

London Irish Women's Centre Report



June 1986

CONTENTS

Staff Biographies	PP 2-5
History and General Background	PP 5
Facilities at the Centre	PP 5
Need for the Centre	PP 6
Impact	PP 6
General Aims and Objectives of the Centre	PP 7
Welfare and Campaigns	PP 7
Childcare	PP 7-8
Classes and Courses	PP 9
Social and Cultural	PP 9-10
Future Plans	PP 10
Artistic Policy of the Centre	PP 10
Recording Our History	PP 10-11
1st London Irish Women's Conference	PP 11
2nd London Irish Women's Conference	PP 11,14
How the Centre is Run	PP 14-15
Access	PP 15
Women, Racism, and Imigration — a paper for discussion and debate	PP 17-19
Irish Women and Employment	PP 19-20
Funding History	PP 20-21
Accounts for 1984	PP 22
Accounts for 1985	PP 23
Accounts for 1986	PP 24

PUBLISHED BY THE LONDON IRISH WOMEN'S CENTRE

All photographs Joanne O'Brien with the following exceptions:

Cover photograph, London Irish Women's Centre photograph, photograph of Jean Byrne — Lynne Connolly

Childcare photograph, photograph of Imelda Redmond — Imelda Redmond

Photograph of Sheela-Na-Gig — Wendy Falconer

Artwork, Design and Typesetting by LASSO, 86-100 St Pancras Way, London NW1 telephone: 267 1284

Printing by Trojan Press, 25 Downham Road, London N1 telephone: 249 5771



Rae Dowds

The London Irish Women's Centre would like to thank, first of all, the women who formed the group at the start — namely: Brid Greally, Roisin Boyd, Margaret Walsh, Dorothy Fergus, Annie Campbell, Bay Leahy. Some of these women have returned to live in Ireland since. We would like to thank funding authorities — the GLC, Islington Council Women's Committee, Hackney Council, Greater London Arts, London Boroughs Grants Scheme. We would like to thank all those giving us advice at the moment in setting up the arts project — Lenthall Road workshops, Radio Thamesmead, Women in Sync, Women's Media Resources Project; the volunteers — Viv Acious, who has given us invaluable technical advice as well as performing innumerable other duties as a volunteer, and other women who have come to help in any way at any time over the past few years — and there have been countless occasions: all who have given advice and encouragement: women who have been involved in the centre in a supportive capacity, especially those involved in the subgroups.

Claire Keatinge, who whilst working as officer in the GLC has given us invaluable and endless advice in dealing with the tedious bureaucracy during the past three years.

Finally we would like to thank all women who use the centre.

Rae Dowds

I am a working class woman from a large Catholic family from Belfast. I originally came to England because there were no jobs or training opportunities for me at home. I was reluctant to come and I had no intention of staying for very long. That was nine years ago.

I became very actively involved in women's politics in England. I worked in Women's Aid refuges in the North East of England and



Brid Boland

then in London. I thoroughly support the work of Women's Aid and personally I gained a lot from working with women in refuges.

The male-dominated and sexist Irish community in London held no appeal for me and as a lesbian my only support at this time was from the English women's movement. However I became very dissatisfied with the English women's movement generally because of its domination by white, English, middle class women; it's denial of my experience as an Irish woman; and it's ignorance of the war in the North of Ireland and England's present and historical role in it. As a result I started searching out Irish women's groups and became more involved in Irish women's issues and politics.

I have now worked at the London Irish Women's Centre for 3 years. For 18 months I worked as a part time co-ordinator and this involved the initial campaigning work around the need for an Irish women's centre: securing funding for more workers, capital equipment and the building; buying the building and arranging for alterations to be done. This was a pressured but exciting and rewarding period for me — especially as my co-worker Brid was such a committed and skilled worker. We worked well together and we were lucky enough to have the support and direction of a small but enthusiastic and effective management group. Since January 1985, I have worked as a welfare/advice worker and the job of setting up the centre has continued along with welfare and campaigning work.

I have seen a lot of the projects we fought hard for over the last three years come to fruition in the last few months and this has been a source of great personal satisfaction to me. Socially, politically and culturally my involvement with the London Irish Women's Centre has been

very fruitful. I only hope we will secure funding for the future so that the centre can go from strength to strength and be a source of inspiration, opportunity and support for other Irish women as it has been for me.

Brid Boland

I grew up in a small farming community in South Sligo — a part of the country renowned for its traditional Irish music. My mother lived and died, one of Ireland's unrecognised women musicians. My background nurtured in me a love for Irish culture and music which has stayed with me ever since.

When I came to London first I knew nobody so I arranged to work as a volunteer in a therapeutic community in Kilburn. I spent a year there. For another year I worked as a cleaner — mostly cleaning for middle class English 'feminists' and paid £2 an hour — this was the extent of my involvement with the Women's Movement here. This was despite the fact that I had done very well academically in Ireland and had struggled to get into Higher Education. It seemed to make no difference.

Three years ago I got my first break when I became employed on a job share basis as a co-ordinator for the London Irish Women's Centre. For 18 months I shared this work with Rae Dowds. It was during these months that the future plans for the centre were devised and foundations were laid for what has now become a reality. The teamwork and trust I experienced working with Rae were of a very rare quality. Since January 1985 I have worked as an outreach/research worker. The work has been very challenging and has often involved work above and beyond my job description. Working at the centre has allowed me to use my creative ability for my own benefit as well as that of

all Irish women in London, and this has been a source of great pleasure. But nothing could have been achieved without the teamwork and without the support of a stable, committed and trustworthy management group, on whom the workers could always rely for sound advice and support.

Imelda Redmond

I was born in Dublin and, like thousands of others, my family emigrated to London when I was quite young. Throughout my childhood and adolescence my family was always involved in the Irish community in London.

As I got older I began to become involved in feminism and the feminist movement in London. During this time my Irish identity was forced very much to the background. The growth of the Irish women's movement in London has meant that I no longer have to choose between the two.

