



MEASURE WOMEN'S JOURNEY

NEXT Friday is National Women's Day.

This annual event is an opportunity to reflect on how far Irish women have come since the days when they had to retire from public service jobs upon marriage.

It's also a good time to reflect on how far we still have to go to achieve real gender equality.

In 2013, Irish women still earn 14% less than men.

We're massively under-represented in the boardroom.

And there's only a handful of us in the corridors of power.

To address the last issue, a non-party organisation, Women For Election has launched a campaign to help women "Get On The Ticket".

Its training programmes are designed to help women decide if they'd like to run for election and to give them the information they need to plan a campaign.

Feedback from Fianna Fail members is positive.

Visit www.womenforelection.ie or, if you're interested in running for Fianna Fail, get in touch with me.

GARDA DESERVE SUPPORT

ONE of the biggest issues people have been raising with me recently is the impact of Government cuts to Garda resources.

More than 100 stations have been closed and 35 others were downgraded.

The number of officers has also been dramatically reduced, leading to a situation whereby the force is completely overstretched.

For four-and-a-half hours on February 10, not a single Garda car was available for an area of nearly 200,000 people in North Dublin.

On February 14, when a woman was mugged at knifepoint in Clarehall, the only available vehicle was a two-seater van.

Officers could not bring her home and instead had to give her the bus fare.

Gardai are doing their best to cope with less resources but they are fighting an uphill battle.

The Government should look again at the alternatives the Fianna Fail proposed at Budget time and provide gardai with the resources they need.

Put end to legal victimisation of gay workers

DID you know a teacher or doctor could be fired just for being gay?

It's hard to believe that in 2013 a person could still lose their job just because of their sexuality.

However, this is very much the case for teachers, doctors and other staff of religious-run schools and hospitals.

Under current Irish law such bodies may discriminate against employees on the grounds their sexual orientation or marital status is a threat to the religious ethos of the institution.

Workers may be penalised not because of anything they have said or done, or because they are not good at their jobs, but because of who they are.

The possibility of such discrimination is a source of real fear and unhappiness for LGBT staff.

Many teachers in particular have told me they feel they have to hide their sexual orientation from colleagues.

Day in, day out they pretend to be someone they're not.

They stay quiet in the staff room while others talk about their families and how they spent their weekend.

They even go to great lengths not to be seen socialising with their long-term partners in the town they work.

It really angers me that teachers who

are great at their jobs and respected by their students and parents are being made to feel so unhappy at work.

They should be judged on the same basis as everyone else - their effectiveness in the classroom - not on the basis of a prejudiced view of their sexual orientation.

Given that 95% of our primary schools are under religious management, it's not as if they can avoid discrimination by opting to work elsewhere.

Freedom of religion is an important value which I fully respect.

But it should not be used to permit discrimination which would be unacceptable and illegal in any other employment, especially by State-funded institutions.

This time last year, I published a Fianna Fail bill to end this discrimination.

Under our proposals, schools and hospitals would still be entitled to insist staff members demonstrate respect towards their ethos in the workplace and not actively seek to undermine it.

But they wouldn't be able to discriminate against conscientious employees just because they don't approve of their

sexual orientation. When our Bill was debated in the Seanad, all parties agreed in principle.

However, Fine Gael and Labour voted against it on the basis they would shortly be bringing forward their own legislation in this area.

So, one year on from the publication of the Bill, I tabled another debate on this issue in the Seanad last Thursday.

Disappointingly, the Government response simply confirmed that not only is there still no sign of their promised legislation, the body they tasked with developing it hasn't been established.

This lack of progress is a huge shame and a major disappointment to LGBT staff who simply want to be able to focus on their work, free from the threat of discrimination.

Major improvements have been made in recent years in how lesbian, gay and bisexual people are treated in Ireland.

However, the fact some people still have to live with the fear that coming out could put their jobs in jeopardy speaks volumes about how much we have yet to do.

I will keep highlighting this issue until the current legislation is changed.

THIS IS A SOURCE OF REAL FEAR FOR GAY IRISH WORKERS



I'M still recovering from my recent charity boxing competition.

I stepped into the ring on behalf of Suttonians Rugby Football Club to raise money for Down Syndrome Ireland, the Make A Wish Foundation, Bees For Battens and the IRFU Charitable Trust.

These charities do incredible work and it was great to have the opportunity to help.



Raising €1,200 for them helped to make up for the bruises - to my body and my ego - when I lost.

Or as they'd say in politics, when I came second.

This was my third charity bout and my first loss so I'm not throwing in the towel just yet. I really enjoy the sport.

The high intensity of the training gets you in shape very quickly and going a few rounds with a punchbag certainly works off a lot of stress.

As one of only two women in a Dail party with 31 men, it's no harm for them to know I can look after myself.