

## **GENDER AND NATIONAL IDENTITY: INTRODUCTION**

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The papers published in this issue of **Scottish Affairs** were delivered at a seminar on Gender and National Identity held at the University of Edinburgh in 1996. The event formed part of a series of seminars on the theme of Boundaries and Identities sponsored by the International Social Sciences Institute at the University. The conference organiser, Esther Breitenbach, aimed to initiate a dialogue between participants from Ireland, Scotland and Wales concerning the place of gender in debates on national identity, to explore the extent to which common themes emerge across national boundaries, and to examine the factors that have contributed to or inhibited the development of research on gender in the different countries.

The seminar was influenced by several factors:

- by the recognition that feminist research and published work on women and gender issues in Scotland has been of a limited character, with consequences for developing analysis and theorising the gendered nature of Scottish society (Brown, Myers and Breitenbach 1994);
- by the desire to examine whether this was a situation common across boundaries;
- by the way in which the discourse on national identity and nationalism itself tends to be gendered, often excluding both the experience and contribution of women.

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This last point can be illustrated by examining the data from the Scottish Election Survey carried out at the last general election which demonstrates a gender gap in the constitutional preferences of men and women and the way in which they describe their identity. More women than men stated their support for a Scottish 'Assembly' (52.5% as against 46.1%), while more men than women preferred independence in the European Community (20.7% compared to 14.1%) and also total independence (7.2% men and 4.3% women). Asked to say which statement best described how they saw themselves, more men than women described themselves as 'Scottish not British' (20.7% as against 18%) and 'Scottish more than British' (42.9% versus 37.7%). However, more women than men saw themselves as 'equally Scottish and British' (36.5% women and 28.5% men). This is just one example of the way in which issues related to national identity and nationalism may be interpreted differently by women and men. The point is that we have little understanding of the explanations for such differences and whether or not they would be reproduced if we examined other indicators.

Papers for the seminar were, therefore, sought from contributors who would assess the way in which history has been written and the extent to which women's participation in public life has been acknowledged; and which would look at analyses of literary and other types of cultural production and the generation of stereotypes and cultural icons. The authors were also asked to address the difficulties encountered in the construction of identity for women, and whether the boundaries between nations and national identities are rendered problematic by the boundaries between men and women and feminine and masculine identities. The focus was on developments in Ireland, Wales and Scotland because the question of national identity has a clear significance and history in connection with debates about the relationship of these countries with England and with the 'British state'. While gender studies may have reached a more developed form in England, for example in the fields of women's history, or feminist literary criticism, the issue of national identity has not assumed the same salience, and it is hard to find work that brings these themes together. As stated in a forthcoming publication on women in Scotland: 'the paradox facing women in Scotland is that the debate on nationalism in Scotland has ignored gender, and feminist debates on nationalism have ignored Scotland.' (Breitenbach, Brown and Myers, 1997). The same could be said for women in Ireland and Wales.

One paper from the seminar, that written by Aileen Christianson, has already been published in the issue 17 of **Scottish Affairs** (autumn 1996). It explores the boundaries of gender and national identity within the context of some

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twentieth century Scottish women's fiction, and develops the twin themes of Scottishness and femaleness.

In the present issue, Esther Breitenbach continues the focus on Scottish women by looking at the problem of their lack of visibility in Scottish political and public life in the twentieth century and their marginalisation within Scottish history, British feminist history and debates on nationalism. She asks whether this absence creates problems for contemporary Scottish women in constructing a positive public identity for themselves, and argues for the need for a greater range of potential identities.

The discussion on gender and national identity in Wales is outlined by Jane Aaron. She cites quotations referring to the culturally invisibility of Welsh women and the way in which images of Wales and the Welsh have been largely representative of male views with little place for women's perspectives. She offers explanations for the absence of positive female images in Welsh culture in the past while demonstrating the changes that have taken place in contemporary Welsh women's sense of identity.

The position in Ireland - both north and south - is assessed in the papers by Carmel Roulston and Yvonne Galligan respectively. Carmel Roulston argues that because women in Northern Ireland can be said to be divided by religion and national identity as well as class, this has caused difficulties for constructing a feminist agenda in a country where the 'nationalist question' takes priority over other issues. This is reflected also in the current 'peace process' during which 'the difficulty has been to find ways of including women while allowing the differences among women to find expression'. However, the creation of the Women's Coalition is one demonstration of the way in which women are making their voices heard.

The relationship between women and the state in the Republic of Ireland since its foundation in 1922 is examined by Yvonne Galligan. Women in the Republic are expected to play a traditional role in the home (witness the concern cited over the 'poor dinnerless husband') and there has been little acknowledgement of the contribution made by women in shaping public life in the past. Nevertheless, over time, the public activities of women in Ireland have influenced social and political attitudes to accepting women as legitimate participants in the public sphere. The author also demonstrates the way in which the campaigns of organised women have often had a significant influence on the nature of public policy outcomes.

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Key themes emerging from the papers are:

- the marginalisation of women and their relative invisibility in past records of political and cultural life across the countries examined (although such evidence as exists would suggest that this is not an accurate reflection of the actual involvement of women, but rather their exclusion from the historical, political and cultural records written by men);
- the extent to which there is a mood of change in which women are asserting their right to participate in many different ways and in different arenas and to change the nature and content of the debates;
- in pressing to become more 'visible', women are campaigning not just on the basis of a unitary woman's identity but to be allowed to hold different 'identities', in which to claim Welshness or Irishness or Scottishness, they are not forced to deny their feminist, class, colour or other identities.

The papers therefore demonstrate just how vital it is to include gender in any discourse on national identity.

### **REFERENCES**

Breitenbach E, Brown A, Myers F (1997). Understanding Women in Scotland, **Feminist Review**, forthcoming.

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