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Panel Conversation

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A Conversation on Generosity, Leadership, and Caring on International Women's Day

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Abstract

This panel discussion, convened for International Women's Day at University College Dublin, explores the transformative role of caring, generosity, and mentorship in academic and professional life. Through personal reflections, five women leaders examine how "micro-supports" build the confidence necessary for career development. The conversation critiques the gendered expectations of "academic housekeeping," emphasising the need for sustainable support to prevent burnout. The panelists distinguish between formal mentorship and sponsorship, advocating for the active "naming" of women's contributions in rooms where they are not present. Key themes include the importance of wellbeing, the power of informal "soft power" networks, and the necessity of reframing failure as a prerequisite for innovation. Ultimately, the discussion posits that investing in others is not a zero-sum drain on resources but a vital mechanism for strengthening the entire community, grounded in caring, kindness, and solidarity.

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Welcome by Ernesto Vasquez del Aguila

Welcome, everyone. My name is Ernesto Vasquez del Aguila, and I am the Vice Principal of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion / Widening Participation at the College of Social Sciences and Law. It is my absolute pleasure to welcome you to today's event. This marks the second time we have gathered for an informal panel discussion with colleagues to reflect on their experiences as leaders. The session will be chaired by our College Principal, Professor Niamh Moore Cherry, after which we will open the floor for informal conversation and, we hope, fruitful new connections among colleagues. We view this event as an occasion not only to mark, but to celebrate the vital work women are doing within our university and the wider community. While we see increasing positive shifts toward gender equality globally, we cannot ignore the profound challenges facing women in regions such as Sudan, Afghanistan, and Gaza. Domestically, we also face the systemic challenges of gender-based violence, the rise of the "manosphere," and the escalating backlash against feminism and gender equality. Though we are living through an incredibly challenging era for EDI globally, it is more important than ever to celebrate the local progress we are making within our own communities. We hope this event serves to lift our spirits as we hear from our esteemed colleagues. I now leave you with the chair of this conversation, Professor Niamh Moore Cherry.

Niamh: Thank you, Ernesto, for organising this gathering today with our team in the college office. International Women's Day is an interesting time of year to reflect on women, on the role of women, on how women support each other, but also — how we engage with others. I'm delighted to see so many men in the room today — a recognition that we need to be working together in support of each other, and to lift each other up. That is why gatherings like this are so important. Through them we recognise that nobody is an island, and that we need to be working together and supporting each other in all that we do. This is something that has stood to me in my career and my life to date. When I think about the people that influenced me all the way along — and I took a bit of time on Sunday, which was International Women's Day, to think about that — of course, my mum came, really strongly, to my mind. She is one of the strongest and cleverest people I know. Because of the time she grew up in, she did not have the opportunity to continue her formal education at secondary school and the thing she always said to myself and my sister — I have no brothers, so it was a very female-driven household — was, "Education is no burden to carry". She was always encouraging us to read and take up opportunities. I think perhaps she valued them so much because she never got them. She had to leave school at fourteen, because she had

four younger sisters, and go to work. She gave up her opportunity in order for her siblings to benefit, all of whom had the opportunity to continue in school, especially following the introduction of free secondary education. I'm also conscious of the role that my dad played and plays in my life. My dad was in a house with females — he had me and my two sisters. He always supported us, and helped us support one another. The opportunity to go to college was not open to him either and over my time growing up, both him and my mum sacrificed things to give us our chances. The idea of education as important, not just for the learning but for the opportunities that it brings, has very much shaped me as a person. I also think of other highly influential people on my career — one of them, of course, was my geography teacher at school. I loved her. She was enthusiastic, organised, and seemed to live such a glamorous life. She had lived in Australia for a year; and when you're in secondary school, in a convent school in the 1990s, to have a geography teacher who'd actually lived in Australia for a year was amazing. Her ability to bring the world to life was hugely inspiring and shapes my worldview, even today. I then came to UCD and had an unusual experience at the time. When I was an undergraduate in geography, there were two professors, both of them women, which was very unusual in the 1990s. I would say that all of these people were important female role models, though I didn't think in that way at the time. But looking back, I really understand the importance of female role modeling to others and the idea of, "If you can't see it, you can't be it". When we invest our time, knowledge, and resources in others, they don't just help the other person, but strengthen our entire community, which ultimately benefits us all. That is something I'm really looking forward to exploring with our four panelists today.

