



STATEMENT

by

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of the United Nations

Commission on the Status of Women

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Madam Chairperson, Distinguished delegates,

It is both an honour and a great pleasure to address the 49th session of the Commission on the Status of Women on behalf of the Irish Government. I would like to thank you Madam Chairperson, the Commission for the Status of Women and the Division for the Advancement of Women for the outstanding efforts you have made in preparing for this historic event. As this session commences, I share with you the hope that this review of the Beijing Platform for Action will copperfasten the progress we have made in the last ten years and propel us forward into a new era of true equality for the women of the world. Ireland associates itself with the statement delivered earlier by Luxembourg on behalf of the European Union.

Madam Chairperson

Ireland's approach to gender equality closely follows the EU model and involves three separate but interlocking approaches - legislation, gender mainstreaming and positive action. In my intervention to the round table yesterday I elaborated in some detail on the legal infrastructure that supports equality in Ireland. Today, I will focus on how we have succeeded in incorporating a gender mainstreaming approach into many areas of public life in Ireland.

In 1999, the Irish Government made the landmark decision to gender mainstream the National Development Plan, 2000-2006, an investment plan totalling over 50 billion euro and covering most areas of Government. The decision to mainstream the Plan has meant that the concept of gender mainstreaming has been introduced to almost every area of public administration in Ireland.

The Plan has given us a new context to advance work on gender equality. It has acted as a vehicle for strengthening our gender equality work in traditional areas where the gender perspective was already accepted, such as employment and training, and also enabled us to move into new areas, such as physical infrastructure. From the outset, all the "people" indicators across the Plan are being gender disaggregated and, as a result, we have valuable information on how women and men are benefiting from the Plan. Real progress has been made and I am confident that the approach adopted will take root in Irish administration generally.

Two new Units were set up to support the implementation of the gender mainstreaming process in Ireland, one within my own Department and one in the Department of Education. The Units are co-financed by the European Union. The Unit in my Department has funded developmental work on gender budgeting which will be disseminated shortly.

Allow me now to turn to some priority areas of Government policy which are central from a gender equality perspective. The promotion of equality of opportunity within education, training, and employment is crucially important to our efforts to advance gender equality. Ireland also has a considerable focus on gender in its welfare policies and programmes.

The Government, supported by the European Union, has developed a Childcare programme, on which over half a billion euro will be invested by the end of 2006.

Complementary work/life balance options are being supported through the social partner structures. Increasing gender balance in decision making is being driven by gender targets in State Boards and at management levels in the public service. We have also made some degree of progress in relation to increasing women's participation in the area of political decision-making, though it is acknowledged that a lot more needs to be done if the historical deficits in this area are to be overcome.

As Chair of the National Steering Committee on Violence against Women, I am acutely aware of the terrible consequences that this crime can have on women and children. I am pleased to say that the close collaboration of the key actors in this area - state agencies and women's organisations - has begun to show progress, but there can be no let-up in our efforts to eradicate this scourge from our society.

Challenges in relation to women's health are monitored by the National Women's Health Council. Priorities include screening programmes for breast and cervical cancer and implementing the strategy to address crisis pregnancy. In addition, attention is now turning to gender differences in mainstream health provision, such as the incidence of cardiovascular disease among women. Rather worryingly, heterosexual transmission has replaced drug use as the biggest cause of HIV infection in Ireland. The level of smoking among young girls is also a cause of concern for us.

Ireland's development co-operation programme prioritises the promotion of gender equality in its own right and as an integral part of Ireland's commitment to poverty reduction and in the treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS. An emphasis is placed on the importance of dialogue and partnership with developing country governments and non governmental organisations based on an analysis of the economic and political realities facing women and men. In the fight against HIV/AIDS Ireland adopts a multi-faceted approach which includes funding for sexual and reproductive health information, services and research.

Madam Chairperson

Ireland has made major progress since Beijing. The combined approaches of effective equality legislation supplemented by gender mainstreaming and positive actions in our case are showing results. Our indicators in all areas are showing improvements: women's employment has reached 57%, the gender pay gap is close to the EU average of 16%; and women now occupy some of the most senior positions in Irish life, including that of President and Deputy Prime Minister.

However, the Government recognises that considerable gender gaps remain in Ireland and we have decided to develop a National Women's Strategy that will address those gaps over a ten year period. The strategy will be inspired by the spirit of Beijing and I hope it will become the touchstone for progress on equality for women in Ireland that the Platform for Action has become for the women of the world.

Finally, Madam Chair, we undertake to continue our efforts, while working in partnership, at the national, regional and international levels, to achieve our shared goal of real gender equality.

Thank you.