

Conference on women's rights and equality

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“Women's Rights: One of the Great Ethical Challenges of Our Time”

Speech by President Michael D. Higgins

**at the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission & National Women's Council of Ireland
National Conference**

“A Woman's Place is in the World: Have your say on Beijing+20”

Dublin Castle

Friday, 20th February, 2015

Tá áthas orm bheith libh ar fad anseo inniú.

Ba mhaith liom buíochas ó chroí a ghlacadh le Emily Logan, Príomh-Choimisinéir Choimisiún na hÉireann um Chearta an Duine agus um Chomhionannas agus le Orla O'Connor, Stiúrthóir Chomhairle Náisiúnta na mBan in Éirinn, as a geuireadh fial chugam le haithreas a thabhairt don chomhdháil thábhachtach seo.

[I would like express my sincere thanks to Emily Logan, Chief Commissioner of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and to Orla O'Connor, Director of the National Women's Council of Ireland, for their kind invitation to address this important conference.]

When I was elected as President in November 2011, I made a commitment that mine would be a “Presidency of Ideas”. It was with a view to stimulating discussion across all sectors of society on the challenge of living together ethically that in November 2013 I launched The President of Ireland's Ethics Initiative. Underpinning this Initiative is the conviction that the moral principles that guide a person's behaviour, in other words ethics, have an important place in Irish life and in Ireland's relationships abroad.

In a first phase I invited Irish universities to contribute and have been greatly encouraged by the generosity and enthusiasm with which students and academics have responded, with over sixty separate events organised over the past year. In a second phase launched last September, I invited civil society to engage in this national conversation on ethics, and this invitation has been taken up by the Society of St Vincent de Paul, Dóchas, the Wheel, the Congress of Trade Unions – and today by the National Womens Council of Ireland. The Initiative will shortly be coming to a conclusion with a final event at Áras an Uachtaráin, but throughout the various events, it has become clear that the Irish people at home and abroad, indeed the whole community, are anxious for a better understanding of where we are heading to as a society.

The question of women's rights is one that engages the fundamental structures and values of our society and it is for that reason that today's conference is one of the most important events of the President of Ireland's Ethics Initiative, which will be coming to a close in the coming months. The agenda for today's discussions run to the heart of the political, economic and cultural challenges of our contemporary world, none of which can be understood without recognising the gendered nature of inequality and injustice. This is not a residual aspect, but is one apart. This is an appropriate occasion to review the progress that we have made, but also to consider more deeply the nature and scale of the journey we have yet to complete to achieve the full enjoyment of women's rights.

The occasion for our discussion is, of course, the twentieth anniversary of the most progressive and comprehensive strategic plan for the achievement of women's rights in the different regions across the globe. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action continues to be a pivotal point of reference on gender equality for governments, civil society and the public. Its twelve critical areas of concern have provided both a focus for concerted intervention as well as a flexible structure to support the monitoring of progress and to identify effective practices.

As this anniversary approaches, the international community has been challenged to reflect on and review both the achievements that have been made, and the challenges that remain, and new challenges that have emerged since the drawing up of this historic document. Certainly, the overall view of progress under the Platform for Action relates much that is positive, and does indeed contain a message of hope and optimism. Yet there remains a significant journey to be made to full equality.

Women's rights are spreading and strengthening across Africa. There has been a gradual increase of women involved in decision making processes and Rwanda is now rated first in the world in this area of achievement with 64% of the country's legislative seats being held by women. Today most African countries have at least 40% female representation in ministerial positions, creating an example for other regions to follow. With more and more African women and girls now receiving access to education this positive development seems likely to continue. Although, in the economic areas – in theoretical work, policy and practice – progress towards gender equality remains unacceptably slow.

In Asia there has been encouraging progress in the areas of governance and government institutions, including the adoption of gender equality related policies and legislation; the enhanced status of national women's organisations; and an increasing commitment to gender equality across government bodies. While some achievements have also been made in the elimination of violence against women and girls, at the global level violence and coercion are increasing, in particular in zones of conflict.