I am joined by Associate Professor Sara O'Sullivan from the School of Sociology. Sara and I have worked together for a very long time on various projects, including the University Fellowships in Teaching and Learning. Sara was the inaugural Associate Dean for Social Sciences in our College.

Our second panellist is Dara Gannon, School Manager in the School of Politics and International Relations. Next, we have Lisa Madsen, our interim College Office Director, and, finally, Professor Imelda Maher, Dean of Law. Imelda is certainly a role model for female leadership in the university; both in terms of being a voice that's listened to and how to be that voice, but also in terms of being a very human and a very kind person, always thinking of other people. I am delighted to have such great panellists for our discussion.

Starting with you, Dara — can I ask you how a spirit of generosity has influenced you in your career, or helped you accelerate your career?

Dara: I've been very lucky in my career. I have been surrounded with managers that have been hugely supportive; both male and female, in equal measure. I've had fantastic opportunities to learn, with no obstacles put in my way whatsoever. It's basically [felt like], "Please go and thrive, and reach your full potential". That has been a huge influence on me. I like to continue in that vein in my management of people, or in my dealings with people in general. Seeing others succeed and also reach their full potential is a huge reward. It's a great *buzz*. It's lovely when you meet somebody that you've mentored a little bit in the past, and they're absolutely flourishing and flying high, and you think, "Wow, go you!". And I think that's fantastic. As I said, I just like to carry that through. In terms of enabling that — if you give people sufficient latitude to fail as well as to succeed, that's carrying forward that generosity rather than that gatekeeping. It's very important that people can fail also, and be allowed to fail, and know that it's not the end of the world. And you know what? We all make mistakes, and owning up to those mistakes yourself, when you make them, is hugely important as well. Allowing people that latitude is really what counts, in my view.

Niamh: That's really interesting. I read a book recently by Amy Edmondson. It's about psychological safety, and the idea that the places that are most successful and thrive, are the places where innovation is allowed to happen. And innovation never happens the first time. There has to be failures and learning, and failures and learning. That idea of a reflective approach to what we do, and adapting and allowing that space, is really interesting. That's great, thanks Dara. Maybe the same question, Imelda, to yourself? That spirit of generosity — where you've seen it, and how that helps others?

Imelda: One of the important things is to see it. Giving involves taking. Sometimes, it's only afterwards that you realise, "Oh, that was really nice, I didn't notice". Or you find out indirectly that somebody had nudged something, or mentioned something, or sent a paper your way, or thanked you. When I was a junior scholar, I met a figure who was very big in my field, in law. We had a nice conversation, and that was all very good, and I went about my way. And then he said, "You can send me your paper", and I did, and he commented on it. I now know that the fact that I thanked him in a blurb at the start [of the paper] was really important. But at the time, I didn't realise it. So sometimes you learn after the event. Also, people are kind to you, or they give to you, and they don't realise it. So I wrote to somebody recently who had retired, because he'd written me a lovely review of a book I had written, which I never forgot. When I wrote to thank him many years later, he was *gobsmacked*. He'd never even thought he'd done anything special. He wore it very lightly. And that's a great position to be in, if you can help people without even feeling like you're being drained of your personal resources. So I don't know what his

secret formula is. I think he naturally liked being in a community, and I think that counted for a lot of it.

Niamh: That's the point — what matters doesn't have to be the big things. It's very simple to send an email or to write a letter. And sometimes receiving a handwritten note, in today's age where nobody gets any post, is a really nice thing. Sara, how about you? Have you encountered that spirit of generosity in a way that helped you in your career?

Sara: I definitely encountered it when I was Associate Dean. So many people were so helpful in lots of different ways. Both at a very significant level — taking on jobs that I couldn't have done if they hadn't stepped up, without having to be prodded or asked. Lots of big things that people did, but actually lots of small things. Again, at meetings, where maybe things were a bit tricky or techy, somebody just coming up afterwards and saying, "Oh, you handled that well, and well done keeping your calm"; or those small, little micro-supports that were really, really important in keeping kind of spirits up, and also making sure that you're confident. I think a lot of our work relies on confidence, doesn't it? And if there's any little knocks to that, it can really impede your ability to function well, or to move on to the next thing, or not get caught up on that. Another thing that I learned early on was [that] nobody else is going to remember most of this. So don't sweat the small stuff. Don't be focused on, "Why I did and why I didn't do that?" And then, "Oh my God, that was an absolute disaster, and everybody's going to be talking about that forever!" Nobody else remembers it. That's all in your head. You have to recognise that. And when somebody says something kind, just go with that. Let's leave that last part and move on to the next thing.

