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DOCUMENTS

THE IRISH WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT IN DUBLIN DURING THE MID 1970s

Elizabeth Malcolm

Introduction

The international movement known at the time as women's liberation—later called second-wave feminism—emerged in Ireland at the beginning of the 1970s. The feminist activist and scholar, Ailbhe Smyth, has divided the Irish Republic's women's movement during that decade into three phases: mobilisation 1970–74; radicalisation 1975–7; and consolidation 1977–83.[1] But these phases by no means capture the full diversity of the all-Ireland movement at the time. Experiences differed as between, for example, North and South, town and country, middle- and working-class women, gay and straight women, and those who wanted an autonomous women's movement as opposed to those who sought to tie feminism to republicanism. Smyth's phases do highlight the movement's initial volatility though. Groups and campaigns came and went in rapid succession, before a degree of stability emerged towards the end of the decade.

The Council for the Status of Women and Reform, 1973–7

Already in the 1960s, ongoing campaigns organised by a variety of fairly conservative women's groups in the Republic were aiming to improve what they saw as the inferior position women occupied in Irish society.[2] Some of these campaigns culminated in 1973 with the establishment of the Council for the Status of Women (CSW).[3] The CSW received state funding and was a cautious body dedicated to lobbying for measures aimed particularly to extend female employment opportunities and to end discrimination on the basis of sex that was enshrined in law. Its foundation was quickly followed by the passage of some important acts, introduced by the 1973–7 Fine Gael-Labour Party coalition government and endorsed by the CSW.

In 1973, for example, the government legislated to remove the ban imposed in 1931 on married women being employed in the civil service and in other state agencies. In 1973 also, a social welfare act was passed introducing 'allowances' to be paid for the first time to single mothers and deserted wives. For single mothers, this meant that they might be able to keep their babies instead of having to give them up for adoption; for deserted wives, it meant they had a better chance of supporting their children and saving them from being institutionalised or fostered. The act marked a significant break with the state's policy of leaving mother-and-child issues to the Catholic Church, which nearly all previous Irish governments had followed since independence.[4] In 1974, several feminists took a case to the Irish supreme court, which ruled that a 1927 act effectively barring women from jury service was unconstitutional. Then, in 1975, under pressure from the European Economic Community (later European Union), which Ireland had joined in 1973, an act was passed introducing equal pay for equal work.

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[1] Ailbhe Smyth, 'The Women's Movement in the Republic of Ireland, 1970–90', in Ailbhe Smyth (ed.), *Irish Women's Studies Reader*, Dublin: Attic Press, 1993, pp. 245–69.

[2] For a survey of the legislative restrictions imposed on women in the South after independence, see M.G. Valiulis, 'Virtuous Mothers and Dutiful Wives: The Politics of Sexuality in the Irish Free State', in M.G. Valiulis (ed.), *Gender and Power in Irish History*, Dublin and Portland, OR: Irish Academic Press, 2009, pp. 100–114.

[3] For an account of the origins and activities of the CSW by its first chairwoman, see Hilda Tweedy, *A Link in the Chain: The Story of the Irish Housewives Association, 1942–92*, Dublin: Attic Press, 1992, pp. 35–60.

[4] Robbie Gilligan, 'The "Public Child" and the Reluctant State?', in Maria Luddy and J.M. Smith (eds), *Children, Childhood and Irish Society, 1500 to the Present*, Dublin and Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2014, pp. 145–63.

However, when the coalition government postponed implementation of the measure claiming it would be too costly economically, the European Commission rejected this excuse and equal pay was extended to women workers in the Republic from 1977—albeit very slowly.

The Irish Women's Liberation Movement, 1970–75

More radical feminism made its first appearance in 1970 with the formation in Dublin of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement (IWLM). This group attracted a number of younger, more militant women.[5] Many were professionals, journalists especially, some being active in left-wing politics, and most showed little patience with CSW's restrained methods. The CSW's first chairwoman later described how the journalist and IWLM member, Nell McCafferty, 'descended on the CSW committee on more than one occasion and told us in no uncertain terms what we should be doing'.[6]

The IWLM campaigned on a variety of issues under a programme called 'Chains—or Change? The Civil Wrongs of Irishwomen'. Prominent among these 'wrongs' was women's lack of reproductive rights. This was an issue that the CSW had decided not to address due to the Catholic Church's strong opposition to artificial methods of birth control, recently restated in the pope's 1968 encyclical.[7] But the IWLM took the opposite view. It set out to publicly challenge the Republic's ban on contraception through direct action: that is by openly disruptive and, if necessary, illegal tactics. Many members believed that laws discriminating against women would only change if they were repeatedly broken and shown to be unenforceable. Thus, in May 1971, in defiance of a 1935 act banning the importation or sale of contraceptive devices, 47 members of the IWLM travelled by train to Belfast, where contraceptives were legally available. On their return to Dublin, they were met at the station by a cheering crowd of women as they declared their illegally imported condoms and spermicides to customs officers, who chose to ignore this blatant lawbreaking. What came to be called the 'contraceptive train' attracted huge media attention in Ireland and also abroad, but not all supporters of the women's movement agreed with such confrontational tactics. Some feared that they would alienate rather than win over Irish public opinion.[8]

The Fight for Reproductive Rights, 1972–92

When a 27-year-old fisherman's wife, Mary McGee, who was in poor health and already had four children, took a case against the contraception ban to the courts in 1972–3, the supreme court ruled that the 1935 law criminalising the importation of contraceptives for private use

[5] Among the IWLM's founders were the Derry-born journalist Nell McCafferty, who later joined Irish Women United; Nuala Fennell, another journalist, who left the IWLM in 1971 and served as a Fine Gael minister for women's affairs during 1982–7; June Levine, also a journalist; Mairín de Burca, who worked for Sinn Féin; and Mairín Johnston, a trade union activist. According to McCafferty, six of the 12 founders of the IWLM were journalists, and three of them edited the women's pages of the *Irish Times* (Mary Maher), *Irish Press* (Mary Kenny) and *Irish Independent* (Mary McCutcheon). For personal accounts of the group, see Nell McCafferty, *Nell: A Disorderly Woman*, Dublin: Penguin Ireland, 2005, pp. 200–204, 217–32; June Levine, *Sisters*: *The Personal Story of an Irish Feminist*, Dublin: Ward River Press, 1982.

[6] Tweedy, *A Link in the Chain*, p. 49.

[7] Ibid., pp. 57–8; Lindsey Earner-Byrne, 'Moral Prescription: The Irish Medical Profession, the Roman Catholic Church and the Prohibition of Birth Control in Twentieth-Century Ireland', in Catherine Cox and Maria Luddy (eds), *Cultures of Care in Irish Medical History, 1750–1970*, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 207–28.

[8] For general histories that discuss the Irish women's liberation movement during the 1970s, see Linda Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement: From Revolution to Devolution*, Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2003, pp. 89–154; Myrtle Hill, *Women in Ireland: A Century of Change*, Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2003, pp. 145–58, 177–80. Connolly's important book includes interviews with former members of 1970s' women's groups.

was unconstitutional. This judgement was not based on women's rights, however, but on what the male judges perceived as a right to marital privacy and the state's duty to protect the family.[9] Even if importation was now permitted, legislation was still required to regulate it and also sales. Yet, a bill introduced in 1974 by the Fine Gael-Labour coalition to strictly 'control' the manufacture, importation and sale of contraceptives was soundly defeated. Not only was the measure strongly opposed by the Catholic Church and Fianna Fáil, even Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave[10] voted against his own government's bill.[11] The legalisation of contraception in the Republic thus remained a major rallying cause for a diverse collection of women's groups throughout the 1970s. But not all these groups campaigned within the limits of the law; some, employing direct action, ignored the law altogether in their efforts to make contraception readily available.

