



## ***Sinn Féin - Engine for Change***

*Women in an Ireland of Equals*  
*“Níl saoirse gan saoirse na mban”*

## ***Introduction***

Sinn Féin advocates the right to full social, economic and cultural equality. This encompasses the equality of all people on this island irrespective of gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, age, marital or family status, sexual orientation, disability, socio-economic status, or political or religious affiliations.

Inequalities in society are not inherent, but are caused by inequalities of power. It takes political vision and will to change these things, but it can be done.

Building an Ireland of Equals is one of Sinn Féin's core objectives.

Sinn Féin believes that gender discrimination and equality for women are issues of concern for us all. We advocate the use of all possible mechanisms for advancing gender equality including:

- Equality and other legislation
- Funding for women's groups
- Affirmative action
- Gender-proofing
- Gender mainstreaming

We also recognise the vital need for the equal participation of women in politics and in the decision-making process.

We will continue to work towards the achievement of these priorities.

## ***A Rights-Based Approach***

Women's rights are basic human rights. We cannot have a just and free society without equality for women.

The rights-based society we are working towards should offer protections across the full spectrum of political, social, economic, cultural and human rights, including women's rights specifically.

Sinn Féin will continue to campaign for women's rights.

- The Good Friday Agreement was endorsed by the majority of women on the island. Sinn Féin will continue to work for its full implementation, including all the equality and human rights provisions.
- Sinn Féin will continue to press for the conclusion of an All-Island Charter of Rights that offers full protection from discrimination and promotion of equality for women.
- Sinn Féin will continue to advocate full compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and to call for implementation of the UN CEDAW Committee recommendations by all levels of government on this island.
- Sinn Féin is also calling for the full transposition into domestic law of the three existing EU Equality Directives (including the Gender Equal Treatment Directive), and for the introduction of more comprehensive EU anti-discrimination legislation including a new comprehensive Gender Equality Directive.

## ***Women and Decision-Making***

In Ireland, women are still not fully represented in either national politics or in local government decision-making structures. Men continue to dominate all our cultural, social, economic, legal and political institutions. The following statistics from the National Women's Council of Ireland graphically illustrate this inequality:

- Ireland compares poorly to other nations in the parliamentary representation of women, ranking 59th out of 120 nations.
- 51% of the population are women, but only 13% of TDs are women.
- 10 counties have no women TDs.
- Only 15% of elected councillors are women.

These statistics are an indictment of our society. They are unacceptable and Sinn Féin intends to work both within our party and at local, national and European levels to make the necessary changes.

- Sinn Féin supports the call of the National Women's Council of Ireland for state and public bodies to implement 60/40 gender quotas on boards of management and in the policy-making arena.
- Sinn Féin supports the call of the European Women's Lobby for the introduction of binding gender parity measures in the next EU Treaty, the appointment of at least 40% women to the next EU Commission, the appointment of a qualified woman President of the EU Commission, and the adoption of similar equal representation measures by the new European Parliament.

## ***Sinn Féin's Record***

### ***In the Party***

In line with Sinn Féin's support for the National Women's Council of Ireland's call for affirmative action on gender quotas, the 2003 Sinn Féin Ard Fheis changed its rules for electing members to the Ard Comhairle of the Party to ensure that 50% of those elected are women.

In addition to this Sinn Féin's Equality Department has run a series of compulsory seminars on gender inequality for all members of the Ard Comhairle, Party Officers and regional Officer Boards to raise awareness of gender issues.

Through a proactive policy of gender promotion the party is improving women's participation. Two of our five candidates for the forthcoming EU election are women, and of the more than 200 local election candidates selected, 21% are women. These levels represent an improvement on past performance. However, we recognise that women are still under-represented. Sinn Féin is committed to continuing work in this area until we achieve full gender parity.

### ***In the Assembly***

In the Six County Assembly, Sinn Féin has been leading by example.

As Minister for Health, Bairbre de Brún implemented new, flexible, family-friendly working arrangements, gender-proofed policies and monitored their application. Her Department made nearly £1 million available to women's groups. She prioritised support for marginalised women, supported healthcare training for Traveller women to work within their communities, produced a strategy for carers, and worked in partnership to develop best practice in combating domestic violence.

As Minister for Education, Martin McGuinness appointed the first-ever female Chief Education and Training Inspector. He also issued new guidelines on relationships and sexuality education. The Education Department now has an approved equality scheme and equality branch to implement equality policies within the department and the schools system.

Sinn Féin MLAs have also been a voice for equality in all the Assembly committees, when other parties have prioritised business interests at the expense of the disadvantaged and the marginalised.

