

Scottish Affairs, no.18, winter 1997

**WOMEN AND NATIONAL IDENTITY
IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND
OR
THE PLIGHT OF
THE 'POOR DINNERLESS HUSBAND'**

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The relationship between women and the state in the Republic of Ireland has long been a problematic one. Even today, when we observe the situation of women in Ireland, we are immediately struck by the apparent unquestioning acceptance of a lifestyle based in the home. This ideal of motherhood and domesticity has found continual expression in political terms. Yet, when we look more closely, we find that Irish women have not accepted their exclusion from public life with equanimity. Beneath the outward stability of Irish social attitudes and political practice, women have challenged the male hegemony. Thus, we find that the gendered nature of citizenship and civic participation in the Republic of Ireland is a rich source of analysis for scholars and a focal point for feminist activity.

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PUBLIC IDENTITY AND WOMEN, 1922-1960S

The fashioning of a public identity which confined women to the home did not happen with the emergence of the Free State in 1922. It was, in fact, part and parcel of the cultural psyche even before independence from British rule. It was shaped by the convergence of two conservative forces. One was the development of Catholic social thought, the second was the emergence of Irish nationalism.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Catholic thinkers developed a social vision incorporating the principles of subsidiarity, social consensus and family solidarity (McLaughlin 1993, pp.206-7). As Ireland was a predominantly Catholic country with an authoritarian institutional Church, these principles found a ready hold. Catholic social thought viewed the state as having little or no part to play in social or economic affairs unless social order or the national interest were threatened. This concept of subsidiarity, then, allowed the Catholic Church to shape social policy and to dominate many spheres of social activity. It placed a high emphasis on the family, seeing it as the cornerstone of society. And, in a logical extension of thought, Catholic Church authorities considered the family unit to be outside the realm of state influence.

Nationalism, too, was a conservative force. Nationalist leaders did not plan to overthrow the institutions of state as laid down by British rule. Their aim was to replace British bureaucrats and office-holders with an Irish equivalent. For instance, official titles were changed. The position of Secretary of State was replaced by a President chosen by popular election. A parliament was created in Dublin, replacing rule from Westminster. It was called a Dail, but was essentially based on the political rules and procedures of the House of Commons. The electoral system adopted by the founding fathers of the Irish state was different to that operating in the United Kingdom, but the existence of proportional representation in Ireland is largely due to its introduction to Ireland in 1911 by British supporters of electoral reform (Gallagher 1987, p.27). Thus, the institutional arrangements of the Free State did not differ from the already established British procedures in the area of government and administration. The conservative nature of nationalist political thinking is reflected in their social attitudes. This is not surprising, given that Irish nationalist leaders were, for the most part, educated in conservative Catholic schools where there was little challenge to the basic tenets of a conservative culture. There was little disagreement among nationalist leaders with the

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sentiments expressed in the *Connaught Telegraph* in 1881 (quoted by Smyth 1995, p.208) which declared that:

God and nature never intended women to take an advanced position in fighting for the emancipation of any nation.

Thus, religion and nationalist political thinking formed a consensus around the nature of women's citizenship which was firmly in place on the eve of independence in 1922. And, as the identity of the new state was being formed, the fate of women as citizens of that new state was also being shaped. As Rosemary Cullen Owens noted

The sublimation of women's issues to controversial national questions ensured that the position of Irish women remained subservient, a situation compounded by the deepening Catholic ethos of the state. (Cullen Owens 1984, p.123)

Thus women who participated in nationalist politics identified with it as a political agenda and had difficulty in developing a broader feminist perspective. Indeed, as Margaret Ward points out

Relations with their feminist contemporaries were often acrimonious because, while both agreed that women were at a disadvantage within society, the nationalists maintained that to place the needs of women before those of 'the nation' (which was little more than an idealised abstraction, devoid of any social content) would be divisive, and from this perspective they criticized feminism for its implicit lack of commitment to the nationalist cause. ... For their part, feminists discovered they had little popular support in a country which, after the upheavals of years of war, had settled down into a self-sufficient, traditional society, regarding with suspicion and distaste any foreign influence, particularly in areas of morality. (Ward 1983, pp.248-50)

The role of women vis-a-vis the public life of the new state was extensively debated and defined (Cullen Owens 1984, pp.130-1; Valiulis 1995, p.123) The newly independent state sought to limit women's participation in public life to the casting of votes. It thus embarked on a series of sustained policy initiatives intended to limit women's civic involvement. In 1925, for instance, the Free State government passed the Civil Service Amendment Act. This legislation gave the government the right to limit employment opportunities