Latin America has seen female participation in the workplace rise by 33% since 1990 and can claim one of the world's highest representations of women in top government positions, although throughout society we cannot say that machismo has been defeated. Most European countries have reported significant legislative developments aimed at improving and strengthening the rights of their female citizens.

In Ireland, the impact of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was notable in encouraging the development of gender equality legislation since the mid 1990s. It has also profoundly influenced the successive frameworks of policies and actions under and related to the National Women's Strategy, through which the efforts of government agencies, civil society, trade unions and businesses to promote equal treatment of men and women are coordinated. While progress is not even, it is also true to say that there is no area of public life in Ireland which has not been touched to some extent by the ambition underpinning the Declaration and Platform for Action and I welcome the ongoing commitment to continue working for its implementation.

Among the successes to date, we can count spectacular gains in the educational attainment of women and girls, and a substantial reduction in teenage pregnancies. Prior to our recent economic crisis, we also witnessed a steady increase in the numbers of women engaged in paid work; even if the full economic and social contribution of women in areas of activity, such as caring, have not been fully recognised, and it is a fundamental issue of what we define as 'work'. At a societal level, the scourge of violence against women is no longer a taboo subject to be kept hidden within the family or household but is increasingly being viewed and discussed as a human rights issue of urgent concern to both men and women; although it must be recognised that there are disturbing statistics on the emergence of new forms of coercion and intimidation.

Across all Irish development aid programmes and policies, gender impact is considered and monitored. There is now a public expectation that good governance of the State requires strengthening equality principles in the work of all public bodies and the empowerment of women through their participation in public life.

There is, therefore, some modest reason to be optimistic as we survey progress made on this groundbreaking roadmap towards the achievement of full equality for females across the globe. At the same time, there remains much in that overall story that speaks of profound and persistent global injustice for women, reminding us of the many immediate and longer term challenges which must be overcome if we are to achieve empowerment of women across the world.

Oxfam Ireland recently stated that gender inequality lies at the heart of the gap between the richest and poorest people in the world, a gap which sees the 80 richest people on the planet owning the same wealth as the poorest 50 percent. Across the world, women earn less money than men and own less property. In Africa, for instance, while women represent half of the agricultural workforce, they own only 25% of the land, leaving them highly dependent, at risk of losing their livelihood, and vulnerable to poverty, abuse and levels of violence which are up to five times that of developed economies. On a global scale, women produce more than half of all food that is grown but have been described as 'invisible actors', unacknowledged in official plans and policies and denied access to extension resources, seeds, implements and training courses, which could empower them economically.

In Ireland, while we are seeing a welcome increase in high-profile female role models in leadership positions in the public sector, we must accept that women remain under-represented in most key decision-making roles. Politics and the higher reaches of business and academic life are examples of sectors in which the predominance of men and the struggle to transform the working environment to one more inclusive of women are attracting scrutiny.

Despite advances in educational attainment, we have yet to fully break down traditional and stereotypical career expectations for girls and boys and support informed subject and career choices, free of bias. Five of the top six occupation groups for women in Ireland, such as clerical and office work where over 80% of employees in 2011 were women, are in sectors which tend to be feminised globally. We still find gender segregation in the uptake of specific subjects, particularly in the STEM fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Not only are girls and young women a minority of students in these fields, it is also a concern that qualified women are more likely than men to leave these professions.

The slow pace of advancement of women into decision-making roles and on closing the gender pay gap may also be consequences of this ongoing segregation by gender in the labour market. Indeed, European Commission statistics published in 2014 show Ireland's gender pay gap is increasing, standing at 14.4% in 2012 compared with 13.9% in 2010 and 12.6% in 2009 and 2008.

