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IRISH WOMEN: ORGANISING FOR CHANGE

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INTRODUCTION: 'ENGENDER' AND SCOTTISH WOMEN

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Engender, the new women's research and campaigning group in Scotland, held its first Annual General Meeting and conference on the 19th February 1994 in Glasgow. It was addressed by Yvonne Galligan, campaigner, researcher and writer, from the Republic of Ireland, on the position of women in the Republic. Yvonne's address to the conference is reproduced here in **Scottish Affairs**.

Engender was launched as a membership organisation in February 1993 and since that time has attracted a membership of over 300 women. During the first year, the women in Engender have achieved a great deal. They have raised money through a variety of fundraising activities and campaigned for a Women's Committee in Glasgow District Council. Engender produces a Newsletter for members and published its first **Gender Audit** in 1993. The second **Gender Audit**, which includes key information and statistics on the position of women in Scottish society, will be available in April of this year. Local groups have been established in Glasgow and Edinburgh and they have organised public events including talks, social evenings and performances. Engender also works with other women's organisations in Scotland to raise the profile of issues of gender and equality. In conjunction with the University of Edinburgh, it has completed a Research Review of publications covering Equality Issues in Scotland. This project was funded by the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Research Report will be available later this year.

One of the objectives of the first AGM was to provide an opportunity for all members of Engender to come together and to discuss the aims of the

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organisation and strategies for change. In conducting an exercise of this kind, it is important to learn from the experience of others. That was why Yvonne Galligan was invited to speak.

In listening to Yvonne, the differences and parallels in the experience of women in the Republic of Ireland and Scotland soon emerged. Unlike Scotland, Ireland is a free state, has a written constitution, has proportional representation and holds referenda on key issues. Yvonne outlines how these constitutional and electoral differences have provided Irish women with both barriers and opportunities for change at different times. Where the experience of Irish and Scottish women is very similar, however, is in relation to a political culture which is hostile to women and where women are poorly represented in Parliament (although the representation rate of Irish women is almost double that of Scottish women). In addition, in both countries, women have had to campaign strongly for legal rights, anti-discrimination laws, equal pay and conditions, and educational opportunities.

Yvonne records how the energies of women in Ireland have been harnessed to bring about real change for women, and how women both inside and outside formal political structures have coalesced in their campaigns. Given that, in many respects, Ireland is often portrayed as a country in which women are particularly disadvantaged, in terms of access to contraception, abortion and divorce, the many gains made by Irish women may come as a surprise to some readers. Not only does Ireland have a woman President, Mary Robinson, who as Yvonne states is clearly committed to the cause of women, it has a Council for the Status of Women which has achieved many successes. In the run-up to the 1989 general election, the Council used the political opportunity to secure the commitment of all political parties to the establishment of a Second Commission on the Status of Women. Their impressive Report, which was published in 1993, has already had an impact on the new coalition government. A Ministry for Equality and Law Reform has been established, there are provisions to gender-proof all proposed legislation and to monitor the implementation of the recommendations made by the Second Commission, and more legislation to improve women's rights is proposed, including an Equal Status Bill.

Women in Ireland have demanded and achieved change by using the political system, and they have done so without sacrificing the autonomy and radicalism of the women's movement. The social and political climate for women in Ireland is now a much more positive one, largely as the result of the energies of many committed women.

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After listening to Yvonne's address, those women present began to discuss the possibilities for women of constitutional and electoral reform and a more woman-friendly Parliament in Scotland. The potential for real change in Scotland for Scottish women was appreciated, although the need to keep up the demands for change within the present system was reinforced. The lessons from Ireland are encouraging.

ADDRESS TO ENGENDER CONFERENCE ***YVONNE GALLIGAN***

When we think of women in Ireland our picture is one of a majority of the population (52 per cent) who:

- have few legal rights, particularly in marriage;
- live in a society dominated by a conservative and authoritarian Roman Catholic ethos;
- live in a political environment which is distinctly unfriendly to women (unless, for electoral purposes, you are the widow or daughter of a former parliamentarian);
- live in the shadow of a constitution which clearly defines women's home-centred role;
- and are denied, by the law of the land, some basic rights such as divorce and abortion, and, in the past, contraception.

But, over the last twenty or twenty-five years, Irish women have come together - at different times, over different issues and in different circumstances - and have demanded, and *got* change. And, while we still have no divorce, while the abortion question is an incredibly sensitive matter and while the constitution still says that 'by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved', the political, legal and social structures have *had* to take women and women-centred agendas on board. So now, in 1994, we have:

- a woman President who is clearly committed to the cause of women and who uses her office to reaffirm this in a symbolic way;
- some substantial legislation recognising the rights of married women as individuals;

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- a range of legislation which goes some distance towards recognising women's right to sexual autonomy;
- general acceptance of anti-discrimination laws in employment;
- and 28 of the 226 parliamentarians (12.4 per cent) and 5 of the 15 government ministers (33.3 per cent) are women.