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in the civil service of the new state on the grounds of sex alone. Ostensibly justified by the need for efficiency in the administrative system, the real reason for limiting women's employment was the crisis in male employment in the 1920s. As Daly, in a study of women's employment patterns in the 1920s and 1930s, notes:

The permanent white-collar posts which became available were bitterly contested within the new Irish state. The establishment of a native civil service brought increased openings for low-grade clerical positions, such as writing assistant and typist. Following the model established by the British civil service, these posts were restricted to women. ... Despite the low pay on offer, which was allegedly inadequate to maintain a single person, there were protests against male exclusion, both on the grounds that preference should be given to male veterans who had fought in the Irish War of Independence, and because these were the only civil service posts open to those with primary education. Had it not been for the pressure on government to find work for veterans of the Irish struggle for independence by restricting several competitions for clerical positions to ex-servicemen, including at least one examination of 'a particularly easy standard', women's employment in the civil service would have risen more rapidly.

(Daly 1995 pp.109-10)

In 1927, women were exempted from serving on juries. Justifying this policy, one Irish newspaper commented that women had no desire to serve on juries, to be 'wrenched from the bosom of their families, from their cherished household duties, from the preparation of their husbands' dinners' (Valiulis 1995 p.123). Government ministers were of a similar mind, asserting in public debates that the primary role of women was within the home: marriage and motherhood was their lot, tending to the needs of husbands and rearing children their role in life.

Expressions of the gender dichotomy in the civic arena from government ministers were frequent. As Valiulis (1995, p.123) comments, gender difference alone 'supposedly justified the government's attempt to establish an almost impenetrable barrier between the public world of men and the private world of women'.

This view of the world was not accepted by all women. It was argued that marriage and family life need not preclude public participation. One woman, quoted by Valiulis observed in a spirited fashion that:

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It is extraordinary how the poor dinnerless husband manages to survive in this country as an argument against almost any kind of progress. In pre-war days it was the parliamentary franchise. If a woman left her home for a period of time necessary to record her vote it might entail the dread possibility of her husband's having no dinner (masculine imagination apparently could picture no greater calamity).

One is really ashamed of the type of argument which is being used today in the Free State in order to push women back into the dark ages. Surely the argument of the neglected home and husband has become too thin and poor to be referred to save by way of joke in any civilised country? (Valiulis 1995, p.125)

But the vision of vast numbers of Irish husbands being left dinnerless while their women were preoccupied with economic and public affairs did not disappear from the minds of Irish decision-makers. If anything, it grew stronger. Successive governments sought to reinforce a home-centred role for women in the form of restrictive and discriminatory public policies. In the 1930s, the Land Commission - a body set up to oversee the government's land distribution policies - refused women the right to inherit land. This policy was not reversed until the 1960s. In 1932, the marriage bar for female employees in the public and civil service came into force. This effectively excluded married women from any form of public sector employment. Although this policy was repealed for the teaching profession in 1954 by ministerial order, it remained in force for the civil service and local authorities until 1972. Sections of the 1935 Conditions of Employment Act gave the Minister for Labour the power to ban women from certain areas of the industrial labour force in order to ensure the employment of men (Ward 1983, p.254). Thus, there is ample evidence of the political intention to circumscribe the scope for women to participate in the labour force and in civic affairs during the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, it was the view of Eamonn De Valera, one of the most influential leaders of the Irish nationalist movement, that women should give priority to their duties as wives and mothers:

In regard to labour and in regard to work, our aim ought to be that the breadwinner, who is normally and naturally in these cases, when alive, the father of the family, should be able by his work to bring in enough to maintain the whole household and that women ought not to be forced by economic necessity to go out and either supplement his wages or become

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breadwinners themselves.
(McLaughlin 1993, p.211)

The constitution reflected this view and indeed the wider principles of catholic social teaching which saw the enforced domestication of women. Women's groups protested loudly at the narrow and marginalised role the 1937 Constitution envisaged for women (Ward 1983, pp.238-45). However, a formalistic view of women's citizenship, which marginalised women's civic, economic and social participation, became institutionalised in Article 41, which declared that:

- 41.1.1 The State recognizes the Family as the natural, primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights antecedent and superior to all positive law.
- 2 The State, therefore guarantees to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State.
- 41.2.1 In particular, the State recognizes that by her life within the family home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.
- 2 The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.

The sentiments regarding the duty of the state to support women in their home-making role were clearly aspirational (Ward 1983, p.239). The constitution copperfastened the role of women as carers, as home-makers and as economic dependants on men. Scannell summed up the relationship between women and the state as follows:

For almost thirty years after the constitution was adopted, the position of women in Irish society hardly changed at all. The common law regulation of women to domesticity and powerlessness continued. Laws based on the premise that women's rights were inferior to those of men survived in, and indeed even appeared on, the statute books.
(Scannell 1988, p.127)

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The 1940 to 1960s were years in which women remained in the home. Women's groups, mainly the Irish Countywomen's Association and the Irish Housewives Association, were clearly traditional in outlook, and by and large accepted the restricted definition of women's citizenship. Although both groups fulfilled an important educational and social function for women, their political activities were modest and were mainly focused on improving the lot of the Irish housewife.