Niamh: The word you use, "micro-supports," that's really interesting. We all know the damage micro-aggressions can do. But we never actually think of the value that micro-supports can bring. That's something to think about and for us to really reflect on, because they cost so little and yet can be so impactful. And that idea of just building each other up, and confidence building, actually gets so much done. That's interesting. Lisa, any similar stories?

Lisa: Similar to my colleagues, I've been very lucky in my career to have had really, really generous line managers at various points, but also very senior colleagues giving me their time, very experienced colleagues I worked alongside. But, the one thing I would say in terms of career acceleration, is that I also did the Aurora programme, which was amazing. The real meat of that programme for me was the mentoring piece. I had an excellent mentor who really held me to account in terms of getting the job I wanted. And what she said to me was, "You have to do the job that

you want; you have to be able to do enough in your day-to-day to really prove to somebody that you're more than able to take that next step". So, as well as doing my day-to-day, she really put pressure on me to deliver on all these additional projects and initiatives, which, let's face it, can be hard to find the time to do. But having that person behind me, pushing me on, was just invaluable. And because of her, I really feel like I made that jump to the next level. It was just her generosity. And I try to emulate that as much as I can in my own leadership, because she was just amazing.

Niamh: That's great. That's so lovely. Did you ever say it back to her?

Lisa: I have [*smiles*].

Niamh: I think sometimes we under-estimate the impact of the conversations we have and take for granted so it is really important to give that feedback as well. One of the things I'm interested in is how we support others but also take care of ourselves in the process. I remember, Sara, when you and I were working on some of the fellowship projects, there was this idea doing the rounds — it's women who do the academic housekeeping, and that sometimes women just keep giving to the point of exhaustion. How do we avoid that?

Sara: I suppose you have to be strategic. You can't always be jumping in. You have to know your own limits. You have to know when you're overcommitted and when you need to step back a little bit. One of the things that I would always think about is in terms of the values; depending on what it was that I was being asked to participate in or contribute to, it has to align with your own values. So not so much your own career progression, nothing like that. But just, "This is something that I think is a good thing, and that I'd be happier if we were doing it better as school or as college or whatever. So I'm happy to be involved in that". From the research on gender in organisations and how it operates, you do have to be thinking kind of strategically as well. Because you can't just jump into everything, or else you'll just end up not able to do anything. So you have to be very selective. And things have to align with your core values, more than saying yes to everything.

Niamh: That idea of boundaries is really interesting. How do you draw them and stop thinking that saying "no" is a bad thing, but rather it can actually be a productive thing to do sometimes? Imelda, I might follow up with you on that, because you're involved in a lot of things in the university, but also externally as well. So how do you manage that? How do you give to those different organisations and draw boundaries to sustain your own well-being?

Imelda: I knit [*the audience laughs*]. I sing in a choir. They're very conscious choices. Oh, and I have a personal trainer. I can't just go to a gym on my own anymore. So I very consciously thought about using different parts of my brain as an academic. So that's the short answer. I want to reflect, though, a little bit on women not having needs. I come from a very traditional upbringing. Our need as women was to find ourselves helping others. And you need to put limits on that. But I think there's another aspect to that as well, which is that if you're a senior woman, sometimes there is a presumption that, as a conspicuous woman, your job, your role, is to give. And there's no regard given to the fact that you can't actually keep giving; that the giving has to stop at some point. While, if you were a man in the same role, I suspect there isn't that presumption of, "Oh, you're here to help me and do what I need; and if you don't do what I need, to the extent that I need, you have failed in your role". I think the expectation around senior women can be very different. The analogy is when my children were small. Me as a mother spending time with and looking after my kids would not be noticed or commented on, while my husband used to say that if he as much as glanced in the general direction of the two kids, someone would comment, "Oh, isn't he great?" [*audience laughs*]. That kind of says it all.

