



**Catholic Girl Guides of Ireland  
Chief Commissioner Award**

Orla O'Connor - NWCI

**Thank you**

Firstly, thank you to the Catholic Girl Guides for inviting me as the Director of the National Women's Council of Ireland to address this inspiring event with your Chief Commissioner Awardees. I feel very honoured to be here to join in the celebration with you all - Guides, parents, families and friends. The Catholic Girl Guides of Ireland play a vital role in bringing young women together to develop their skills and confidence and provide opportunities for the wonderful young people here to realise their potential.

**NWCI**

I would like to tell you a little bit about the organisation that I am proud to lead. The mission of the National Women's Council of Ireland is to seek full equality between men and women. We are proud to say that the NWCI is the leading national women's membership organization in the country. As Director I am proud to represent a growing number of members who are the primary inspiration for our work and direction. The Catholic Girls Guides are a **key part of this** along with over 180 member groups from a diversity of backgrounds, sectors and locations. These include trade unions, Universities, Community Groups, and groups that work with particular

communities such as migrants, Travellers and women with disabilities. The National Women's Council is about bringing women together and men who support our vision to take action to improve the lives of women and girls in Ireland. We work every day to reach our goal of equality between women and men. We know that this is an ambitious task but we know too that when it is achieved, Ireland will be a better place to live, for all women, for men, for children, for families and communities. Reaching this goal means highlighting and taking action to address the very low numbers of women in politics, the low numbers of women leading in the world of business and finance and the low numbers of women who are part of making key decisions that affect all our lives. Reaching our goal means working to end violence and harassment of against women, promoting good quality healthcare and childcare and ensuring that women have an equal chance to develop, grow and excel on whatever path they choose to take. We want to ensure we make **your** voices heard wherever and whenever decisions are made that affect the lives of all women everywhere in the world.

## **Getting Involved**

We are proud to have the CGI as one of our members and salute your mission to provide a challenging Guiding programme within a safe environment, to enable all girls and young women **to develop their full potential**. In CGI you do this by allowing young people learn and value independence and team work. These lessons do not take part solely in meetings, they may be learnt by cooking on a campfire, putting up tents together or trekking through woods to find fire fuel, all the time looking out for each other.

Importantly the CGI also offers choice. Young girls are given the choice to try things in a safe environment, where they can feel confident and comfortable to try adventure sports like abseiling, water skiing, mountain climbing. This inspires confidence in our young women. And all this along with - fun weekend breaks, camping and holidays with your friends, is a good way to learn. All of these activities have such a positive impact on young people. I am sure that it is very rewarding to observe the progression of CGI members as they grow in experience and confidence, where Guides

progress to Rangers encouraged and supported by the adult helpers who endeavour to keep these precious traditions alive.

I myself was a member of CGI and have very happy memories of that time. For me and many others it meant being totally accepted for who I was. It didn't matter what my colour, size, ability, or family background was because I was accepted for being me. We know these factors often come into play in a negative way within our education system so the importance of being accepted uniquely for yourself cannot be underestimated and that happens here within the CGI. Some of my memories of being in CGI are my first experiences of being independent from my parents – going on hikes, spending weekends in Fernhill in Wicklow – which helped me to grow into being a confident young woman also and I think more importantly as I Reflect back is the value of working together – with in groups, which was a such an important feature of our weekly meetings and of outdoor adventures. This helped build for me the importance of solidarity, supporting your friends and fellow guides and of working collectively. In my role as Director of NWCI – these are critical values and skills that are so necessary for bringing about change for women– we cannot bring about change as individuals – this needs collective action – but also showing support and solidarity with women is crucial whether that's working with the staff team in NWCI – to working with you our members – to campaigning and standing up for the rights of women and against the sexist culture that pervades all our lives.

All these missions you have undertaken -, all your achievements and all the tasks you completed through the Chief Commissioner Award will contribute to your growth, to your confidence and to your independence. No doubt during the course of this project you also experienced a great amount of fun which most likely helped forge friendships that will last a lifetime.

The vision for Girl Guides is that all girls and women in CGI are empowered to recognise the contribution they make to society and are thus inspired to make a difference in and to the world. Today we mark The Chief Commissioner Awards which is the highest award for 12 – 14 year olds in

the CGI. This is such an impressive award, involving a lot of work over a range of activities, everything from history, engagement with the community, the sharing of knowledge, connecting with others at home and abroad to improve skillsets and ultimately make a positive impact on the world.

