

Opening Remarks
Minister of State, Jack Chambers, T.D.
Joint Oireachtas Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media
Wednesday, 15 December 2021

Introduction

Go raibh maith agat, a chathaoirleach. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil chuig an gcoiste as ucht an cuireadh teacht anseo inniu.

I want to thank the committee for the invitation to appear before you to discuss this important topic and for the opportunity to outline some of the actions this Government is taking to address the challenges facing women in sport. The Committee has done some important work in facilitating progress in this area and I want to acknowledge that at the outset.

Equality in sport is a key priority for Government. Our overall vision is for women to have an equal opportunity to achieve their full potential while enjoying a lifelong involvement in sport. Both the Programme for Government and the National Sports Policy are unequivocal in their commitment to making this a reality. Making progress in this area is something that I am personally passionate about has been an area of focus for me throughout the past year.

The year has been dominated by amazing moments for women's sport. Rachael Blackmore's historic Aintree win, Leona Maguire's performance at the Solheim cup, Kellie Harrington's homecoming, Fionnuala McCormack's second fastest ever marathon time, the largest ever victory for the women's football team, Amy Hunter becoming the youngest-ever batter to hit a century, Emma Slevin becoming the first Irish gymnast to qualify for the All Around finals of the World Gymnastics Championships and the battle between Dublin and Meath this summer.

All of those moments are inspiring the next generation of women and girls to take up a sport, to get out, to get active, and to be the next generation of sporting heroes who will inspire us in the years and decades ahead.

We are prioritising the growth in grassroots participation all the way through to high performance throughout the sporting system through Sport Ireland, the National Governing Bodies, Local Sports Partnerships and the Federation of Irish Sport who all contributing to the increase in the number of women and girls taking part in sport.

For the committee's information, I intend to provide a brief update on funding, participation, women's participation in leadership positions, and I then intend to touch specifically on Gaelic players and Women's Rugby.

WIS Funding

As members will be aware, the Women in Sport funding programme is in place since 2005 and since then, over €20 million has been invested through the National Governing Bodies of sport and the Local Sports Partnerships around the country.

In 2018, funding under the Women in Sport programme was €600,000. Since then it has increased significantly. Sport Ireland announced an investment of €4m for the two years 2021 and 2022. This investment is having an impact across the sporting system with 45 sporting organisations set to receive funding under this investment. And a further €265,000 has been invested this year in the Local Sports Partnerships under the Programme.

These increases are in the context of increased funding for Sport Ireland in the Budget for 2022, bringing their total current expenditure budget to over €96 million compared to €92 million for 2021. This will enable Sport Ireland to continue to support NGBs and Local Sports Partnerships in delivering programmes for all participants, male and female.

Gender participation gap

One of the key aims of the National Sport Policy 2018-2027 is to eliminate the gender participation gap in sport entirely by 2027. The 2019 Irish Sports Monitor Report showed that the gender gap in sports participation was 3.4%, narrower than at any point over the past ten years.

Unfortunately, while the Irish Sports Monitor report for the first quarter of 2021 showed that the gender gap was eliminated during the Covid-19 restrictions, the latest Irish Sports Monitor figures for Quarter 3 show that a gender gap is beginning to re-emerge as COVID 19 restrictions are lifted. In Q3 of 2021 male sports participation had returned to pre-pandemic levels at 48%, while female sports participation was at 38%, 7% behind the level measured in 2019.

The emerging gradient is cause for focus and ongoing monitoring.

It is crucial we move now to ensure that this gap is closed. To this end, many National Governing Bodies will begin to deliver Women in Sport and Dormant Accounts Funded Programmes this winter which will actively target populations that have been disproportionately impacted by the Pandemic including females, economically and socially disadvantaged communities, people with a disability and Ethnic Minorities. These targeted activities will form part of a wider Winter Initiative to kickstart participation following the end of restrictions.

Leadership/Board Composition

The funding being provided by government and the increased participation we are seeking to support will need to be backed by progress at the leadership level also.

We recognise the importance of ensuring strong gender representation on boards of NGBs. The research in this area consistently shows that balanced boards lead to better outcomes and we need to ensure that this happens in sport.

The National Sports Policy set a target of 30% of either gender on the Boards of funded bodies by 2027. In the new Action Plan for Sport, I have strengthened that target and we are asking all NGBs to achieve 40% gender representation on their boards by the end of 2023.

It is a particular priority for me to enable women to take more leadership positions in sport and the 40% reflects this prioritisation. I firmly believe that the leadership of sporting organisations needs to reflect their growing female membership.

Gaelic Players

One of my priorities this year was to eliminate the funding gap that existed in grant funding for male and female gaelic players and I am very pleased to have achieved that aim and ensured that we have now parity in grant funding.

Additional funding of €1.7m has been provided this year and for future years for enhanced support of female inter-county gaelic games players on an equivalent basis to that being provided for their male counterparts. This additional provision brings the total amount available for female players in this context to €2.4m. This is a very important development for women's sport and demonstrates the Government's commitment to equality in sport.

Women's rugby

I am sure you are all aware, on Friday Minister Martin and I received a letter from 59 female international rugby players, both currently active and retired, regarding issues they have with the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU).

We have responded to the group to advise that a meeting will be sought with the IRFU and that Sport Ireland will meet with the players to discuss the issues raised. That meeting will take place before Christmas.

Both Minister Martin and I indicated that we were also happy to meet with the players should that be needed, and I hope that we will be able to do so next week.

Minister Martin and I will provide any assistance or advice needed that will help to address the issues raised. Sport Ireland has particular expertise in working with National Governing Bodies and high performance athletes and it will work with both the players and the IRFU to address the issues.

Equality in sport is a key priority for the Government; we want to achieve a sporting landscape where women have an equal opportunity to achieve their full potential while enjoying a lifelong involvement in sport.

Conclusion

While there has been good progress for women in sport, there are still challenges that need to be addressed. My officials and I continue to work closely with Sport Ireland and the sport sector with a view to achieving a much improved landscape for women and girls in sport.

I am happy to answer questions from the members.

Thank you Chair.

ENDS