Niamh: That's really interesting, because the same point came up in our International Men's Day conversation as well. Our male colleagues said they were uncomfortable when some mums said to them at their children's events, "Aren't you great?" [*audience laughs*]. And they were like, "But you wouldn't say that to another woman". And what struck me in our International Men's Day event was some of the themes just resonated across everyone. Dara, following up on that, how do you balance the desire to give back to younger colleagues, or more junior colleagues, and keep the day job going, without reaching that burnout point?

Dara: I think it ties in with this last one, as an empowerment strategy. It's funny — when I thought about this, I thought more of a home-based scenario, where I'm constantly chiding myself; I have two stepsons, and I'm not making them do enough. And they're going to turn into these useless, "not being able to boil an egg" type guys [*audience laughs*]. But then I struggle with the part of, "Oh, but it's going to take me an hour and a half now to show them how to make this dinner". Whereas, if I do it myself, it'll be done in twenty minutes. And I have the rest of the evening to sit on the couch. So, in a way, there are corollaries in the workplace; "Okay, yes, it may take time". But you're empowering somebody else to then be able to do it from then on. And you're also empowering yourself; you're giving yourself back that time. Once I show them how to boil the pasta, I'm hoping that they'll be able to boil the pasta themselves from now on. Maybe it's looking more with a future vision in mind. And also,

the whole thing of not getting burnt out — you have to realise that you can give advice if you're asked. You can offer things up, but everybody is on their own path. People may not take that advice, and that's fine. That's up to them. You don't have to take it as a personal criticism because they didn't follow it. You're just giving your perspective, and that may or may not suit. If you keep those things in mind, it may help.

Niamh: A little distancing.

Dara: A little distance. I need to work on boiling the pasta [*audience laughs*].

Niamh: Well, sometimes when you're just in a hurry, it's easier to do it yourself. That is something I would see in myself as well and I need to be mindful about. Not long after I took over this job, I was talking to a colleague about a project and said, "It's okay, I'll do it". And they were like, "But it's not your job to do it". And I said, "But I don't mind". The answer I got back, which sticks with me is: "But it's not about whether you mind; it's about whether you're undermining somebody else, because it's their job". That was a completely new way of framing things. I had to learn that delegation wasn't me being lazy, it was about letting somebody else do their job. Sometimes how we frame things in our own minds can be the challenge. Lisa, how about yourself in terms of balancing your needs with others?

Lisa: One thing that does strike me about additional mentoring and role modelling is that it isn't just another expectation on women that they have to also add this to their to-do list. It shouldn't just be automatic. When we give, it should be intentional. We should take that pause around why am I doing this, who am I doing it for, what am I hoping to achieve, and that recognition that your generosity is not exhaustive. That we have to do it sustainably, because you can't give from an empty cup. So you have to be careful in terms of how you dole that out. I think people understand that you can't do it indefinitely. So it's having that consideration. And also, if you can't give to somebody, there's other resources there that you can direct them to. So it's boundaries and all of that.

Niamh: Thank you. If we think about wisdom that might have helped shape us, or things somebody said to us that were that lightbulb moment for us — what's the most valuable piece of borrowed wisdom that you've received that you now use with other people, and why has it helped? For me, going back to Dara's point, it was about not taking things personally. Somebody showed me a quote once, "Leadership is about people, but it's not personal". And I thought, actually, that's really useful because you don't personalise everything. People are at the core, but this isn't

personal. I think if we thought about that a bit more, we probably would get less touchy with one another. So thinking about things that have been a light bulb moment and helped you move on or progress past something difficult… Any borrowed wisdom that you want to share? Sara?

Sara: Shortly after I took on the role of Associate Dean I bumped into Pat O'Connor downstairs, in the Arts Building. She was Professor of Sociology in UL and she had been Dean in Limerick. She's a very precise woman. And she said, "I've one piece of advice for you. And it is, when you say no, and you're going to have to say no a lot, but when you say no to things, don't explain yourself, ever" [*audience laughs*]. And the second piece of advice was, "And in future, observe — that that's what men do," and then she swept off. I did use that advice, and I have passed that on.

Niamh: Dara, how about yourself?

