
Bank of Ireland's inspiring IWD event in Athlone

Four women with diverse backgrounds shared their inspiring career stories during a roundtable interactive lunch at Bank of Ireland's International Women's Day event in Athlone.

Ethel Gavin, governor of Midland's Prison in Portlaoise, Debbie Mulhall, owner of two established beauty salons in Athlone and Tullamore, Una McDonagh, co-owner of Irish fast-food chain Supermac's and Aine McCleary, director of distribution channels at Bank of Ireland, all came together to celebrate the day and talk about their experiences as female leaders in their fields. The panel discussion was moderated by Sadie Concannon, branch manager at Bank of Ireland. The evening concluded on a high note, with comedian Alison Spittle, doing a stand-up show.

"We are delighted to host this event in the midlands with over one hundred of you here in the room," said Ita Gray, head of counties Longford and Westmeath at Bank of Ireland. "Before 1973, I wouldn't actually be able to stand here and address you all because I am a married mother of six and I would have to give up work before I got married. So big changes within a few years," she noted.

Introducing herself to the attendees, Ethel Gavin talked about how when she joined the prison service in her late twenties, she instantly knew that she would love her job. “I didn’t think I was going to be a governor, but I knew that I loved working with the people, and it was very natural to me,” she said.

“I am very privileged to stand in front of you here today, to talk about what I have achieved. I am extremely proud that I am the only female governor in charge of a male prison, which is also the biggest prison in the country. And I love my work, I believe that we offer a good service for the prisoners and the community. We want to ensure that the prisoners can avail of education, addiction counselling, whatever it is that they need, it is up to them to take personal responsibility, and I am confident that we have a very modern penal system,” she added.

The Prison Service could benefit from more women

According to Gavin, more female employees would only benefit the prison service. “Women have only been in male prisons since 1996. The men would always say that women brought normality to the job, and they think as a result, that prison now is a more caring environment.”

When asked about the most challenging aspects of governing Ireland’s biggest prison, she replied: “I suppose getting people to believe that your ideas are real and that they can work, is what I still find challenging - even when you have fostered a lot of changes, and you believe that they have been embedded in the organisation.”

Gavin also stressed the importance of having a work-life balance. “I love to travel, I do yoga, I walk, I swim, I am in a fantastic book club and I have two children. I think that the greatest achievement in anyone’s life - if they like being a mother - is being a mother. I think it is important when you are in a difficult job, to make sure that you have a work-life balance.”

Una McDonagh, recounted how after she finished her Leaving Certificate, her passion was to join the Gardaí, but she couldn’t apply before she was 21. It was then that, Pat, the man that later became her husband, asked her to work with him at his newly-opened local restaurant in Ballinasloe. “That’s changed my life forever. I got the job in Ballinasloe, and never left it,” she said. Three years later, the couple had already expanded their business by opening a second store. Their first restaurant outside Galway was in Ennis, Co. Clare, and a few years later they moved to O’Connell St. in Dublin. “This was probably the biggest step we ever made,” said Una.

Today, the couple owns 116 restaurants and six hotels across the country. For Una, listening to what the customers want is essential. “There’s no point in having a product that your customer doesn’t want. We really have to listen to our customers, to make changes, to see what their needs are” she explained. But it’s her kids and family that Una is most proud of in her life - and the fact, that she could work with her husband for 40 years. “He’s very strategic, and I’m a very good

people's person and a manager," she said.

Debbie Mulhall's journey in the beauty industry began eight years ago, after returning from the United States, where she had opened her first business. "About 18 months after I opened that business I became pregnant, I had an awful pregnancy, I was very sick, the relationship failed, and I found myself at my lowest point ever. I came to the very tough decision to move back home in 2011, during a very bleak time in Ireland. There were no jobs and everybody was telling me that I was nuts to return home".

Debbie had no background in the beauty industry, no money, and a new baby to take care of. "I did some courses, and started using Facebook and Instagram, and posting pictures of what I was doing. I now have a team of 12 women," she said.

For Debbie, being a leader doesn't come naturally. "But I am fearless, I go for things. I am so proud of where I am, I am so proud of my team, they are my inspiration, and I try so hard to be better for them", she said.

The banking industry has a long way to go

Aine McCleary, who was elected as the first female president at the Institute of Banking, is head of distribution channels at Bank of Ireland. "I work very closely with my colleagues across all our branches, our contact centres, and digital channels. I lead a team of 2,800 people across Ireland, and my job as a leader is to make them thrive. If they do better, I do better, the business does better and the customers do better," she explained.

Asked about how much the banking industry has changed for women, Aine replied, "I think that sometimes when we look at the statistics, the industry has a long way to go, I'd be naive not to say that. Success for me would be if we didn't need an International Women's Day. In the Institute of Banking, at the entry level, 60% of our students are female, while at the director level, only 25% of our students are female."

When Aine started her career in banking at Ulster Bank, one of her male colleagues was promoted based only on his gender. That was a watershed moment for her. "I possibly wouldn't have the resilience or have driven myself where I have if it wasn't for that moment. At the time I didn't realise it, but now I very much do," she said.