

Submission by Men's Voices Ireland to Citizens' Assembly on Gender Inequality

We were encouraged by articles in the newspapers on Jan.25 2020 which promised that there would be a place for men in the deliberations of the Assembly. The assumption is widespread that when gender inequality is mentioned that this is something which applies to women only and the only question is to prioritise those areas in which this is most glaring.

This is completely false. There is a total disregard in the media of those areas in which men are disadvantaged. This has been going on for so long that it is taken for granted and has become an axiom of media discourse. Meanwhile men suffer silently over a whole range of areas which are never aired in the press or radio to the extent that the public is completely unaware of it. Much of this is outrageous.

In making a submission to this Assembly we are conscious of a deep unease in that we are hard put to determine under which heading in the Assembly's programme some of our concerns properly fit. Men are invited to participate but under what category does Education lie, where do we put Male Suicide? In both cases there are very real inequalities.

We have decided to plough ahead regardless and to list the areas which we believe most need to be heard.

Issues in which men are discriminated against which are very pertinent:

1. One broad area of inequality is the funding of men's lobby groups compared to those of women.

A core underlying factor affecting all particular issues is that there is no nationwide advocacy group or counterpart of the NWC for men, with a permanent office. This is a huge drawback when it comes to establishing a presence, lobbying politicians and state agencies, taking up issues with the media, doing research and making appearances before Oireachtas committees.

The NWC has been state-funded since the mid-seventies. This has enabled it to set up a permanent office with a full-time staff (11 at present) to keep abreast of developments in research, maintain an input into discussions on social issues, to appear at hearings before Oireachtas committees and to brief the media.

Apart from the NWC, which acts as an umbrella organisation for women's groups, there is a plethora of other groups, receiving millions of euro from the State, dealing with a variety of issues affecting women's lives.

As a consequence, men as a group are disadvantaged; there is no recognised lobby group to highlight the inadequacies in provision for men in areas such as male suicide and mental health, domestic violence, family law and education. Men's Voices gets no funding from any quarter.

One glaring example of this inequality occurred during the Hearings of the Justice Committee on Domestic Violence in February 2014. There was not one group present to put the case for men, (even Amen was not there nor did it make a submission) there were more than 40 groups representing women, all state funded. The report which appeared the following October reflected this imbalance to an overwhelming degree.

No doubt there have been many other such instances.

2. The whole area of Domestic Violence, DV, is riven with inequality:

The imbalance in funding for male victims of DV is enormous. In answer to a Parliamentary Question in April 2018 we got the following information:

Funding to Anyman, the men's support service, represented 1.4% of the total €17 million of funding provided by Tusla to Domestic Violence services in 2017.

There are more than 20 refuges for women, not a single one for men. There is not a single centre for male victims in the whole of the greater Dublin area, where more than one million people live. The nearest one is in Navan. Yet this centre in Navan, currently the home of Anyman, is only able to offer a very limited 9 to 5 service from Monday to Friday, with no service on weekends.

Contrast this with the services offered to female victims which is 24/7 all the year round. Moreover, according to the best of our knowledge, there are 45 domestic, sexual and gender-based violence centres spread across 24 counties. These include Anyman and the MDN service which support men and the OSS in Cork which serves both genders. There are more than 40 centres providing support for women, many offer refuge also.

These do not include the 16 Rape Crisis centres.

Quite a number of these groups received in excess of €1m funding in 2018: Women's Aid, Safe Ireland, Sonas, Aoibhneas, Adapt.

None of these facts gets coverage in the media.

The evidence from an overwhelming body of research and from researchers on DV agrees on certain fundamental points [5], [6], [7].

We know from this literature that:

- Men and women perpetrate DV across all the types at comparable rates
- More than 50% of DV is reciprocal; that is both parties are engaged in it
- Women are as controlling as men

- Men and women perpetrate DV for similar motives.

Yet this is never debated in the media and a one-sided narrative prevails. Repeated efforts to draw media attention to these facts have met with silence.

3. Family Law outcomes are acknowledged to be harsher on men. When a decision is made to award the family home to one partner, that partner is most often the woman. Dr. Roisin O'Shea published a seminal thesis *Judicial Separation and Divorce in the Circuit Court* [4], in 2013 which provides much information on the outcomes in such cases. She found that:

- Men rarely acquired the right to reside in the family home.
- Men are nearly three times more likely to leave the family home.

This places the man in the difficult position of not only having to maintain himself but of trying to maintain regular access to his children often from a distance. Current practice is one evening a week and every second weekend [4].

But if a man's circumstances do not permit, he may be denied overnight access because of inadequate accommodation. We know that Joint custody on a 50:50 shared basis occurs only on a minuscule level.

In relation to parity of treatment see recommendation 33 in the Justice Committee report [5].

In a Dail debate in Feb. 2015 Deputy Billy Kelleher said: *"As you are aware I have a problem with the ease with which men can be removed from their homes by their wives. This is where the problems begin for most men"*

Men's Voices along with others has already argued the urgent need to move away from the adversarial system of the family courts to a form of alternative dispute resolution, ADR.

A critique of the adversarial form of the family law system and the benefits of moving towards ADR is the subject of a number of recommendations in [5].

There is at present no automatic right to guardianship for single fathers. See Recommendation 35 of [5]

It should also be remembered that there is almost no support for men undergoing the difficult process of separation/divorce.

This brings us to another grave inequality, that of unjustifiable, enforced father absence from their children.

