

The battles of the fairer sex

The Americans devote a whole month to the idea while most others give it a mere twenty-four hours. But does it even cost you a second's thought? International Women's Day (IWD) has come a long way from the suffragette movement of the early 1900s, but obviously not far enough. I'll save you scrambling in the calendar, and your blushes; it lands on 8 March.

BY DAVID YOUNG

The noble twin concepts of equality and emancipation may well not resonate with the same urgency today as they did a century ago but there is more than a hint of unfinished business, and not just for the more subtle of the species. Let's just say, it's running a distant second to the non-entity of Valentine's.

We tend to think the struggles for basic rights in the workplace, and at the polling booth, have given way to complex and worthy debates on the mysterious art of fine tuning remuneration packages. Parity of esteem? Equal pay? Fat chance. The celebration of women in all strides of life is not quite the party it could be; merit, regardless of gender, is still not automatically reckoned with, let alone recognised.

The ladies in these pages are examples not just to their peers but to anyone who appreciates endeavour and achievement, and integrity. The IWD concept may appear to be no more than a trivial diary date – but perhaps it should signal something much more... a work in progress.



Caroline Counihan

General Manager of Brown Thomas Cork, and winner of the Cork Business Association Business of the Year Award – one of the most prestigious accolades within the Irish business community

"The day is a terrific acknowledgement and recognition of the huge contribution that women have made, as a result of their increased and active participation in areas such as peace and social progress in the world we live in today."

Ironically, Caroline steps outside the corporate world to find her inspiration. Having worked closely with Adi Roche on the Brown Thomas International Fashion Show in Cork, she admires greatly the incredible work of the

Chernobyl Children's Project International. *"Adi's outstanding, dedicating her life to improving the quality of life of others...namely the children of Chernobyl,"* she enthuses.

IWD is really the story of ordinary women making history extraordinarily – wives, mums, daughters. Just think of the courageous Russian women who chose to strike for bread and peace in 1917, with two million of their men dead in the war. In the face of overwhelming opposition, they did not relent, and within days the Czar abdicated. They won their vote; found their voices; but were successful for so much more than just themselves. So, have a nice day.



Ursula Kilkelly

A Professor in the College of Business and Law, University College Cork, with research interest in children's rights in international and domestic law

"The burden of family' bears heavily still on women" – this is the very first utterance from Professor Kilkelly when asked about the issues facing women. It's her area of expertise; she should know. Saluting the progress that has been made to date, she points to how women are the ones having to juggle professional and family commitments to the point where they cannot make the contribution required to truly progress. The inequality maybe less than it was, but it remains fundamental'.

"The maternity issue that politicians toy with focuses too much on the 'return' to work and not on the 'balance' needed to underpin a family-oriented society," she says, critical of all parties. Looking to childcare, Ursula points to an industry that is poorly regulated and wholly expensive. "It is no surprise that society is under strain; the dual income needed to keep many households going is proof positive."

Ursula is candid – most people, herself included, will not bat an eyelid on IWD. But she does not deny its potential; suggesting it could provide a hook to hang events on, involving both men and women. For a lady who admires Mary Robinson, it is no surprise she too is challenging the system.

Marion Ormond

President of Network Ireland in Cork – the organisation for women in Business, the Professions and the Arts

Life began for Marion at 40. *"With age comes a confidence to try things; a willingness to dispense with the fear of failure; if it doesn't work, keep going,"* she advises. Marion undeniably enjoys what she does but is aware that the world of business is a competitive one; especially when certain male quarters still have difficulty taking female involvement seriously.

She smiles though when speaking of the young business generation coming through the ranks. *"They're not intimidated. They are confident in their merits. They need to be careful not to be too enthusiastic; you can cross a line, beyond which you've lost ground,"* she explains, in almost poker-playing fashion, but still cannot hide her admiration for them.

Christina Noble is her role model – a lady who's come through very difficult circumstances to shine. Marion identifies with this type of defiant integrity; she also looks to her counterparts in politics who've got to do that bit more; chip in that extra bit of time to make things happen. *"TWD ought to be taken more seriously,"* she asserts.



