have our own challenges in the representation of women in trade unions.

There is a serious democratic deficit in trade union structures seen in the under-representation of women in the senior levels of all trade unions. Many trade unions have begun to address the under-representation of women in their decision-making positions, particularly in the light of the growth of women's membership in many countries. However, there is some evidence of a reversal of the representation of women. Putting in place measures to improve the representation of women requires a commitment to change the status-quo and

make women more visible, and to do this it has sometimes been necessary to put in place some transformational measures. This requires the development of trade union policies to improve the representation of women and a genuine commitment to a more balanced gender representation in the decision-making structures of unions.

The Women on the ICTU Executive should not be merely seen as having the full responsibility to raise gender issues, it is important that the men also raise these issues as indeed they have in the past. However, we must work towards gender being seen as part of the package, not something on the side.