Through the NWCi Youth Project – The Y Factor, we have noticed the resurgence of feminism among young women. Put simply, feminism is a belief that women are equal to men and have a right to have that equality recognised and supported in all aspects of life. Last Sunday Emma Watson the 24 year old actress who starred in the Harry Potter films gave a powerful speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations. Emma has recently been appointed good will ambassador to the UN body UN Women. In her speech she condemned the harm that gender discrimination causes to both men and women and invited men to become active participants in the global struggle for equality. In describing how she came to be a feminist Emma said ““When I was 8, I was confused about being called 'bossy' because I wanted to direct the plays that we would put on for our parents. But the boys were not. When at 14, I started to be sexualized by certain elements of the media, when at 15, my girlfriends started dropping out of their beloved sports teams, because they didn't want to appear 'muscle-y,' when at 18, my male friends were unable to express their feelings, I decided that I was a feminist”. She continued “ I think it is right that women be involved on my behalf in the policies and the decisions that affect my life. I think it is right that socially, I am afforded the same respect as men. But sadly, I can say that there is no one country in the world where all women can expect to receive these rights. No country in the world can yet say that they have achieved gender equality”.

We've noticed that being part of a feminist movement has instilled confidence in girls. You have a true value, a worth as an individual and not just as an object for boys *to fancy*. Your achievements will have taught you to stand up for, not just yourself, but for others too across all aspects of your life, including relationships. Hopefully it has instilled and triggered awareness that, as a girl, you can be just as interested in

science, maths or woodwork or any other traditionally male field, and you can excel there too.

## **The Y Factor**

I know from the NWCI youth project – The Y Factor - that young people can and do feel just as strongly about gender inequality as anyone else but rarely are their voices heard. The Y Factor was set up on the basis that gender inequality affects people at all stages and at all levels in their lives – from local family life to global relations. Young people are the voice of the future.– **The Y Factor** has been set up to empower and support young women like you and give you the space to have your voices heard in the ongoing movement for equality. Unfortunately in spite of much progress in women's equality over the last century, there are still many areas in life where women do not get the same opportunities or positive life experiences as men.

Inequality between women and men can be so deeply rooted in every part of our society that we may not always notice or recognise it. Many perceptive young people who can and do detect it are tired of settling for an inequality in society. They witness the injustices; they reject sexism and racism and they want to continue to help make it equal for all. They see the endless possibilities for women and men to recognise, respect and live together as equals. I would like to invite you all to be part of The Y Factor movement and check out our website or find us on Facebook!

## **Learning new skills**

At our AGM this year two of our members, the INTO and the ASTI, proposed a motion to combat gender stereotyping amongst young girls. ALL members present, supported this motion in full. To this end we are developing a gender conscious toolkit for youth practitioners and youth workers. 'Gender' refers to the learned roles, behaviours, and activities that society considers appropriate for men and women. This is a long list which changes dramatically over space and time, within and between cultures. (ie Women care for children; Men build houses; Women wear skirts etc).For

example in youth work settings gender stereotyping is evident where boys play sports and girls are invited to learn about makeup, hairdressing with an emphasis on their appearance. Through this toolkit we want to ensure that young people and youth practitioners can understand and recognise gender stereotyping for what it is, and therefore refuse to continue with it and refuse to reinforce it.

We really commend the action the CGI and you, its guides, are taking with the new '**Free Being Me**' campaign which '**Dove**' is partnering. This is a ground breaking new programme for 7-10 and 11-14 year olds which unmasks society's beauty myths – exposing air brushing and challenges unhealthy body talk. Many of you will be aware of the survey carried out by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs on young people's body image which asked "Are you satisfied with your body image?" Findings showed only 38% of girl participants were "fairly satisfied" and a shocking 21% were "dissatisfied".

With the '**Free Being Me**' Programme, the girls and young people are taught that body confidence and self-esteem come from valuing their bodies. They are taught to stand up to social pressures, to support others to be more body confident. By working together, leading others and speaking out, participants will be empowered to make a difference in their local and global communities.

This issue of body image comes up again and again for **The Y Factor** and the young people we engage with. So we support the wonderful **Free Being Me** campaign that you are rolling out wholeheartedly.

### **Engaging with Community**

All of you who have been awarded today have shown your capacity to break gender norms and chose to explore more, do more, learn more in a practical way and fun way. I want to talk to you today about sharing this learning with your community. Engaging with your community will lead to a better society for everybody. The CGI vision is a positive all inclusive community movement on the island of Ireland empowering girls and women to recognise the contribution they make to society and this is

certainly clear today. You should be very proud of yourselves, we certainly are very proud of you.

You awardees have opened your hearts and minds to new and different ways of doing things. This curiosity, critical analysis and learning is crucial as you move through secondary education and into third level and or into the job market, as you embark on all of life's adventures.

I celebrate your achievement today and wish the awardees, their CGI group, their families and friends the best of luck. I encourage one and all to stay involved, share your knowledge and your opinions, we at the NWCI need you but more importantly - your country needs you! Well done to you all. Congratulations...