Family Planning Services (FPS), which was established by women in Dublin in 1972, imported condoms by the truck load from Northern Ireland and sold them by mail order throughout the Republic. However, because such sales were illegal, FPS adopted the tactic of accepting a 'donation' in return for its products. Due to booming sales and profits, FPS was soon able to open clinics, first in Dublin and then in other cities and towns. These employed nurses to give contraceptive advice and also often doctors to prescribe the contraceptive pill. Available since 1961, the pill could be prescribed in the Republic, ostensibly, for the regulation of periods, which was legal, but not for birth control, which was illegal. In 1976, radical feminists began the Contraceptive Action Programme (CAP), which, in a provocative display of defiance, sold contraceptives, mainly condoms, in public from market stalls in city centres, as well as distributing them free of charge on working-class housing estates.[12] In 1978, the first Well Woman Centre opened in Dublin, employing medical staff and offering family planning information and services, some of which were again illegal.[13] By the late 1970s, it was estimated that between 40,000 and 50,000 people were visiting the Republic's nine family planning clinics each year, with another 35,000 receiving contraceptives through the post. Public opinion surveys were also showing consistent majority support for ending the total ban on artificial methods of contraception.[14]

With the law being openly flouted by a growing number of women's organisations, the state decided that action had become essential. In 1979, a family planning bill, devised by then Fianna Fáil health minister, Charles Haughey (taoiseach in 1979–81, 1982, 1987–92), was passed. It legalised the supply of condoms, caps, spermicides and the pill for '*bona fide* family planning' purposes, but only when they were dispensed by a pharmacist on a doctor's

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[9] The 1973 McGee judgement was based in part on articles 41/1/1–2 of the 1937 Irish constitution, in which the 'State' guaranteed it would protect the 'Family as the … fundamental unit group of Society, … a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights … superior to all positive law'.

[10] Liam Cosgrave, the son of W.T. Cosgrave who had headed the Irish Free State government (1922–32), was a Fine Gael TD from 1943 to 1981 and served as taoiseach during 1973–7.

[11] For the campaigns mounted against women's liberation by the Catholic Church and its Irish lay supporters during the 1970s, and their successes in the 1980s, see Emily O'Reilly, *Masterminds of the Right*, Dublin: Attic Press, [1992]; Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2002, pp. 206–12.

[12] Emilie Cloatre and Máiréad Enright, '"On the perimeter of the lawful": Enduring Illegality in the Irish Family Planning Movement, 1972–85', *Journal of Law and Society*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2017, pp. 471–500. This article contains interviews with former FPS activists.

[13] Laura Kelly, 'Irishwomen United, the Contraceptive Action Programme and the Feminist Campaign for Free, Safe and Legal Contraception in Ireland, c.1975–81', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 43, no. 164, 2019, pp. 280–82. Kelly's article contains interviews with former members of Irish Women United.

[14] Chrystel Hug, *The Politics of Sexual Morality in Ireland*, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1999, pp. 103, 112.

prescription to a couple who were assumed to be married.[15] Feminists strongly objected to the 'medicalisation' of all contraceptives, with power over women's fertility thus being concentrated in the hands of the largely male and conservative medical and pharmacy professions. The act also meant that the operations of FPS and CAP remained illegal—FPS's 'donations' were explicitly outlawed in the legislation. Furthermore, doctors' and pharmacists' charges, plus sales tax, had the effect of making contraceptives, especially condoms, far more expensive and thus harder for working-class and rural communities to access. One scholar has remarked, in something of an understatement, that the 1979 act was 'tainted with social discrimination'. This was because those who needed contraception the most—poor working-class women with large families—were the group least likely to benefit from the legislation.[16] In addition, as a gesture to placate the Catholic Church, the act authorised substantial government funding for clinics researching and teaching 'natural' methods of birth control, even though these were less reliable than artificial methods.[17]

The 1979 Health (Family Planning) Act by no means ended the operations of family planning organisations run by women that knowingly broke the law, and especially as many doctors and chemists refused to prescribe or dispense contraceptives. A 1982 survey found that around 80 per cent of contraceptives were still being purchased illegally from clinics, with some clinics now selling condoms from vending machines. Feminists accepted that the pill, given its potential for harmful side effects, needed to be prescribed by a physician, but they insisted that condoms should be as widely and cheaply available as possible. Finally, in 1985, the sale of condoms without a prescription to anyone aged 18 or over was legalised, and in 1992 the age was lowered to 16. These measures, though, had little to do with women's rights. The former was the result of growing government concern about increases in the rates of illegitimacy, abortion and venereal disease, while the latter was largely a response to the AIDS pandemic.[18]

Women Politicians during the 1970s

During the 1970s women struggled to have their voices heard in the Republic's parliament, the Oireachtas. This was hardly surprising given that Irish female politicians were a rare species.[19] In the half century between independence in 1922 and 1972, each year on average, the Dáil had just four women TDs—that is 3 per cent of deputies—while there were usually a similar number of women in the Seanad. Many were relatives of male politicians, widows or daughters especially. The general election in 1969 saw only three women TDs returned, with four in 1972 and six in the 1977.[20] Similarly, whereas the first woman to serve in an Irish cabinet had been the Countess Markievicz, appointed in 1919, it was to be 60 years before the Republic had another female cabinet minister: Fianna Fáil's Márie Geoghegan Quinn appointed in 1979.[21]

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[15] For an account of the contraception campaigns of the 1970s by a leading member of Irish Women United and CAP, see Anne Speed, 'The Struggle for Reproductive Rights: A Brief History in its Political Context', in Ailbhe Smyth (ed.), *The Abortion Papers: Ireland*, Dublin: Attic Press, 1992, pp. 85–98.

[16] Hug, *The Politics of Sexual Morality in Ireland*, p. 112.

[17] Ibid., pp. 109–15.

[18] Ibid., pp. 115–31.

[19] Frances Gardiner, 'Political Interest and Participation of Irish Women, 1922–92: The Unfinished Revolution', in Smyth (ed.), *Irish Women's Studies Reader*, pp. 45–78.

[20] Yvonne Galligan and Rick Wilford, 'Women's Political Representation in Ireland', in Yvonne Galligan, Ellís Ward and Rick Wilford (eds), *Contesting Politics: Women in Ireland, North and South*, Boulder, CO, and Oxford: Westview Press, 1999, pp. 131–2.

[21] Márie Geoghegan Quinn was elected a Fianna Fáil TD for Galway in 1975, replacing her deceased father who had held the seat since 1954. She remained in the Dáil until 1997, serving in several portfolios. She was appointed to her first cabinet position, as minister for the Gaeltacht (1979–81), by Charles Haughey after she had supported his successful bid for the leadership of Fianna Fáil in 1979.