Other challenges, which persist despite significant activity since 1995, include the over-representation of women as providers of the caring role within the family. There can be no doubting the importance of this work, both economically and at a societal level. Next week, I will be delivering the Edward Phelan Lecture to the International Labour Organisation and the National University of Ireland on the theme "The Future of Work", and I will be addressing this question of the need to define work in such a way as to encompass the role of the carer. Unfortunately, however, at present this is work that is often

undervalued by our society and the disproportionate level of care work undertaken by women in Ireland is a significant factor in the lower economic status of females in this country.

While awareness of gender based and sexual violence has undeniably improved, the prevalence of violence remains a grave cause for concern. Indeed disturbing new patterns of sexualised behaviour and the promulgation of sexualised images present a growing threat to children and young people.

Viewing the position of women's rights twenty years after Beijing, then, we see a mixed picture – achievement and progress towards many goals, but persistent and new problems in other areas. However, there is also a danger in focussing solely on the statistical picture of the measurable progress, or otherwise, of women by reference to identified discrete goals. Quantification can obscure the context and quality of discrimination as it is lived and experienced. Rather, the persistence of discrimination against women can also be seen in the context of a deeper crisis at the heart of our political and economic systems.

The outcomes of the economic crisis of the past decade, have been unemployment, poverty, denial of basic human rights and the spreading of feelings of alienation and insecurity throughout our societies. Many individuals and their families are under acute stress and look to the future with a great deal of apprehension. We need to respond by seeking to chart a vision of a hopeful future, an equitable and sustainable future. I have spoken consistently about the need to fundamentally review the structures of our economic and financial systems if we are to maintain the legitimacy of our democratic structures. But we cannot address these great questions of politics and economics without recognising the essential and pervasive gender dimension to the issues at hand.

There is a clear and urgent need to challenge economic analyses that treat women as invisible, or that serve to reinforce situations oppressive to women, and to develop innovative research designed to overcome these failings. What I refer to is, of course, the expanding field of feminist economics, as described by Julie Nelson, Chair of the Department of Economics at the University of Massachusetts Boston, and a prominent scholar in the field. This is a field that includes both studies of gender roles in the economy and critical work directed at biases in the content and methodology of the economics discipline itself.

The economic marginalisation of women is not only bad for women. The pivotal role of gender diversity in policy-making circles in order to broaden the available public policy choices is now becoming more clearly understood. In this regard, I was interested in a 2013 survey of American Economic Association members which found the views of male and female economists differed on a number of issues including the minimum wage and labour standards, and especially on explanations for the gender wage gap and issues of equal opportunity in the labour market.

It is over twenty years since governments, at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992, recognised *women as one of the nine important groups in society to achieve sustainable development*. We know that the outcomes of unsustainable patterns of development can deepen gender inequalities, with the economic, environmental and social consequences disproportionately affecting women and girls. In fact, gender equality can be characterised as both a fundamental rights issue and a very important enabler of sustainable development. It can, therefore, not be seen as an agenda separate and distinct from policies focused on sustainability. From my visit to three African countries, I became even more convinced that security in land tenure for women and equal opportunities in access to materials such as seed and cultivation technologies as well as access to information technologies, marketing resources and budgeting supports are all crucial equality issues as far as women are concerned.

When I spoke in January at the Irish launch of the European Year of Development, I highlighted the coming year as one in which the world's nations would embark both on negotiation of the UN's post-2015 development agenda, and on the climate change agenda, two inter-related processes which are of immense importance. There can be no doubt that this year will require brave and wise decisions from world leaders. It will also require vigilance and activism among Ireland's NGO workers, parliamentarians, public intellectuals, academics, and beyond, to ensure that our policies are sourced in global welfare and that our policy-makers deliver on their promises. It is essential that the position of women is central to both processes.

As I have said, and it is important to give it emphasis, the centrality of women to finding the solutions to sustainable development was brought home to me again and again during my visit last November to Ethiopia, Malawi and South Africa. I had the opportunity to meet inspiring women who spoke about overcoming the myriad challenges in their daily lives, dealing with HIV/AIDS, Gender Based Violence, Climate Change and the day to day challenge of providing the food, water and energy needs to their families.

