

Citizens' Assembly – 14 November 2020

Theme - Work

Personal Experience Panel



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🕒 Citizens Assembly Speaker Notes

Citizens Assembly on Gender Equality online meeting
Theme: work

I am currently IT Support and Moderator for An Cosán. I am also a Board Director and Secretary of a Social Enterprise and Housing Association Project and have awards as JCI Ten Outstanding Young People in Ireland and Dublin 2018. I have been an advocate in liaison with An Cosán, Aontas and The National Women's Council of Ireland. I am passionate about Human Rights, Social Justice, Community Development, Education and Technology.

History

I will be speaking about my experience as a working lone parent. I have tried my best to come through adversity and persevere with grit. I have been working in paid employment since the age of 16 and worked fulltime throughout pregnancy at 18 years of age.

I spent 8 years working Part Time in retail and in 2009 my contract was cut from 15 to 4 hours making my position untenable. I had returned to education and retrained and took up CE Scheme as Childcare Assistant and advanced to Financial Assistant. I have had short term contracts since 2012 and have had 6 roles since then.

Many times I have not had much choice in the roles I took, it was a matter of survival and being there to be a parent to my daughter. Due to the lack of community and childcare services in the duration of austerity I had to wait until my daughter was in school before I could leave very precarious part time weekend retail employment. The salary norms for most women in certain sectors are very low, especially in retail and NGO sector but I had hope that I would one day work my way up.

I have also completed 2 CE Schemes, 2 Internships and an Apprenticeship and each time I have had to take cuts in income. Despite adding to my skillsets and education portfolio I had to start back at the bottom. I was willing to do this as the skills and networks gained and mentorship were valuable. At the same time Lone Parent Family payments were being cut each year for working parents. In 2017 I took a break to focus on my education as it was no longer viable to continue working, being involved in the community, studying and caring for my daughter. It was exhausting and not worth it. I was studying for my degree and my daughter was transitioning in secondary school. I could not gain full time employment due to my caring responsibilities, seen by some as the Motherhood Penalty. My friend helped me on the full day I had in college and my daughter trusted her. I would not have been able to work any other hours past the school collection time. I needed the balance, to be able to be a Mother and be present and work in a role I enjoyed and flourished in.

I applied for a job on the Digital Pathways Team in An Cosán and it suited me as it was only a few hours a week and I loved helping students to learn. I advanced in Technology and was still able to be there for my daughter. A year and a half later and I was offered an Apprenticeship with Goodbody Stockbrokers who are a Partner of An Cosán. I took the challenge and enjoyed learning about Tech and Business. I came back to An Cosán and am now IT Support.

I kept studying and tried my hardest to work full time. I negotiated a 35 hour contract as with my circumstances 39 is too much pressure and my daughter still needs me. Society thinks that once a child reaches 13 that they no longer need you, when in fact teen years are a crucial stage of Development. As single working mothers we have twice the stress, twice the worry and little support in navigating parenthood and are more pressured into finding fulltime work before us or our children are ready. If we are pushed by activation measures and gone all day our children are left to their own devices and are prey to undesirables as they don't feel cared for. A cycle then begins, and antisocial behaviour and trouble is the result, this affects society as a whole. Being employed is good but only if it meets yours and your family's needs. The Covid pandemic has revealed huge gaps in policy regarding women and the lack of childcare. Childcare is a feminised profession, so it is not viewed as important or valued like business or economics and structural pay inequality is dominant.

There is no insight that our children are our future leaders. If we treat them with love, compassion, support, and kindness and provide adequate services for them then we will have a better society led by great people. If we continue to under invest in children, women, men and families well then all of our futures look bleak as mental health issues and conflict will skyrocket. I'm still trying to navigate the system and am reminded of the trauma of the last recession where finances decrease, and nothing is promised. I still live with the mind-set of never spending more than I earn as I never want to be classed as being a poor single mother ever again.

Recommendations:

In my experience I assert that the most effective way to help Gender Equality for working women and Mothers are

- To revolutionize Childcare Policies.
Lack of Female representation and diversity, especially Socio economic status means that current policy is based on situations that the affluent will never have to experience. Subverted Childcare, Early Years Education and Teen Development schemes which will benefit working parents, children and childcare staff needs to be implemented. This could be done through tax incentivisation or benefits in kind. In the 21st Century innovative solutions are required if women are to be a part of the workforce.
- Flexible work hours.
Women have risen to the challenge and have shown their strength during the Covid crisis, turning into teachers, leaders and workers all at the same time. We were able to adapt, some women from office to home, others balanced children with work outside the home, all with no warning. Remote working was never offered to many, yet we were expected to do it straight away. I recommend that in the future women get the option to work some hours remotely and not to have to stick to rigid 9 to 5 structures. Many women are stuck at present as school times changed and there is no transport and walking carries risk due to crowds. Some women are forgoing lunch breaks to facilitate drop offs and collection, again paying the price of the motherhood penalty. There should be more flexibility to allow mothers to meet deadlines and have work-life balance. Policies have not moved at the pace that the change we have been accelerated into has and they need to reflect our new ways of living.
- Pay us what we are worth.
Why am I worth less than a man doing my job? Is it because I have the few appointments a year to attend to, which my leave it holidays cover? The midterm school collections? Is it because I funded and completed my degree part-time over 3 years rather than fulltime with the full student lifestyle? Or is it simply that I was born a Female and that's just the way it is? I am written in law as less than a man. The roles I was born to fulfil were within the domestic and care spheres, I fulfil these roles but I also fulfil many more. We need to have options, career paths, role models and funding structures which support us in having a career we will be great at and not just a cog in the wheel in a job. We need to be able to dream, to aspire, inspire and try. We need to be paid what we are worth to do this. 75% of the work we do is unpaid, unrecognised work, yet it is the most vital to keep society functioning. Invest in a women and the whole community and society benefits. It makes logical and economic sense and will bring in more tax revenue.