I have taught the Ceili Dancing class run by the London Irish Womens Centre in conjunction with Islington AEI for about 3 years. I have worked with children more or less for 10 years now in numerous different settings. Since February 1985 I have been employed as a full-time child worker. Though the job is very demanding and we often have to work to impossible deadlines it is rewarding to see how far we have all come in such a relatively short space of time.

Jean Cross

I'm from Dublin and lived there until September 1985. That's when I decided my lifestyle didn't so much need a change as an overhaul. I left school at 18 and have done a variety of jobs, from Purchasing Officer in a distributing company to domestic worker in an old folks home. In an effort to change the world in 1983 I gave up paid employment,



Imelda Redmond



Jean Cross

looked up 'charities' in the Yellow Pages and started voluntary work for the first one I found, Amnesty International. I was the Secretary of the National Executive Committee when I resigned in 1984, having become involved in the Socialist Workers Movement where I was on the Branch and Editorial Committees.

It was when I began to become very involved in the Women's Movement that I decided to move to London. As a lesbian I found it increasingly difficult to operate within the moral confines of Irish society and with no job prospect there was little to stay for, not that that made the break easy.

The London Irish Women's Centre was in the turmoil of moving when I arrived on the scene, but my timing wasn't totally off as I was asked to teach the soon to start History Class, an offer I readily accepted. That was January 1986 and soon after the official opening in February, I became a volunteer at the Centre, helping with administration and drop in sessions. Then in April I was appointed temporary Arts and Recreation worker.

For me the London Irish Women's Centre has offered the kind of opportunity that just is not available in Ireland. It has made a difficult transition easier, and put me in contact with many Irish women of common experience. It was largely because of the Centre that after six months in London, I knew my decision to leave Ireland was the right one. The future looks even brighter....

Eilish Dowds

I'm from Belfast and lived there until September 1981. My involvement in feminism began in Belfast with my work at the Women's Aid Office.

Once in London, I soon became frustrated and demoralised within the narrow white middle class dominated

structure of English feminism. I was drawn to the London Irish Women's Group over three years ago and since then I have gained an enormous amount both personally and politically.

The small group of women who I have worked with to bring the Centre together I regard as some of my closest friends. Politically the group and the Centre have provided me with a forum in which to discuss and develop my own ideas. I have been able to develop my skills, learn new ones and even pass some on to other women.

I have been a member of the Management Group for three years. Since I have been out of full-time employment over the last few months I have also been a volunteer at the Centre. Coping with the day to day running of the Centre has been hard work but enjoyable and stimulating too.

Now that the London Irish Women's Centre is here to stay, I hope no Irish women arriving in London will ever have to go through the same isolation and alienation that Irish women emigrants, including myself, have endured in the past.

Anne Gilmartin (Co. Armagh)

Ironically, it was around the time of the last referendum held in Ireland (The Abortion Referendum) that I started to search for other Irish women in London in order to be able to discuss this issue, and others of importance to Irish women.

I had been in London only a few months, after having spent several years working abroad and because I had few contacts and no job, I was finding London very heavy going. Even though I had come in search of a discussion group, before I knew where I was, I found myself sucked into a Management Committee for a future London Irish Women's Centre and the fun was only

beginning.

Jean Byrne (Co. Antrim)

I came to London in June 1978, the day after I finished my college course. I had no job and roughly £100 in cash.

My brother was working as a bar-man in Croydon and I had hoped I would be able to stay with him in his accommodation for a little while. I knew after one night that it wouldn't really be possible, so the next morning I took the train up to the West End, to look for a live-in job.

I didn't find anything that first day, so I found a place in a hostel in Notting Hill Gate. The fact that it was run by nuns and I was forced to share with three other girls did not make me feel any less isolated. I searched hard for a job and after a few days I was taken in by a hospital in Kings Cross as a domestic with live in accommodation in WC1.

I was desperately lonely. I hated the job and the few vague contacts from home which I had, were all men and all from the other side of town. I stuck it for as long as I could, which was about four months.

I moved into a council flat in Aldgate East having told my landlady that I was working. I thought, mistakenly, that I couldn't sign on without getting my landlady into trouble so I lived on the little savings which I had. I spent all day every day searching for a job.

I was still very, very lonely and frightened. There was a Salvation Army hostel on the street where I lived and it slowly dawned on me that it was full of Irish and Scottish down and outs. Some of them were very much older than me. I knew London fairly well and I wasn't without skills, but I was scared that I wouldn't survive.

Around one month after moving to Aldgate I got a job as an interviewer in an employment agency. It was a pretty dreadful job, but at least I didn't have to scrub any floor.

Since then in terms of employment and housing things have improved beyond all recognition. I am paying the same rent now as I was eight years ago in Aldgate East. I work as a housing advisor for Camden Council and part of my job is to advise and assist the single homeless.

I have been involved in the Irish Women's Centre Group for about three years. I came to it via the women's movement which at

the time seemed to begrudge any recognition of Irish women's experience. The contacts I've made through the Irish Women's Centre group have made a big impact on me and have enabled me to come to terms with my own experience of immigration. For a very long time I was too ashamed to talk about how difficult it had been. I felt that I would be blamed for not making proper arrangements. I suspected that people would think I was crazy because I never really considered leaving.

It has taken a number of years and a lot of confirmation from my sisters to enable me to admit how hard it was to arrive in London clueless, with inadequate money and no friends. I certainly couldn't do it again. I hope that the support offered by the London Irish Women's Centre will make it easier for the large numbers of Irish women who continue to arrive.

Dorothy Fergus

I was born near Bangor Erris, Co. Mayo, November 1959, youngest of nine, three brothers and five sisters. I went to the local National School, then to the Convent of Mercy Galway and University College Galway. Came to London in 1980. Worked in my time as care assistant, draughtproofer, building worker, bar attendant, street sweeper, wholefood co-op worker, creche worker. At present I am a residential social worker with Hackney Council. I have been a member of the London Irish Women's Centre since it began. Before that I was in the Irish Women's Abortion Support Group.

