

## Submission to the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality and how to achieve it

*by Moira Devery, M.A., Historian, National Tourist Guide and former Human Rights Activist*

### Historical Introduction

Achieving Gender Equality is one of the greatest challenges we face, not just in Ireland but globally. Why? Because patriarchal society (the domination of men over women) has been a feature of every single historical era and ruling class worldwide for the last five or six thousand years. The Patriarchy has survived slave society, feudalism, and still dominates capitalism. It is a form of society where men try to reserve the public domain or sphere for themselves to wield power and where they keep women oppressed to force them into the private sphere and exploit women's bodies for both sexual pleasure and their reproductive capacities. Giving birth is the only thing men cannot do themselves and thus historically women have been traded as slaves and concubines. Women are pressed into submission either by violence or by indoctrination such as the Nazis telling German women their role was to produce new members of the pure Aryan race. Martin Luther and Napoleon are both known to have referred to women's main function as giving birth. Luther famously said: "And who can enumerate all the ludicrous, ridiculous, false, vain, and superstitious ideas of this seducible sex?"

Thus, women's intellects and minds have been manipulated for many thousands of years and women (and men too) have internalised the role that is expected of them i.e. women to be subservient to men, to feel inadequate, inferior to men, to feel incomplete unless they have a man in their lives, to refer to men for guidance in decision making and for leadership. This is felt from the moment a baby is born: the first question is: boy or girl? If it's a boy, then he will carry on the family name and inheritance even though the logical approach would be to have a matriarchal line since only maternity was indisputable for millennia (before DNA testing came along). Despite many advances in women's rights thanks to the women's liberation movements and many legal reforms giving women some rights equal to men, much of the sexism and discrimination against women continues on a daily basis. Nowadays, given the necessity to be politically correct, the discrimination is more covert, hidden, inherent, subtle, much more difficult to pinpoint and nail down. Sometimes it even continues at an unconscious level because people are creatures of habit and do not change discriminatory practises unless they become aware that they are discriminating against women. Very often, the discrimination is blatantly obvious but yet accepted by women because they have resigned themselves to it. For example, victims of sexual assault and rape not reporting the attack because they know the system is loaded against them. In most countries, the number of rape cases where a conviction follows is very small compared to the numbers reported: women are subjected to accusations of why did they walk down the dark alley, why had they drunk alcohol, why did they wear a short skirt. Instead, our legal

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system, where most of the lawyers and judges are men, should be asking different questions such as “Why did the accused rapist not respect the women’s right to be out late at night, why did he not control his urge to subject a woman to his will, why did he feel entitled to attack and take control over a woman’s body for no reason apart from his lust for power and to express his hatred for women and his desire for revenge?”

People with power or privilege are very reluctant to give it up or to share it. This is one reason why wars and disputes arise. No ruling class ever gives up power or privilege voluntarily unless they are put under sufficient pressure to do so. For thousands of years, up until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most work was manual and heavy and unsuitable to the generally smaller and less muscular frame of women compared to men. In addition, women also had the massive disadvantage that they had no way of reliably controlling their fertility and were thus caught up in the trap of their financial dependency of a man to provide for them, thus making them very vulnerable to exploitation and violence.

So despite the fact that in the First World at least, women now receive a good education, have certain legal rights their great-grandmothers didn’t have such as the right to inherit property, to obtain an abortion or a divorce, to obtain a third level education, the mass of women still live very much in a world where most major decisions in politics, religion, finance and business are taken by men. We were socialised to be women, not men, to be caring and considerate, not egoistic and ambitious. Who determines what we have to be like? The ruling classes, religious leaders and their ideology/philosophy which means rules and ideologies invented by men.

My generation of women (born in the mid-1950s) was told it was important to have a profession but only until you got married or in case your husband died young. Men were raised to believe their job or career was the most important thing in their lives because it meant financial independence. They would be the breadwinner if they decided to get married and have a family. These inbred attitudes are changing in the younger generation in Ireland and in most modern First World countries but not necessarily in most of the rest of the world. And even in our First World society, the hidden glass ceilings are still very much present.

Most employers, even some female employers, prefer men because they are seen to be more reliable because they can’t become pregnant and take time off to look after their children. In addition, men are very often still considered to be more rational than women who were often considered to be more hysterical/emotional, the dichotomy of being ruled by the head and not the heart.