Yet the 1969 election did see the emergence of one powerful female political voice. Mary Bourke (later Robinson), a 25-year-old law professor was elected to the Seanad as one of three senators representing Trinity College, Dublin (TCD).[22] Over the following 20 years, until she became Ireland's first female president in 1990, Robinson would introduce many bills intended to improve Irish women's lives. She was one of the lawyers who represented Mary McGee before the courts and, during the 1970s, several of her bills aimed—without success—to legalise contraception.[23]

Irish Women United, 1975–7

Irish Women United (IWU) was established in Dublin in the middle of 1975, some of its founders being more politicised members of the IWLM, which had split and become less active over the years.[24] IWU operated as a collective and an umbrella organisation affiliated with other women's groups, and it campaigned on a variety of fronts. It aimed to empower women and girls in the home, family, school and workplace by replacing discrimination with equality. This was what the word 'liberation' essentially meant to IWU's members and supporters.[25]

Discrimination in the home and family included, among many issues, women being prevented from controlling their own fertility through legal contraception; wives being prevented from divorcing violent, abusive or absent husbands; and women being prevented from acquiring their own homes because renting a house or taking out a mortgage required the consent of a male relative. In the workplace, the most blatant form of discrimination was the substantially lower wages paid to women, even those doing equivalent jobs to men. Furthermore, women had no right to maternity leave and could be legally sacked if they became pregnant. As regards education, IWU wanted the state to develop a network of pre-schools, plus a system of primary and secondary secular schools in place of the existing education system controlled by the Catholic Church. It wanted sexual stereotyping of girls and boys in the curriculum to be removed, with women's studies programmes taught at both the secondary and tertiary levels. IWU also advocated for state-funded nurseries and creches to enable mothers to continue to work or study while caring for young children. The influence of socialist thinking on IWU was particularly apparent in its support for what it called the 'socialisation of housework', which included communal laundries and kitchens. IWU was also the first Irish feminist group to publicly recognise lesbian rights through its demand that women's sexuality should be 'self-determined'.[26] But IWU did not advocate strongly for the legalisation of abortion. Members themselves were divided over the issue, while some feared that a pro-

[22] Under article 18/4/1 of the 1937 Irish constitution, graduates of the University of Dublin (that is Trinity College, Dublin) had the right to elect three senators to the 60-member Seanad, while graduates of the National University of Ireland (that is the university colleges in Dublin, Cork and Galway) also had the right to elect three senators.

[23] Lorna Siggins, *Mary Robinson: The Woman Who Took Power in the Park*, Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1997, pp. 53–8; Mary Robinson, 'Women and the Law in Ireland', in Smyth (ed.), *Irish Women's Studies Reader*, pp. 100–106.

[24] McCafferty, *Nell*, pp. 293–302. See also Mary McAuliffe, '"To change society": Irishwomen United and Political Activism, 1975–9', in Mary McAuliffe and Clara Fischer (eds), *Irish Feminisms: Past, Present and Future*, Dublin: Arlen House, 2015, pp. 85–102.

[25] For the aims and methods of IWU outlined in an important in-house document, see Mary Purcell, Linda Hall, Anne Speed, Máire Casey, Anne O'Brien, Betty Purcell and Jackie Morrissey, 'Discussion Paper for Teach-in of Irishwomen United: The Autonomous Women's Movements; Why a Charter?; What is IWU?; A Balance-Sheet; Conjunctural Changes', n.d. (author's collection). For a report by Deirdre Cullen on this teach-in, which was held at TCD in May 1976, see *Bell Jar*, no. 8, May 1976, pp. 1–2.

[26] For links between feminism, lesbianism and gay law reform, see Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement*, pp. 132, 139–41; Linda Connolly and Tina O'Toole, *Documenting Irish Feminisms: The Second Wave*, Dublin: Woodfield Press, 2005, pp. 171–93. Male homosexuality was de-criminalised in the Republic in 1992, while same-sex marriage was legalised by referendum in 2015.

abortion campaign would simply alienate Irish women because the majority had been thoroughly convinced by the Catholic Church that abortion was a mortal sin.[27] The seven basic demands of IWU were summed up in its charter.[28]

The Charter of Irish Women United, 1975[29]

> PREAMBLE:
> At this time, the women of Ireland are beginning to see the need for, and are fighting for, liberation. This is an inevitable step in the course of full human liberation. Although, within the movement, we form diverse groups with variant ways of approaching the problem, we have joined together around these basic issues. We pledge ourselves to challenge and fight sexism in all forms and oppose all forms of exploitation of women which keep them oppressed. These demands are all part of the essential right of women to self-determination of our own lives …
>
> 1. THE REMOVAL OF ALL LEGAL AND BUREAUCRATIC OBSTABLES TO EQUALITY …
> 2. FREE LEGAL CONTRACEPTION …
> 3. THE RECOGNITION OF MOTHERHOOD AND PARENTHOOD AS A SOCIAL FUNCTION …
> 4. EQUALITY IN EDUCATION – STATE-FINANCED, SECULAR, CO-EDUCATIONAL SCHOOLS WITH FULL COMMUNITY CONTROL …
> 5. THE MALE RATE FOR THE JOB WHERE MEN AND WOMEN ARE WORKING TOGETHER …
> 6. STATE PROVISION OF FUNDS AND PREMISES FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF WOMEN'S CENTRES IN MAJOR POPULATION AREAS …
> 7. THE RIGHT OF ALL WOMEN TO A SELF-DETERMINED SEXUALITY.

Banshee*: Journal of Irishwomen United, 1976–7*

The charter appeared on the back of IWU's magazine, *Banshee*, eight issues of which were published between early 1976 and early 1977. The extracts from *Banshee* reproduced below have been chosen to illustrate some of the specific issues that preoccupied Irish feminists during the mid 1970s. As a number of its founders were journalists, IWU was particularly concerned about the portrayal of women in the media—or, as *Banshee's* first editorial pointed out, their non-portrayal. The fight to end church and state power over women's bodies was another major issue. Victory in this struggle was defined especially in terms of women taking control of childbearing through the legalisation of contraception. Sexism in all its manifold forms also preoccupied IWU, ranging from women being harassed or assaulted by men on the streets to them being barred from leisure facilities, like swimming pools, tennis clubs and public houses. Some of IWU's founders had links to the trade union movement and socialist

[27] Smyth, 'The Women's Movement in the Republic of Ireland', pp. 258–60.
[28] Original documents relating to the 1970s' women's movement have been published in June Levine (ed.), 'The Women's Movement in the Republic of Ireland, 1968–80', in Angela Bourke et al. (eds), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol. v, Cork: Cork University Press and Field Day, 2002, pp. 171–228; and in Connolly and O'Toole, *Documenting Irish Feminisms*, pp. 21–52.
[29] All documents quoted in this article are from the author's personal collection. In the Republic, many documents produced by the women's movement during the 1970s are held in the Attic Press/Róisín Conroy Collection, 1963–91, Boole Library, University College, Cork (hereafter UCC), IE BL/F/AP.

politics, so the organisation advocated strongly for equal pay for equal work and the removal of all barriers to female employment. The Republic's famously restrictive censorship acts, passed in 1928, 1935 and 1946, were also challenged by IWU, particularly when these laws were used to ban magazines and books because they contained factual material on contraception, abortion or lesbianism intended to inform women readers. In addition, *Banshee* took judges to task for their lenient treatment of rapists, while it castigated leaders and parties for sexism, whether they were on the right, left or centre of the political spectrum.