Dara: I had a piece of advice a few years ago, and I was in a situation where I needed to take some carers' leave. And there was a guilt setting in. I knew I needed to do this from a personal side. But it was like, "Oh, god, it's going to be six months. What's going to happen?". Not that I'm indispensable, I should add, but I was trying to set things up to smooth it over. And I remember my Head of School at the time saying to me, "Family always trumps". Or loved ones. For some it'll be family, for others it'll be a loved one of some kind. And that stuck with me, because I thought, "We're not performing open heart surgery". If we were, maybe you'd have a little bit of difficulty with those decisions. It taught me that you don't need to feel guilty about putting your family, your loved ones before work, because that's what should happen.

Niamh: Thank you. Lisa?

Lisa: I got a piece of advice a few years ago as well, which I wish I'd learned sooner. It was like, "Don't wait to feel ready. Readiness comes in doing". I think that's so true for a lot of women, where you feel like you can't put yourself forward for an opportunity if you don't meet every qualification or hit every criteria on a job description, or whatever it is. And you're waiting for that confidence and that self-belief to hit you. And you kind of only realised, again, in retrospect, when you look back, that you were ready at various points, but you just didn't realise it. You only realised it when you had to do the job and build that capacity. I think that's something that was just valid advice I wish I had embraced a bit earlier on.

Niamh: It takes time, though, sometimes, to let those things sink in. It's one thing somebody saying it, but then letting it sink in is a challenge, for

sure. We often need to get past ourselves. Imelda, how about yourself? Any wisdom that you've received that is worth sharing?

Imelda: I think the three pieces of advice that I'll talk about come under 10 words. So the first two are more or less the same, but came from two different people. One is, "Suck a lemon every day," and the other one was, "Just push through, just push through". And "suck a lemon every day," actually every morning, first thing, [means] do something you don't really want to do. And it's hard. You can tell. I find it really hard. But actually, it is giving, because I find it hard. And it's usually for the benefit of somebody else or the institution, or something. So that's been quite difficult, but I think it's a very, very, very good piece of advice if you're a manager of any sort. And the third one is from Jan Morris, one of my favourite travel writers. When she turned ninety and she was living in North Wales, an intrepid journalist sought her out and interviewed her and said, "So you're ninety, you've had this amazing life, what's your top tip?" And she just said, "Be kind". It's a good motto, really.

Niamh: I think so. And it's actually interesting that the primary school wellbeing curriculum is now called *Bí Cineálta*. It means "be kind". So in terms of something practical we might do when we leave here today to build each other up — we often talk about mentorship. I was very lucky as part of the Aurora programme to have a mentor for six months and that really made me think differently and challenged me. But sometimes, it doesn't have to be formal mentorship, it can be sponsorship. It's actually encouraging a particular person to go, or recommending a particular person for something. So how can we as different types of leaders more actively use our positions to bring the next generation of leaders along? How can we use our political capital to help other women gain a seat at decision-making tables, or fora, or get some visibility or profile? Any suggestions? Lisa, I might start with you.

Lisa: I did think quite a lot about this. Something I do try to do — when you have someone in your team who you think is very talented, and maybe that talent isn't visible to the right people, it is making sure that their name is mentioned in the rooms that they're not in; and that the excellent work they do, that they're given credit for that work all the time, every time. I think that's the best way to sponsor someone. When you're sponsoring someone, I think there is a bit of a risk, because you are putting your name behind them and your credibility behind them. So you probably don't do it all the time, but I think it's a very generous thing to do, and I think we should do as much as we can.

Niamh: And again, that's a relatively easy thing to do in that it costs nothing, but just requires some intentionality. Sara, any suggestions?

Sara: Yeah, so I was thinking on a very similar line to you. It drives me mad at meetings when people's contributions are not mentioned. You know, like a passive voice is used around something that has been done or gotten done. And you know, somebody has actually been the person who's seen it through and done the work, you know? So I think it's really important to name that when you notice it, and say, "Oh, wasn't that really cool, that thing that Boróka did, or Barbara did. That was a kind of over and above thing. So it needs to be named and highlighted, actually". So it's not just about visibility, it is also about highlighting stuff that isn't just the routine, run-of-the-mill *stuff*. And making sure that it's not just that people are getting recognition, but also that they're seeing the value in the efforts and in the work that has been done.

Niamh: That brings me back to the Aurora programme. There was a session on Power, Politics and Profile. And it was really interesting because it was about things like raising visibility, how to build a profile, how you're seen by other people. It was all of those things. So in terms, then, of how you think we could sponsor people a bit more, maybe actively, to help them engage in their careers, any thoughts?

