

ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT MICHAEL D. HIGGINS TO THE WOMEN'S CONFERENCE,  
IRISH CONGRESS OF TRADE UNIONS,

WATERFRONT HALL BELFAST

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank David Begg for the kind invitation to join you here this morning at this important biennial meeting of the Women's Conference of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. I understand that you have had many fruitful discussions on a wide range of topics and have shared information with a range of interesting speakers.

We continue to live through challenging times and this is reflected in the theme for your Conference this year. I thoroughly endorse the concept of "Fighting Back!" as a reflection of the need to reposition ourselves and to reaffirm the values and principles of community, cohesion and collective endeavour which we have long cherished in Ireland, both North and South.

Collective action has been the cornerstone of the trade union movement since its earliest days. Individual unions were established to address the needs of individual groups of workers and the demonstrable benefits of collaboration led to the establishment of the Irish Trade Union Congress in 1894. Since then, Congress and all its constituent unions, has continued to work selflessly to promote the rights of workers and to act as the collective voice of organised Irish labour.

Almost 120 years after its foundation, Congress continues to play an important role in the lives of over 800,000 men and women across this island. Congress also continues to influence social and economic policy development and to ensure that the rights and aspirations of workers are listened to, respected and vindicated.

What a change that period of 120 years has brought to the economic and social lives of the people of Ireland. Education standards on the island of Ireland are now among the highest in Europe. Women now outperform men in educational attainment and we enjoy the highest percentage of women graduates in Europe.

New standards of medical care means that we can hope to enjoy significant periods of active retirement while the development of social protection ensures that we do so with a degree of financial security.

The workplace has changed utterly in that period. We have been transformed by new technologies and seen the end of much of the back-breaking work that was so much a feature of life in the 1890s. We have seen the numbers of women in the workplace advance to such an extent that women now make up half the workforce here in Northern Ireland and nearly half in the South.

While the overall narrative is therefore one of progress and development, I am very conscious that the current socio-economic story is far from comforting or reassuring. In a situation where approximately a half of million people on this island are unemployed, there are the greatest grounds for concern. In such a context, the imperative must be to fix the economy, achieve sustainable economic growth but, above all, to do this in a way that

creates employment opportunities. I know this is the shared priority of the two administrations on this island, as it is of Congress, and that a huge amount of effort and ingenuity is being invested in policies and programmes that will, over time, promote growth, create jobs and restore hope and confidence to our people.

The current economic downturn means that many of our citizens find themselves in difficult situations. In certain sectors such as construction, this crisis has impacted more on male workers than on women, although recent trends show that the latter are being affected more and more by the unemployment scourge, for example, in such areas as the retail sector. Whether male or female, behind every lost job is a tale of pain and suffering as families come to terms with diminished incomes and increasing pressures. I fully appreciate the anguished situations which now face many families as they struggle to make ends meet, meet their mortgage commitments or face the wrenching prospect of their son or daughter involuntarily emigrating.

It is very understandable that people are hurt and dismayed by the economic crisis that shattered their lives. It demands a response. A huge price has been paid for the speculative period of unsustainable growth and false property led development in the first decade of this century. For those who promoted this bubble, personal wealth and material possessions became a dangerous obsession; at the level of society, ostentation replaced simplicity; and selfishness replaced selflessness. The sense of community, for which our island was so richly famous, was eroded as those who pursued aggressively individualistic goals had little time for collective endeavour, little interest in social solidarity and little capacity for ethical reflection. It is important too that the assumptions and the values behind this false economy be exposed, be faced and be rejected as any version of the future we wish to create on this island.

We are emerging from a dark period in our economic history and we are certainly entitled to curse that darkness. But we also need to light the candles of hope that will help us to navigate a path towards a better and fairer future. The tone of cynical fatalism that has dominated some of the public discourse in recent years will not serve us well for that journey ahead - it is markedly insufficient for the task of transformation we need. But surely the lesson of the peace process in Northern Ireland is that no problem, however its apparent intractability, is impervious to solution if we summon up the collective will, determination and ingenuity to address and resolve it.

We are at a crucial point of transition from one economic model that failed us all to another that has yet to be fully realised. We need to debate the nature and shape of that economy so that sustainability and social cohesion are given as much priority as efficiency and competitiveness. The perspective of women as citizens, in every sense of that term, must be allowed to inform that alternative version of economy and its connection with society. The media has an important role to play in ensuring that this debate takes place and that it occurs in a civil manner respecting the right of all points of view to offer their perspectives on the kind of economy and society they wish to bequeath to their children.

