

Co-determination.

The 1977 Worker Participation State Enterprises Act allowed for 1/3 of the boards of State companies to be elected from the workers. In 1988 it was amended to provide for below board structures. There is individual legislation for other State agencies where the worker representation may be less than 1/3; sometimes just one worker. Over 51,000 workers are represented by worker directors.

Of the 50 worker directors active within the Worker Director Group of Ireland from 18 organisations, only 5 are women. Apart from CIE, and I was the first women to seek election since the 1977 Act, the other women are from the newer State agencies, probably reflecting the male dominated culture within the older State companies.

Gender Issues In Ireland.

As late as the 1960's women were granted a lesser percentage wage increase to men under centralised wage agreements (Trade Union Century, Mercier Press, Dublin). The 1974 the Anti Discrimination (pay) Act and the 1977 Employment Equality Act outlawed such agreements, yet there is still a 15% pay gap experienced by women in Ireland (Niall Crowley CEO Equality Authority 6/2/06). Women tend to be in part time positions. Careers where women are in a majority tend to be less well paid than other posts which require the same educational qualifications or work effort. By 2004 the participation of women in the Irish labour force had increased to 55.8%. Lack of accessible and affordable childcare is an issue which may be dealt with under the new social partnership deal between the Irish Government and the social partners. Between 1974 and the Equality Act of 2004 there have been many legislative improvements promoting equality. Society's attitude needs to change on the same scale if Irish women are to attain full equality.

Equality on Boards.

There is a government commitment of having 40% of each gender on State boards. This is not always achieved. As there is no legal obligation to enforce this, there is very little to redress the situation unless companies are publicly or politically embarrassed.

Women can only advance equality on boards by influencing the chairperson, the other board members, and higher management. Persuading them it makes business sense to be known as a good employer. The penalties for non-compliance with legislation both financial and from a public relations perspective may also influence board members.

Once equality policies are accepted at top level, it is dependant on management and the trade unions to ensure an equality culture develops and that equality is not just a top coat dressing to comply with legislation.

Women on boards keep equality on the corporate agenda. They can request equality reports from Management or invite the equality officer to make a presentation to the board. They can promote equality by ensuring the equality department works in conjunction with but independent from the human resource department. Boards should make adequate budget provision for the equality department who should control this budget. Women on boards have the same collective and legal responsibility for the welfare of the company. Sometimes other issues dominate the board agenda. Women on boards encounter the same difficulties as working women and women in society, but women on boards must stay focused. They have a leadership role and responsibility to ensure the gender equality issue does not "fall off" the agenda. Particularly now when equality legislation has expanded to include 9 grounds of discrimination, there is a perception that the gender issue has been dealt with and resources should be spend on other areas of discrimination. Effective women serve as role models and should mentor others.