Ellen Reynolds

I was born in Preston in Lancashire in 1954. My mother came from Mayo and my father came from Leitrim, they had come to look for work.

Having been a member of one Irish group or another since childhood, from dancing classes, to Prestons Irish Club, to Troops Out (not all at once) news of the LIWC Group hit me like a bolt. It was just what I'd been wanting. The trouble was would they want me? Well, on a wet Sunday afternoon in February 1984 I put my best foot forward, took the bull by the horns and attended a LIWC Conference planning group meeting. By the second meeting I was edged by a ten minutes silence into volunteering



Eilish Dowds



Anne Gilmartin



Sabina Sharkey

to chair. I liked the women and felt welcomed and quite at home.

Everyone worked like Trojans to make the first conference, 'Irish Women and Immigration', the success it was. I remember there was a shortage of drivers and transport. After several frantic, pleading phone calls we ended up the day before the conference with four buses and only two drivers, myself and Imelda, with instructions to drive to 20 different places at the same time. With the heat, the panic and the rush the lb's were flying off me. Oh but it was great fun. (I think.)

I sort of thought that was the end of it. No such luck. Transcripts from the tape had to be made and a conference booklet produced and the evening meetings carried on relentlessly. The miles between my home in Twickenham and Cromer Street seemed to grow with the length of the meetings. I moved.

Things started to hot up on the premises. After a very disheartening trawl throughout London and numerous visits to disused clubhouses and empty shops, the workers found Stoke Newington Church Street and £65,000. At the same time more money was found for staffing and management became responsible for three full time workers — a responsibility we did not view lightly.

A second conference was held with over 20 workshops and the usual round of fund raising events, e.g. for the Dunne Stores strikers, continued. Every weekend there seemed to be some national, London or local meeting to which we had to ship off a representative from the LIWC. We took it in turns.

As the day of the Grand Opening came nearer, I fancied myself as the graphics whizz kid. Fortunately Olga wanted to do posters too so we were both let loose. Then it was two weeks

before opening — no carpet down, no paintwork, nowhere to sit and the workers shattered and still working.

On the eve of the opening I went to the centre and was amazed. You can make a silk purse from a sow's ear. We had our own place at last and it looked really good.

The 1st February arrived and we were still rushing round. Would anyone come? Maybe there's a bus strike! Pity it's raining. At times like this the best thing to do is to sit down, take a deep breath and panic slowly.

By 2pm about 150 women were trying to squash into a room meant for 40. Perhaps we needed a bigger building, I thought. But after 5 years of sheer drudgery involving many women I thought I'd leave that little suggestion for someone else.

We had a great day. A confetti of champagne corks knocked us out (heavy confetti). I was happy, even merry, certainly gay.

So we have the centre, we have the workers (just about) and we have the interest. Through the open meetings and the AGM there are likely to be many changes. New faces on management, perhaps new workers, old faces shying away to make room. I have enjoyed very much being part of the LIWC and I would end by congratulating the workers and the many women I have never met who did the very early work five years ago which first set the centre in motion.

Sabina Sharkey

I'm from Donegal. I lived in Dublin for about four years, and now to my surprise, I've lived in London for another four, although I came for the weekend!

After my first year I got fed up with having only snatches of conversation with other Irish women on a bus or in a queue, and thought I'd try out the LIWC meetings I'd seen advertised. Either we'd all get to finish our sentences, or I'd clam up entirely because they'd be Superfeminists.

Well, there were no bludgeoners but rather a group of women who wanted a fair share of resources, including a centre, for all of us, and who were quite prepared to put the work into it. There were also two women, Brid and Rae, sharing one job and working harder than I'd ever seen before, and running an office-based Irish Women's Centre right then! I was hooked, this was a lot more than I'd imagined anybody/

bodies trying to do, but if they were going to do it, then I wanted to be involved. So much for bus queues.

We all worked on grant applications, on Councillors, on politicians, on people within and outside the Irish Community who needed to be reminded that Irish women were there, were not to be dismissed as a silent 52%, or as the joke within the Irish joke. We also organised Conferences, Ceilidhs, children's events and courses. We went to speak where we were invited and sometimes where we weren't but should have been.

It all seemed, and seems, worth it, and it feels great to have our own Centre, which Irish women, young and old, disabled, able-bodied, with children, lesbian and heterosexual, can call our own.

And we made friends, and had a laugh; we fought those who were giving us trouble rather than each other, and we're still trying to change the world to suit ourselves, and why not?

Margaret Walsh

My name is Margaret Walsh. I come from a working class housing estate near Dun Laoighaire, Co. Dublin. I have lived in London since the Spring of 1975.

My first introduction to politics of any sort was when I found a discarded copy of 'Spare Rib' in Regents Park in 1976. It was like manna from heaven. Through this I joined the Harringay Women's group who were at that time involved in getting the Harringay Women's centre off the ground. I remained involved with the Harringay women's group for some years. I learned a lot and enjoyed my time there but found the British Women's Movement at the time was predominantly middle class and as such had little relevance to the experiences of Irish and other foreign women. They meant well but seemed unaware of their own racism and were dismissive of cultures other than their own. Because of this I felt the need to join an Irish women's group which would offer a sense of shared experience.

Isolated Irish women's groups did exist at that time but were very difficult to find. Through word of mouth I became involved in the Women and Ireland Group, and later the Irish Women's Discussion Group and the Irish Women's Abortion Support Group.

It became apparent to many

Irish women that there was a great need for an Irish Women's centre. We needed "a room of our own", to meet, advertise and record our activities: a safe place where Irish women could find each other and share in our common culture, both socially and politically.

A group of us got together and applied for funding from the GLC which we got and finally in 1986 the London Irish Women's Centre opened its doors eleven years after my first arrival in the "Big Smoke".