PUBLIC IDENTITY AND WOMEN, 1970S AND AFTER

During the 1970s pressure for changes in legislation and other aspects of public policy began to emerge from three main sources - the judiciary, the European Community, and the feminist movement. It is interesting to note that these agencies were more important catalysts in the initiation of change in the status of women than politicians or parliament. In particular, the re-emergence of the women's movement in the early 1970s prompted a public discussion of gender-based discrimination in law and public policy. The desire for a new kind of political society which included rather than excluded women encouraged feminists to organise within the political structures along with keeping the character of social movement politics. The two government-sponsored Commissions on the Status of Women, which published reports in 1972 and 1992, provided a basic agenda for a removal of gender discrimination in public policies.

However, attitudes towards the nature of women's citizenship were slow to change. Surveys seeking to measure public attitudes on women's social roles indicated that there were conflicting ideas among the public on women's participation in the polity. In an early survey of social attitudes, King (1976) found that a substantial number of married men, single men and single women held negative views about married women working outside the home. This points to the persistence of conservative views which were earlier noted in the report of the Commission on the Status of Women in 1972. The public policy consequence of a persistence of these attitudes was, according to this report (1972, p.13):

to leave untouched a larger and more subtle area of discrimination consisting of those factors which limit women's participation, even in the absence of formal discrimination, that is, the stereotyped role that is assigned to women, the inculcation of attitudes in both boys and girls in their formative years that there are definite and separate roles for the

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sexes and that a woman's life pattern must be predominantly home-centred while the man's life pattern will be predominantly centred on employment.

Fifteen years later, a survey on attitudes towards the role and status of women in Ireland commissioned by the parliamentary committee on women's rights (JCWR 1988) indicated a growing espousal of egalitarian beliefs among the Irish population. This was illustrated by a liberalization of public views on the participation of mothers in the workforce. It was modified, though, by the expectation that women would carry the burden of home duties as well. The research suggests, then, that by the 1980s, although Irish attitudes towards equality issues had changed to reflect a modestly liberal position, there was little evidence of a shift in the traditional thinking on women's role within the family.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the recurring theme in the analyses of the status of women in Irish society is that women's role was clearly predicated on traditional social attitudes reinforced by the ideology, institutions and structures of both the Roman Catholic Church and the State (O'Dowd 1987, pp.32-3). In the famous words of Benedict Anderson, nations are 'imagined communities'. Feminist imagination was repressed in the early years of the state in favour of a Catholic, nationalist male view. Since the 1970s, Smyth (1995, p.209) notes that, 'Irish women have been protesting their exclusion from the elite task of "imagining the nation"'. At one level, they have successfully imposed an alternative view of women's citizenship, have influenced many policy changes, and convinced political leaders of the need for an increase in women's levels of political representation. This political agenda has resulted in some interesting initiatives such as a government target of a minimum representation of 40% of men and women on State boards. Yet, at another level, women's citizenship in Ireland is still contested. The domestication of women is still institutionalised in the Constitution, the state definition of the family remains the traditional one in law (if not necessarily so in practice) and social attitudes remain ambivalent towards women working outside the home. Support for the traditional view of women's civic participation was presented in a speech by Finola Bruton, wife of the current Prime Minister John Bruton, on the occasion of the visit by Hillary Clinton to an assembly of women's organisations. Her suggestion that women should remain at home to rear their children was forcefully criticised by leading women politicians, yet

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loudly hailed in the media by the general public. A political campaigner, Nora Bennis, fought the European elections on a 'Women in the Home' platform and received considerable support. Given that there are more women at home than in employment outside the home in Ireland, Nora Bennis and Finola Bruton have obviously tapped into a constituency which feels marginalised and unrepresented in Irish public life. Nonetheless, the trend of this public discussion serves to illustrate the complexities of women's citizenship today. Two competing perspectives are juxtaposed - that women stay in the home and remove themselves from public participation for the good of their families and the betterment of society or instead engage in shaping the identity of the nation to the detriment of family life. This argument is indignantly countered by politically active women. In the meantime, the vast majority of Irish women balance family demands with part-time employment. An outing to the polling station is the extent of their political participation. The clear indications are of a conservative consensus in Irish society in which the male hegemony is undisturbed. For now, Irish men need not worry unduly about their dinners.

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March 1996