

Public Sector Women in Leadership Conference 2024

Empowering ‘strong and smart women who are destined to lead’

The benefits of more women in leadership goes beyond visibility, it’s about creating a fairer, more equitable society for all, writes **Quinton O’Reilly**

The Radisson Blu Royal Hotel, Dublin, was bustling with activity as the Public Sector Women in Leadership Conference 2024 got underway. Exploring the theme “tackling the road blocks”, an engaged audience listened to all who took the stage. The experiences, thoughts, and advice shared by speakers really resonated with attendees. Likewise, the speakers brought a relaxed and personal air to proceedings, demonstrating the comfort and warmth the room provided. The summit chair, Jennifer Cox, director for Ireland in Women in Cyber Security (WiCyS) UK & Ireland, expressed her excitement about being at the event. “That’s why gatherings like this are so important; they provide a place for open dialogue and sharing experiences and innovative ideas,” she said. “It isn’t about gender, it’s embracing the richness of diversity in all its forms.” The first keynote address came from Aine Fanning, chief sales and marketing officer at Cpl Group, who spoke about topics dear to her: female leadership, diversity, and inclusivity. Speaking about how men usually receive bigger bonuses and benefits than women, she had advice for the room. “My advice is to know your value,” she said. “Nobody is a perfect fit for a job, so learn to celebrate your accomplishments. Don’t focus on the gaps; it’s about you, your experiences, and the diversity of thought that will bring value to your business.” Next up was the keynote panel discussion on accelerating female leadership in the public service, which included Breda Burke, principal officer and head of human resources at Houses of the Oireachtas Service; Dr Siobhan Roche, director of science for the economy at Research Ireland; Laura O’Donovan Calvert, business development director at Irish Centre for Diversity (ICFD); and Lye Ogunsanya of the Ireland United States Alumni Association. When asked what key advice the room can take, O’Donovan Calvert said to know your workforce and where you’re starting so you can address the gaps in support for communities like LGBT+ and persons with disabilities. Burke mentioned the importance of championing others, while Ogunsanya said to find strong role models. Linda Doyle, president and provost at Trinity College Dublin (TCD), delivered the next keynote address, where she made six observations about leadership. Her final point was to “jam the door open”, as it’s easy for organisations to get complacent when a milestone has been achieved. “One thing that happens is once, sometimes, women succeed in an area, they think they’re done,” she said. “They think, ‘we’ve done that now so we can return to the way it was’. So jam the door open, look at what we can do to educate ourselves, to ensure the women coming after us come through, and we’re not creating the next gap.” The last panel before the coffee break focused on educating the public sector



Aine Fanning, chief sales and marketing officer, Cpl Group; Sarah Murphy, CEO, Business Post; and Linda Doyle, president and provost, Trinity College Dublin  
Pictures Maura Hickey



Mairead McGuinness, EU Commissioner for Financial Services, Financial Stability and Capital Markets Union and Shay Cioherty, Managing Director, iQuest & Business Post

workforce of the future and featured Bernie McNally, secretary general at the Department of Education; Colin Mac Hale, chief revenue officer at San-tegic; Dr Eilish McLoughlin, associate professor at the School of Physical Science in Dublin City University (DCU); and Sheila Porter, founder and CEO at Scifest. Porter mentioned that every young person has a gift, and much of education is about finding that gift, capturing it, and giving them the means and pathways to develop it. “That’s what we have to encourage,” she said. **Being brave** Once the coffee break was concluded, it was straight into the European keynote address from Mairead McGuinness, EU Commissioner for Financial Services, Financial Stability and Capital Markets Union. In a wide-ranging speech, McGuinness stressed the need and benefits of having more women in leadership positions, which go well beyond having an equal gender balance. “It’s not about being nice to women; it enhances performance, and it brings innovation and decisive decision-making,” she said. “It’s measured not by an equal split, and having a gen-

der balance isn’t the same as having diversity.” Her talk was followed by another panel discussion on keeping pace with technology advances, which included Anne-Marie Tierney Le-Roux, senior vice president of global enterprise technology at IDA Ireland; Dr Susan Leavy, member of the Irish Government AI Advisory Council; and Elaine Burke, sci-tech journalist, editor, and broadcaster. Regardless of the technology, Tierney Le-Roux mentioned that all careers have barriers but are not to be defined by them, and there’s still a long way to go. “It’s very different from the Ireland of 50 years ago,” she added. “The dial has moved, and there are amazing female leaders... but there’s still a long way to go.” The next panel discussion was on mastering self-promotion for career success, and it saw Aimée Kelly, director of Public Sector at Cpl, Roisin Duffy, chairperson at Women on Air, and Sabrina Staunton, director of Women in Tech Ireland Chapter and executive and leadership coach. “The key to this is understanding whether self-promotion is boastful or negative,” said Duffy. “Various panels here have talked about some kind of



