

# Women in Stem SPECIAL REPORT



Sonya Lennon, entrepreneur and thought leader for workplace equality; Sarah Murphy, chief executive, iQuest and Business Post LIVE; Brid Horan, chancellor, Dublin City University (DCU) and Deborah Threadgold, country general manager, IBM



Dr Deirdre Lillis, Convene Enterprise Academy lead, Technological University Dublin; Dr Eilish McLoughlin, associate professor, School of Physical Sciences, Dublin City University (DCU); Lisa Cusack, first officer, Airbus 330, Aer Lingus and Sheila Porter, founder and chief executive, SciFest



Sarah Kate Sweeney, Physics student, University College Cork (UCC); Ao Sasame, Medical student, University College Dublin and co-founder, AccessMed Ireland; Ruth Madden, biological and chemical sciences student, University College Cork (UCC) and Sonya Lennon, entrepreneur and thought leader for workplace equality

Pictures Maura Hickey

## Women driving deep changes in world of Stem

This year's Women in Stem summit highlighted the rich seam of talent in those women who have pursued stellar careers in the sector, but far more needs to be done to achieve gender balance. **Quinton O'Reilly** reports

I could say we have a roster of riches and brilliance, but it underplays the speakers here," said entrepreneur Sonya Lennon, who chaired the Women in Stem Summit 2022. "And the words today matter as they make a difference to government and to business policy in both the medium- and long-term."

In a packed schedule full of quality, the Women in Stem summit showcased a large and diverse range of demographics and experiences that highlighted both the progress made and what steps are needed to achieve gender parity.

The summit brought together the full range of stakeholders in policy, education, business and many more sectors to Croke Park on Wednesday, March 30. Among numerous elements, one recurring theme was that tackling the imbalance in Stem is more than just an issue with the pipeline, education or business. It's fundamentally a societal issue and everyone has a role in addressing it, regardless of gender, background or demographic.

This was reflected in the high quality of speakers across the board, who chose to cover areas like breaking bias in education, trailblazing in the industry, technology, female founders and rising stars.

Contributors ranged from Deborah Threadgold, country general manager at IBM Ireland giving a keynote on finding a pathway in Stem, Sheila Porter, founder and chief executive of Sci Fest, and Dr Eilish McLoughlin, associate professor at the School of Physical Sciences at DCU chatting about how they've created pathways for the next generation of women to be inspired by, to poet, writer and playwright Felispeaks performing spoken word poetry to an attentive audience.

Added to that was an insightful panel discussion on how it takes a village to enact change, which involved Linda Doyle, provost and president of TCD and Dr Andrea Johnson, vice president of Work Human and chairwoman for Women

in Technology and Science (WITS). The result was a comprehensive, constructive, and in-depth analysis of an always topical issue. The first set of talks entitled 'breaking the biases in education' set the tone for the day. A key element was how perception and biases can start very early on in a person's life.

A great example of this was highlighted by Lisa Cusack, first officer for Airbus 330 at Aer Lingus who highlighted that only 5 per cent of pilots in the world are women.

Speaking about her experiences in talking to primary school students, she gave two examples of the challenges involved. One telling thing is that when she asks them to guess her job by looking at her uniform, she'll get answers like sailor. Another issue is the different approaches boys and girls have to specific tasks.

"Sometimes, we split the girls and boys into groups and ask them how we scare birds away before taking off," she said. "Every time the girls get it right: turn the lights on. The boys will say we don't know but what happens if you fart in the cockpit?"

### Empathetic society

As the conference continued, many themes emerged over the day. One was the role of empathy, not just for women, but as a way to address problems in wider society.

This was best represented in the section 'breaking the biases in industry' with companies showing how they're rising to the challenge.

In their respective sessions, both Shay Walsh, managing director at BT Ireland and Rhonda Doyle, director of operations, services and projects at Schneider Electric Ireland, mentioned initiatives their companies had taken. These included creating a culture of empathy, allowing flexibility in workers' lives for parenting, maternity and paternity leave, and other factors in people's lives.

Such initiatives are breaking through

to companies across the board with partners and sponsors for the summit including WITS, Workequal, HealthTech Ireland, BAM Ireland, Schneider Electric Ireland, the daa, Enterprise Ireland, Martinsen Mayer, and Skillnet.

While initiatives bridging the gender gap are crucial to bringing better representation of women across the board, many of the speakers emphasised the importance of knowing it creates wider benefits in how we treat everyone in society.

It's easy to suggest such issues as isolated, but they impact everyone.



Joanne O'Riordan, activist

"You have to start from the why," said Dr Claudia Igrubde, learning technologist and business adviser. "When you hear the gender conversation, it's positioned as if it's a charity of sorts, or giving back to women or a compliance issue. It's beyond that."

And while the main focus is on women, another key element is ensuring that men are part of the change. The idea of allowing men to have permission to show up emotionally, say that's okay and engage in parenting and other activities that traditionally they may not have been able to do in the past.

That men like Gavin Fox, director at Martinsen Mayer, could talk about par-

enting freely was already a sign that the preconception of what men and women can and want to do is dissolving.

Providing that flexibility for parenting, parental leave and maternity leave isn't just beneficial for women, it benefits men too.

### Bringing everyone to the table

In one of the later panels about accelerating progress in education and industry, that element of connectivity was crucial. Stem does not exist in isolation, it's very much part and parcel of the modern world and how it's constructed is a reflection of how the world is constructed. Changing the shape of it will take time and effort but it will be worth it in the long run.

There's no appetite to have the same conversation in ten years' time and that was reflected throughout the entire summit. Much of what's necessary for progress boils down to showing the pathway and having the necessary supports and structures to address any unseen barriers.

One example that emerged was when Enterprise Ireland started looking at why the majority of postgrads coming to the body for support were men. Deirdre Glenn, of start-ups and commercialisation at Enterprise Ireland said that after extensive research and getting independent evaluations, it was discovered that women might be quietly confident but reluctant to show it publicly.

"It was the simple things [to work on]; it was finding that space at the table. They may be quietly confident but showing that confidence [is important]," she said. "It's about that self-confidence and really encouraging women to get up and saying it doesn't matter if you make a mistake."

"The companies that do best are the ones that are balanced from a gender and equality perspective. They're a lot better at retaining talent, and they per-



Linda Doyle, provost & president, Trinity College Dublin; Clare Harney, executive director, Digital Health Transformation, HealthTech Ireland and Dr Andrea Johnson, VP, Work Human & Chairperson, Women in Technology and Science (WITS)



Fiona Edwards Murphy, chief executive and co-founder, ApisProtect; Dr Jennifer Keenahan, assistant professor, School of Civil Engineering, University College Dublin (UCD); Lorraine Brady, pre-construction director, BAM Ireland and Andrea Carroll, group head of sustainability, daa



Felispeaks, poet, performer and playwright: attentive audience at event



Paddy Hayes, chief executive, ESB



Breda McCague, co-founder, Lean-In Ireland and transformational specialist



Shay Walsh, managing director, BT Ireland: culture of empathy