We are now also at a point, I suggest, when we need to refocus and reaffirm the values of active citizenship and a caring community. The view of the individual as being no more than a passive consumer of goods and services, and living in disaggregated isolation, is simply an unacceptable and very impoverishing thought. The idea of the citizen actively participating in a society in which he or she enjoys personal rights and discharges responsibilities in a shared community is a far more liberating and life-enhancing vision. The trade union movement has been central to the development of community for over a

century and I believe that the trade union movement, of which you all form such an active part, will again play a pivotal role in rebuilding our damaged society.

Women have long played a central role in the development of our island, North and South. Women have been central to the trade union movement from the earliest days. Indeed the first female President of Congress was the inspiring Inez McCormack. A strong negotiator and formidable leader, Inez is still active in promoting human rights through a range of activities. Inez followed in the foot-steps of a number of other remarkable women trade unionists including Mary Galway from County Down who became the first woman Vice President of Congress in 1910 and Betty Sinclair who was Secretary of the Belfast and District Trades Union Council for nearly 30 years and the first chairperson of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association.

It has been my experience that the style of leadership usually pursued by women makes them particularly effective in getting the job done. There is accumulating evidence that women bring a set of communication and interpersonal skills to the workplace which, while often ignored in the past, are better suited to the team-oriented leadership of the 21st Century. I have only to reflect on the amazing work achieved by my two predecessors in Áras an Uachtaráin. They worked in a measured and focused way to unpack problems, break down barriers and get to the heart of an issue in a way which made it amenable to solution. The achievements of Mary McAleese in respecting and reaching out to all traditions and fostering friendships across communities are peerless. The work of Mary Robinson on behalf of the most disadvantaged across the globe has brought her an international recognition she never sought herself.

I hope to build on their achievements during my period in office. I do share with them a deep commitment to citizenship, to equality and to human rights and I am happy to have been part of the struggle for gender equality in the 1970s. Again Congress was to the fore in advancing the role of women in society - at a time when separate pay scales for men and women were more or less endemic and when the marriage bar, which applied in the public service, impacted on the employment opportunities of women.

While we have made progress in relation to gender equality, there are still many barriers to be broken. Despite high standards of education, women still have not been afforded the opportunity to fill many key decision-making roles. It is not only women but society as a whole that suffers a loss from such exclusion. In many instances, women are not enabled and empowered to bring their expertise to the table to ensure that our decision-making is based on the balanced views and experiences of both genders. It is a matter of regret to me that patriarchy and its related authoritarianism still prevails in many fields and that it conspires to self-perpetuate, despite all the evidence in support of the value of diversified decision-making. As women members of Congress, you are well positioned to advance this debate, not just in Congress but also in your respective workplaces and in the many facets of your lives.

Much of the success of Irish society, both North and South, can be attributed to the efforts of groups of women. I think, for example, of the many women activists in the community who pioneered the fledgling efforts towards peace. Women like Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan collaborated in the 1970s to organise the peace march and began a movement which was recognised internationally with the award of the Nobel Peace Prize. Some years later, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition emerged as a cross-community coalition of women working for reconciliation, inclusion and equality. Together with other women negotiators in other parties, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition - under the

leadership of Monica McWilliams and Jane Morrice - made a very constructive contribution to the negotiation and implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

And in community groups all across Northern Ireland, there were, and are thousands of women who built, and who are building, bridges for peace through offering the hand of friendship to their neighbour on the other side of the traditional divide. I also acknowledge the contribution made by women in marginalised communities in the South who continue to work to empower other women in their neighbourhoods. All of these achievements can be attributed to women of vision.

Women of vision are those women with an idea who take the action necessary to achieve it. I do not doubt but that each person coming to the Waterfront Hall today has her own vision for a better future. It may be personal or family related; it may be an issue at work; it may be a plan to enhance your community. We all have our personal Aisling of hope, renewal and transformation. This is the time that we must each act on those goals - that we redouble our efforts to convert those visions of the head and heart that we hold into outcomes that benefit our families, our colleagues, our communities and our society.

We must work together to reclaim a better version of Irishness than the recent one which has thankfully expired - where we put community solidarity and social cohesion above the demands of acquisitive individualism. Only then can we fully rebuild our personal lives and our communities. Only then will our island re-emerge as the homeland of social inclusion rather than social exclusion, as a place whose international reputation repudiates the appalling notion that "greed is good".

The trade union movement has always espoused the concept of caring and sharing. I know that Congress has been active over the years in promoting the advancement of women through a range of dedicated initiatives. I commend everyone one of these efforts and encourage you to continue to build upon it.

I know that you will have derived great benefit from your participation in this biennial Women's Conference. I hope that the discussions have spurred both you and Congress to continue your good work with renewed courage and commitment, with an increased vigour and that you return safely to your homes and to your workplaces with that enabling sense of energy and renewal that solidarity of trade unionism brings to our lives together.

Thank you.