Banshee, No. 1, February 1976

> EDITORIAL (p. 2)
>
> You've just read the daily papers. You've been listening to the radio. You're probably about to watch television. Would you know, from the attention devoted by the media to women, that females form fifty-one per cent of the population?
>
> Did you notice any howls of justifiable outrage that Irishwomen are denied contraception, divorce and abortion? That we work for half the wages that men get? That we rear families, a difficult job indeed, under conditions that no trade unionists would tolerate for a minute in a factory—mothers get no pay, no paid holidays, no training for the job of child-rearing, and often no home in which to rear children? They don't even have the legal right to decide the religion, education or domicile of their children.
>
> You've just spent the day learning nothing about women. And no-one wants to hear what you think.
>
> *BANSHEE* is the answer of Irish Women United to the media silence …
>
> BOYCOTT THESE PUBS! (p. 9)
>
> Irish Women United intend to continue their campaign of protest against places who discriminate against women socially … This issue we will begin by naming a few of the places who either refuse to serve women at all or who refuse to let them drink from pint glasses.[30] Either boycott these pubs or else go in with a few friends and demand to be served the same way as men are: NEARY'S, Chatham Street … BRIAN BORO … Glasnevin … LOWES, Dolphins Barn … SEARSONS, Upper Baggot Street … SCOTCH HOUSE, Burgh Quay …[31]

Banshee, No. 2, March 1976

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[30] Some Irish pubs, while banning women from their public bars, allowed them into lounge bars or snugs. But drinks were more expensive in such spaces, especially as women could only buy half-pints not pints. Discrimination against women in pubs declined after being publicised by feminist protests in the 1970s. Yet publicans could still legally refuse to serve women, and gay people as well, until 2000, when the Equal Status Act explicitly outlawed discrimination in the supply of goods and services on the basis of gender or sexual orientation. Cian Molloy, *The Story of the Irish Pub*, Dublin: Liffey Press, 2002, pp. 80–81; Bill Barich, *A Pint of Plain: Tradition, Change and the Fate of the Irish Pub*, London: Bloomsbury, 2009, pp. 30–31.

[31] Mairín Johnston, a founder member of IWLM who grew up during the 1940s in the working-class Liberties area of Dublin, later highlighted the connection between the exclusively male pub, with its heavy drinking culture, and the widespread prevalence of 'wife beating'. K.C. Kearns (ed.), *Dublin Pub Life and Lore: An Oral History*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1996, pp. 214–17.

EDITORIAL (p. 2)

In 1951, the Irish Catholic Church brought down a government which offered to provide free milk for babies up to six weeks after birth. The Mother and Child Scheme, devised by Noel Browne to provide pre- and ante-natal care for pregnant mothers, was seen by the Hierarchy as an evil state interference with the family.

Today, 25 years later, the Irish Catholic Church is proposing that the government provide, not just free milk, not just pre-natal care for the pregnant mother, but a wage which will support her and the unborn child from conception to birth.

The Church's shenanigans are designed to ensure that the male Catholic Hierarchy keep control of the female body … Like King Canute, they are trying to stem the advancing tide. Women have asserted loudly and clearly a claim to control their own bodies, regardless of Church and State interference. This assertion takes two forms—the one of contraception despite state laws against it—and the desperate recourse to abortion where contraception has failed or been unavailable. 10,000 Irishwomen have gone to England [during 1968–75] to terminate pregnancy …

Irishwomen United say to the Church and State—no offer of milk for unwanted children, no miserable wage for the unborn child.

We want *free legal contraception now*. We demand that all our children, if and when we decide to have them, be born free.

RED BIBBY (p. 5)

The Taoiseach, Mr Liam Cosgrave [Fine Gael, 1973–7], who last year voted against his own government's bill (which would have legalised contraception) has rebuked Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien, his [Labour Party] Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, who recently advocated free contraception. As punishment for his political sin, Dr O'Brien has been ordered to make three local phone calls daily from a public telephone kiosk. Every night he must try and place a long-distance call, from a private Dublin phone, to Clonakilty, West Cork.[32]

Banshee, No. 4, June 1976

EDITORIAL (p. 2)

Now that Summer is here, Irishwomen United is taking direct action against daylight sexism. We are attacking sexist advertisements on the streets, invading all-male sports

[32] The joke here concerns the Republic's antiquated telephone system. Public phones were poorly maintained and private phones expensive, while connecting to a local number was often difficult and to a distant number sometimes impossible. C.C. O'Brien was much criticised for speaking out on many issues unrelated to his portfolio, instead of concentrating on modernising the telecommunications network. O'Brien, a controversial diplomat, historian and journalist, served as a Labour Party TD for Dublin (1969–77), but having lost his seat in the Dáil in 1977, he was elected to the Seanad representing TCD (1977–9). Long a critic of Irish republicanism, during the 1980s and 1990s he became a supporter of unionism in Northern Ireland.

places and clubs that discriminate against women members, and disarming second-degree rapists who verbally insult us as we walk in the streets.

As women become more aware of sexism and support one another in the fight against it, it will die a quick death. But many people do not yet realise the psychological harm that sexism does—to women *and* to men … Why do [men] need to keep up such a concerted attack against us—What are they afraid of?

Is it just coincidence that the 40-foot 'men only' swimming pool in Dalkey is the best swimming-place on the east coast and Fitzwilliam tennis-club, which does not allow women members, has the best sports facilities in the country? …[33]

Do men really think that it's best to set themselves up on pedestals of greed, injustice and privilege, and then live in constant fear of the other sex in case they'll be toppled? Unfortunately, many of them do. And that is why the struggle against sexism must be waged by women, who know better—and want better.

Banshee, No. 7, March 1977

EDITORIAL (p. 2)

Irishwomen United will not tolerate the banning of the British feminist magazine 'Spare Rib' by the Irish Censorship Board. This ban is a blatant infringement of our rights as women to read the literature of our choice ...[34]

The Censors, five Government appointees, exist to monitor literature coming into this country. They place absolutely no ban on many books and magazines which propagate sadism and degrade women, while titillating men. The husband, son or lover can learn how to be a rapist, but a woman cannot learn how to become a liberated individual.

The few rights we possess have been slowly eroded in recent months.[35] Not only are we forbidden legal contraception, but we are prevented from informing ourselves about contraception: witness the recent banning of the family planning booklet. The feminist classic 'The Second Sex' by Simone de Beauvoir remains on the banned list and the lesbian novel 'Rubyfruit Jungle' has now also been banned. These acts of the Censorship Board are just one expression of the increasing repression of sexuality in Ireland. The Project Acts Centre lost its grant because it presented two plays about homosexuality. A television series 'Executive Suite' was withdrawn because it dealt with abortion and lesbianism.

[33] IWU organised a direct-action protest by women swimmers at the 40-foot pool in September 1976, which led to it being opened to women and children. *Banshee*, no. 5, September 1976, p. 4.

[34] IWU protested the ban on *Spare Rib* using the same tactics that the IWLM had employed in 1971 when protesting the ban on contraceptives. Twenty members bought 200 copies of the magazine in Belfast and returned to Dublin where they were met by gardaí at Connolly Station. But, in the face of a large crowd of IWU supporters, the police failed to prevent the women and their magazines getting through customs. *Banshee*, no. 7, March 1977, p. 4.

[35] There was certainly truth in this claim as, between November 1976 and March 1977, no fewer than 117 books and three periodicals were banned by the Republic's censors. O'Reilly, *Masterminds of the Right*, pp. 42–3.

As feminists we recognise these actions as forming a common consensus by the Irish establishment to deny women the right to control their own fertility and to freely choose and express their sexuality …

RED BIDDY (p. 3)

Another of our liberals, Garret FitzGerald [Fine Gael taoiseach, 1981–2, 1982–7], speaking in Cork, remarked—'We got rid of the discrimination that barred married women from working and we can't go back on that, but with the present level of unemployment I think that in many cases we should apply some form of gentle discouragement'.