These are concrete examples of something which has happened at a deeper level in twenty-five years, in one generation. There has been a huge psychological shift in the perception of women - initially in how women saw themselves and then by society at large because, I would argue, of the voices of women. I would like to share with you my experience and my observations on how these changes came about. Throughout, you will notice a pattern being repeated again and again - how women with a reforming agenda have engaged with the political process, have rolled up their sleeves and got stuck into lobbying work, and have refused to go away until legislators listened, learned and, finally, delivered what women wanted. And, while there is a constant debate within women's organisations on the perils of co-option, of becoming part of the establishment, in Ireland if you want to bring about change, you play the political game.

A MODEST REFORMING AGENDA: THE 1970S

Playing the political game was something that Irish women, feminists and non-feminists alike, learned early on. Irish women have worked parallel with one another, inside and outside the political structures, advancing similar causes. This two-track pattern appeared around 1970, when two things happened.

First, traditional women's organisations had joined together in lobbying for a government-established Commission to investigate the status of women in Ireland. They got this in 1970. It delivered a report to government in 1972 which recommended extensive legal, social political and employment-related reforms. This agenda was accepted by the government and acted upon over the following eight years.

Second, a new phase of the women's movement emerged with its demands for:

- one family, one house;
- equal rights in law;

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- equal pay and the removal of the marriage bar on women's employment in the public service;
- justice for widows, deserted wives and unmarried mothers;
- equal educational opportunities;
- and access to contraception.

As a social phenomenon, the women's movement energised women - not all women, but a critical number. It also politicised them, and it fed into the work of traditional women's groups, shaping their views and broadening their awareness. The Irish women's liberation movement adopted the usual social movement range of strategies - media-catching protests, experiments with alternative lifestyles, and producing controversial personalities.

There were a lot of tensions within the movement, however, and inevitably, it split. One section developed a radical feminist identity. The remainder focused on single issues and self-help groups. Many of these organisations began to learn how to use the political system to bring about change. There were groups such as CHERISH (a single mothers self-help group), AIM (family law reform), ADAPT (for separated women), Women's Aid, the Women's Political Association and later the Rape Crisis Centres.

Alongside these, there was the Council for the Status of Women, which, in the mid-1970s, began to embrace the feminist-founded groups while still keeping the membership of the traditional women's organisations. By the end of the 1970s, the Council for the Status of Women was recognised by government as an umbrella group representing the voices of Irish women, and was receiving funding from government for their activities.

So throughout the 1970s there were women - from the women's movement and from traditional organisations - looking for changes in the status of women. There were also some individuals within the political system looking for change and there were women taking cases to court in order to establish rights. This historical aspect of women's political activity is significant. From this period of feminist politicisation there emerged women who were to become parliamentarians in the 1980s and push a feminist agenda from *within* the political structures.

Over the 1970s there was some progress, based largely on a modest reforming agenda, which was all that the political parties and government would accept:

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- women were given some property, inheritance and protection rights within marriage;
- social welfare benefits directed at women as single parents and their children were introduced;
- equal pay and anti-discrimination measures were adopted on EEC insistence;
- and contraception for married couples was provided for in legislation.

Also, by 1977, politicians were discovering the 'women's vote' and, consequently, the need to woo the women members of the electorate.

So you can see the 1970s as a period when, as a result of women's activism, there were legislative reforms which usually centred around the role of women in a family context. But, while there was a general acceptance of reforms, there were no significant shifts in the social perceptions of women's role.

LOCAL ORGANISATION: THE 1980S

The 1980s, however, ushered in a very different and more complex period. I see it as the time when the theme of reform shifted from woman as mother and wife to one of woman as woman - to a demand for recognition of individual rights. This, of course, generated a high level of social and political upheaval. Why? Irish society and politics were not used to the notion that adult women had or should have an identity above, beyond and independent of home and family. This hiatus took place in the context of a general political instability which saw five governments' being formed in eight years and a severe economic recession.

Within the system, political commitment to women's issues was shown in the setting up of a parliamentary committee on women's rights and the creation of a junior Ministry for Women's Affairs headed by a campaigning feminist, Nuala Fennell. She introduced some significant pieces of legislation such as the Married Women's Domicile Act, 1986, which gave a married woman the legal right to have a home independent of that of her spouse. She also introduced an equal opportunity programme in the civil service and commissioned a review on the status of women carried out by a study group drawn from the departments of the State.

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But her achievements, all done with a minimal budget, were overshadowed by the two major political debates on the status of women in the 1980s - abortion (1983) and divorce (1986). Both debates saw a coalition of feminists and reformists being roundly defeated in two divisive referenda by a 2:1 majority on each occasion. The political parties all but ran away from both issues, leaving the organised forces of conservatism and reform openly challenging one another.