## ***In Leinster House***

Since their election in 2002, the Sinn Féin TDs have:

- Called for equality proofing of all legislation, policy and budgetary decisions - in particular budget cuts.
- Raised the differential impact on women of Government legislation and policy, including the 2003-2004 Budgets and Social Welfare Bills.
- Tabled amendments to gender-proof the language of Government Bills.
- Tabled amendments to legislate for equal gender representation on the boards of newly-created statutory bodies, to ensure that at least 50% of appointees are women, and that all appointments are made on the basis of an open competition.
- Worked with community, voluntary and NGO groups to defend the integrity of the equality legislation from Government attempts to erode it.
- Pushed for the speedy passage of a Domestic Violence Amendment Bill in the aftermath of the Supreme Court decision invalidating interim barring orders.
- Demanded a Dáil debate each year in December during the 15 Days Against Violence Against Women.
- Raised the issue of women's human rights and the need for CEDAW compliance at the Justice Committee.
- Campaigned for a full inquiry into the barbaric practice of symphysiotomy carried out on women without their consent between the 1950s and the 1980s.
- Campaigned for a full inquiry into the dozens of unnecessary caesarean hysterectomies carried out on women at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda between 1974 and 1998.
- Campaigned against cuts in childcare for VTOS participants and supported the TUI protests against these savage cutbacks.
- Met and consulted with women's groups to listen to their priorities and learn how to better represent their interests.

Sinn Féin recognises that women's inequality is deepened by other factors such as poverty, educational disadvantage, lack of housing, poor health care, violence, rural isolation, inaccessibility for people with disabilities, racism, homophobia and ageism.

We will continue to promote gender equality and pursue the following priorities at every level: the community, the local councils, the Dáil, the Assembly, and the European Parliament.

## ***Women in Poverty***

All of the groups at highest risk of poverty are composed predominantly of women.

According to the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), "One in every four women in Ireland raising children or managing households on their own will experience poverty despite our economic boom."

Sinn Féin supports the National Women's Council's call for a rights-based approach to the elimination of women's poverty. We will continue to campaign for the right to:

- an adequate and independent income.
- affordable and accessible education.
- accommodation.
- a childcare place for each child.
- accessible and women friendly healthcare.

## ***Women in the Workforce***

Today there are more women in work outside the home than ever before. However there is still a disproportionate amount of women on the minimum wage and in the part-time and services sector.

Women face a higher risk of being in low paid employment than men and 30% of women employees are below the minimum wage in comparison to 18% of men.

The shortage of quality childcare makes it difficult for women to access full-time employment or to remain in the workforce. Women's unpaid caring work remains unrecognised, undervalued and unmeasured with the resulting denial of basic rights such as social insurance and pension credits. Women returning to the workforce face additional problems in accessing training and education because their work in the home is not recognised and therefore they are not on the Live Employment Register.

It is essential to develop structures and work practices to allow the reconciliation and harmonisation of family life and work. Only in this way can we ensure gender equality and equal participation in employment.

Sinn Féin will continue to campaign for the women's right to work and the right to equal pay. We will campaign for:

- An increase in the minimum wage and the elimination of the gender pay gap.
- Increased measures to create flexible, family-friendly working arrangements.
- Paid parental leave as a right.
- Extended maternity benefit from 18 weeks to 26 weeks.
- Increased accessibility and relevance of enterprise supports for women returning to employment.
- Allowing women to claim social welfare and other benefits as individuals, including atypical workers such as spouses assisting on family farms and in family businesses.

## ***The Right to Recognition of Care Work***

We commend the Carers' Association for providing a loud and strong voice for tens of thousands of full-time, and many more part-time carers. The issue has been placed higher on the political agenda than ever before.

Carers must be recognised for the work that they do. Their work saves the State incalculable amounts of money.

Sinn Féin calls for:

- The abolition of the means test for full-time carers.
- Replacement of the present Carer's Allowance with an expanded payment scheme that properly recognises the value of carers' work.
- The modification of the social welfare system to give recognition for benefits to those who have worked in the home.

## ***The Right to Childcare***

"Childcare is seen as a core issue in addressing employment, equality, family, education and anti-poverty objectives" - Evaluation Report on NDP Investment in Childcare 2003.

Working in paid employment, education or training and having children should not be mutually exclusive activities. It is imperative that affordable quality childcare facilities are provided as a matter of course for families who require it. In addition to this, childcare costs should be directly related to the ability to pay. The state must meet its obligations and not rely on the private sector to provide childcare.

Currently €349.49million is available through the 2000-2006 Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) including €170million from EU Structural Funds. In an evaluation of the EOCP it was found that “the programme is demonstrating noticeable levels of deadweight, particularly among private providers receiving grant aid under the capital grants measure”. It also found that “a major constraint facing the programme is the lack of capacity on the part of beneficiaries to draw-down funding related primarily to under developed business management skills and inexperience in meeting public funding requirements”.