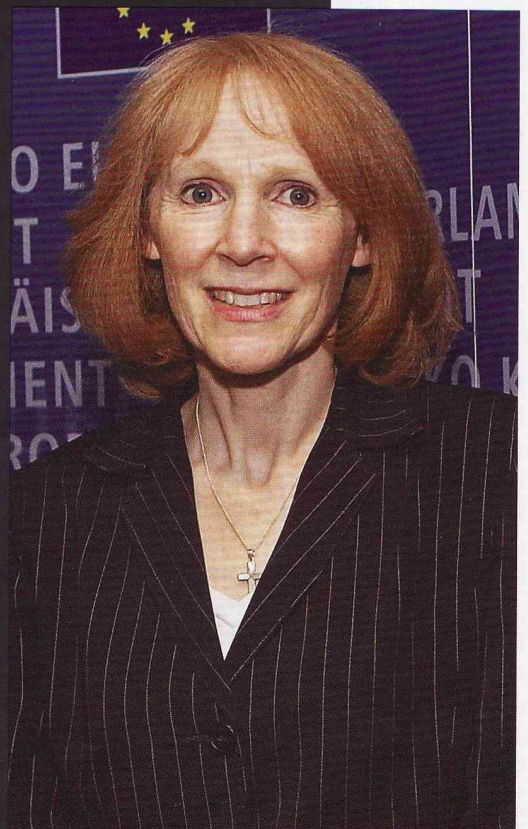
She laughs when asked if her husband knew what housework was before she became so involved in Network. *"Only in the last few years has he learned to hold an iron and not toast the clothes. It's all about the balance,"* she says, mischievously. So what's her plan for life? *"To be happy,"* she offers. It's hardly a variation on the universal theme, but she just makes it sound so natural.

Kathy Sinnott

Disability Rights Campaigner and Independent MEP for Munster

Kathy wanted to be a stay-at-home mom but circumstances dictated otherwise. *"If the Government had measured up,"* she says, she would not have emerged as a dissenting voice. She is a lady who is consummately aware of how tough politics can be: she missed out on a Dáil seat in the 2002 general election by a handful of votes, and all that after a recount. But she found her public niche by successfully making it in the European elections.

What trained Kathy for this political life? Her candour affords you an insight into the demands of a family of nine; they moulded her into the policy-maker she is today. That is, the common sense-driven municipality of the home echoing in the administration of a community of nations. It makes sense really.





Deirdre Clune

A Fine Gael City Councillor, elected to Dáil Éireann in 1997, lost her seat in 2002, and is challenging again in 2007

"Mo Mowlam – now she was a frank and honest lady who wasn't afraid to suffer the consequences. But still people warmed to her," Deirdre says without hesitation. She also admires Angela Merkel, the lady to displace Gerhard Schröder as German chancellor. "I'd love to know how she did it?" she admits. Her belief is that she can be as good as anyone else; her intellectual competitiveness may well stem from her academic prowess – being a qualified civil engineer. She was reared alongside four brothers, and now has four sons of her own; Deirdre may well be perceived by some to be playing in a man's game, but for her this is natural.

"Women have to shine brighter in the political arena," she says, "Not all of the 166 Dáil deputies are stars but the women certainly cannot hide." The very notion of an IWD is one she feels can lift people's horizons. "We're all Europeans now..." she heralds, "inequality – it's just another problem solving challenge."

Adi Roche

Founder and International Executive Director of Chernobyl Children's Project International.

"It's a day of solidarity, of women coming together...it's also a day to assess the challenges that remain and encourages us all, as women and men to bring about global equality for women in all their diversity." As a former Irish, and European, Person of the Year, Adi was never likely to give less of an answer.

She looks to the younger generation for dynamism; it gives her confidence that the educational successes of female students will translate into achievement in the workplace and also the arena of politics. The resistance to women in positions of power and authority is a collective matter: it's a *we* thing. We're all responsible; there's *a way to go*.

So who inspires her? *"Al gore. His film 'An Inconvenient Truth' had a profound effect on me; so much so that I really hope he wins the Nobel Peace Prize,"* she says. Drawn to what she sees as a *modern-day visionary*, Adi affirms her belief in *"courage, perseverance and trust"* – Presidential sentiments really.



Patricia Messinger

Presenter of North Cork Today, a four-hour daily talk-show, on Cork's 103FM

With 20 years' on-air experience, 16 of them with Cork's 103fm, Patricia has spoken to an audience that has evolved from belt-tightened times to prosperity. Radio is all she's ever wanted to do – talk to people; listen to their stories; engage in lives; share daily existences. IWD has provided her another opportunity to open the studio doors to discussion and debate on the challenges facing women.



She's very honest about who occupies her mind's eye when she's behind the mike. *"When I started out, it was the stay-at-home mum,"* she admits, *"the woman standing at the sink. But the audience demographic has changed."* Nowadays, her male listeners delight in telling her she's their voice too – kind of ironic.

Two decades on the air is a tough gig, no matter how much human interest drives you. But Patricia can still hear the voice of the nun in her school days who said *"money for talking. Ms Messinger, no such job exists..."* She fondly remembers being bitten by the media bug at 12 years of age; a quick few minutes on RTE radio caught listeners' attention; neighbours stopped herself and her mum in town afterwards; marvelling. That brought a certain confidence.

Her inspiration is her adopted daughter Marsha. In 1999 she travelled to Belarus as a broadcast journalist to report on the Chernobyl Children's Project. It was from this experience came her choice to bring a deaf and blind child into her life. *"Marsha welcomes every day in a way that makes you believe no problem is insurmountable."*