Already women are denied contraception, equal social welfare rights, nursery facilities and divorce, and married women pay higher taxes than any other workers. What more 'gentle' discouragement does FitzGerald have in store for us!

RED BIDDY (p. 3)

Members of a branch of Provisional Sinn Fein, in a recent effort to take a public stand on 'woman's rights', distributed leaflets stating that abortion was 'a British plot' to decrease the production of children for Ireland.

Has the 'Kinder, Kuche, Kirche' policy found new advocates in Ireland?[36]

NEWS (p. 4)

In Northern Ireland a British soldier was released on a two-year suspended sentence after raping a woman. The judge declared that he would usually have given a heavier sentence except for the specific circumstances. We know the 'needs' of British soldiers but what about those of Irish women? HIS SUPERIOR OFFICER WELCOMED HIM BACK.

EVICTIONS—BALLYMUN (p. 4)

While selling *Banshee* in Ballymun [a working-class housing estate on the outskirts of north Dublin], our attention was drawn to the number of evictions taking place there … Ballymun has a high unemployment rate and a very young population but the eviction notices continue to arrive and the bailiffs continue to evict—and the woman, whose 'place', the constitution states, is 'in the home', may arrive back any day to find she hasn't got any home.[37]

The End of IWU?

[36] 'Kinder, Kuche, Kirche' was an official policy towards women, promoting 'children, kitchen, church', adopted in late nineteenth-century imperial Germany and pursued vigorously under Nazi rule during the 1930s.

[37] The Irish constitution states in article 41/2/1 that 'the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives the State a support by which the common good cannot be achieved'. Article 41/2/2 goes on to say that the state will endeavour to ensure that women are not obliged 'by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home'. For feminist campaigns in Ballymun, see Ita McAteer and Susan Coyle, 'Ballymun Women Fight On!', *Women Against Oppression*, no. 4, 13 May 1975, pp. 1, 3 (author's collection).

IWU fragmented in 1977 and *Banshee* ceased publication.[38] This was partly due to in-fighting among members, especially over politics and sexuality. The Northern Ireland Troubles caused tensions between women who believed feminist groups should ally themselves with republicanism and those insisting on an autonomous women's movement, one independent of male-dominated political organisations that had never demonstrated much interest in female equality. Lesbianism too raised divisive questions, especially about the issues IWU should prioritise and the extent to which it should work with and through men. But the demise of IWU was also partly due to sheer exhaustion among activists after years of intensive campaigning. Some radical IWU members, including a number of lesbian women, moved to London, where they felt they faced less discrimination, but other members seeded later important campaigns. IUW had established CAP in 1976, and some former members continued to lead it into the early 1980s.[39] In 1977, IWU helped open the first Rape Crisis Centre in Dublin.[40] Former members were also active through the 1980s and into 1990s in the fight to legalise divorce.[41] Then there was the abortion issue, plus ongoing campaigns waged against domestic and sexual violence.[42]

Trinity Women's Liberation Group, 1975–7[43]

Among the various organisations affiliated with IWU was a women's liberation group formed at TCD by female students and staff in June 1975. As well as holding public meetings, participating in demonstrations, staging concerts and conducting consciousness-raising groups, the Trinity Women's Liberation Group (TWLG) also published a monthly newssheet.[44]

The first issue of this periodical appeared in September 1975. It was called *Bell Jar* after the American poet Sylvia Plath's 1963 novel.[45] *Bell Jar* reported on the activities of IWU and other feminist groups, but it also publicised discrimination against women at TCD and in Irish education more broadly. Female students had not been admitted to Trinity until 1904, well after most other Irish universities and, 70 years later, the college still had very few women among its senior staff: only three out of 66 professors were women. The 37 per cent of the student body that was female by 1974/5 was largely confined to the Arts and Social Sciences faculties.

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[38] McCafferty, *Nell*, p. 310. For documents relating to IWU, including copies of *Banshee*, see the Attic Press/Róisín Conroy Collection, Boole Library, UCC, IE BL/F/AP, subsection 6.3, items 1172–83.

[39] For a report by Maura Molloy on the founding of CAP, see *Bell Jar*, no. 9, September 1976, pp. 9, 13. For a recent study, see Kelly, 'Irishwomen United, the Contraceptive Action Programme and the Feminist Campaign for Free, Safe and Legal Contraception in Ireland', pp. 269–97.

[40] Rosita Sweetman, *On Our Backs: Sexual Attitudes in a Changing Ireland*, London: Pan Books, 1979, pp. 197–203.

[41] A referendum held in 1986 in the Republic aimed at removing the ban on divorce in the 1937 constitution failed, but a second referendum was successful in 1995. Diane Urquhart, *Irish Divorce: A History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 215–34.

[42] The existing legislative ban on abortion was added to the Irish constitution by referendum in 1983 and was not removed until another referendum in 2018. Abortion was legalised in the North in 2019, but by the Westminster parliament after the Northern Ireland Assembly had refused to act. Lindsey Earner-Byrne and Diane Urquhart, *The Irish Abortion Journey, 1920–2018*, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Pivot, 2019.

[43] The official centenary history of women at Trinity College makes no mention of the TWLG, but the chapter on the 1960s and 1970s, subtitled 'Decades of Change', is poorly researched. Susan M. Parkes (ed.), *A Danger to Men? A History of Women in Trinity College Dublin, 1904–2004*, Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2004, pp. 202–19.

[44] See, for example, the flyer, 'WOMEN'S EYE VIEW! A Programme of Songs, Readings and Sketches on the theme of WOMEN'S LIBERATION. Devised and Presented by Trinity Women's Liberation Group and Sisters from the Women's Movement', March 1976 (author's collection).

[45] Surviving copies of *Bell Jar* appear to be rare. The periodical is not listed in the guide to the Attic Press/Róisín Conroy Collection at UCC, nor does it appear in the online catalogue of the TCD Library. The author holds multiple copies of issues 1–9 (1975–6) of *Bell Jar*, plus a special issue titled *Man's Realm*, published in 1977 and dealing, often satirically, with male liberation.

Reflecting this latter fact, the TWLG's newssheet displayed a marked interest in women's history and literature, as well as in education, sociology and religion, but it also reported on the proceedings of the Oireachtas, where Senator Mary Robinson, representing TCD since 1969, was attempting to legislate for women's rights in the face of determined male political opposition.