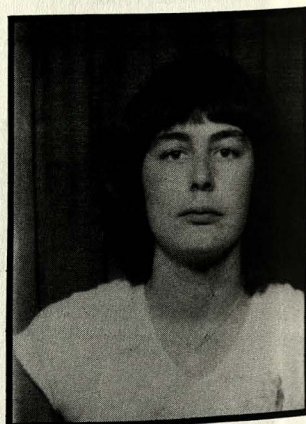
It seems a great pity that future funding is uncertain. As well as its other functions the centre provides a much needed service of advice on housing and welfare rights etc to immigrant Irish women arriving in London daily.

Viv Acious

I initially became involved with the Irish Women's Centre Group at social events when I was asked by Brid to provide PA equipment and be sound engineer for the live music, as well as doing the occasional disco. Before the Centre Opening, I was asked in to give advice about sound equipment with regard to both PA and the radio recording studio.

Then came the Open Day — and the clearing up the following day which took ages — 'twas then that I realised (was I really coerced?) that I had a flare for helping out when needed (= volunteer). My efforts were praised and appreciated and my ego flattered and that was it! I was enchanted with the centre and its workers and have not looked back since!

Seriously though, I became a volunteer when I realised the tremendous effort, thought and vision that had gone into setting up the London Irish Women's



Margaret Walsh

Centre. I totally admire and respect the small group of women whose commitment and never-ending work has made an idea a reality — a centre for Irish women where we can meet, learn and share skills, communicate, record our history, give and receive advice and possibilities — thank you to these women.

I began helping with the tremendous workload of the day to day running of the Centre, as

well as advising on technical points — especially the P.A. equipment and running the workshops, helping with the newsletter and all the other odds and sods which crop up.

It's fun being a 'Volly' as we're affectionately called — you too could have endless amounts of fun as well as hard work in this friendly environment — jobs are varied and can be what you make of them — join now!!

History and general background

The London Irish Women's Centre took its inspiration and impetus from Irish women's groups that had been in existence before it — groups such as The Irish Women's Abortion Support Group, The London Armagh Group and The Women and Ireland groups. Our work is a continuation, a development and an expansion of the work of these groups. Discussions about setting up a centre first began back in 1981. Camden and Islington Councils were approached initially for funding. Finally funding was first obtained in 1983 when the GLC Women's Committee gave the group a grant to fund one worker and some running expenses for a year. A jobshare (Rae Dowds and Brid Boland) was appointed to start the development work. Fundraising began for a building and future plans were laid. A building was finally purchased in December 1984 after a year's search — finding a suitable building was a difficult task and we met with all the innumerable problems one often does when getting into the business of buying property. The repair of the building was complete one year later (December 1985). Three workers were employed in January 1985 and the centre was finally opened on 1st February 1986. Our priority was to get the building open before the GLC would be finally abolished.

Although we knew at the time that the GLC was due for abolition, it was a political decision to go ahead and set up a place for Irish women which would be here for ever more — no matter what — a base where Irish women could work from even if we had nothing else. This would ensure that we could never again

be overlooked or ignored. It was also a political decision to take as high a profile as possible in London's community in order to raise the profile of Irish women generally. So whilst the plans were to have a local women's centre, the centre would also be a base for political and cultural activity for Irish women all over London — and indeed further afield.

At the time that the centre received funding the Irish community was becoming increasingly active in London. The GLC was in the process of holding consultative conferences with the Irish community in order to see what needs were not being met and how to best serve these needs. A couple of these conferences had been held — no women had been invited and the structure and content of these meetings and conferences completely ignored the needs and aspirations of Irish women, our contribution to social, cultural or political life either here or in Ireland. The London Irish Women's Centre pushed that women delegates be included in the February 1984 Consultative Conference with the Irish community. Twenty eight women came forth and presented 5 papers to the conference. Sixteen resolutions were passed. This conference was a turning point for Irish women. A few months later the first Irish women's conference was held. In 1985 we had another and the likelihood is that these will now become an annual celebratory event for Irish women in London. In the past few years it can safely be said that an Irish Women's Movement has evolved. That is not to say that Irish women were not active before — groups were

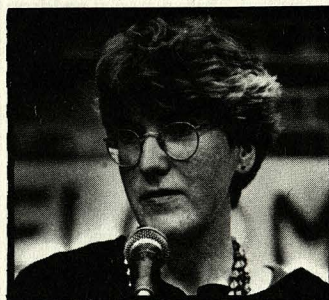
working very hard and achieving a tremendous amount — but there had been no co-ordination of this work. Now there are up to 20 Irish women's groups in the London area. The centre supports the work of these groups, which ranges from anti-imperialist struggles, to abortion issues, to anti-racism. Many as well are local discussion groups.

Three groups have come directly out of the centre: The Irish Community Radio Group, now known as Glór Gael and now operating from Irish Women in Islington Project; an Irish Women's Mental Health Group (set up in conjunction with Islington Women and Mental Health); and an all-women Ceili Band, called Sheela-na-gig.

As Irish women it is up to each and every one of us to ensure that what happened in the past will not

happen again. Many of us must wonder what the report from the 1985 Irish Women's Conference would have been like in the Irish Post if women had had control over what was reported on. The Community Radio campaign and the Irish Radio Group in particular afford us the opportunity to make sure in future we are not discriminated against in the Irish media as well as the mainstream British media.

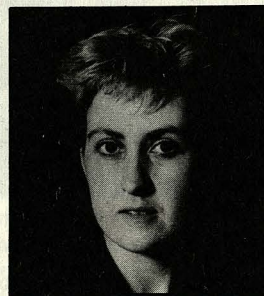
The Mental Health Group is in the process of publishing a pamphlet on the needs of Irish women in the Psychiatric Health Service. The formation of a ceili band raises the profile of women in Irish music. It promotes a positive image of women in Irish culture and helps to counteract the cultural imperialism that takes place here in the schools and mass media.