Dara: Well, I'd probably echo much of what's been said already. I think one thing that I've tried to use maybe in the past is where there are networks, committees, et cetera, within the school, college, university. I think it's a really good experience, both from a networking point of view, and just work and opening your eyes to what goes on in a UCD perspective; I think it's great to encourage people to go for those. Because a lot of it, I think maybe Sara said it, a lot of stuff that people do is "behind the scenes" type of work. And it's not always the most visible. And it is important, I agree, to call that out and celebrate the smaller wins, as well as the bigger wins, I guess.

Niamh: Yes, because a win should be seen as a win for everybody. If somebody in Sociology does something great, it's not just good for that person; it's good for Sociology, it's good for the College, it's good for the University. It's building that ecosystem of support that we talked about at the start. Imelda, how about yourself in terms of sponsorship?

Imelda: Lots of ideas going around in my head. Going back to the first point at the start of the session, it's about space. So it's not about saying to somebody, "You should do this", but saying, "How about this, have you thought about this?" So they go away and it becomes their idea. And I think that's very giving, if you can do that. Because they won't remember you said, "Have you thought about this?" And that's fine. You want the person to have ownership of the thing. That's really powerful then. Which brings me to a related point, which is, I actually think it's easier to sponsor and mentor somebody when you're not in a leadership position.

When I stopped being Dean, I did an awful lot of meetings over coffee. They knew me very well over in the [University] Club. And you can make suggestions and have ideas, if somebody's not sure. But the last thing you might want to do is walk into the Dean's office for advice. And to be honest, it doesn't matter how senior you are — it's not easy to look for advice from someone in a direct line of authority above you. You know, it's much easier to go to someone who used to be in that office, and there's no authority anymore, and go and talk to them. And that works, I think. So soft power. It works at all levels. You don't need to have a senior person tell you; anyone can say to you, "Oh, have you thought about doing that? That would be really good." And I think presence really comes into this as well, in this post-COVID age. We're all emailing all the time. But it's all about nudging; "Have you thought about so-and-so?" I would very rarely put anything like that in an email. It's all about as we have the sandwich, or [while] walking over to a meeting… That's when the conversation happens, and also [when] encouraging people [happens]. It's in person. And I fear for that a little bit in this day and age. Presence matters.

Niamh: That's very true, because sometimes, if you look for a meeting with somebody, it becomes a very structured conversation. And very often, it's those informal moments, over a cup of coffee or bumping into somebody in the corridor, that you can have those gentle conversations. I think what we're hearing a little bit here is the importance of influence, as opposed to direction. And that's something that we can all do. We can all encourage and influence, and shape how people see themselves. That's really important because how you see yourself and how others see you is probably very different. In my role, I have to ask people to do things like sit on committees and I know that sometimes can probably be seen as, "Oh, here's more work coming". But actually, there is usually real thought that goes into who gets asked to do what, in terms of, "That person would really benefit from whatever the role or the job is". So the reframing of those conversations is a really important thing we can all do. I'm going to ask one last question of you all — if you could go back to the start of your career and give yourself one piece of advice, what would it be? And how might you have benefitted by knowing it sooner? What would you tell your twenty-year-old self, Dara?

Dara: I'm not going to say what I've got [*laughs*] — "Keep buying those lotto tickets!" Again, I thought long and hard about this one last night. And what I came up with was, "Think about what success means to you," if I was to go back to my twenty-year-old self. Because for some people, that can be money. That can be a great title. It could be power. For others, it might be a great work-life balance, or a very collegial environment, or whatever. And they're all manners of saying, "I'm successful". And I think I probably would have said to myself, "Really think

about what that means to you". Because sometimes I think I maybe chased the wrong version of it, or the one that didn't sit comfortably with me, or went against my core values. And also, I think to be aware that that vision of success will change. It's not static. And what you might have wanted at twenty-two is not necessarily what you want at forty-two or fifty-two, or whatever it might be.

Niamh: That's a piece of advice in itself, isn't it? Let life happen. Don't try and overthink.

Dara: Don't overanalyse.

Niamh: Lisa?

