Fellow Ministers, Director General, Distinguished guests,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this workshop this afternoon on the topic of the economic engagement of older women – the full title is Older Women and Europe’s Labour Market – Working Together for the Needs of All.

I am pleased that we will have the benefit of expert views from two D.Gs in the Commission. We are honoured to have Mr. Koos Richelle Director General of DG Employment and Mr. Aurel Ciobanu Dordea Director for Equality of DG Justice to give us the Commission’s insights this afternoon.

As Minister with responsibility for Disability, Equality, Mental Health and Older People, the choice of topic for this discussion links two of my own areas of responsibility – gender equality and older people. I make no apology for this. I have worked towards gender equality for just about as long as Ireland has been a member of the EU and I have to acknowledge that membership of the then EEC made our task somewhat easier.

The strength of the EEC’s legal acquis on equality and good practice from the other eight Member States supported our work to enhance the role of women both at work and in society in Ireland and I believe we have been largely successful, although there are still some challenges, as persists in all Member States.

In speaking about the economic engagement of older women this afternoon, I envisage that much of the discussion will focus on their potential contribution to economic growth and on the personal benefits older women can derive from work to enable them to live outside the poverty trap which is so often experienced in old age, particularly by older women.

Our theme links closely with the portfolios of my two colleagues here at EPSCO. My colleague Joan Burton, has responsibility for social inclusion, social welfare and labour activation, while Minister Richard Bruton has responsibility for employment and enterprise.

I believe that the issue of “work and older women” has been inadequately addressed in the research to date, and indeed, I think this also applies to policy initiatives, both here in Ireland, in Europe and indeed on the broader international front. Much of the work published to date relates to the economic engagement of older people, addressing the needs of both men and women and does not adequately differentiate between the sexes.

The needs of men and the needs of women differ for a number of reasons. Despite the availability of incentives such as parental leave and paternity leave for many years and in many Member States, men still tend not to interrupt their careers to participate in caring duties within the family. As a result, men achieve, and maintain, full pension rights more easily than do women.
This continual attachment to the labour market also enables male workers to advance more easily in their careers, ensuring higher career long earnings and more financial comfort in older years. Detachment from the labour market for child rearing and caring duties is regarded as a causal factor of the gender pay gap. Again this impacts upon the lifelong income, and ultimately the pension entitlements, of women.

Eurostat statistics tell us that, across the EU, the “at risk of poverty rate” for women aged 65 years and over is 18.1 per cent, just over 40 per cent higher than the comparable rate of 12.9 per cent for men, even when social transfers are taken into consideration. Surely this points clearly to the need to extend the labour market engagement of women and to facilitate their retention or return to the labour market.

I was recently at a meeting on women and leadership where one of the speakers made the point that, in Ireland “we employ least those we educate most”. With the high levels of educational attainment of women across the European Union, I believe we have to take steps to optimise their contribution to the labour market, and more importantly to economic growth.

Many women make a life choice to interrupt their careers to bear and care for their children and I am not seeking to sway any woman who wishes to make this choice. However children tend to have a high level of care dependency for a comparatively short period within the lifecycle of the mother. While respecting their right to choice, I believe that mothers should be actively encouraged to return to the labour market when their children no longer need full time care. Women may need to upskill or change their chosen career but these should be seen as positive steps to maximise the benefits of an experienced and highly qualified workforce and to make provision for pensions and older age.

Much of the literature suggests that the North America and Australia are to the forefront in encouraging the re-engagement of older women into the labour market at present.

We know that the key focus of Europe 2020 is on the achievement of an employment rate of 75 per cent by 2020. While the problems of unemployed youth are inescapable at present, I think that we also need to take a longer term view and look at the many millions of women, including older women, who are inactive in Europe at present. It may be that you are unfamiliar with the statistics, and the gender differences were a particular surprise to me.

I looked recently at the age group 50 to 64 years in the Eurostat labour force survey and found that 25 million women and 30 million men in this age group are in employment. This was a difference of 5 million women. There is only a difference of 600,000 between the sexes in the numbers in this age group who are unemployed – 2.4 million men and 1.8 million women.

However, when we look at those who are recorded as inactive, there were 14 million men in this age group who were economically inactive, but there were over 22.6 million women aged 50 to 64 years who are neither at work nor unemployed from a labour market perspective. This represents a missed opportunity, on the part of these millions of women who are not building up pension entitlements and possibly providing adequately for their old age.
CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

But it is also a missed opportunity economically as their productive capacity is not being fully utilised for the betterment of economic growth across Europe.

I believe that we, as politicians, need to look more closely at the challenge of encouraging the return to work of the significant numbers who have interrupted their careers and have not returned to the labour market. There is evidence to suggest that this will require special initiatives to support the less confident to believe again in their abilities and their capacity to contribute positively to the world of work. We have run such programmes in Ireland for the past decade with the generous support of the European Social Fund.

Recent discussions at E.U. level have focuses on the desirability of encouraging Member States to use the next round of E.S.F. funding to foster the employment goals of the E.U. We have benefited in Ireland from such funding in a number of other initiatives which have assisted older workers. In the 1990s, we expanded our tourism sector with a mix of E.R.D.F. and E.S.F. funding and much of the resulting expansion in employment was taken up by more mature women who offered the warmth and charm that is synonymous with Irish hospitality.

In the early years of this decade, and with the encouragement of the Commission, and again with a mix of E.S.F. and E.R.D.F. funds, Ireland expanded our childcare facilities to support working parents. Frequently the beneficiaries of grant assistance were mature women who established small scale family day care facilities, creating an employment opportunity for themselves and others while also offering invaluable childcare services to working parents. This is another “win, win” situation, assisting older workers and enabling them to create wealth for their older years.

With so many economic challenges at present and particularly with the realities of global competition so clearly etched out for us, we need to maximise the contribution of every citizen to economic growth while also ensuring the well-being of each and every citizen, particularly in later years.

The reality of early 21st century economics is that we need every citizen to plan for his or her old age in good time. Recent experiences have shown the fragility of monetary resources. As the leaders of Europe, we need to create a greater awareness of these realities and to actively encourage women in particular to plan their careers from a “whole of life” perspective, taking the necessary interruptions to have children, but seeing this interruption as just a temporary break, with prospects to return to, and advance further in the labour market, be it in the same field or in an equally challenging role, which makes full use of intellectual capacity.

As Minister with responsibility for both gender equality and older people, I hope that our discussion here today marks the start of a broader debate on the merits of putting in place active policies and initiatives across Europe to address Older women and Europe’s Labour Market – Working together for the needs of all – the theme of our discussion today. I believe it will be clear at the end of our discussion that the return to, or retention of, older women in the labour market helps both the economy and the lifetime prosperity of the woman – a “win, win” situation.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to hearing your views.