Bell Jar, No. 1, September 1975

> WHY JOIN THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT? Romira Worvill[46] (pp. 1–2)
>
> What does it mean to say that women are oppressed? In the most general terms, it means that in most areas of life—in education, in employment, and so on—they do not have the same opportunities as men to develop their capacities to the full. This is because our society makes certain assumptions … about what women can and should do. Thus, women must live their lives hemmed in on all sides by legalised restrictions and social conventions. These inflexible norms constantly thwart and frustrate many women …
>
> At last, however, it <u>does</u> seem as though things are changing. Due to a complex of different factors—the demands of national economies, more widespread education, changing climates of opinion—women have over the last two decades been participating more and more in the life of society outside the home … The liberation of women, we now see, is not something that will suddenly happen to us on a specific date in the distant future. Women's Liberation is happening now! … this will be the great achievement of this and subsequent generations of women, but only if we refuse to give up; only if women go on joining together and working together to maintain the impetus and keep the process alive …
>
> IRISHWOMEN UNITED, Maura Molloy[47] (pp. 5–6)
>
> Irishwomen United was formed in April 1975 as an umbrella group to coordinate the activities of various radical women's organisations. It was decided to organise this main group around a charter of women's rights. This charter was endorsed by approximately 100 women at a conference in Liberty Hall on June 2nd. It contains 7 basic demands dealing with the law, the family, birth-control, sexuality, education, employment and women's centres …
>
> Irishwomen United is not a single-issue group; several sub-committees have been set up to deal with specific topics including contraception, employment, social-welfare benefits and a Women's Centre. A regular newsletter will soon be printed. On Nov. 12th a conference on contraception will be held in Liberty Hall. Several pickets and public protests to ministers involved have already taken place in connection with this …
>
> Rooms have recently been acquired at 12 Lower Pembroke St., and meetings will be held there every Sunday at 4p.m. It is also intended to open a Women's Centre here, which to begin with will open every Saturday. All women are welcome at the meetings and at the Centre when it opens.

[46] Romira Worville was awarded an MA in French by TCD before later becoming a professor in languages at Arcadia University in Nova Scotia, Canada.
[47] Maura Molloy was an undergraduate student at TCD and a member of IWU.

Bell Jar, No. 2, October 1975

MILITANCY AND THE IRISH WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT, Roisin Boyd[48] (pp. 6–7)

At our last meeting the question of whether the Women's Group should be militant—and whether in fact it is already militant—came up. Many Irishwomen seem to shy away from this term. Looking it up to find its literal meaning, I found this definition: 'war-like, active in conflict'. Well, I don't think anyone, even the most chauvinistic of chauvinists, could … call us 'war-like'. No, we are not war-like, but we <u>are</u> active in the face of conflict!

Militancy does not mean violence. But the only way to combat ignorance is to be forceful and strong … It has been said that 'women remain the last colonial territory'. The analogy is obviously an accurate one. Imperialist powers have always been unwilling to hand over power to those whom they oppress … but if we are united in our struggle there will be no need for violence. Oppressed peoples only resort to violence when they meet with violent opposition to their just demands.

IS THE FATHER-FAMILY HERE TO STAY? Naomi Hope (pp. 8–11)

…In working to change the conditions under which women live, we are simultaneously changing ourselves and subsequent generations of women for life in a society which will have developed beyond patriarchy and the nuclear family. This is what makes the Women's Movement radically different from all other political groups, whether on the Right or on the Left …

The nuclear family, which is the environment that moulds and conditions all of us, is an immensely powerful force in the perpetuation of present-day patriarchal society. To see it in its true light as a particular historical development which occurred as a response to specific conditions, and to renounce once and for all the view that it is natural, inevitable and permanent, is the first step towards liberation from all its ills and from the oppressive society it plays so vital a role in maintaining.

Bell Jar, No. 3, November 1975

HIST. DEBATE—REPORT (pp. 7–8)[49]

MOTION: 'That this house should embrace a gayer culture'[50]

… Of the total of ten speakers, the most outstanding were Dr Browne and Mr Norris,[51] both of whom were received without the derisive comments and laughter which greeted

[48] Róisin Boyd wrote for *Spare Rib* in London during the early 1980s, spent 16 years working in RTÉ and later became a lecturer in communications at the Dublin Institute of Technology.
[49] Known as the Hist., the College Historical Society was a debating club established at TCD in 1770. Not until nearly two centuries later, however, in 1969, were women allowed to become members of the Hist.
[50] For the homosexual law reform campaign, see M.J. Casey, 'Radical Politics and Gay Activism in the Republic of Ireland, 1974–90', *Irish Studies Review*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2018, pp. 217–36.
[51] Dr Noël Browne, minister for health in the first inter-party government (1948–51), was forced to resign when the Catholic Church opposed his scheme to extend free, state-funded health care to all mothers and children under the age of 16. He remained a TD until 1982, except for 1973–7 when he served as a TCD senator. David Norris,

the remarks of many other speakers. The opposition retaliated with … Ms Marks from the Family League … much of her speech consisted of tedious biblical allusions, including one to a good and dutiful husband who valiantly prevented a homosexual action with the courageous words: 'no, take instead my wife and my daughter'! … T.C.G. O'Mahony from the League of Decency … equated homosexuality with … incest, murder, suicide, abortion and euthanasia! … Fr Kelly … began denouncing homosexuality because it denies 'the ability to transmit God's gift of life'. (And his celibacy?)[52]

… All those supporting the motion showed a wealth of compassion which was sadly lacking in the professed Christianity of their opponents.

Despite denouncing discrimination against homosexuals, the supporters of the motion seemed to be oblivious of the active discrimination in the debate: of the ten speakers, only three were female, and practically no allusions were made to lesbians in any of the speeches. There was a large majority vote in favour of the motion …

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN AUSTRALIA, Elizabeth Malcolm[53] (pp. 10–12)

Australia has generally proved a very hostile environment for women. The first white women sent there … were considered 'damned whores' by their male jailors … In the horrifying story of the rapid and brutal destruction of Aboriginal society, the white man's greed for women figured prominently side by side with his greed for land …

Since 1945 however, one can discern more hopeful signs … Economic prosperity, plus the liberation resulting from the development of safe, reliable contraceptive techniques, gradually opened up new opportunities for women … This changing economic situation has been vital in the growth of the Women's Liberation Movement in Australia. Groups [first founded in 1969–70] … were mainly composed of young, educated middle-class women and their strongholds were the universities, though they did, somewhat self-consciously, make claims about the social condition of all women …

But the full impact of the Women's Movement as a political force was not felt until 1972 and the formation of the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) … By the end of the year, WEL had nearly 2,000 members and surveys in Victoria showed that 30% of women voters were taking into account the issues raised by WEL in deciding for whom they would vote …

One of the great tasks of the Women's Movement in Australia, as elsewhere, is to spread its message and advantages among … poorer, less well-educated, working-class women; among immigrant women, many of whom remain isolated and disorientated, unable even to speak English; and among Aboriginal women, still perhaps the most abused and exploited class in Australian society.

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an English lecturer, was elected to the Seanad in 1987 representing TCD. He led the campaign that succeeded in having male homosexuality de-criminalised in the Republic in 1992.

[52] For the campaigns of the Irish Family League and the League of Decency against women's and gay rights during the 1970s and 1980s, see O'Reilly, *Masterminds of the Right*, pp. 20, 30–31, 34, 43, 48–50.

[53] Elizabeth Malcolm was a PhD student in history at TCD during 1975–9.

NATURAL LAW LANGUAGE AND WOMEN, Joyce Dillman[54] (pp. 14–15)

…'But after all, it is unnatural', is all too often the opening salvo in pub or party conversations, whether the topic be contraception, sexuality or women's liberation. To counter this, every feminist should have, in addition to a knowledge of anthropology and evolution as these relate to women, a working knowledge of natural law language and its abuses stocked in her verbal armoury …

To call something unnatural is often considered condemnatory enough to avoid having to argue its demerits on independent grounds, which is to say, if A is unnatural, A is by definition bad. This type of argument glides over two quite distinct factors obviously: a definition of the term 'natural' and the justification for equating naturalness with goodness …

Bell Jar, No. 4, January 1976

EQUAL PAY, OR HOW THE GOVERNMENT AGAIN BETRAYED THE WOMEN OF IRELAND, Elizabeth Malcolm (pp. 1–3)

…Eighteen months ago, in July 1974, the Anti-Discrimination (Pay) Act was passed despite strong opposition from employers. It was to come into operation on 31 December 1975 … Thus, a coalition government proclaiming liberal ideals, with a Labour Party as junior partner, planned to climax International Women's Year with the introduction of the most basic civil and economic right, equal pay for equal work …[55]

But within days of the implementation, the Irish government threw all its fine principles out of the window and sold out to naked capitalist pressure.