Dorothy Fergus



Jean Byrne



Viv Acious



Ellen Reynolds

Facilities at the centre

Brief synopsis: meeting rooms, creche, library (book/music), arts resource section with facilities and training in radio, video, PA, sound recording, darkroom, paste up, duplicating and photocopying, information and advice giving service, emergency counselling, referral service, classes in Irish language, dancing, music, history, literature and drama, various one off courses, e.g. fresh start course, assertiveness training, voice workshops etc., a newsletter which is produced now by a

newsletter group every six weeks, various cultural events. The centre sees the recording of Irish women's history as a vital part of our work. The positive steps we have taken in this regard include: publishing two pamphlets with papers and reports from three conferences, recording of various smaller events and the compilation of an exhibition on Irish women. Experience has shown that unless we record our own history it will be overlooked/misrepresented as it has been in the past.

Need for the centre

Irish women, who number up to half a million in the Greater London area, have always made a vital contribution to London, many of them providing the essential services, e.g. nurses, cleaners, caterers, teachers etc., but their specific needs and problems had never been identified or met. The work of the London Irish Women's Centre is based on identifying and meeting these needs.

The cultural differences between Ireland and England are immense. Many Irish women are forced to emigrate because of the lack of employment, the political situation particularly in the North

various voluntary and statutory organisations. Women make up the larger proportions of all the most vulnerable groups with social problems, single parents, single immigrant workers, alcoholics, mentally ill. The London Irish Women's Centre is the only organisation in the Greater London area that specifically caters for the needs of Irish women in the Greater London area.

The existing Irish community and cultural organisations are dominated by men. Not only are Irish women's needs not adequately met by these organisations, many needs are not



of Ireland, the social position of women in Ireland which makes life difficult, for example for single women, lesbians and single mothers. When they arrive in London they are faced with culture shock, alienation and anti-Irish racism: many have no knowledge of the English legal, welfare and health systems (this is often not understood by many advice workers), so they cannot exercise their full rights.

Like other ethnic minorities in London, the Irish tend to live in the inner urban areas of worst housing conditions, have the lowest paid jobs and are hardest hit by unemployment. Research shows that in proportion to their numbers in the population, the Irish are over represented in the numbers of people with social problems and under represented in the numbers of staff employed to deal with these problems in the

met at all, e.g. advice on abortion, contraception, employment opportunities for women, the needs of lesbians, and support for Irish women's groups to organise autonomously.

The group considers Irish lesbians as a particularly disadvantaged section of the Irish community, often forced to hide their sexual identity and are discriminated against, e.g. employment, legislation. Many have come here to escape repressive attitudes and legislation in Ireland, hoping to live in a more free or at worst more anonymous way. Because of the lack of recognition in the wider Irish community, many had been forced to shed their Irish identity and assimilate into English society to find support within the English Feminist Movement. Since the LIWC has received funding, this is no longer

necessary. As part of our general aim to counter discrimination against Irish women, we are, and will continue to be, campaigning in particular for the existence and experience of Irish lesbians to be recognised and for an end to discrimination against lesbians both within the Irish community and in the wider London community.

We also recognise that disabled women are another particularly disadvantaged group who face discrimination especially in employment and educational opportunities and we are committed to campaigning against this discrimination and attempting to open up opportunities in these fields for disabled women ourselves, e.g. by ensuring that they are not excluded from events, classes, courses etc. we have.

A large proportion of Irish women in London are elderly (more than 30,000 are over the age of 60). They are vulnerable

because they are often poor, housebound, infirm, and isolated. We want the centre to serve the needs of elderly Irish women. We will continue to encourage Irish pensioners to make full use of the centre and our mini-bus is used very regularly by pensioners groups. We hope the involvement of Irish women pensioners in the centre will continue to grow.

We recognise the discrimination black and other ethnic minority women face and support them in their struggles. We have developed links with these groups in the past and will continue to do so in the future. We are encouraging Irish women to confront their own internalised anti-Irish racism and racism towards black and ethnic minority groups by supporting the formation of groups to explore issues such as these and by stressing the importance of establishing alliances.

Impact

Always, afterwards it is easier to look back and assess the impact of an organisation such as The London Irish Women's Centre — it's difficult when one is right in the middle of an ongoing process. It does seem that it has had some impact on the Irish community — Irish women are now asked to speak at conferences on issues affecting women and the centre has taken on a lot of this work over the past few years. Issues to do with women can no longer be easily ignored, but at the same time the mistakes are being repeated again. For instance research that is being done to date on the Irish community has not included a women's perspective — not enough effort has been made to redress the imbalance of the past. Far from having the desired effect — where attitudes in the general Irish community would have changed towards incorporating a woman's perspective — the fact that we are here means that we are expected to take on the responsibility not only for representing Irish women but meeting their many and varied needs. The work of the London Irish Women's Centre over the years has succeeded in raising the profile and confidence of Irish women and this is apparent at a local level in some

Irish organisations where women are asserting their rights.

Because we are fully committed to women's rights our support of lesbian and abortion rights has often evoked hostility from the general Irish community.

Equally the work of the centre has had an impact on the Women's Movement here. The centre grew out of a need for Irish women to organise autonomously within a movement dominated by white middle-class English women, which by its nature excluded black and ethnic minorities and indeed working class women. The centre has always considered it a vital part of its work to establish alliances with, and work together in mutual support on common struggles with black and other ethnic minority women. For the past two years the centre has had an elected representative, Sabina Sharkey, as a voting member representing Irish women on the Black and Ethnic Minority Panel of the GLC Women's Committee. This has had major implications not only in practical ways such as forging alliances with women from other communities, but also in deciding policies made by the Women's Committee which would affect Irish women.

General aims and objectives of the centre

Our aims and objectives have been developed to counter the discrimination Irish women in London face as a result of their nationality and sex.

