

Women at Work

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Marking 40 years since the abolition of the Civil service 'marriage bar', a week-long series examines Irish women's working lives.



Ciara Brennan, teacher; Marissa Carter, entrepreneur; Eilish Hardiman, chief executive of Tallaght Hospital; Siobhan Parkinson, author and former children's laureate; Fiona Haughney, IT project manager; Caroline Erskine, communications consultant and journalist; Freda McGrane, retired from a career in administration

To open Women at Work, seven women discuss their experiences of the Irish workplace, past and present.

In the four decades since the abolition of the Civil Service marriage bar, in 1973, women's progress in the workplace has been startling, unprecedented and very uneven. There are female chief executives, judges, hospital consultants, politicians, editors, school principals and taxi drivers. But even as choices have expanded for women, in other ways they have contracted. Many women now not only have the opportunity to pursue a career outside the home but simply have no other option.

Increasingly, Irish families rely on two incomes, leaving many with a dilemma. Negative equity and falling pay rates push them in one direction, but the rising cost of childcare, and concerns about its quality, drag them in another.

Meanwhile, a debate has sprung up about whether women are doing enough to help themselves and

each other. Are they pushing hard enough for the opportunities? And where does work-life balance fit into all of this?

Seven women from different areas of employment, who range in age from 27 to 73, agreed to discuss these issues. They are Ciara Brennan, a teacher; Marissa Carter, an entrepreneur; Eilish Hardiman, chief executive of Tallaght hospital; Siobhán Parkinson, the former children's laureate; Fiona Haughney, an IT project manager; Caroline Erskine, a communications consultant and journalist; and Freda McGrane, a retired administrator.

The 1970s workplace

Until 1973, under the marriage bar, women teachers and civil servants were forced to retire if they married. But even in the private sector, gender-based discrimination was rife.

Freda McGrane I had a secretarial position in the Department of Health when I got married [in the late 1960s]. Everyone had to retire upon marriage. It's the way it was. We did murmur and mutter about it among ourselves, but we did nothing.

Eilish Hardiman My mum was a triple-qualified nurse. She worked in neonatal intensive care and then, just because she got married, she no longer had a job, so all her skills were lost.

Siobhán Parkinson I graduated in 1976, and I did an interview for the Civil Service. There were five men on the interview panel, and the whole interview consisted of them barracking me about how the country would function if all the civil servants were women and they all got pregnant at the same time.

Freda McGrane After I got married I looked for another job in the private sector, and I was told several times to go home and look after my husband and my house. I stopped working when I had my children, in the early 1970s, and I was at home quite happily until my husband had a stroke, when he was 38. It left him unable to work, and I had to go back full time to support the family. I could have gone back to my job in the Civil Service, but the real injustice was that if you went back you went back [to the point on] the scale at which you had left. It would have been a horrific jump back from what I was able to earn in the private sector. I did eventually go back in the 1990s, at the level I had been at when I married, and I started studying for my degree then. I graduated the year I retired, when I was 65.

Women with families

Has the attitude that women with families don't belong in the workforce completely disappeared?

Fiona Haughney They're a lot more subtle about it now, but if you have an equally qualified male and a female going for the job, there's still that attitude of "Go with the male, because he's not going to go off and get pregnant."

Ciara Brennan It's more discreet now. I don't have an engagement ring, but if I did I'd be very nervous about wearing it to an interview for a teaching job.

Eilish Hardiman I'm the top decision-maker in my organisation, and it's critical for a chief executive to set the culture and values in an organisation. There are 2,340 staff in Tallaght hospital, and 65 per cent of them are female. Within that you've got to acknowledge that pregnancy is the norm. I know there are challenges if, say, you've got four physiotherapists in one area and they're

all [having babies at the same time], but you've got to create a culture of flexibility. One of the most obvious advances of the past 40 years is that there is now an expectation that women can, if they wish, continue to work after they have started a family.

Caroline Erskine There is a percentage of women who are never going to want to be stay-at-home mothers the whole time. They love their children, but they've got an education and they want to get out there and use it, or they've got big plans for life. And that's fair enough.

Freda McGrane Most young women I've spoken to are working only to help pay the mortgage and the bills. There's no wonderful ambition, no needing to do whatever; it's just an economic fact in this country, especially with these ghastly mortgages and negative equity, that they have to work.

Siobhán Parkinson And the country needs them to work, too. It needs women's talents, and our skills.

Cost of Childcare

Fiona Haughney My partner, Paul, and I are at a crossroads. Our monthly childcare bill is €1,600. Because I work from contract to contract I'm faced with looking at whether it's worth it for me to look for another job. I have a decision to make: do we tighten our belts for me to stay at home? Or do I try to find another job, and channel most of the earnings into my childcare bill?

Caroline Erskine Childcare costs about one-third of a family's income now. There must be a tipping point beyond which people can't go. One solution might be to give both parents the chance to work part time while their children are younger. The State would top up their salaries to a sustainable level, say 80 per cent. And then, when they return, they would not be penalised in terms of pay or promotion opportunities.

Eilish Hardiman Culturally, childcare has to be valued, no matter who does it.

Fiona Haughney It should be a calling instead of a low-paid job.

Ciara Brennan But a calling goes only so far. You need to feel valued, and that means financially valued.

Eilish Hardiman We have a creche at the hospital, and it's making so little money that it's not worth it, really. But then I see the mothers coming in early, dropping off their kids, and I know they can go down during their lunchbreak to see them. It's a headache to run, and there's a risk attached, but I can't get rid of it, because it's the right thing to do, and it's worth it in terms of staff retention. If the Government would identify that childcare needs to be properly supported and give organisations with 2,000 or 3,000 staff the funding to run a creche without being commercial, that would be a very good solution.

Creche scandal

Fiona Haughney I cried all the way through the recent Prime Time programme. We had our eldest child in one of the chains it featured. We paid €1,000 a month to ensure that my child was being properly cared for by staff who were fully qualified. I wasn't happy with it: I had the impression there were more kids in there every time I went in. Now they're with a childminder.

Eilish Hardiman I watched the programme and was horrified and really, really upset by it. From my professional background as a nurse I kept saying, "How come the other workers aren't reporting

each other?”

Siobhán Parkinson The reason there are all these scandals in creches is that these women are being paid a pittance. If they're going to be trained to professional standard, they need to be paid as professionals. Fathers are often denied a voice in the childcare debate but, increasingly, they play a role in raising their children.

Eilish Hardiman My husband is an artist. He has a studio at home, and he is the primary caregiver for our twins. I could not survive without that. But if we want to balance the thing at work it needs to become acceptable for men to be stay-at-home fathers.

Freda McGrane When I had to work full time my husband came home from hospital. [He had a stroke in 1977.] While he might have been disabled and unable to work, he was very good around the house. I'm not lucky he was ill, but I was lucky he was there, because I couldn't have afforded childminding.

Marissa Carter My husband and I have that argument where we're both saying, "My job is just as important as your job," but overall he's very, very supportive.

Siobhán Parkinson A lot of us have used the word "lucky" about the men in our lives, but everybody can't be lucky. There need to be structures in place that allow men to do their fair share.

Ciara Brennan For a single mother, her partner might be her mother, her sister or her cousin. It doesn't matter who your partner in rearing the child is; we need to broaden the whole perspective beyond that, and to honour grandparents too.