

## National Women's Council of Ireland

# PRESIDENTIAL QUESTIONNAIRE ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS

### Q1.

What major initiatives will you conduct as President to advance women's equality? (2-4 ideas)

#### MARY DAVIS



I believe the President can play a powerful role in challenging public perceptions of issues such as equality, and I would like to use the office to highlight the diverse range of issues that affect women in Ireland today. I would be interested in holding a regular forum in the Áras involving women from diverse backgrounds to hear what they have to say and draw attention to their concerns.

As president I will profile and highlight the issue of violence against women, which is still a serious problem. In the past three years there has been an increase of 40% in the demand for services in the area of domestic violence. A recent report from Safe Ireland identifies 38% of women and children seeking refuge cannot be accommodated. I have also given my support the campaign "Turn off the Red Light" which seeks to end the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation.

I would also like to highlight and encourage the work of Irish Aid abroad and showcase the invaluable work which they are doing in promoting women in small community based enterprises, for example in Liberia. I believe Irish Aid plays an important part in building respect for Ireland abroad, and these are projects that we at home can learn from.

#### MICHAEL D HIGGINS



- Next year will see a major review of our constitution and I would be encouraging everyone, including women's groups, to take an active interest in reflecting on how, as a living document, it might best serve all our citizens; men, women and children in the years ahead. I also intend to act as patron to a series of open Presidential seminars on key themes, and I believe that one of these should look at women's equality and participation, particularly in terms of public life and political representation.
- I believe that the President, along with others in positions of authority, can play a genuine role in combating violence against women, something that remains a serious problem. We know that attitudes towards violence against women are affected by cultural context, therefore it is important to create a culture where that kind of violence is unacceptable. As President I would use the discretionary space available to send a powerful signal against this kind of violence.
- Women globally continue to face discrimination and hardship in terms of poverty, illiteracy, land right. I believe our country can continue to play a leading role in standing in solidarity with women worldwide who struggle for freedom and rights. There is much to be learnt from the global exchange of ideas and I can see a role in facilitating that exchange.
- I would be very open to acting as a patron for causes affecting women, should I be asked to do so, including those emerging directly from the grassroots.
- My wife Sabina has been my partner in everything and an activist and public person in her own right. If I was to be elected, she would, I believe, prove a valuable resource and, much as Martin MacAleese highlighted issues such as isolation amongst older men, I'm sure Sabina would make an appropriate and valuable contribution in many areas.

# Q1.

## What major initiatives will you conduct as President to advance women's equality? (2-4 ideas)

**SEÁN  
GALLAGHER**



As President I will recognise and celebrate the role and contribution of unsung heroes in communities, who are working tirelessly in voluntary, advocacy and disability groups. This is important if others are to be inspired to make a contribution.

I would like to highlight the entrepreneurial and enterprising spirit of women. This begins in schools where I have seen over the past years that Transition Year students with micro-companies have been hugely represented by successful young women. It is important to encourage this success, as young women become Managing Directors or Marketing Managers of their micro-companies they need to be inspired to fill these roles in the business world.

I would continue to meet with women's groups and networks to hear from them what they would like to see in their Presidency and what contribution I could make to support them.

**MARTIN  
MCGUINNESS**



This year marks the centenary of International's Women's Day and whilst huge strides have been made in the fight for gender equality some of the key demands of the women's movement of 1911 still remain. Women won the battle for voting rights but are still campaigning for better pay and an end to discrimination. We cannot let the outstanding battles take away from the successes of women over the last one hundred years but instead we must honour these achievements with a commitment to end discrimination and inequalities in our society across the island.

Women still earn 17% less than men in this State. As President I will advocate for a new equal pay framework that makes clear the obligations on public and private employers to tackle unequal pay.

I will continue to speak out against the growing poverty experienced by women and their children. By working side-by-side with NGO's and the community sector the office of the President can serve as a voice for women who are far too often ignored.

Services for women seeking refuge from domestic violence continue to be underfunded. We need a renewed strategy to combat the reasons for and results of domestic violence. Existing service providers must be brought to the cabinet table so as to ensure a voice is given to victim's experiences. Funding must be restored and the judicial system reformed to ensure women and their children are protected.