Lisa: Yeah, I was thinking [about] this last night as well and for me, there were a couple of things. One was trusting myself a little bit earlier; to have a little bit of confidence to put myself in those uncomfortable situations, knowing that I'll float, so I won't drown. And then, the second thing was to just make sure I'm mindful of those relationships I formed throughout my career. How important they are and those networks, and how much care and attention you should give them; that ultimately they can stand to you more than any one item on your CV.

Niamh: Thank you. Sara?

Sara: Mine would be: "Don't think you have to do everything by yourself". It was pretty far into my career before I started to work in any meaningful way, I think, with other people. I would have really benefited from knowing, actually, that that was the fun, [and that] it just made work so much more enjoyable. It kind of makes sense with what you were saying — you don't have to do everything.

Niamh: That is interesting because as academics, we're often, particularly when we're early-career, valued on what we've done and how many papers we've written, and you're trained to be an individualist. Whereas, what we're talking about here is the realisation over time that the collective is where the fun and the joy is. Imelda, how about yourself?

Imelda: Yeah. Close to the start of my career, I moved to the UK. It was in the late eighties, so it was still pre- the Northern Irish peace agreement, pre- the Birmingham Six being left out of prison, and the Guildford Four. I'm ancient [*audience laughs*]. And it was very challenging in many ways. The word "hostile" comes to mind in some circumstances. Be it at the airport; being quizzed every time I went through; and all the rest. So what I would tell my younger self is, "You don't have to fit in".

Niamh: That's very powerful and we could all learn a lot from that. I want to give the audience a chance to ask a question or two, and then we can have some informal conversation as well. So would anybody like to ask the panel anything?

Audience member: Thank you. It can be very hard to engage men in EDI issues. And you've spoken about how women can empower other women. But how can men in the university, here in UCD in particular, empower women?

Sara: That's a really important thing you're pointing to. Looking back at the Athena SWAN process, one of the valuable things there was to help identify structures that are producing the outcomes that are problematic for everybody, both men and women; in terms of invisible work, or academic housekeeping, and who does them, for example. One important thing is to notice those things and not ignore those, and notice who they're impacting negatively, because it's not always about gender. And do, again, small things to try and upset that particular pattern of action. I don't know if that really answers your question, but again, it's about the small stuff.

Imelda: A very practical thing — more men in the university should be encouraged to volunteer as mentors for Aurora. That's a really small, but very practical, six-month mentorship. I've done it — the mentoring works both ways. You've all talked about how great you've found the mentoring. But it cuts the other way as well.

Ernesto: Something we discussed in the International Men's Day event was how can we make "caring" masculine, because caring is not valued, and men do also care, and how can being a carer be as important as being a provider, or being a protector. And values like generosity, caring, kindness, or compassion are associated with femininity and are not considered important for a successful career. You all are successful women, so how do you balance your generosity, your kindness, and success, and be a leader who challenges these gender stereotypes?

Lisa: That's a very difficult question. I think it's about being as transparent, as honest as you can in your day-to-day, and owning those values. You're never going to keep everyone happy all the time, but so long as they know you're authentic, that gets you by.

Niamh: That's the crux — to be honest to yourself. And integrity, for me, is key. If that underpins it, then that helps. If people get to know you, and you have to make a decision that's hard, it's not that you're being unkind or ungenerous. People know enough to realise there's a reason for it, and

[that] it's not personal. It all comes back to values at the end of the day; and helping them shape every decision and every choice that you make.

Imelda: I made a very conscious decision to be a visible parent when I became pregnant. My kids would rock up with me in the Law School sometimes. I would talk about them, as well. I didn't want to have that complete barrier between my professional and personal self. And it's one of the privileges of working in a university — that you don't have to have that barrier. But I also got stuck thinking about your question, because I would never put on my personal profile on the web that I was a parent. And I have male colleagues who do. And for them, it's a plus. For me, I think it would be a negative. Maybe for a man to say they've got kids, though, is an acknowledgment of caring that has a different message for them than for women.

Niamh: From the reaction in the room, as we were going through our questions, I could hear a lot of nodding and agreement and the conversation seemed to resonate a lot with people. I would like to wrap up by saying a massive thank you, first of all, to the audience. It's wonderful to have a room where people are standing because there aren't enough chairs. Thank you all for your presence, for showing up today. Thank you to our wonderful set of panelists, Dara, Lisa, Sara, and Imelda, thank you so much. And thank you once again to Ernesto and the team for all of the organising behind this lovely event.

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