

# Why equality benefits everyone

Three women currently hold positions on the Teagasc Authority. We've asked them their views on how more women might reach their full potential in the workplace

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**Cliona Murphy** is an engineer by profession. She worked in the chemical industry after graduation and joined PepsiCo in 1997. She has held many senior positions and is now responsible for Global Quality Assurance at PepsiCo.

As an Assistant Secretary, **Eilís O'Connell** is one of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine's most senior officials. She has also held management positions at the Department of Defence and the Office of Public Works. In her current role, she has responsibility for human resources and corporate affairs.

After 18 years at Teagasc as a senior agricultural economist, **Thia Hennessy** joined UCC in 2016 as Professor of Agri-food Economics. She was subsequently appointed dean of the UCC Business School.

**What advice would you give people, women in particular, considering their future careers?**

**Cliona Murphy:** I would really encourage women, and men, to get out of their comfort zones and embrace opportunities when they arise. I moved from engineering to product development and have taken opportunities to work in China and in Thailand, and now I am in Research & Development. To make big changes in terms of activity or location might seem daunting at the time, but they generate tremendous opportunities to learn and grow.

**Eilís O'Connell:** I think having a good mentor, or mentors, can be hugely beneficial. I have had excellent informal mentoring throughout my career from both women and men. As well as providing wise advice, it gives you the sense that you have someone in your corner. So I would advise people to participate in mentoring

Cliona Murphy.



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programmes if they are available, or to find someone who they trust and who can act in a mentoring role.

**Thia Hennessy:** If you have been in an organisation or a role for quite some time, to make a change is challenging. But for the growth and progress it brings, the short-term discomfort is worth it.

**What do you think about initiatives in terms of gender balance?**

**CM:** It's not about favouring women, it's about favouring diversity. We know that teams which have a better gender balance have better outcomes. It's about ensuring that everyone flourishes, which benefits us all.

**EOC:** I think some people relate gender initiatives to the introduction of quotas and certainly there can be reservations about this, but gender

initiatives can be more about developing creative initiatives that support women to avail of opportunities to participate at the highest levels and organisations that are more diverse perform better from a business perspective.

**TH:** I think while legislation protects the jobs of women who are away on maternity leave, it is the responsibility of organisations and leaders to ensure that women are not forgotten about when they are away and that their roles are not eroded. There needs to be advocates for women who are away to ensure that they are not 'out of sight, out of mind'.

**What do you think is holding women back?**

**CM:** I think much of the old fashioned thinking by is gone,

Eilís O'Connell.



Thia Hennessy.



though it's important to be aware of unconscious biases. Some women do need to have greater belief in themselves. A man will look at a job description and say: "Great, I have 80% of the qualifications needed." And have a go. Sometimes women will not go for a job unless they feel they have 100% of what's required. So I think anyone considering a position should be realistic, but not limit themselves.

**EOC:** I agree with Cliona. A key challenge is believing in ourselves. Stop listening to that voice that tells you that you can't do something. Because you certainly can.

**TH:** There is no expectation that women should stay in touch during maternity leave, but I think informal advocacy would support women and, as mentioned earlier, ensure that they

are still being considered when away.

**What advice would you give to young people, women in particular, considering careers on farms or in agriculture related occupations?**

**CM:** People are most successful when they love what they do. Now, more than ever, we need people in agriculture who are passionate about the future of food and the environment.

If you love it, go for it and make sure you avail of all the training and support that is available.

**EOC:** Don't allow yourself to be put off by stereotypes. Bring your own unique perspective and insight to the role, and to any new challenges that you may face. Work collaboratively with others and use your networks to get things done. Most importantly, accept support when it is offered to you.

**TH:** The agri-food sector is at an exciting stage of development and Brexit aside, there are still a lot of opportunities for ambitious young people entering this sector at the farm or industry level. We launched a new BSc in agricultural science at UCC this year and there has been great interest in it from male and female students alike.

My main advice to any young person considering a career is to follow their passions, do what they love, not what is expected of them, and that success will follow regardless of gender.

\*This text is derived in part from a series of interviews conducted by Valerie Farrell and videoed by Declan McArdle. The videos are available on the Teagasc website.