Sinn Féin calls for:

- The establishment of a central unit to co-ordinate Government strategy, policy and funding for childcare This strategy should include the provision of a one-stop-shop for suppliers and consumers of childcare.
- Provision of quality, affordable, community childcare for all those who need it.
- Development and extension of after-school childcare.
- The extension of training schemes for child-minders in the informal sector.
- Development and extension of after-school care facilities.

## ***The Equal Right to Education***

Education is power and choice and educational disadvantage closes doors. Education is a key to tackling poverty, promoting choice and fulfilling human potential.

As such, equality of access to education and vocational training is another precondition to women’s full participation in society and successful integration into the labour market.

All women have a right to education. Sinn Féin calls for:

- An enhanced maintenance grant scheme for students from disadvantaged and low-income backgrounds.
- Development and adoption of curricula and teaching materials to improve the self-image and broaden the horizons of young women to embrace career areas where they are under-represented.
- A Code of Best Practice to assist schools in their response to teenage pregnancy, and support for teenage mothers who wish to remain in mainstream education.
- Reversal of the decision to withdraw the child- care allowance from single parents on the Return to Education Programme. The majority of those parents are women.

## ***The Equal Right to Housing***

Women in Ireland are feeling the crunch of a housing crisis characterised by rising house prices, lengthening social housing waiting lists and a growing number of homeless people.

As women are still more likely to be trapped in low-paid employment, they are also at a higher risk of being priced out of the housing market. Many of the 48,000 families on social housing waiting lists in the 26 Counties, are headed by women who are lone parents.

The lack of available low-cost rental accommodation and Government cutbacks in the rent allowance are causing increased hardship among women.

Contrary to the stereotype of a homeless person as a single older man, there are an increasing number of young homeless women.

Housing is a right, and all women have an equal right to housing. Sinn Féin calls for:

- Adequate funding to local authorities for implementing targets for the elimination of housing waiting lists.



- Social housing building programmes for all councils, to provide appropriate solutions to the specific accommodation needs of single homeless women, single mothers, older women, women with disabilities and Traveller women.
- Special provision in the lettings schemes for women experiencing domestic violence.
- Immediate reversal of the restrictions and cutbacks in Rent Allowance, which is increasing homelessness and causing disproportionate hardship for women facing domestic violence and women who can no longer remain in their parents' home as a result of pregnancy.
- All local authorities to implement Homelessness Action Plans, which should include solutions for women and children made homeless by domestic violence.
- All housing developments to have necessary services and infrastructure including play facilities for children.

## ***The Equal Right to Health***

Good health is linked to income, education and employment as well as lifestyle and environment. Women are more likely to be caught in the poverty trap and more frequently put the needs of their families before their own. This jeopardises their right to health.

However, gender itself is also a factor. For example, breast cancer is the most common non-skin cancer among women in Ireland. One in 13 women will develop breast cancer in their lifetime. It is a major health issue. Yet a woman living in Ireland is four times more likely to die from breast cancer than her European counterpart because comprehensive breast cancer services are still not available to all on the island. The State is not providing adequate healthcare for all.

Health care is a right. Sinn Féin will continue to call for:

- The abolition of the current two-tier health system and the development of an all-Ireland universal health service providing care free at the point of delivery and funded through general taxation.
- A free and prompt national breast-screening programme for all women over 40 and free and regular cervical screening for all teenage girls and women.
- Preventative health care, health education and health promotion throughout a woman's lifespan with practical supports at local level.
- Funding for an outreach programme under the auspices of the Women's Health Council to empower women in determining their own health needs.

## ***Violence Against Women***

Violence against women is the most outrageous consequence of women's unequal status within society.

Violence against women is a core cause of poverty and homelessness among women and children.

40% of Irish women have experienced domestic violence. Sexual abuse, mental and financial abuse is as common as physical abuse. We need to recognise that violence against women can happen in the family, within the community, in the workplace and at the hands of the State. It can happen to babies, to girls, to adult women, and to elderly women.

Sinn Féin readily accepts that it is not enough for us as a party to reject such abusive behaviour. It is incumbent on us to support educational and awareness programmes and other effective measures that will ultimately instigate a sea change in attitudes in Irish society.