- (1) To provide a centre, a women-only space where women feel comfortable and relaxed and use as a drop-in centre.
- (2) To give help support and information on a range of subjects such as abortion, contraception and legal rights, to individual women living in London.
- (3) We are a campaigning group focussing on issues of welfare, health and legal rights, with a view to promoting the interest of Irish women in London.
- (4) To build up a library and information bank to be used by individual women and groups, enabling them to carry out the much-needed research into the experiences and needs of Irish women.
- (5) To initiate and carry out research ourselves in this area.
- (6) To establish the centre as a recreational and cultural focal point.
- (7) To stock Irish books and records, musical instruments etc. not easily available outside of Ireland.
- (8) That Irish women's groups would be encouraged to form all over London and the centre used as a base for this network of groups.
- (9) That the centre cater for the needs of Irish women who are doubly or triply discriminated against and particularly vulnerable, e.g. women with children, disabled women, elderly women, lesbians. To provide adequate childminding facilities and ensure that at least part of the centre is wheelchair accessible with toilet.
- (10) To cater for the needs of Irish children.

Welfare and campaigns

Apart from campaigns for funds to establish the centre, the group has always been involved in campaigns on issues of concern to Irish women, e.g. the first of these being the anti-amendment campaign during 1982/3. Since then the centre has been involved in a whole range of campaigns at many different levels and degrees

of involvement. The Irish women's conferences have served to launch new campaigns and many new groups working around different issues. The centre supports the work of other Irish women's groups and women's groups generally working on such issues as: a women's right to choose,



Maire O'Shea was one of the speakers at the second Irish Women's Conference, who was a victim of the Prevention of Terrorism Act at the time. Following a massive year long campaign, she was finally cleared of charges early in 1986. The centre took an active part in the campaign.

abortion, health, strip searching and other anti-imperialist campaigns. We have supported and been involved in other campaigns as well, such as: community radio, Repeal the PTA, Withdrawal of Troops from Ireland, Anti-Apartheid, Health, Campaigns against Cuts in Social Security, NHS and Education, and anti-racist campaigns.

The centre has provided an information giving, referral and advice service to women who have come for help over the past few years. During this time it became apparent that by far the biggest welfare problem confronting the centre was that of homelessness amongst Irish women. Much work was done establishing contacts with women's organisations working in the areas of housing, e.g. GAP House, Homeless Action. The problem is particularly difficult for those who have just arrived in this country. The present shortage in London's housing stock has made the job of trying to help single women find a decent place to live a very difficult if not practically impossible task, and workers at the centre are painfully aware of the inadequacy of referring women to hostels throughout London.

Last year the centre lodged an application with the London Borough Grants Scheme for capital and revenue costs to set up six houses which could be used as places where women could live temporarily whilst finding their feet in a strange city. We are still awaiting the decision on this. A meeting on Irish women and housing is planned for July and it is hoped that this will become a campaigning group exerting

pressure on local authorities etc. to cater for the housing needs of Irish women.

Because of the proposed dismantling of the Psychiatric Health Service, the closure of large psychiatric hospitals with the simultaneous expectation that women will take on this extra burden of caring in the community, the centre became concerned about the effects this would have on the lives of Irish women. In 1985 we set up, in conjunction with Brid Grealley from Islington Women and Mental Health Project, a discussion group around this issue. The group has continued to meet over the past year and is in the process of publishing a pamphlet which points out the particular needs and experiences of Irish women. We hope the pamphlet will be ready by the autumn.

According to research, the Irish community is high on the list among those who use the psychiatric health service. But any research which has been done in the past has totally ignored women. This is another area in which there is an urgent need for research to be done. Some meetings have already taken place with Mind Black and Ethnic Minority Working group on this. In the future we hope to follow up these initiatives.

In the meantime the centre has given some small financial support to Islington Women and Mental Health Project to enable it to publish a booklet on 'Women and Depression' — because more than 75% of the women who use the services of the project are Irish.

Childcare

The London Irish Women's Centre has always had a commitment to children as fundamental to its philosophy.

Much of the ground work has been done and is still being done in identifying what the needs of Irish children are.

There are really two issues here. Firstly, there are the children who have been born and spent their early days in Ireland before their family emigrated to England. Not only do these children have to cope with the traumas of adapting to a strange, new environment, but they also often have to cope with hostility

and rejection from other children, adults and teachers.

Secondly, there are the children who are born and brought up here of Irish parents. Because most schools do not recognise that Irish children even exist, let alone come from a very different cultural background, the children are often forced into a situation where they are Irish at home and 'English' once they step outside. Irish children, like Irish women, also have to contend with a barrage of anti-Irish racism both institutionalised e.g. through the education system and socially, through jokes, stereotypes etc.

At the London Irish Women's Centre we aim to counteract some of this discrimination and to give children a positive image of what it means to be Irish.

A vast wealth of talent exists amongst Irish children generally; so many of them are accomplished dancers and musicians, though this is rarely recognised and often schools are critical of the fact that they 'waste their time on it', (a very different attitude to an English child who might be good at ballet).

The types of activities that are either currently going on or are planned for the near future are varied. We hope to cover all age groups.

At present we run a very successful Baby and Toddler group. This is held two mornings per week, Tuesdays and Thursdays. These are drop-in sessions and all Irish women are welcome to use them. The sessions cater for children from 0-5 years. On Thursdays we all stay around after the group and have lunch together; this enables us to chat, swap ideas, stories and information.

During the summer we intend to run a week-long festival for Irish children between the ages of 5-11. We hope this will be a celebration of our culture and also for many children an introduction and an insight into many aspects of our culture that they didn't know existed. The Childcare Sub-Group of the London Irish Women's Centre is also planning an 'Open Day' during the summer where children from different play schemes, not necessarily Irish, can participate in workshops on such things as Irish music, dancing, cookery and sport. Through this we hope to counteract some of the stereotypes that children are taught about the Irish and so lead to a greater understanding and

hopefully make life a little easier for Irish children.

The London Irish Women's Centre is concerned about the plight of Irish children in the education system. As yet ILEA does not recognise the Irish as an ethnic minority and does not see it as important to validate the cultural differences for children from Irish families. The London Irish Women's Centre has been instrumental in setting up a pressure group to raise the issue of Irish children in schools and to educate those who work in education and play with children, to the importance of recognising and validating the cultural difference of Irish children and to raise their awareness of the mechanics, history and results of anti-Irish racism.