Until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, history was mainly written by men about men and their deeds. Women are generally conspicuously absent. Most well-known historical figures such as emperors and popes, kings and generals, explorers and inventors, artists and musicians were men, so women grow up with a world where men appear to be the more intelligent, powerful force and women’s feelings of inferiority are reinforced on a daily basis. Religion,

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the backbone of patriarchal society, proclaims that God is a man or three men (Trinity), as are his prophets (Jesus, Mohammad or Buddha). The so-called "holy" books, written by men, invariably say that women are subject to men because that is God's will. Christianity proclaims the loss of paradise is attributable to a woman disobeying God and tempting man. Islam grants many privileges to men (polygamy) and the express right to subjugate a wife by beating her. Even Buddhism says men are greater than women and are closer to God because Buddha was a man and he achieved enlightenment first. Thus, the monks are higher in the hierarchy than nuns. Patriarchy as an all-encompassing, all pervasive social force continues to relegate women to a more inferior role and place in society and will continue to do so unless we can find ways to subvert it, to dismantle it, to de-construct it and to expose its exploitation of women at all levels of society.

### **What is the way Forward?**

What can we do to dismantle the patriarchy and establish a society where women and men enjoy equal rights and respect?

As with all complex challenges, a multi-tiered approach or action plan with short, middle and long-term goals is required.

### **The Importance of Consciousness Raising**

Consciousness or awareness raising is not just important, it is vital for both men and women. Men too often feel trapped in social roles and expectations such as not being allowed to show feelings or weakness. Women especially need to see and understand the all pervasiveness of this discrimination towards them. We all need to understand that while some discrimination is conscious and planned, some of it is inbuilt into a social system which keeps functioning as long as people support it and do not challenge it or try to change it.

We need to initiate a social discourse about establishing gender equality and combatting everyday sexism, where sexism comes from, how it is self-perpetuating and how we can tackle it. Once we have understood the origins of the problem, we need to go beyond that understanding and set about writing a blue-print to achieve change at all levels of society within a given timeframe. This means legal changes i.e. changing the constitution on gender roles and introducing legislation to ensure equal rights, but also and mainly mind-set changes. Men too are often trapped into this role of breadwinner and leader.

Many men nowadays are delighted at the easing of strict gender roles to be able to look after their children more and to share the responsibility of bringing home the money for the family with their wife. We need to breakdown the stereotypical roles of man, the breadwinner and woman, the homemaker and create social and economic structures which enable both parents to work and care for their children on a full or part-time basis. This can only happen if and when the state creates childcare facilities which enable both parents to work on an equal basis. It will mean raising taxes to pay for state child-care facilities, but the benefits of having a state-run system are clear: standardised care with greater

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accountability. It goes without saying that such childcare facilities should be secular and have no religious overtones or connections of any kind.

But no one gives up privileges easily or willingly. When it comes to sharing power and influence at the higher levels of management, financial and scientific leadership and politics, it will prove far more difficult to persuade men to accept women into the ranks of leaders. Quotas are one option here, but why be satisfied with 30%, why not 50% as the long-term goal?

Few men admit that they have an advantage over women simply because they are men. In my lifetime, I have only ever met two men who voluntarily admitted that simply being born a man gives you a distinct advantage over any woman! Luckily, there have been a few men in history who took up the cause of women such as John Stuart Mill, the Marquis de Condorcet in France and the late Jack Holland, journalist, who wrote the book *Misogyny, the world's oldest prejudice*. Thus, women have to become more assertive and demand equal rights in every field of life and in every way possible whether it's getting their husband / partner/ or children to share the household chores, sharing maternity / paternity leave, sharing the driving of the family car (if it's still a one-car family), whether it's looking after elderly relatives. Even more importantly, we need to take the *state* to task and to challenge its *constitutionalised* assumption that women are there to be unpaid carers and volunteers for work that should be paid. The *state* must provide childcare and care services for elderly people. We have to challenge the idea that it is normal for women to work for less money and to do part-time work so they can do this work of caring for children and elderly relatives. The women are the ones who suffer in the end and who pay the high price of poverty in old age because their pension is negligible. There is a worldwide problem of female poverty, not just in old age.

Women need to inform themselves about salaries when going for job interviews and know what to ask for and not take a lower salary for the same work. Women need to increase their sense of self-importance and self-confidence and develop their leadership skills. They need to go into politics (whether local or national) and find their voice and use it to demand equality and not be shy about calling discrimination, discrimination. The gender pay gap must be combatted at various levels. Legal changes are required but there must also be ways to enforce any legal changes, otherwise they are toothless reforms.