Sinn Féin supports a safety and sanctions approach to dealing with the issue. We will continue to call for:

- Increased secure funding for local crisis and support services for women experiencing violence.
- Enlargement of the network of refuges and an expansion of their capacity so that no woman in need will be turned away.
- Awareness raising and education around the issue of violence against women including the training of the Gardaí and all staff involved in the judicial process, including judges.
- Increased resources for family law courts to alleviate delays, and access to expert reports on custody and access issues in domestic violence cases.
- Legal representation, State funded if necessary, for victims of sexual assault cases.
- Reinstatement of the Civil Legal Aid Private Practitioners' Scheme to allow victims of domestic violence priority access to legal advice and representation.
- Amendment of the Domestic Violence Act to remove the residence requirement on barring and safety orders, which excludes some women in need of protection.
- A rehabilitation programme for offenders, available on request without delay.

## ***Rural Women and Isolation***

People living in remote rural areas share a number of problems such as distance from services and amenities, and isolation from others. These are particularly acute among rural women and especially elderly rural women, who frequently live alone.

Elderly rural women unable to afford the cost of a car are left isolated from society or dependent on relatives and the local community. Some find themselves living in appalling conditions because they lack support. A major issue of concern for women in rural areas is therefore the lack of a reliable public transport system and a proper services infrastructure.

To enhance the social inclusion of rural women, Sinn Féin calls for:

- Easier access to the Government subsidised Rural Transport Initiative, which is vital for the survival and well being of women in rural communities
- A voucher system for taxis to cater for vital services for women such as shopping and hospital visits
- The development of gender inclusive local services and information infrastructure catering for the health, welfare and social needs of women in rural communities
- Increased representation of women on LEADER and CLÁR Committees to at least 50%

## ***Older Women***

Older women often live on the margins of society, particularly if they have a low-income background. Independence, respect and involvement in the decision making process are frequently denied to older women by virtue of their status.

The issue of pensions is crucial. Contributory Pensions are determined by the years spent in the paid workforce where an Occupational Pension existed. Yet the majority of older Irish women spent most years of their lives caring for others, or were forced to leave the workforce to rear children or work in part-time or low paid employment. As a result many older women now depend on non-contributory old age pensions and so their incomes are lower.

These women have the right to live in dignity not poverty, and to have their economic and social contributions recognised and rewarded equally to those of their male counterparts.



In the interests of equality for older women, Sinn Féin calls for:

- Retrospective pension credits for women who spent their working life caring for others.
- Linking old age pensioners' social insurance contributions to inflation to ensure a sufficient standard of living.
- Support for local services for elderly women including day centres at a community level with transport availability.
- Statutory funding for voluntary agencies such as Meals on Wheels.

## ***Women with Disabilities***

Inequalities faced by all women in Ireland are magnified for women with disabilities. They are more likely to suffer income inequalities and have even less access to education and employment. They are regularly denied access to public services including appropriate health services. They are more likely to experience some form of abuse and they experience all the same gender-based obstacles to independence and more.

- Sinn Féin will continue to call for the introduction of a rights-based Disability Bill.
- We will argue for direct payments including a Cost of Disability payment and an Independent Living Allowance to offset the additional economic challenges for women with disabilities.

## ***Traveller Women***

Traveller women face higher poverty, mortality and unemployment levels, and lower levels of educational attainment than their settled counterparts. They face daily discrimination from the settled community and such discrimination is still considered socially acceptable by many. In recent times, publicans have attempted to introduce blanket bans against Travellers. Settled residents groups regularly organise and lobby to prevent the establishment of official halting sites nearby. The Government does not recognise Travellers as an ethnic group and has actually criminalised their way of life.

- Sinn Féin will continue to call for the repeal of the Housing Miscellaneous Provisions Act that criminalises Traveller women.
- We will continue to call for full implementation of all Traveller accommodation programmes on schedule by end 2004, to increase Traveller women's access to appropriate, safe accommodation.
- We will continue to call for the full resourcing and implementation of the Traveller Health Strategy to reduce Traveller women's health inequalities.
- Sinn Féin rejects any attempt by the Government or any other group to permit discrimination against individual Travellers or Travellers as a group.

## ***Immigrant Women***

Immigrant women make an important economic and cultural contribution to Irish society that is rarely recognised. They deserve equal respect and equal treatment. Racism and discrimination is not acceptable. The growing trend to stigmatise immigrant women must stop.

- Sinn Féin will not accept the introduction of legislation that allows for discrimination against non-national women or that violates our international obligation to protect refugee women.
- We will fight for an end to degrading, paternalistic policies on asylum seekers including direct provision and forced dispersal, and for a recognition of these women's right to work while their asylum applications are in process.
- We will fight for an end to the present system whereby work permits are issued to employers rather than employees, effectively keeping women migrant workers in a form of bonded labour.
- Sinn Féin will challenge the growing stigmatisation of pregnant non-nationals and non-national mothers of Irish children.