As a step towards strengthening children's Irish identity, the Centre runs Irish language classes for children weekly. The children seem to really enjoy these classes but apart from that they have proved useful for children whose family might decide to return to Ireland and so will not be completely lost during Irish lessons.

We also have a commitment to open all our provisions at the Centre to children with mental or physical disabilities. We have applied to a number of charities for equipment so that we will be able to provide a better service for these children.

There are many possibilities for expanding our childcare provisions and there has been shown to be an obvious need for such things as play groups, after school clubs, full-time holiday schemes, 'Saturday' school, etc. However the resources available at present could not cope with the demand. There is only one Childcare Worker employed and so there is a limit to how much can be taken on.



Picket by Irish women outside the Irish Embassy in London, April 1985, in protest against the victimisation of Joanna Hayes by the tribunal supposedly set up to investigate the brutal behaviour of the Irish police in dealing with the 'Kerry Babies Trial', Ireland.



Women-only meeting, November 1985, to show solidarity with the strikers (mostly women) at Dunnes Stores, Dublin. They have been refusing to handle South African goods for over two years now. From this meeting a permanent women's group was set up both to support the Dunnes Stores strikers and to take action against the Apartheid Regime in South Africa.

However, there is another side to the childcare provisions at the London Irish Women's Centre and that is a back-up service to enable Irish women with children to participate in all on-going activities. The Centre has a bright, clean, fairly well equipped creche room and creches are provided for all classes, courses, meetings and seminars that either take place at, or are organised by the Centre.

We firmly believe that in order to run a successful women's centre there always have to be childcare provisions that are of

high standard and stimulating so that both the women and the children benefit from their visit to the women's centre.

The childcare facilities are extremely well used. At times we have had more children than we anticipated. There were as many as 45 children in the creche at the Conference and about 50 at the Open Day. The number of children in a creche is always a good indication of the success of a venture.

After all it is women who are mainly responsible for passing on the culture to their children.



Children play in the creche at the centre.

Classes and courses

A number of classes are run by the London Irish Women's Centre in conjunction with Islington Adult Education.

Ceili Dancing Classes

This class has been running for three years now. Imelda Redmond is the tutor and it is held every Thursday evening at Whittington Park Community Centre, Yerbury Road, N19 from 7.30pm–9.00pm. The class provides a good opportunity for women to become competent at ceili dancing in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere.

Irish Music Classes

This class has also been running for three years. Siobhan O'Donnell, who plays both tin whistle and flute, is the teacher. The class caters for women who have never learned music and who wish to start from the basics as well as women who share their interest. The classes are held each Monday at 6.30pm at Caxton House, St. John's Way, N19.

Literature and Drama

The Literature and Drama class is a relatively new venture. It was felt that with the increase in the amount of Irish language classes in London this would give women a chance to use the language in a more creative and exciting way. The class is taught by Sabina Sharkey and looks into literature, both in English and Irish. The class is held each Tuesday evening at 6.30pm at Highbury Round House, Ronalds Road, N5.

Women in Irish History

The aim of this class is to re-examine the traditional image of

women throughout Irish history and to help Irish women here to discover their true historical identity by recounting the past deeds of Irish women and their contribution to the shaping of modern Ireland. The class is held every Thursday from 7.00–9.00pm at Highbury Round House, Ronalds Road, N5.

The London Irish Women's Centre hopes to be able to put on a series of classes later this year with funding from Hackney Adult Education. These will include: self defence, craft classes, voice classes, making radio programmes, assertiveness training and a fresh start course.

In February of this year we ran a Fresh Start Course. This took place one day a week for six weeks and was very much a pilot scheme. The course was designed to help women who wished to enter the employment market and covered such topics as: assessing skills, how to apply for jobs, interview techniques, assertiveness training and returning to study.

It also gave women an insight into aspects of particular careers, e.g. computers, manual trades. We hope to run a follow-up course later this year now that the Centre has become more established.

The London Irish Women's Centre has run training courses for women who work with children to raise their awareness to anti-Irish racism and the cultural backgrounds that children from Irish families will be coming from. The course was successful and since then there has been quite a demand for a similar course to be run with small groups of workers at their work place.

for a non-intimidating environment for creative expression is recognised.

The ways in which the centre has nurtured and encouraged the involvement of women in Irish culture have taken two forms:

- (1) By taking an active part in bringing Irish women musicians, artists, writers, etc. over from Ireland to perform here, e.g., Macalla, a 23-piece all-women ceili band, played at three venues for International Women's Day 1985; Nell McCafferty, feminist writer and journalist, opened the Centre

formation of a London-based all-women ceili band with 15 members, that played at three venues. The band, called Sheela-na-gig, are in the process of making arrangements to be recorded. Numerous other social/cultural events are held, e.g., poetry reading, smaller ceilis. We are in the process of helping to organise a Lesbian and Gay Pride Festival with Hackney Council, as well as a library Festival to be held in November. Future plans include an Irish Women's Film Festival in the autumn,



Cass Breen and Siubhan McNally enjoying the ceili



The Hairy Mary's, an Irish women's drama and dance group — an old and new interpretation of Irish dancing.

in February 1986; and Charabanc, the Belfast Theatre Group, gave women a lunchtime performance at the 2nd London Irish Women's Conference.

- (2) By encouraging the cultural development and raising the public profile of women in Irish culture in London. To this end the centre has set up, in conjunction with ILEA, classes for women in Irish language, dancing, music, history, literature/drama. The Irish women's conferences have always finished with a cultural celebration. For International Women's Day 1986 the centre supported the

setting up an amateur Drama Group, giving support to the setting up of a proposed Irish women artists group, plus the hosting of regular ceilis in a local pub with live Irish music, singing and dancing.

