

## O'Rourke expects 'horrific fury' over any referendum on children's rights

PATSY McGARRY CAROL COULTER and

A REFERENDUM to amend the Constitution on children's rights "will involve horrific fury throughout the land", Fianna Fáil TD Mary O'Rourke warned yesterday.

She was speaking as she launched the One in Four 2008 annual report in Dublin yesterday.

Chairwoman of the Oireachtas committee on children, she said its members were "all agreed that an amendment to the Constitution is needed" where children's rights were concerned. "We have to get the wording right. We want children's voices to be heard," she said. The "horrific fury" she spoke of would come from "those who believe they should have total control in the family," she added. But, while acknowledging that the family was "the best situation for a child", she said there were cases where this was not so.

She said her role as chairwoman of the committee was "the most important job I ever did, apart from having children and rearing them".

Over 16 years ago Judge Catherine McGuinness, as she then was, recommended a constitutional amendment to protect the rights of children in the family. It arose from her report on the Kilkenny incest case where a man had sexually abused his daughter over a number of years and social services felt constrained from intervening because of protections given the family in the Constitution.

Similarly, in the Roscommon incest case last January, it emerged that the mother in that family had obtained an injunction restraining the health board from intervening.

In her 1993 report Judge McGuinness said "the very high emphasis on the rights of the family in the Constitution may consciously or unconsciously be interpreted as giving a higher value to the rights of parents than to the rights of children". Mrs O'Rourke also warmly commended One in Four and sympathised with its current difficulties. "I very much regret and am sorry that the emergency funding sought has not yet materialised," she said.

She gave an undertaking to make representations to the Taoiseach and Minister of State for Children Barry Andrews at the Fianna Fáil meeting in Athlone, Co Westmeath, yesterday afternoon.

"I do hope I have some bit of clout [with the Government] and it is at the disposal of One in Four," she said. Mrs O'Rourke praised the agency for "the very modern way it confronted these ills [of child abuse] in Irish society".