So the 1980s were a low point for feminist morale. Women began to look away from national politics and towards their local areas. Slowly, a different movement emerged, this time based on local groups and in local communities. These women were not looking for change led by the national women's organisations. Instead, they developed self-help, awareness, social, educational and community-based initiatives. Of course the lobbying at national level went on as before. But at grass-roots there was a new awakening, a new assertion of identity which was not exclusively centred on the urban middle class. And through this self-empowerment came a more critical appraisal by women of politics and politicians in Ireland.

A FEMINIST AGENDA: THE 1990S

By the late 1980s, Irish women had changed their view of themselves and of politics. This was one of the chords which Mary Robinson touched in her Presidential campaign which took her to all parts of the country. And it was an awareness which, it could be argued, assisted in her election as President in November 1990. This signalled two changes:

- it marked the new self-confidence of women;
- political parties had to adopt a deeper feminist agenda than the substantially tokenist one they had previously held.

Around the same time, organised feminists, particularly the Council for the Status of Women, were becoming quite sophisticated in the tactics of political pressure. The Council had identified the weeks prior to an election as a time when politicians and parties were particularly sensitive to group demands. So, just before the 1989 election, the Council succeeded in getting a commitment from all parties to establish a Second Commission on the Status of Women. This was duly set up under the Fianna Fail and Progressive Democrat coalition government, and the Commission issued its report in 1993.

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This report, which recommends extensive public policy reforms in all aspects of women's lives, has been adopted by the present coalition government of Fianna Fail and Labour. Indeed, the inclusion of gender equality as part of the agenda of social reform was a clear characteristic of the political debate before and after the 1992 general election. The final programme for government agreed between the two parties gave considerable attention to equality issues, and provided for the establishment of a full Ministry for Equality and Law Reform. This Department is headed by a senior political figure from the Labour Party, Mervyn Taylor.

Working within the institutions has, for the time being, paid dividends for women wishing to bring about change. They were assisted by two developments - the general shift in society towards the holding of more egalitarian attitudes on women's role, and the public and political focus on constitutional issues centring on women's rights. While the change in public attitudes towards women took place over a decade, the debate on the status of women was thrown into sharp relief in 1992. The vehicle was the political discussion on a new Europe and specifically the Maastricht Treaty. The Maastricht debate (which required a referendum) aired the problem of the law criminalizing women who sought and gave information on pregnancy options. This debate almost overshadowed the public discussion on the political and economic implications of a more unified Europe. Further impetus was added to this debate when a Supreme Court judgement lifted the restriction on a young teenage girl, known as X, from travelling to the UK for an abortion. She had, it was claimed, become pregnant as a result of rape. Later in 1992, a constitutional referendum was placed before the people in order to enable the citizens to decide public policy on abortion, travel and information.

Women, as individuals and groups, coalesced to campaign on the second abortion referendum to be held in ten years. This time they had the tide of public opinion with them on removing the restrictions on travel and information. These issues were carried by 2:1 majorities. The result on the abortion question, which sought to make abortion unlawful except to save the life of the mother, was more complex. The government proposal was defeated, and the result was seen as a victory by both progressive and conservative forces alike.

By the time the coalition government was formed in early 1993, some key issues regarding women's sexual autonomy had been widely debated. The situation at the moment is as follows:

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- the women's movement has again become diffuse
- the Council for the Status of Women and women's reform groups are enjoying a wave of political credibility
- and the government are pursuing a reform agenda.

To date, the government have adopted a proposal put forward by the Second Commission on the Status of Women to 'gender-proof' all legislative proposals. This means that the impact on women of proposed legislation must be assessed by the government minister introducing the changes. A monitoring committee to oversee the implementation of the report of the Second Commission is due to be established. Several pieces of legislation giving women more rights are due to be introduced. The most comprehensive of these is the Equal Status Bill which will seek to give women the same rights as men in obtaining credit facilities and in membership of sporting organisations.

The pattern, then, is of women organised and now well established, gaining a voice within the political structures. Currently the climate is a positive one, on the whole, for women in Ireland. However, the women's movement and women's organisations have come to a crossroads. They have succeeded in having the demands of the 1980s addressed by legislators in the 1990s. Women now have to define their agenda for the 1990s and beyond. They have to keep pushing the boundaries of the feminist agenda. One of the big challenges facing both organised women and the feminist movement is how to incorporate the demands of women who choose to be full-time homemakers. This is a huge group which feels marginalized by the activities and the profile of feminists. They are now demanding that their needs be addressed. This is part of the agenda for the 1990s. In looking forward, however, one must also look back on the previous two decades and value the achievements of strong and committed Irish women who have refused to take no for an answer.

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