

Women, Work and Saving the World

In 2009 the Dalai Lama said “THE WORLD WILL BE SAVED BY THE WESTERN WOMEN”. He also said he is a feminist. I’m one myself. I had sort of forgotten until some sparks reignited recently. Despite PhD-level education, I have, due to child-rearing and geography, been loitering around the bottom of the career ladder; working part-time for minimum wages. To improve my economic lot, I attended a start-your-own-business course run by inspirational Gweedore entrepreneur Moira Ní Ghallachóir. She fired up a belief that ‘sisters can do it for themselves’. Around that time, my friend Emer asked if I’d help organising events to mark 1916 from a women’s perspective on International Women’s Day. Erstwhile feminism ablaze, I took to reading about Kathleen Lynn, Countess Markievicz et al. who participated in the birth of our nation. Fires were fanned further on attending Donegal County Council’s Ladder programme, an initiative that raises awareness of global development issues. It quickly became clear that economic problems are shared by women globally. The words of the Dalai Lama rang in my ears. Do Western women in their relatively privileged position have the ability to rise and potentially make positive change worldwide?

In 2015 the global average salary for women was \$11k, about half of the \$21k average for men. Despite doing two-thirds of all work, females make up a whopping 70% of the world’s most poverty-stricken. Global capitalism is sweeping through poorer economies and women like Africa’s low-paid, mal-treated flower workers are bearing the brunt. Our own James Connolly put it well: “The worker is the slave of capitalist society, the female worker is the slave of that slave.” Women also do the majority of the world’s unpaid work (homemaking, caring, farming, volunteering etc.), and a New Zealand study shows that already by age 12, girls are doing twice as much as boys, and females continue in this vein until men eventually catch up by age 75! If unpaid work is more likely done by women it’s no wonder their work is habitually undervalued.

The wage-gap is only part of the problem. Our womanly ‘superpower’ of being able to grow humans negatively impacts career building. In Ireland, interesting CSO statistics show that in the population qualified to degree-level but unemployed, women outnumber men 2:1. Does this mean gender is affecting recruitment prospects for similarly qualified people? Since 2007, maternity leave is 26 weeks. 2 weeks paternity leave is being introduced this September. In my opinion, not until parental leaves are equalised, will men and women be perceived as equal ‘risk’ when it comes to the impact of family responsibilities in the workplace. Such equalisation would improve women’s job-prospects and at last recognise a father’s equal right to share time with their children, improving everyone’s work/life balance.

In 2014, Ireland was ranked 5th globally for gender parity. Another 2010 study ranked us 9th in Europe. So we’re good, but we could be better. Irish women’s wages are about 14% less than men’s. Ireland’s austerity has disproportionately affected women and, worryingly, has seen the dismantling of most of the country’s equality architecture. Our tax and welfare systems see swathes of women as ‘dependent’ and therefore invisible when activation measures are devised, (something I’m encountering first-hand trying to get business supports). Irish women’s pensions are a huge 35% less than men’s. Women work almost ¾ of the country’s part-time jobs, which tend to be low-paid with unsociable/unreliable hours. By contrast 88% of the top-level public service jobs are held by men.

Lessons from the developing world teach us why it is important to change this. Charities, the World Bank and IMF have all spotted that female economic empowerment means better outcomes for everyone. Once able to shape their lives financially, women choose to spend on food, education and on areas which improve the lives of the greater community. In the west, women-led businesses blaze a trail for social and environmental responsibility. Maybe the Dalai Lama is on to something.

A closing thought: In 1975, Icelandic women stopped all types of work for one day, highlighting their undervalued contribution to society. The country ground to a halt, and that year, a raft of gender-specific improvements were hurried legislated for. Just an idea...