**GAY  
MITCHELL**

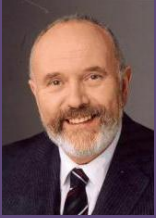


1. I was appalled in reading about the whole area of domestic violence to see that women and children on over 3000 occasions seeking access to refuges could not be accommodated. While the President does not control spending, s/he can by paying visits draw attention to problems and put issues on the political agenda. The need for adequate refuge places for the victims of domestic violence is an issue I care passionately about. We must protect those who are victims of domestic violence and I will do all I can in office to promote that issue.
2. The President is advised by the Council of State. Men dominate the Council, as men hold most state offices whose members sit on the Council. While people selected for the Council are selected for their individual talents, I will strive where possible to achieve a gender balance.
3. In accepting engagements, I will seek to ensure I attend a broad mix of engagements that cross all class, religious, gender and orientation barriers
4. In the centenary commemorations due over the next seven years, most prominently the centenary of the Easter Rising, I will make a point of highlight women's contributions. Too often women have been marginalised in Irish history. Women's history and women's contributions must also be highlighted.

# Q1.

What major initiatives will you conduct as President to advance women's equality? (2-4 ideas)

**DAVID  
NORRIS**



No response received.

**DANA  
ROSEMARY  
SCANLON**



No response received

## Q2.

### What do you think are the top 3 issues for women's rights in Ireland?

#### MARY DAVIS



#### 1. Women's participation in decision making.

I believe that all aspects of decision making, be it in public or private enterprise or in our political system, will benefit greatly from diversity. This includes diversity of gender, ability, ethnic origin, age and so on. We must create the space for women to know they are needed, valued and that their contribution is important. We should strive for a gender balance at all levels of decision making.

#### 2. Violence against women (*see above*).

#### 3. Women's participation in the economy and child care.

Women's unemployment rates have increased by 10% in 2010 (compared to men 6.8%). In July 1,300 women signed on in comparison to 300 men. Women are concentrated in low paid, part time/casual work areas where statistically they are more vulnerable. A growing number of women are unemployed and many families are relying on the wages of low paid women for survival. Women's participation in the workplace is directly affected by access to childcare. Even the IMF recognised the requirement to support women via provision for childcare, to enable women to properly participate in the paid workforce. On average families pay 29% of income on childcare in comparison to France (11%) and Germany (8%).

#### MICHAEL D HIGGINS



There are many issues. But to focus on just four that I think are particularly important.

- **Fuller Participation in every aspect of life:** Ireland can greatly benefit from women's full and equal participation and contribution in every area of our social, economic, cultural and political life. Although huge progress has been made I do believe there is still some distance to be travelled – most clearly in relation to increasing women's participation and representation in the area of politics.
- **Violence against women** As I outlined in the first question, violence against women is still a serious issue – one that takes many forms, not only in terms of physical abuse but in terms of mental and emotional abuse and in terms of systematic violence such as trafficking.
- **Childcare and other caring roles** childcare is an important issue for both men and women, but it does still affect women to a greater extent. Difficulties in accessing appropriate affordable childcare and a lack of family-friendly policies in the workplace can act as barriers to women's employment, education, and career progression. I might also mention that a large proportion of carers are women and caring work with family members or others, does not, I believe, receive enough acknowledgement or support.
- **Poverty** is an issue which can have a particular dimension for women. Many of those in the lowest paid jobs are women. The figures also show that a majority of single parents are women and that single parent households are more likely to be in poverty. As a legacy of the marriage bar, some older women have little or no contributory pension, leaving them very dependent on their partners and therefore quite vulnerable.

## Q2.

### What do you think are the top 3 issues for women's rights in Ireland?

SEÁN  
GALLAGHER



To me, equality of opportunity and pay; elimination of discrimination in the workplace coupled with concern over prevalence of violence against women, and the rise in female trafficking in recent years, are the top issues affecting women's rights in Ireland.

The role of women in our economy, community and voluntary sectors, as carers, advocates and home makers must be recognised and celebrated. I believe that investing in women, ensuring full protection of their rights is one and the same as investing in families and in turn amounts to an investment in our communities and society as a whole.

During my listening tour as I have met numerous women who have impressed me with their collaborative supportive way of working and how effective they are in team building and I think if these skills are harnessed and encouraged from a young age that challenges women face can be addressed more effectively.