Women need to find role models to emulate and to have as inspiration. There are some wonderful role models out there, not as many as men have but they are hidden, lost in the mists of history or neglect. Women have not been raised to blow their own trumpet and to tell others about their achievements. But when we (re)-search we do find some wonderful female artists, composers, musicians, inventors, researchers, scientists, writers, poets, sportswomen, politicians. But we need to make them visible.

Concrete examples: Men name streets, squares, buildings and bridges after men. Women's groups have to fight to have streets or squares or bridges named after other women.

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Example: when the tower of the city hall in Cologne, Germany was being renovated and it was decided to erect 129 statues of famous people on it, only five women were included by the city council. It took years of fighting and campaigning by the local women's historical society to persuade the council to include more women. This proved difficult because it meant having to demote some of the chosen men but their perseverance was rewarded in the end and the final balance was 18 women and 111 men, nowhere near equity but still a victory of sorts! I recently devised a walking tour of Dublin about Hanna Sheehy Skeffington for the Herstory Light Festival on Brigid's Day because I felt she is one of the most interesting women in modern Irish history and yet far less-well known than Constance Markiewicz. Is this because she was a radical feminist or because she was a pacifist who refused to take up arms for Irish freedom? Yet she was active in Easter Week and spent months fundraising for the new free state in the USA and Canada. We need to make women like her better known to everyone. She is a typical example of how male historians ignore a fascinating activist who drove an amazing political movement for woman suffrage which is not treated in most school history books.

### **Combatting Everyday Sexism in its various Forms**

**Language** is far more important than we think when it comes to achieving gender equality. Words define people, things, concepts. Those who define, determine how we see things. The words they choose are important. An example: men are proud of being "men". Why are women in Ireland not proud to be women? Why do most people in Ireland, both men and women, refer to women as "girls"? Having lived abroad for almost 40 years in another European country and having travelled extensively, I find it astonishing that women allow themselves to be referred to as "girls" and that they often refer to themselves as "girls". The definition is a girl is someone under 18, immature, young, inexperienced. Women will never be taken seriously or be treated as equal partners if they allow people to refer to them as girls. I nip this particular disrespect in the bud immediately if anyone refers to me as a girl. I say I am not a girl, that I am a woman and proud of it and that it's been a long time since I was a girl and that I do not wish to be referred to as a girl. This (polite) assertiveness usually raises eyebrows but has not made any enemies so far. In my experience, European women are proud to call themselves women.

Ireland is becoming very Americanised, unfortunately, and so we find more and more people using the inappropriate term "guys" to address both men and women. In my youth, we spoke of lads and lassies or guys and gals. Now women are being subsumed under a male category as we are when texts refer to the reader as he. This has to change to s/he or they. Legislation to change this would be a welcome first step. Women are always being treated as the "Other". Try using the female pronouns "she" and "her" in all conversation and general communication for even a week and men would soon realise what it is like to be always treated as the "Other" or "Second" sex as Simone de Beauvoir described it. When undergoing training as tourist guides in 2019, we were taught that the correct address is *by Moira Devery, M.A., Historian, National Tourist Guide and former Human Rights Activist*

“Ladies and Gentlemen” or simply “Folks”, if you want to address people in groups. Both forms are more inclusive than “Guys”.

Much of languages in misogynist. Many jokes perpetuate myths about women being bad drivers, nasty mothers-in-law, nagging wives, dumb blonds, etc. There also appear to be far more denigrating words for women than for men. Prostitutes have multiple names such as whores, sluts etc but how many denigrating words exist for the men who demand the sexual services from them?

Despite the fact that the women’s movement in the 1970s introduced the word Ms as the modern equivalent of the male Mr (i.e. no reference to women’s marital status), it is astonishing that so many countries refuse to adopt this term. Despite protest emails from feminists, major airlines such as Lufthansa and Aer Lingus still refer to female passengers as Mrs and not Ms. Ryanair is one of the only ones to allow women to choose to be referred to as Ms. We probably need a new Ms not Mrs campaign on Twitter to fight this discrimination.

### **Sexism in Religion**

On the question of institutionalised world religions which relegate women to the role of second-class citizens with no voice or power, I would say two things:

*Patriarchal religions are the backbone of our subjection as women.* People are drafted into the respective religion as babies so they accept its doctrines without question: this applies to both men and women. Self-designated “holy” men then tell us our place in life as women is to be subject to God and to men while men only have to be subject to god. Not alone do women have no voice in the main mono and poly-theistic religions, we as women are blamed for Paradise Lost or for tempting men into sin (hence veiling in Islam) and thus we are taught to listen to men, to respect their word, to accept their superiority, whether they are priests, imams, rabbis, Buddhist monks or Hindu holy men.