Having awarded politicians substantial pay rises during the year, the government found that neither it nor private industry could afford to pay women workers a decent wage. Irish women were in effect told that the government and the economy of the country could not survive without their continued exploitation … [They] were told that they must continue to accept 59% of male wages for the same work …

The public relations exercise of International Women's Year is over, but the real fight for women's rights goes on! …

'SAVE THE EQUAL PAY ACT'
PUBLIC MEETING
THURSDAY JANUARY 15TH—8 P.M.
MANSION HOUSE

Bell Jar, No. 5, February 1976

[54] Joyce Dillman was an undergraduate studying philosophy at TCD and later worked for a feminist printery in London.
[55] During 1973–7, a coalition government made up of Fine Gael and the Irish Labour Party, with Liam Cosgrave as taoiseach, was in power in the Republic. In 1972, the United Nations had designated 1975 the first International Women's Year with the aim of highlighting discrimination against women worldwide and promoting reform.

LETTER TO THE EDITORS, David McAdam, Dick Sutherland, Brian Torode[56] (p. 1)

Dear Bell Jar,
We would like your readers to be aware that a men's group has been meeting since October to radically examine sexual attitudes and practices. We are interested in combatting the forms of sexism perpetuated by the Irish institutions of family, Church and education. We are trying to work out what we mean by sexual liberation. The development of a feminist perspective is of crucial importance for women and for men and must be accompanied by a radical reassessment by men of their own roles.

'WHAT'S WRONG WITH WOMEN'S EDUCATION?'—TWLG FORUM (pp. 5–16)

On Tuesday, January 20th, the Trinity Women's Liberation Group held an open forum [on women's education] … The session was quite well attended; as one might expect the audience was made up largely of women, although there were a few men present … As usual on such occasions, one or two of the men there seemed to have come simply in order to pontificate on what they think women want and need, rather than to find out what the views of the women themselves are. However, they were dealt with fairly successfully, and the rest of us managed to avoid the reactionary quagmire and to learn something new about the topic under discussion … For the benefit of those who were not able to attend the forum, the papers that were presented are printed below …

WOMEN AND EDUCATION IN IRELAND, OR SCIENCE VERSUS DOMESTIC SCIENCE, Elizabeth Malcolm
WOMEN'S STUDIES AND THE UNIVERSITY, Romira Worvill
WOMEN AND UNDERACHIEVEMENT, Peggy O'Brien[57]
SEXISM IN SOCIOLOGY, Sarah O'Hara[58]

Bell Jar, No. 6, March 1976

THE RIGHT TO TALK—CRIMINAL CONVERSATION, Jean Cathcart[59] (pp. 3–4)

The bringing of two recent actions for criminal conversation underlines once again the injustices of the Irish legal system towards women.[60] In such cases a husband brings an action for damages against a man who has committed adultery with his wife … If ever proof were needed that a wife is, in the eyes of the law, considered as nothing more than a servant and the property of her husband, the existence of this form of action is surely proof enough.

[56] Brian Torode was a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at TCD.
[57] Peggy O'Brien lectured on American literature at TCD before becoming a professor in the English Department at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.
[58] Sarah O'Hara was an undergraduate student in sociology at TCD. In 1977, she helped establish *Wicca*, a feminist magazine that replaced *Banshee* and, during the 1980s, she was involved in women's publishing.
[59] Jean Cathcart was an undergraduate in English and French at TCD and later a secondary school teacher in England.
[60] Criminal conversation, which allowed a husband, in the event of his wife's adultery, to sue her male lover for having deprived him of his wife's 'society and services', was abolished in England in 1857 and in Northern Ireland in 1939, but not in the Irish Republic until 1981. Urquhart, *Irish Divorce*, pp. 205–6.

In one of the recent cases, a man received £14,000 in compensation. In contrast to this we see the plight of deserted wives …; the position of battered wives, who are forced to leave their husbands; the fact that the wife's domicile is legally that of her husband, even if he deserts her; and that a husband who has deserted his family may still receive tax rebates for his children. It goes without saying that a wife cannot file an action for criminal conversation when her husband deserts her. These are only some of the injustices and incongruities of family law which underline the desperate need for reform …

On Saturday, February 7th at a conference on Law Reform, the [Fine Gael] Attorney General, Declan Costello,[61] said that there was no reason why outdated laws like Criminal Conversation should not be abolished, if it could be shown that public opinion supported their repeal. It is surely a sign of … lack of concern for human rights that a government will not take action automatically to right recognised and glaring injustices; but this attitude is one which we have come to expect from a government which will renege on principles to which it has previously paid lip service, as has been the case with Equal Pay.

Bell Jar, No. 7, April 1976

USI [UNION OF STUDENTS IN IRELAND]—A Male Spanner in the Works, Sarah O'Hara (p. 2)

The first USI Women's Rights Conference finally took place on April 10th-11th in the National College of Art. It provided a platform for several interesting and informative papers, but even more interesting was the political manoeuvring going on behind the scenes. The first thing to be noted is that most of USI's leadership are supporters of Official Sinn Fein, and they are strongly opposed to any autonomous women's movement, i.e. a movement which they are unable to control.[62] This means that Irish Women United couldn't truthfully be described as their favourite organisation …

… none of the official guest-speakers were members of Irish Women United. [But the USI's hierarchy, including the president Dave Kennedy and the president-elect Eamonn Gilmore, were] a little perturbed to discover that many of the delegates from Dublin were … members of IWU.[63]

A revealing aspect of the conference was the wide platform handed to the Northern Women's Rights Movement.[64] In contrast to IWU, the NWRM are a mixed group of men and women, with several trade union and community bodies affiliated to it. It is

[61] Declan Costello, son of former taoiseach, John A. Costello (1948–51, 1954–7), was a Fine Gael TD (1951–69, 1973–7), attorney general in the Cosgrave government (1973–7) and later president of the high court (1995–8).
[62] Official Sinn Féin had split from Provisional Sinn Féin in 1970 and renounced the armed struggle in the North in 1972. As a Marxist party, it was influential in Irish universities and also within RTÉ, and in 1977 it changed its name to The Workers' Party.
[63] Eamon Gilmore served as USI president during 1976–8. He was elected a Workers' Party TD in 1989, before joining the Irish Labour Party in 1999. He was Labour leader (2007–14) and Tánaiste (2011–14) in the coalition government led by Fine Gael's Enda Kenny from 2011 to 2017.
[64] The NWRM was established in 1975 largely by members of an earlier group based at Queen's University, Belfast. Unlike IWU and the TWLG, it admitted male members and was not a collective, being governed by an elected committee. Eileen Evason, *Against the Grain: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Northern Ireland*, Dublin: Attic Press, 1991, pp. 16–17, 19–24.

probably sheer coincidence that groups considering affiliation include Official Sinn Fein and the Communist Party of Ireland …[65]

USI's policy with regard to women has so far been hopelessly inadequate …

Bell Jar, No. 8, May 1976

SPEAKING OF WOMEN (p. 19)

Four programmes, under the title 'Speaking for Women', have been made by the Trinity Women's Liberation Group for the college radio station broadcast during Trinity Week [a week in May celebrating the end of the academic teaching year]. The four centre on the topics of: the autonomous women's movement, women and Trinity, voices from the past and everyday issues of work, contraception and education. For those interested we publish below a list of the music and written sources used in these programmes.