Frances Fitzgerald, member of the Gender Equality Advisory Committee to the G7; Catherine Noone, lawyer; and Lynn Ruane, independent senator at the conference

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unconscious thing, and that’s clearly social conditioning. “The social status is predominately male, and we need to normalise the sound of women’s voices.” Before the lunch break, the crowd was galvanised by Breda McCague, CEO of Aiming4Awesome, who brought high energy to the audience while offering advice for women to improve their self-talk so they’re bringing out the best in themselves. “If you are not talking to yourself like a coach, then you’re talking to yourself as a critic,” she said. “If you’re criticising yourself, how will you be brave?” **Creating safe places to work** Cox welcomed the room back after lunchtime and brought Jack Chambers, Minister for Finance, to the stage for the afternoon keynote address. Speaking about the importance of bringing more gender balance across governance levels, he said that diversity would strengthen Irish institutions and help deliver more inclusive policies. “That’s why events like today’s conference are so important as they help everyone across the public policy paradigm better understand the barriers preventing full participation by

women as leaders in the public sector,” he added. “Tackling these obstacles and empowering women – if we’re to meet challenges we meet as a country and the scale in front of us – requires everyone to play their part.” Next up to discuss tackling the gender gap in Irish politics, was a panel moderated by Catherine Noone, a lawyer and former senator. Joining her on stage were Frances Fitzgerald, a member of the Gender Equality Advisory Committee to the G7 and former MEP, and Lynn Ruane, an independent senator. Ruane was candid, saying that when tokenism comes up with gender quotas, it’s rarely the quota itself that causes the issue; it’s usually the lack of follow-through in support that’s the issue. “I don’t think the tokenism is the women themselves; it’s the support they need to ensure they have to run the campaign. We must be very careful that women are supported and ensure somebody is supported to go all the way.” Once concluded, the spotlight turned to two presentations involving female leaders. The first was delivered by Caroline Bocquel, CEO of Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM), who gave her experiences working in the seafood industry and kept her advice succinct. “Probably, the most important thing is to look after is yourself,” she said. “This conference is really celebrating the strength and ambition of women in the public sector. We have too few women in leadership and, now more than ever, we need that talent and diverse perspectives.” “My advice to you is you don’t have to be one of the guys; you’re strong, you’re smart, and many of you are destined to lead, so own it.” Lorraine Smyth, e-enabler and schedule care digital transformation manager the HSE, spoke about the innovations brought through the HSE. Speaking about a trial session involving UV-C light robots cleaning hospital wards, she mentioned the HSE and how, in Ireland, we don’t back anything until we see it done elsewhere. “I remember the comment: ‘we can’t see this being rolled out across Ireland,’” she said. “Now, if we saw this in the UK and US, we’d say it looks amazing. We hadn’t got the confidence ourselves, and sometimes I think in Ireland we have an inferiority complex, and we believe that we can’t do it, but we can. “And actually, the NHS believed they can, so they’re rolling it out, and the EU innovation fund gave them €3.5 million,” she added. Working with the Department of Justice since 2021, Dae Hanley was tasked with wrapping up the talks. They are chair of Justice LGBT+ Network committee, and have worked across departments and public sector bodies to establish the Proud to Work for Ireland Network. They commended the conference’s energy before starting their session. They mentioned the importance of creating supportive spaces for all and said that is why they transferred to the Department of Justice. “People actively look to move into these departments because they have a reputation of being supportive places,” they said. “I chose to transfer into the Department of Justice, and it’s another case of providing that opportunity to show you’re a safe place to work. Wrapping up the conference for another year, Cox gave her closing remarks and urged attendees to carry on the conversations they had. “Leadership isn’t about where you are; it’s about how you empower people and bring them with you,” she said.



Breda McCague, CEO, Aiming4Awesome; Jack Chambers, Minister for Finance; Grace Aungier, Conference Director, iQuest & Business Post; and Lorraine Smyth, e-enablement and digital solution management change and innovation in the HSE



Roisin Duffy, chairperson, Women on Air; Aimée Kelly, director – public sector, Cpl; and Sabrina Staunton, Women in Tech Ireland Chapter director, executive and leadership coach



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