Do we have to accept this discrimination as part of “Civilization or our Heritage”? The answer is No. We do not have to respect any religion which does not respect us as an equal human being. We can use our feet and walk away, refuse to be a member, stop paying dues, stop going to services, stop veiling ourselves. Spirituality is possible without an institution. Community with others is possible in many other ways than going to religious services. Just watch the clouds moving across the sky and listen to the birds chirping and you’ve meditated on the beauty of Mother Nature.

### **Sexism and The Glass Ceiling**

At the level of awareness raising and changing behaviour patterns, we need to talk more about the subtle discrimination of everyday sexism.

Example: sociological studies have shown that the academic achievements of women and men are not assessed on an equal basis. The same academic papers submitted for

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assessment regularly attained a higher grade when submitted under a male name rather than a female name. This was true regardless of whether the assessment was done by a male or a female. Thus, not just men, even women, think men are more capable than women, and hold men in higher estimation than women! And while we know of the existence of "old boy's clubs", when men help each other up the career ladder, it seems that the historical rivalry among women to "get a man" means women often tend to see other women as competition and not to want to show solidarity with one another. This applies to **all** areas of life, not just to third level education.

### **Sexism and Fashion**

Women have also been brain-washed into thinking they have to please men by their outward appearance and to dress as men would like to see them. This often results in women falling into the trap of concentrating too much energy on their appearance instead of their education and future career. Women often dress in dangerously high heels, short skirts and a low decoltee to please the male eye while men dress to please themselves since their recognition comes from their job and their career. The beauty trap is one which women need to analyse and reject. Why is beautiful or pretty the most common adjective used for woman while men are content to be seen as clever or intelligent or courageous? Why does fashion constantly turn women into sexual objects e.g. by producing ultra- short shorts for women than show past of the buttocks while shorts for men rarely go above the knees unless they are for playing football or other games? Women have to stop allowing themselves to be manipulated in this way. We can say no to fashion trends just as we can refuse to buy products which stereotype toys and clothes for girls and boys. It is a marketing ploy to offer pink for girls and blue for boys; you can sell twice as much if you stress the differences between the sexes than the similarities. But in reality, it would be better if boys and girls were brought up to play with both dolls and trains. Again, this is a question of raising awareness and choosing to change how we raise our children. In general terms, we need to raise girls to be more self-confident and boys to be more considerate of others.

### **Sexism in Education**

Many of the middle to long-term goals to build gender equality must be anchored in the educational system. Yet it is amazing how much sexism exists even in the education system. We need to stop internalising messages that we are not good at maths or science (my generation was constantly told that girls couldn't do maths and that we were not allowed to do honour maths or Latin, not to mention physics and chemistry, which were not even on the curriculum). Even in my daughter's generation, there were teachers in her school who openly discriminated against the girls. A male chemistry teacher used to tell the girls it was ok to stay at the back of the class and to let the boys use the Bunsen burners. After all, when they, the girls, became housewives, they would only need to know how to operate a microwave oven. Some people, even women, still think it's appropriate to expect girls to help with chores at home while boys are excused and allowed out to play their sports whereas the reality is both boys and girls should be doing chores at home and playing

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sports. There is a good initiative called 20x20 which encourages not just girls to play more sport but also encourages the media to give at least 20% coverage to women's sports. There is another campaign called "She cannot be what she cannot see". If girls do not see women scientists, engineers, and politicians at work, then they will not see these professions are something to aim for. Our history books need to be rewritten to reflect women in history. Wars and battles are overemphasised while social history is neglected.

### **Sexism in the Media**

As in so many other spheres of life, positions of power and influence are mainly held by men and this is still true in the media. But even the journalist is subject to the editing of an editor. Reporting on women's topics, not just women's sport, is not a priority. Where there is a lack of consciousness of gender bias, there is a lack of equal representation. Many live TV discussion panels, especially after elections, are conspicuous because women are often under represented. During the campaign for women's suffrage at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Irish Citizen, the suffrage newspaper, was set up to present these views to the public which would otherwise not have been published. Women political candidates, regularly get less media coverage than male candidates.

