

Funding Women in Science, Engineering, and Technology in Ireland

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INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1990s, I was one of a number of women who recognised the importance of having an on-campus child-care facility for staff and students at the University of Limerick.¹ Up until our child-care facility, Silver Apples, opened in November 1999, we had no on-campus child care available to us. The facility opening was due mainly to the efforts of a small group of women who used many opportunities to talk to management about the issue we had. As a direct result of this lobbying, the University of Limerick applied for and received funding; this would partly fund the building of the facility. More recently, the facility's management, in conjunction with our local primary school (first level), opened a purpose-built after-school club, the first of its kind in Ireland.

This anecdote is an indicator of how Irish society saw the need for child care 10 years ago: It was not high on the political, educational, or business agenda. During local elections at this time, I spoke with politicians about the issue of child care. Many of them had not come across this as an issue previously, or else they chose to ignore it.

Things have changed! One of the current hot political topics in Ireland is the provision of child care to all sectors of employees. It is discussed in the media and in political circles. Questions are being asked as to how this will be funded: whether working parents can claim tax allowances or the government will make direct payments to the facilities providing child care. This change in attitude has come about not solely because of lobbying, but also because the demand for child-care provision in Ireland has grown significantly. In recent years, the workforce demographic has changed. Women are staying in or returning to the workforce, and this is being encouraged at the highest levels within our government. The changing child-care situation is an indicator of this.

In Ireland, the economy performed very well throughout the 1990s. This improving economy has given an opportunity to women to return to the workforce. In 1990, less than 36% of women aged 15 and over were employed; in 2004, this statistic increased to 45% (Central Statistics Office, <http://www.cso.ie>). Women return to the workplace after becoming mothers and so take maternity leaves and/or parental leaves, which may be as short as 4 months and as long as 2 years. Furthermore, women who broke their career paths to become full-time parents, which may have extended to 20 years, are also returning to work.

BACKGROUND

Women working in science, engineering, and technology (SET) may experience difficulties in returning to a workplace where the nature of their jobs has changed significantly, even in a short number of years. Furthermore, young women are not taking up SET third-level options. For example, at the University of Limerick, less than 10% of engineering students are women. Internationally, people (mainly women) currently in SET careers have shown concern about these two issues, and in many countries, networks have been set up to promote SET careers to women. These networks provide initiatives to promote SET choices that are available to both groups of women: those returning to SET careers and those considering SET careers. It is not a case of requiring all women to take SET options: We do not want to see square pegs in round holes. What is required is that women are given choices and can make those choices freely.

In Ireland, once such network is Women in Technology and Science (WITS). WITS was inaugurated in November 1990 to actively promote

women in technology and science in Ireland. It does this through running initiatives such as role-model days and mentoring, and until recently, it was often a requirement for volunteers to organise and run such initiatives. However, that too is changing. The Irish government is recognising the value of retaining and retraining talented people. Consequently, initiatives have been instigated to support women returning to work. Some of these initiatives focus on actions, like the provision of child care, others on sectors, for example, women in rural areas and women in disadvantaged areas. What we are interested in are those initiatives that focus on SET.

Initiatives at the National Level

Recent women-in-SET initiatives include some funded by Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) through the National Development Plan (NDP) Equality for Women Measure.

National Development Plan: Equality for Women Measure

The NDP is a major development plan involving an investment of 52 billion euro of public, private, and European Union funds during 2000 to 2006. Covering investments in many aspects of the development of our economy, there is a specific requirement for gender mainstreaming throughout the plan. In addition, as a support to gender mainstreaming, the Equality for Women Measure is a positive-action program that complements this. Through this measure, 70 organisations have been funded to undertake positive-action projects for women. The specific objectives are as follows:

- Improve women's access to education, training, and employment
- Achieve equality for women in the workplace and in business
- Increase the number of women participating in decision making (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2003)

While much of the funding from the Equality for Women Measure did not go specifically toward science, engineering, and technology projects, many

women who are pursuing careers in these areas benefited. Furthermore, some projects were SET focused. Through this funding, WITS (2005) was enabled to produce a directory of SET women who are qualified for and available to sit on state boards. Tallaght Institute of Technology have instigated a mentoring program, Mentorlink.ie (2005), for young women in SET. Funding from this initiative has given the opportunity to the University of Limerick and the Limerick Institute of Technology to jointly run a foundation course in science, engineering, and technology for women. This course is discussed in detail later.

Science Foundation Ireland

Science Foundation Ireland is a statutory body that administers Ireland's Technology Foresight Fund. Through an investment fund of 646 million euro (2000-2006), it provides financial support for research in biotechnology and information and communications technology. SFI is interested in promoting cooperation between education, government, and industry in these two research disciplines.

Recently, Science Foundation Ireland announced a fund for the promotion of research among women. It states, "SFI's Objective is to encourage and participate in the development of sustainable mechanisms and practices which will ensure that women have an equal opportunity to compete on the basis of their scientific expertise, knowledge and potential" (<http://www.sfi.ie>). It has provided planning grants to 11 third-level institutions (universities and institutes of technology), giving them an opportunity to assess "women's participation in science and engineering research activities and research management." Following this planning period, SFI will be funding up to three development grants in 2006, each worth up to 250,000 euro, allowing third-level institutions to implement "long-term sustainable initiatives" for such participation. In the University of Limerick, due to the receipt of a planning grant, we interviewed faculty and postdoctoral and postgraduate researchers to investigate what positive actions for women's SET development can be taken within our institution.

In addition, SFI has announced Principal Investigator Career Advancement Awards that are designed to support people, particularly women, who

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