Music: Joan Baez 'I shall be released', Carly Simon 'Waiting so long', Dory Previn 'Did Jesus have a sister?', Janis Joplin 'Me and Bobby Magee', Bob Dylan 'When the ship comes in', Helen Reddy 'I am woman'.
Plus 'Bread and Roses', which arose out of a strike by Massachusetts cotton girls in 1912, sung by Joan McKenna, 'The Engineer's Song' sung by Gaye Cunningham and Sandra Stevens, 'The Pill' by Loretta Lynn and sung by Sandra Stevens and 'What did you learn at school today?' sung by Gaye, Sandra and Mary Mac.

Books: Alice S. Rossi *The Feminist Papers*, Bantom [sic] Books (1973). (Contains extracts from Abigail Adams, Mary Wollstonecraft, Emma Goldman, etc.) Virginia Woolf *A Room of One's Own*, Penguin Books (1945). William Thompson *Appeal of One Half the Human Race, Women, against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men*, 1825 (reprinted with introduction by Joseph Lee, Cork, 1975). Midge Mackenzie (ed.) *Shoulder to Shoulder*, Penguin Books (1975).

Conclusion: Irish and Australian Feminism in the 1970s

The 1970s witnessed significant gains for women in the Irish Republic. Linda Connolly in her seminal history of the Irish women's movement called it a decade of 'dynamic growth'.[66] Gains were largely achieved through a combination of political lobbying by reformist organisations like the CSW and public lawbreaking by others like the more radical IWLM, IWU and their offshoots. Much progress was made in rolling back the legislation passed during the 1920s and 1930s that had sought to restrict female autonomy. However, women's liberation generated a forceful reaction from powerful right-wing Catholic organisations. Ailbhe Smyth categorised the period 1983–90 in the South as one of backlash and repression.[67] Gains were not lost and

[65] Evason in 1991 described the women's movement in the North as deeply divided by politics and sectarianism, and thus as having achieved 'meagre' gains. Ibid., pp. 9–15, 57. For the slightly more optimistic views of another activist, in 1993, see Monica McWilliams, 'The Church, the State and the Women's Movement in Northern Ireland', in Smyth (ed.), *Irish Women's Studies Reader*, pp. 79–99. For later assessments by historians, see Connolly and O'Toole, *Documenting Irish Feminisms*, pp. 145–69; Hill, *Women in Ireland*, pp. 177–80.
[66] Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement*, p. 145.
[67] Smyth, 'The Women's Movement in the Republic of Ireland', pp. 264–6.

women's organisations became more stable and professional, but progress certainly stalled for a time; abortion and divorce were both rejected in referenda held during the 1980s.[68]

The 1970s' campaigns in the Republic focused largely on empowering women economically: first, by removing discrimination in pay and employment; and second, by making contraception widely available so that women could control their fertility and therefore, if they wished, work outside the home. But this focus overlooked other serious issues. In retrospect, it is apparent that there was a great deal the mainly middle-class feminists of the 1970s did not know or failed to appreciate. Much remained hidden—literally—behind the high walls of the country's numerous church-run institutions. Magdelan laundries and mother-and-baby homes continued to operate into the 1990s; some industrial and reformatory schools until the 1980s; and the extent of the physical, sexual and emotional abuse committed by clergy only began to be revealed publicly from the 1990s onwards.

The South is still grappling with the traumatic consequences, especially for women and children, of its extraordinarily heavy reliance during the twentieth century on church-run institutions to handle social and economic deprivation—or what historians have come to call its 'architecture of containment'.[69] Yet the Republic was not unique, even if the sheer scale of abuse may have been greater there relative to the small size of the population. Children were also abused in Australian institutions run by the Catholic Church and other churches, by lay organisations and the state. In addition, we can see parallels with government policies in Australia that mandated the removal of many Indigenous children from their families, just as children in Ireland were being separated from their single or impoverished mothers during the same period.[70]

From the perspective of an Australian feminist who had been active in the early 1970s in Sydney's women's movement, the Republic often presented a rather depressing prospect in the mid to late 1970s. In terms of female rights and empowerment, Catholic Ireland certainly appeared in many ways to be behind largely secular Australia.[71] Contraception was available in Australia, for example, although feminists protested its high cost. Abortion, though in theory illegal, was also available in some circumstances, but with a variety of restrictions that differed markedly from state to state. Australia introduced no-fault divorce in 1975, whereas divorce was not legal at all in the Republic until 1995. But, as in Ireland, equal pay and the removal of discrimination against women in the workplace were key demands of Australian feminists throughout the 1970s. Equal pay was accepted in principle in Australia in 1972 and in Ireland in 1975, even if slow implementation in both countries has remained an on-going challenge. The Republic did not have a minister for women's affairs until the 1980s, but the Whitlam Labor government appointed a prime ministerial women's affairs advisor in 1973 and created the Office for the Status of Women in 1975. The parliaments were also rather different as regards female representation, although here the Republic performed somewhat better than Australia. Whereas, in the 1970s, between three and six women served each year in the Dáil and five or six in the Seanad, only one woman was elected to the Australian House of

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[68] For the 1980s, see Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement,* pp. 155–83.

[69] James M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. For the controversy surrounding the 2021 report of the commission into the mother-and-baby homes that had separated single women from their children, see Clair Wills, 'Architectures of Containment', *London Review of Books*, vol. 43, no. 10, 20 May 2021, pp. 17–22; Catriona Crowe, 'The Commission and the Survivors', *Dublin Review*, no. 83, summer 2021: thedublinreview.com, accessed 5 June 2021.

[70] See 'The Stolen Generations', Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies: aiatsis.gov.au, accessed 28 June 2021.

[71] For a discussion of the claim that feminism made more rapid progress in largely Protestant societies than in Catholic ones, see Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement*, pp. 29–30.

Representatives in the four federal elections held during the decade, with seven women being elected at different times to the Senate.[72]

These examples point to the differences between the Irish Republic and Australia in regard to women's rights during the 1970s not being so much about politics and economics, but rather about female sexuality and family life. Thus, the differences were essentially a product of Ireland's more entrenched conservative religiously based culture. Changing Catholic Irish culture to make it less repressive, discriminatory and misogynist was a monumental task, yet the culture has changed substantially in the half century since 1970—and feminists have played no small part in this achievement.[73]

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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[72] For an overview of the history of the women's movement in Australia, see Barbara Caine (ed.), *Australian Feminism: A Companion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. Today both parliaments still fall far short of representing women equitably. In 2021, only 22.5 per cent of Dáil deputies are women compared to only 31.1 per cent of members of the House of Representatives.

[73] For reflections on these changes in the context of the decade (2012–22) of official commemorations of Irish independence, see Sinéad Kennedy, '"No Country for Young Women": (Re)producing the Irish State' and Linda Connolly, 'Honest Commemoration: Reconciling Women's "Troubled" and "Troubling" History in Centennial Ireland', in Oona Frawley (ed.), *Women and the Decade of Commemorations*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2021, pp. 267–83 and 300–314.