

Speech by Mr Martin Cullen, TD

Minister for Social and Family Affairs

at a Seminar entitled

“The Workplace of the Future: Reconciling Pregnancies, Parenting and Employment”

On Thursday 8 November, 9:00 a.m.

Check against Delivery

Ms Katharine Bulbulia, Chair of the Crisis Pregnancy Agency; Ms Caroline Spillane, Director of the Crisis Pregnancy Agency; Dr Maryann Valiulis, Director of the Centre for Gender and Women’s Studies, Trinity College, Dublin; invited guests and Seminar Chair **Mr Peter Finnegan:**

Welcome

I am delighted to have been invited by Katharine Bulbulia to open this Seminar on the topic of reconciling pregnancy, parenting and employment in the workplace of the future. I am particularly pleased to be here because I consider this area to be of central importance not only to the workforce and economy of the future, but also to improving the quality of life for families, and particularly young families, who have to manage the demands of work and family life.

Issues of work-life balance, workplace culture and maternity and childcare issues are of especially high relevance to those who face an unplanned pregnancy and may be a key point of influence when deciding whether to continue with a pregnancy.

I know that the public and private sectors are represented here today, as well as the media and education and research bodies and I welcome you all. I would like to acknowledge the Irish and international experts here this morning who will outline the latest research in this area and who will provide some practical case studies as part of this Seminar. I hope our international guests particularly enjoy their time with us here in our capital city.

As you know, this Seminar is a joint venture between the Centre for Gender and Women’s Studies at Trinity College, Dublin and the Crisis Pregnancy Agency.

The Centre has a proven track record in the area of research in education and equality, the changing nature of families, parenting and work-life balance.

Crisis Pregnancy Agency

Since its establishment in 2001, the Crisis Pregnancy Agency, in partnership with many statutory and non-statutory organisations, has made an effective contribution to reducing the incidence of crisis pregnancy in Ireland and to ensuring that women who experience crisis pregnancy are responded to in a caring and supportive way.

When an unplanned pregnancy does occur, a number of factors influence how it is resolved - these include age, relationship or family status, personal beliefs, life goals and health. The Agency has built up a much needed and valuable body of research on crisis pregnancy. This research has enabled the Agency to ensure that its work is underpinned by appropriate evidence about sexual health and crisis pregnancy in Ireland. I know that many of the Agency's Board members are here this morning together with the staff, and indeed Ms Olive Braiden, the first Chairperson of the Agency is here too and I would like to compliment you all on your achievements.

The Crisis Pregnancy Agency has identified making educational institutions and the workplace more child-friendly and the increased availability of local, affordable childcare, as recommended courses of action in the attempt to reduce the number of crisis pregnancies which lead to abortion.

Research

The body of research which underpins the Seminar today was commissioned by the Agency in 2005 and compiled by the Centre for Gender and Women's Studies.

The project reviewed and analysed research and writings on the issues of work-life balance, workplace culture and maternity and childcare issues. Specific reference was made to how these issues interact and affect both women and men who experience crisis pregnancy. A range of resources were utilised including surveys, empirical studies, academic literature and journal articles. The literature review also included a review of current legislation and policy both nationally and within the context of developments in other countries.

The Research Team comprised Ms Jennifer Redmond, Dr Maryann Valiulis and Dr Eileen Drew and I would like to compliment the team on the quality of their work.

While highlighting the need for further research in this area, the findings of the research review suggests that when women are faced with a crisis pregnancy, workplace policy and culture have an important influence on their decisions about whether or not to continue with the pregnancy and whether or not to continue in work, on becoming a parent.

It is obviously important to look at the implications of these findings for workplace policies. Appropriate responses will bring many benefits as well as challenges.

Today's seminar is an important step in this process.

Seminar Content

The aim of your Seminar is to raise awareness and understanding of the link between parenting, pregnancy, decision making and workplace issues and investigate what is required in the workplace of the future to support workers who are already parents and those facing parenthood.

I note from the programme that the first session is aiming to explore current trends in the labour market, family formation, employment policy and social discourse. Policies that encourage a balance between female participation in economic life and male participation in family life will be explored. The second session aims to present several initiatives and case studies that have responded to new and emerging issues in the workforce. Employers such as ESB will discuss the experience, benefits and challenges to implementing work-life balance initiatives and I know that Mr Eddie Sullivan, Secretary General at the Department of Finance (a Previous Secretary General at my Department) will also provide some interesting data regarding the percentage of men and women availing of work-life balance initiatives.