The societal effects of father absence are grave and far-reaching [6]. We believe this is involuntary in the great majority of cases.

A major cause of father absence lies in decisions made in the family courts. A devastating comment on the failings of the courts to deal with refusal of access is given in [4] P. 157-8:

“It would appear that where a primary carer deliberately chooses to frustrate the orders of the court, seeking to withhold children from the other parent, that the ‘system’ as it currently operates is not only ineffective in addressing this issue, it actually facilitates the strategy of that parent, thereby contributing to the adverse impact on children.”

This has implications for family law reform. See [5] Recommendation 14.

A grim comment on the consequences of father absence was given by Dr Warren Farrell in a TED talk in Oct 2015: *Prisons are centres for dad-deprived boys* [7].

4. It is often said that Ireland does not have a high suicide rate compared to other OECD countries, but this masks a high gender disparity. One of the most striking facts about the suicide figures in Ireland is the high male-female ratio. This fact is rarely if ever remarked on in the press or media or addressed by policy making bodies.

The male:female suicide ratio is 4:1 and has been thus or higher for two decades. Yet it was not always so. Dr Michael Kelleher [8] tracked these rates for many years and found the ratio was 2.3:1 in the mid-seventies. It then climbed steadily until it reached 4:1 about 2000 where it has remained ever since. Why did this happen?

It surely points to serious societal causes which have been deteriorating over a period of decades.

A Research Report from 2012 commissioned by the Samaritans in the UK entitled *Men, Suicide and Society* [9] says baldly **that suicide needs to be addressed as a health and gender inequality.**

The phenomenon is more gendered here in Ireland than anywhere else in western Europe with a male-female ratio at or above 4:1 for decades. Nevertheless, it is not investigated or treated as a gender issue despite suicide being a major cause of death among young males on the island of Ireland.

Ireland has the fourth highest rate of suicide amongst teenagers in the EU, according to a Unicef report [10] with boys three times more likely than girls to take their own lives.

Countries such as Belgium, Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries, have a male- female ratio below 3:1. To quote Professor Brendan Kelly, professor of psychiatry in Trinity College

Dublin: *"Suicide affects both men and women, but men are being particularly left behind in Ireland. In terms of suicide, Irish society is failing men deeply, desperately, and to an extent that other European societies are not. We need enhanced focus on understanding the particular drivers of suicide in men and revised strategies that benefit men as well as women."*

No investigation set out to examine this question. Even the major document *Connecting for Life* from 2015 does not consider this. We know from the ONS in the UK [11] that men who have experienced relationship breakdown are nearly three times as likely to commit suicide as men in stable relationships. This is powerfully relevant to reform of Family Law but again this has not been recognised.

This is further reinforced in a more recent report [12] for the Samaritans in 2017, *Dying from Inequality*, which highlights the impact that social inequality can have on the suicide figures. Among its findings are:

Suicide rates are twice as high in deprived areas

Men are more vulnerable to the adverse effects of economic recession, including suicide risk, than women

People who are unemployed are two to three times more likely to die by suicide than those in employment.

Specific life events where men have little or no support and yet which have heightened risk of suicide include both during and after divorce or separation, when suffering at the hands of an abusive partner, school drop-out, and after losing jobs.

This last factor was highlighted during the recession when the overall increase in suicide was attributed to an increase in the male rate of unemployment.

There are many other areas in which gender inequality exists such as Education, the fact that 93% of workplace deaths are of men, that men comprise the vast majority of rough sleepers, and unequal reproductive rights for men.

If the Assembly is of the view that these last issues, which adversely affect men's lives, cannot be addressed within your terms of reference we would ask that you recommend the setting up of a Council for the Status of Men and Boys or some such forum where these issues can be discussed.

References

[1] <http://www.prweb.com/releases/2013/5/prweb10741752.htm> This is the PASK report

[2] <http://euromind.global/en/nicola-graham-kevan/> is the Graham-Kevan report produced for the Euromind group in the EU Parliament. It confirms the PASK report findings and contains a wealth of references.

[3] [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272518443 Intimate partner violence a study in men and women from six European countries](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272518443_Intimate_partner_violence_a_study_in_men_and_women_from_six_European_countries)

This is the DOVE project 2015 which was commissioned by the EU commission.

[4] http://repository.wit.ie/2825/1/thesis_ROS_WITLIB_201405final.pdf

[5] Houses of the Oireachtas, Joint Committee on Justice and Equality, Report on Reform of the Family Law System, October 2019

[6]

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Cynthia Harper and Sara S. McLanahan , "*Father Absence and Youth Incarceration.*" Journal of Research on Adolescence 14 (September 2004): 369-397 accessible at <http://www.gwu.edu/~pad/202/father.pdf>.

[7] **Warren Farrell TED talk**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qj1oN1icAYc&t=311s>

[8] <http://www.imj.ie/ViewArticleDetails.aspx?ArticleID=186> This is the Kelleher study

[9]

<http://www.samaritans.org/sites/default/files/kcfinder/files/press/Men%20Suicide%20and%20Society%20Research%20Report%20151112.pdf>

[10] <http://www.thejournal.ie/unicef-suicide-report-3450547-Jun2017/>

[11] <https://visual.ons.gov.uk/who-is-most-at-risk-of-suicide/>

[12] <http://www.irishexaminer.com/breakingnews/ireland/samaritans-inequality-is-driving-people-to-suicide-780154.html>