### **Combatting Violence against Women**

This is an area which has not been mentioned in the questionnaire at all. *Yet violence against women is one of the main forms of control over women all over the world and is one of the mainstays of patriarchal power.* Even in Western society, statistics show that one in four women experience violence at the hands of their partner or close relative during their lifetime. Gender violence is a massive problem which is very neglected in almost all countries. It is used to oppress and intimidate women and girls. Women are raped, sexually assaulted and harassed by family members, bosses, colleagues and to a lesser extent by strangers in the street. The problem is so endemic, it is almost not seen because violence against women is so "normal" that we almost don't see it any more. Read the papers any day and you will find constant reports of women being attacked, raped, murdered by family members, neighbours or acquaintances. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Somali-born Dutch human rights activist coined the phrase "gendercide" to express this phenomenon at a Human Rights Conference I attended some years ago in Cologne. Apart from domestic violence, rape and sexual assault, there are many other forms of violence against women such as aborting female fetuses in India and China because boys are desired; abandoning female infants; female genital mutilation in many countries such as Indonesia and Egypt, Somalia and Sudan; forced marriages, honour killings, forced prostitution. Denying women access to contraception, abortion, maternity and other healthcare services are other ways in which women are kept in subjection. For women, their anatomy is often (tragically) their destiny, as Freud once famously put it. Even in Europe, some countries such as Germany charge a higher rate of VAT on tampons and sanitary towels because they are considered to be luxury goods, not basics.

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To combat all these different forms of violence, women and men need to become aware of the problem. Even before women were excluded from jury service in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland, some Irish feminists went to the Four Courts on a regular basis and reported on crimes of violence in the suffragette newspaper. Rape in marriage, as we know was only outlawed in several European countries in the 1990s, in Ireland, 1990; in Germany 1997.

Self-defence classes need to become part of the school sports curriculum, in particular for girls. Sex education for all pupils from a certain age is vital and if teachers are not happy to do this, then trained experts should be brought in for special workshops on the subject. develop and practise leadership skills and learn to be decisive.

Why do men practise violence against women? Because they can. It is such an endemic part of patriarchal society that it is accepted as being part of life. It goes hand in hand with what men see in pornos where women are treated as objects to be used and abused; it is a form of control and intimidation. Misogynist video games must be banned because of the effect they have on boy's and men's minds. Access to porno must be restricted and more healthy pursuits for young people encouraged such as sports and dancing. Dancing brings people together in a social context and would be a useful form of sport if the competitive element is removed.

### **Conclusion**

There will never be gender equality if we simply make laws to guarantee equal pay. The whole basis of patriarchal power needs to be de-constructed both ideologically and in practise. The systematic re-thinking of gender relations, the re-writing of history is required. The mindset, whereby it is better to be born a man, has to change. Both women and men have to become aware of the indoctrination of patriarchal society because otherwise they will never be able to see and recognise sexism for what it is: an ever-present, all pervasive way of keeping women in a subordinate position so men can rule in the public sphere and women are mainly relegated to the private sphere. Once recognised, this oldest of prejudices, misogyny, can be fought and dismantled. The famous Austrian-American historian, Gerda Lerner, once said that until women achieve equal rights, we are still in a period of pre-history. But it will not be easy. For every advance that women have made in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, we unfortunately see a backlash movement while patriarchal elements try to re-establish their power. The election of many macho-style political leaders such as Putin, Erdogan, Trump and Johnson and the defeat of a well-qualified and experienced female politician such as Hillary Clinton is a sign that the Patriarchy is not going to give up its privileges without a battle. But there is reason for hope. Jimmy Carter left his Southern Baptist Convention because it rejected gender equality. The SBC had called for women to be submissive to their husbands and denounced abortion and homosexuality. Even our own former president, Mary McAleese, is considering leaving the Catholic Church because of its failure to take action against the abuse of women and minors by Catholic priests whom the church had personally commended.

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My recent research into Hanna and Frank Sheehy Skeffington and their friend James Connolly brought home to me that had the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising survived and formed a government, we would have had a much more egalitarian society because the 1916 Proclamation called for equal rights for men and women regardless of creed or class.

This Citizen's Assembly is an important first step in this process and I wish it every success.

The ideas and opinions expressed here are my own but have obviously be inspired by my previous human rights work with the German organisation Terre des Femmes and Heroes and my historical research. I apologise for the lack of footnotes or greater structure; I only found out a few days ago that there was a Citizen's Assembly on gender equality and I thought it advisable to get something down on paper before the March 6 2020 deadline expires.

Moira Devery, 5 March 2020