MARTIN  
MCGUINNESS



Childcare, proper recognition of care work, and low pay. For many childcare is a luxury they simply cannot afford. This reality puts up obstacles to work, education and training for so many women young and old. Affordable quality childcare facilities on a needs basis provided as a matter of course must be the goal. It's not rocket science. The State must meet its obligations. Developing and extending after-school facilities and childcare is just one example of how women could be supported back into the workplace. Women caring for family members full time are perhaps our greatest unsung heroes. Their work goes unrecognised, undervalued and unmeasured. Women face a higher risk of low paid employment than men not from choice but lack of opportunity and supports.

GAY  
MITCHELL



Obviously, right now, a key issue across all communities is unemployment. Because the Live Register figures are higher for men than women, there is a danger that how being on the live register affects women will get ignored, or less focused on, in public and in the media. I intend to make sure the impact on both genders is highlighted.

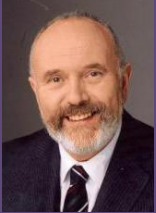
Poverty is also a particular problem in Ireland right now. It affects both genders, but women, who are already disadvantaged in employment through lower pay in some cases (something I abhor), and who may find themselves left assuming responsibility for child rearing, can be particularly badly affected. Again, I intend to draw attention to the impact of poverty and marginalisation on citizens.

I have been a long-term campaigner on mental health issues, both in Ireland and Europe. While not being a specific gender-based issue, it obviously affects women directly. Pieta House mentioned that 486 people died by suicide in 2010. On average 10 people per week die by suicide. 20% of that total was female. We need to deal with the crisis that sees so many people die by suicide. The fact that the percentage of women who die by suicide is relatively low may mean that all attention will be focused on the men, particularly young men, and that what drives women to suicide will be marginalised or forgotten. In dealing with this crisis, we must ensure that all victims are remembered, and suicide prevention strategies remember everyone and offer supports to all.

## Q2.

What do you think are the top 3 issues for women's rights in Ireland?

**DAVID  
NORRIS**



No response received.

**DANA  
ROSEMARY  
SCANLON**



No response received

## Q3.

### What are your three greatest achievements in supporting women's rights in Ireland and abroad?

MARY DAVIS



I have been a strong advocate for women in business, and have given my support to a number of organisations that support women in the world of business, including serving on the board of the Women's Executive Network and International Women's Forum.

I have been a strong advocate for the role women should play in top level sports administration and have called on the International Olympic Committee to ensure women are represented on the IOC.

As a member of the Irish Sports Council, I have served on the subcommittee on 'Women in Sport' and ensure that women have equal opportunity to participate in sport and that appropriate services are available for women in sports facilities.

MICHAEL D HIGGINS



I played a very active role in campaigns for access to family planning, divorce and other civil rights in the 80s and 90s. This was not always easy because at the time Ireland was still a place where you broke the code of social conservatism at your peril. I did pay an electoral price for my stance and lost my Dail seat following some of the more controversial referendums of the 1980's, but was proud to play my part in the drive for progressive change in Irish society.

For over thirty years in the Dail and Seanad, I worked for the advancement of women's rights both nationally and internationally. The very first legislation I worked on, with Mary Robinson, was a bill to remove the label of 'illegitimacy' from the children of unmarried mothers. I was also a member of the Government who introduced Equality legislation and set up the Equality Authority. There are many other examples.

I have always tried to promote women's rights in a global context. In addition to supporting small women farmers and speaking out against trafficking and sexual exploitation, I have consistently highlighted the experience of women in conflict situations from Iraq to Colombia, and the importance of their inclusion in any negotiations to build peace. Peace must take root in families and communities; it does not belong to the combatants alone. I think in Northern Ireland we have seen some powerful examples of the role women's groups can play in peace-building.

SEÁN GALLAGHER



In Waterford in 2010 I addressed the Irish Women's Business Network supported by the County and City Enterprise Boards. Here I actively strove to encourage an entrepreneurial culture where both men and women can nurture and realise their business potential. For me, enterprise and community are two sides of the same coin. We have got to be our own heroes, and own leaders. Whether male or female, entrepreneurs and small business owners need to be given every encouragement because they are our new heroes who are creating vital jobs and opportunities in Ireland today. The economic autonomy of women is tied to this ethos. In addition to this I have constantly called for larger female representation in politics and the contribution of women in the political sphere actively acknowledged.