At the time I quoted the words of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter who stated:

“Food security strategies should be judged on their ability to challenge gender roles and to truly empower women. Gender sensitivity is important, but it is not a substitute for empowerment”.

We must recognise that empowerment relates also to the cultural values being articulated and promoted through media and other influences. The cultural expectations and limitations restricting the personal growth of both girls and boys are no less a problem in Ireland than elsewhere. Rigid cultural and traditional expectations can have devastating impacts on those who do

not fit in. It is up to us to recognise what is harmful, limiting and self-destructive to girls or boys in our culture, and to change it.

Challenging sexualisation and regressive stereotypes is a challenge for women and for men. In the words of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie:

“We should all be feminists. A feminist is a person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes. A feminist is a man or a woman who says, ‘Yes, there’s a problem with gender as it is today, and we must fix it, we must do better.’”

Ar feadh mo ghairmréime féin sa pholaitíocht, chreid mé i gcónaí go raibh sé de dhualgas ar fhir, agus go háirithe ar fhir arbh cheannairí polaitiúla iad, seasamh le mná ina troid ar son a gceart.

[Throughout my own political career, I have always believed that it is incumbent on men, and especially male political leaders, to stand with women in the struggle for women’s rights.]

As an expression of solidarity, and in a spirit of a commitment to women’s rights, then, I am pleased to tell you that I have accepted the invitation of UN Under-Secretary General and Executive Director of UN Women Mlambo-Ngcuka to become one of the group of 10 Champion World Leaders for UN Women’s HeforShe campaign.

HeForShe has been described as a solidarity movement for gender equality that brings together one half of humanity in support of the other half of humanity, for the benefit of all; a global effort that aims to engage men and boys, one half of humanity, in removing the social and cultural barriers that prevent the other half of humanity from achieving their potential. Indeed, as UN Secretary-General Ban has said, HeForShe includes fathers who want to raise empowered daughters, leaders who know their societies will be stronger when there are as many women in business and parliaments as men, and ordinary people who cannot endure seeing violence and discrimination being visited on women and girls. It seems to me self-evident, yet it is inconsistently acknowledged, that the pursuit of gender equality involves at the most fundamental level, men as well as women. The creaky paradigm of gender equality as being in the gift of men, given generously or reluctantly, has missed the point. Gender equality is the prize not the gift. For men, all men, the challenge, in the myriad ways we live our lives, conduct our relationships, engage with our friends and colleagues, is to examine critically what we can do for women’s empowerment and how much we stand to gain.

I commend the bravery and innovation of UN Women’s HeForShe campaign and I am happy today to inscribe my name on the list of what the UN has called Champion World Leaders of the HeForShe campaign. Under the leadership of UN Women and Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, the campaign provides the platform for men to be part of a renewed movement to complete the work we began at Beijing.

As the twentieth anniversary of this historic agreement in 1995 draws close, Member States of the United Nations will be asked next month to renew their commitment to realise the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. This renewed commitment will require new approaches to increase women’s participation in decision-making as we continue to work to achieve a common global vision of full gender equality. It will also involve challenging societal norms and values in every member state, and confronting deep-rooted prejudices.

Through the hard-fought victories of feminism and all those who have campaigned for equality and women’s rights, we have reached the point where all issues affecting the rights of women are open for discussion and can no longer be suppressed or obscured. Yet there is so much to be done to achieve real equality, and there are so many areas where respect for the rights of women remains an aspiration rather than a reality. While contexts and cultures may differ, and have to be respected, there can never be acceptance of any screen being placed between the citizen and her rights.

The realisation of those rights is one of the great ethical challenges of our age – for women and for men who share an ethical commitment to equality and universal respect for rights. I would like to repeat this call to all the civil society organisations represented here today, to join forces to voice the values you wish to see placed at the heart of our collective and indeed global future.

It gives me great pleasure therefore to open this conference and I look forward to the contribution that you will all make to building a more just Ireland and a more just world, for men and for women.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.