

## Garden reception at the Irish Embassy

Speech - **City** Brussels - **Country** Belgium - **Date** 09/09/2022

Ambassador Conmy, honoured guests, members of the Association de Femmes d'Europe. I'd like to begin by thanking the Ambassador for the invitation to speak with you this evening and to congratulate the Association on the quiet, understated, but vital work it continues to do around the world.

I will shortly speak about the situation of women more generally in the EU, but I want first to remark upon the nature of the projects that the Association funds. And what is most striking to me about them is the acute sensibility they demonstrate in relation to the raw needs of the people that you support through them.

Your Association is obviously comprised of people who understand that even the smallest of thoughtful interventions can give comfort at times of financial or other kinds of personal stress.

Here in Brussels you have provided kitchen equipment for a men's home shared with the homeless; a meeting room for female ex-prisoners and their children and an outdoor playground for vulnerable children. In Greece you renovated a shelter for Roma families; In Italy you provided IT equipment to support elderly people isolated through COVID; in the Lebanon you provided a mobile library for disadvantaged children; in Cameroon you built four toilets for girls in a rural school; in Senegal you refurbished a sewing workshop in a shelter for street children.

It is even possible to believe that the gifts you have given will have a resonance beyond their immediate usefulness to those who receive them. It is possible that the meeting room for female ex-prisoners and their children will alleviate feelings of hopelessness that some of those women must surely carry with them. It is possible that the necessary privacy given to the young girls in Cameroon through the provision of bathroom facilities will encourage them to stay in school and secure better lives for themselves and for their families. It is possible that the street children in Senegal may secure paid work in the future through the skills learnt at the sewing workshop. Those small seeds that you have planted through these projects may, over time, achieve great things for their recipients.

I should also say that I found some personal solace in scrolling through the details of your work. It was a rather pleasant shock to be reminded of the abundant and selfless good that still exists in our troubled world. The loud and so called populist voices that have dominated much of political and societal discourse in recent years rarely if ever remark upon kindness, upon love,



upon the recognition of ourselves in the other, upon sacrifice for the sake of those others, indeed upon any of the values that are intrinsic to certain of the religions that they claim to be devotees of.

So please be assured that your work has great value; in the concrete support it gives to so many people, but also as a light in our current darkness, and I commend you for that.

The European Union has also been that beacon of hope for its citizens and in many instances and in particular for its women citizens.

As an Irish woman, who entered the workplace in the early 1980s, I have always been acutely conscious of the role the Union played in securing my rights in that workplace. The laws that bound married women to the home, the laws that discriminated between men and women in relation to pay, those laws and others were abolished on our entry to the Union not because my own Government wished to abolish them, but rather because the Union made it a condition of entry. The 1916 Proclamation of Irish independence which promised to give equal rights to all of its citizens realized that commitment only when we voted to subsume some parts of our sovereignty to the European Union almost six decades later.

I imagine that many European woman, both older and mainly younger than I, may have similar stories to tell. The Union, decoupled - to an extent - from the need to make messy local compromises to achieve or retain political power, could impose the concrete expression of the Union values of equal rights without risking defeat at the next local or national election. The additional sweetener of transformational levels of financial and economic support ensured that those values became lived rather than aspirational.

But the last few years, even the last few months, have taught us to take not a single part of that for granted and by that I mean, stable political systems with ingrained democratic values, respect for the rule of law, and a political class that unites rather than divides. We look at events in the United States we thought unimaginable, we see the rolling back of rights that many thoughts could never be touched.

Elsewhere we see political leaders act with an impunity that is devastating to the democratic contract between those who govern and those who are governed.

My eldest child was born in April 1990. I thought at the time how lucky she was to be born in that year, at that time. I remember taking photographs of our TV screen when Nelson Mandela was released, the same year that Ireland elected its first female President. The Berlin Wall had fallen and – best of all - Ireland reached the quarter finals of the world cup.

One month ago, that 1990 baby girl got married and how the world has changed in those three decades. I do not need to itemize those changes for those gathered here this evening but the screen shots of unfolding events, from Russia's invasion of Ukraine to the climate crisis and beyond are unlikely to feature in my daughter's wedding album.



But she is also a child of the European Union and has been from the moment she was born. Her life and life chances would have been unimaginable to her grandmothers' generation, even to large swathes of my own and Ireland's membership of the Union played an enormous, life defining, role in that. Her siblings have travelled and studied across the EU, roaming through Europe as unimpeded citizens of that Union and hopefully, in time, also contributing to its strengthening and to its resilience.

As European Ombudsman, I am, obviously, given the role, occasionally critical of the EU institutions. But I liken that criticism to that of a parent who sees their brightest, most responsible and talented child do something that undermines all of that. I live and work with a strong sense of the EU's vital role in the world, the upholder of values that are at times threatened, but without which we cannot possibly survive as we would wish to survive, with our rights and those of others respected, with confidence in the integrity of our political systems, with the knowledge that only through selfless collaboration will problems which quite literally threaten our existence on this planet, be solved.

And as I speak to you here this evening, a place of privilege and where we as women in particular enjoy rights and freedoms unknown to previous generations, I would like us to reflect on another generation of women who also enjoyed their own moment of liberation not that long ago and for whom that moment has now brutally ended.

A few days ago I read an account of her escape from Kabul with her young sister by an Afghan woman, Bushra Seddique. Writing in The Atlantic Magazine she said, 'The Taliban prevented my mother from getting an education the first time they were in power, in the '90s. Now they are back and doing the same to Asman (another sister who stayed). The Taliban have banned women from travelling without men, from participating in sports and the arts, from doing most jobs. When outside the home, they must cover themselves from head to toe.'

That denial of the full humanity of women remains a battle still to be fought in many parts of the world and no longer just in the developing world. Your Association, in funding so many education projects for women, recognizes that as key to unlocking certain possibilities and freedoms. And in a world currently high on testosterone that is absolutely vital.