## Q3.

### What are your three greatest achievements in supporting women's rights in Ireland and abroad?

**MARTIN  
MCGUINNESS**



In my role as deputy First Minister of the Assembly I introduced a gender equality strategy for the north promoting and protecting the role of women in society. I have also recently ring-fenced 12 million pounds for a childcare strategy. Again in my role as deputy First Minister I oversaw the resolution of an equal pay claim settlement in the civil service ensuring thousands of women in the civil service would not experience discrimination in pay and career advancement

**GAY  
MITCHELL**



I have been a long-term campaigner for rights, both economic and social, in the developing world. Indeed my work on development issues saw me voted the best MEP on development issues by Parliament magazine. Poverty and discrimination in the Developing World particularly affects women, who are often marginalised in societies. I have raised this issue repeatedly.

I have been strongly critical of China's policy of coerced abortions, where women are forced to terminate pregnancies, in particular where the foetus is female. The policy in my view treats women as inferiors, and regards having girls as less desirable than having boys. I believe passionately in equality between the sexes.

I was a strong supporter of the introduction of civil partnership. That directly helped women in same-sex relationships who previously received no recognition and no protection in same-sex relationships.

**DAVID  
NORRIS**



No response received.

**DANA  
ROSEMARY  
SCANLON**



No response received.



## Q4.

### Would you describe yourself as a feminist (If yes, why and if no, why not)?

MARY DAVIS



Many women don't like the term "feminist" for whatever reason but I don't think we need to apologise for seeking equality. I share the vision of the National Womens Council of Ireland that Ireland should be a place where women and men have equal power to shape society and their own lives. There is a need to continue to work towards change to realise this vision. I am a strong advocate for equality and I have fought against discrimination in all areas, including gender. I believe a more equal society is a more productive society on all levels and I am happy and proud to call myself a feminist and an advocate for all persons who are marginalised or subject to discrimination.

MICHAEL D  
HIGGINS



Yes, most definitely. To me feminism goes hand in hand with a commitment to human rights, equality and fairness. It's a matter of women and men being respected as equal citizens. Feminism has been a tool for women's empowerment and advancement in many areas, but also for society's progress as a whole. Far too often we are presented with policies or systems that suit just one part of the population or perhaps affect women differently from men. It is only when we identify, challenge and break these patterns that we can move on and find the kinds of answers and new ideas we really need.

SEÁN  
GALLAGHER



I believe in equality, and as such equality should not be seen as a priority but rather as a reality. I describe myself as a citizen who passionately believes in and advocates for equality. I have worked all my life in communities, as a youth worker and a disability campaigner. I know the importance of enabling and supporting everyone to reach their potential.

MARTIN  
MCGUINNESS



I would indeed. The fight for equality is what has shaped me as a man. But from an early age I understood that there can be no freedom without freedom for women. Níl saoirse gan saoirse na mban.

GAY  
MITCHELL

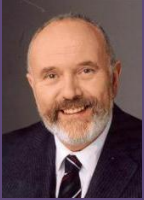


I believe in full and absolute equality for people irrespective of gender. Attaching labels can sometimes come across as divisive or as setting one group against each other. I don't think that helps.

# Q4.

Would you describe yourself as a feminist  
(If yes, why and if no, why not)?

DAVID  
NORRIS



No answer received.

DANA  
ROSEMARY  
SCANLON



No answer received.

## Q5.

Are you willing to participate in a national debate on these issues with the other candidates?

MARY DAVIS



No response received.

MICHAEL D HIGGINS



I would be delighted to do so. Though the schedule is quite tight over the next three weeks!

SEÁN GALLAGHER



Yes, I have already agreed to take part in debates on a range of topics, and with a range of sectors, and more than happy to debate with the other candidates. The office of the Presidency offers a flexible vehicle for promoting conversation and encouraging active participation of every citizen in the narratives that are making our history – encouraging discussion on the issues facing women's rights.

MARTIN MCGUINNESS



Of course.

GAY MITCHELL



I am willing to debate on any issue. Obviously there are major demands on the timetables of all candidates. Timetabling constraints mean that it isn't possible to attend every debate, but if I can attend a debate I will.

# Q5.

Are you willing to participate in a national debate on these issues with the other candidates?

DAVID  
NORRIS



No response received.

DANA  
ROSEMARY  
SCANLON



No response received.