National Workplace Strategy

Much progress has been made in terms of legislation and policy which are making workplaces more family friendly and helping to achieve a work-life balance. For this reason, employers need to promote the work-life balance options which are available and employees need to be clear on their options - from a workplace point of view - if they find themselves in a crisis pregnancy situation.

The **National Workplace Strategy**, launched by the Taoiseach in 2005, is the Government's blueprint to help transform Irish workplaces into '*Workplaces of the Future*'.

The Strategy derives from the realization that workplace change and innovation will be critical to Ireland's future as a dynamic, inclusive, knowledge-based economy and society. The choices that we as a society make with regard to workplace development in the coming years, will have a lasting impact on individuals, families, enterprises and the ongoing success of our economy.

For Ireland, our competitiveness will depend on embedding a commitment to innovation and adaptability in the globalised markets in which we compete. The National Workplace Strategy is focused on stimulating workplace change and innovation across five strategic priority areas - Commitment to Workplace Innovation; Capacity for Change; Developing Future Skills; Access to Opportunities and Quality of Working Life. The Strategy also recognizes the critical role that social partnership can play in this process.

Under the 'Access to Opportunities' title, the Strategy recognizes that addressing issues concerning equality and diversity in the workplace will be critical to meeting the future needs of our economy. Encouraging and facilitating participation in work, ensuring that all employees have access to choices and opportunities and enabling

organizations to benefit from diversity are all key concerns in this context. On the key issue of childcare, the Strategy advocates that it be a priority for all stakeholders who must work together to develop practical solutions for the provision of effective childcare arrangements.

National Childcare Strategy and the Office of the Minister for Children

The Government's commitment to childcare is also evidenced by the National Childcare Strategy 2006-2010 and the creation of the new **Office of the Minister for Children** with a Ministerial seat at the Cabinet table representing the interests of children and young people.

For the first time, this Office brings together the Government Departments of Health & Children, Justice, Equality and Law Reform and Education and Science, all of whom have an input into childcare policy. There is now the unprecedented opportunity to develop and deliver policies and programmes which will help to ensure the well being of our children.

The Government has heavily invested in the Childcare Sector with the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006 and our National Childcare Strategy.

The €500 million EU co-funded Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme was created to develop childcare services to meet the needs of parents in employment, education and training. This programme has exceeded the targets set and to date over 3,300 capital and staffing grants have been awarded to community and private providers which have generated over 36,500 new childcare places and supported 36,000 existing places.

One of the key elements of the new **National Childcare Strategy** is the National Childcare Investment Programme 2006–2010. This Programme is entirely Exchequer funded and the Government has committed €575 million to the Programme over the next five years.

National Framework Committee for Work Life Balance Policies

Your Seminar today is evidence of the increasing importance being given to the need to facilitate employees in striking a balance between their work and their responsibilities outside work, particularly family commitments. In a buoyant labour market like ours, where employers strain to recruit and retain skilled staff, a family friendly work environment is not just of benefit to employees but can be a critical aspect of a successful approach to human resource management. For its part, the Government is committed to a two pronged approach to achieving the goal of making workplaces more family friendly by (1) the provision of statutory entitlements through legislative measures, and (2) the voluntary approach at the level of the enterprise, which is encouraged at national level by the National Framework Committee for Work-Life Balance Policies.

Legislative measures which provide for statutory entitlements in Ireland include maternity leave, adoptive leave, carer's leave and parental leave along with all the other employment rights legislation. Legislation is clearly important in terms of

protecting workers and providing a minimum level of protection. Wherever possible, it would be preferable to rely on the enlightened and proactive co-operation of the Social Partners at enterprise, national and EU level, to advance the work-life balance agenda.

The voluntary approach can be seen in the work of the National Framework Committee for Work-Life Balance Policies, which was established under the Social Partnership agreements. The Committee, on which my Department is represented, comprises representatives from IBEC, ICTU, the Equality Authority and a number of Government Departments.

The Committee, whose work was endorsed under the most recent social partnership agreement, Towards 2016, is charged with facilitating the development of family friendly policies at the level of the enterprise through the development of a package of practical measures. Examples of such policies include, flexi-time, part-time working, annualised hours, teleworking, term time, work sharing, job sharing and other various additional leave options either paid or unpaid.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, I am confident that this Seminar will provide us with a useful opportunity to focus on the workplace of the future and on the challenges of making our workplaces more family friendly. It will also provide us with an opportunity to discuss the practical issues involved and to meet other people with an interest and a role in directing policy in this area. I hope that this Seminar will be just the beginning of debate and discussion among the key stakeholders about reconciling pregnancies, parenting and employment in the 21st century.

Thank you all very much.

ENDS