The use of other art forms and new technology to develop artistic expression is also recognised — hence the centre has set up an arts resource section and studio in the top floor of the building, with equipment in radio production, video recording and editing, darkroom equipment, and PA and sound recording facilities. The PA, video and radio courses have already begun and the studio and darkroom will be in full operation by the end of June.

Social and cultural

Despite attempts by colonial policies and practices in Ireland for the past 800 years to suppress Irish culture, as immigrants to this country, Irish women have brought with them a separate culture and rich heritage in music, song, dance, language and literature. The denial of this culture is carried on here

especially by the Educational System and the mass media.

The London Irish Women's Centre sees the nurturance and promotion of Irish culture as a very important function of the centre — in particular the contribution to and involvement of Irish women in this work is seen as vital. The particular need

The setting up of the arts section and studio in the centre holds endless possibilities for Irish women, and it is our intention that all the facilities are used to their fullest capacity. We see it as affording Irish women the

opportunity to gain access to skills and power in a way not possible before, especially for those who suffer discrimination on grounds of class, disability, age, and sexuality.



Sheela-na-gig, the 15 piece all women ceili band played at 3 venues for International Women's Day celebrations in March 1986: Caxton House, Conway Hall (organised by the LIWC in association with The Iranian Women's Group, Turkey's Women's Group, the Migrant Resources Service, with Eritrean and El Salvadorean women) and the Albany Empire.

Future plans

Radio/Sound Studio

Already there are many individual women musicians and music groups waiting to get access to our recording and rehearsal facilities. This will promote the profile of women in the world of Irish traditional music and song, help them gain recognition and develop skills and confidence. Courses will be run at the centre in how to operate equipment used in recording sound. We will liaise with Women's Media Resources Project to obtain access to more advanced facilities and equipment.

The radio project will link in with the work of Glór Gael. Glór Gael is involved in Spectrum Radio, an umbrella group made up of various ethnic minority and marginalised groups, and has applied for the forthcoming North London broadcasting licence. Irish women are now in a position to produce programmes with material which will validate and reflect their experience. It is hoped that when Spectrum Radio obtains a licence, our studio will be cabled into Spectrum — this will enable women to broadcast live from the studio at the London Irish Women's Centre.

Video Project

The video project contains both VHS and U-Matic production facilities and VHS editing

equipment. The centre will liaise with Women in Sync for U-Matic editing facilities. Women can now learn the skills involved in making videos. It is hoped that this will give Irish women access to, not only work in independent film and video making, but also to mainstream video and television.

Photography

The darkroom contains facilities to take and develop prints. Courses will cover the techniques required for this process as well as how to compile photographic exhibitions.

Music

The music project will stock musical instruments played in Irish traditional music: flutes, fiddles, tin whistles, bodhrans, etc. In particular we hope to concentrate on the area of teaching Irish children their musical heritage which is totally ignored in the educational system.

PA Equipment

Courses have begun in teaching women how to operate it and the process of demystification is underway. The system is of a very high quality and is of invaluable use to the centre and to Irish women in general for social and cultural events, meetings, conferences and benefits.

Artistic policy of the centre

Our artistic policy has been developed over the last few years in response to the devaluation of Irish culture that takes place in the mainstream and dominant culture in London.

Our artistic policy is:

- (1) To respond to the needs of Irish women for a safe, non-intimidating avenue for creative expression of their cultural heritage, and to give due recognition to their experience as appropriate content for that expression.
- (2) To positively discriminate towards those groups who traditionally do not have access to arts and media facilities: the elderly, disabled, lesbians, unemployed, working class.
- (3) To provide facilities where Irish women can develop the skills which demystify the media by having access to learning the processes involved in the transmission of information in video,

photography, recording and radio for example.

- (4) To provide facilities for and work with Irish women's social, cultural, community, political groups and to encourage their growth and development.
- (5) To encourage women who use the arts resources section to set up users groups and to participate in decision making around various projects.
- (6) To establish the London Irish Women's Centre as a recreational and cultural focal point for Irish women in London.
- (7) To promote a positive image of Irish culture (music, dance, song and other art forms) in the wider society and to encourage the full participation of Irish women in this work.
- (8) To counteract the devaluation of Irish culture in the mainstream media and educational system.

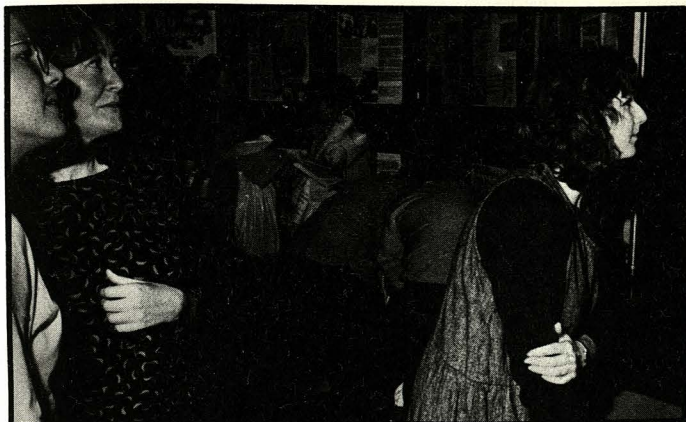
Recording our history

Since its earliest days the London Irish Women's Centre Group has actively pursued its policy of recording Irish women's history, not only in relation to ensuring that the development and activities of the Centre be recorded, but also in making a positive contribution to the process of re-defining the traditional role of women in Irish history.

The collective impact that many generations of Irish women have had on the shaping of our cultural identity and the sacrifices we have made to further the cause of national freedom over centuries of struggle have been denied, distorted, or completely ignored by that process whereby society records its own progress. The London Irish Women's Centre has taken a number of steps to counteract this negative and devalued image and to help Irish women in London to reach a fuller understanding of our true historical identity.

In 1984, having received funding from Islington Adult Education, an Irish Women in History class was set up. This class was repeated in 1985-86 and hopefully will continue in 1986-87. The aim of the class is to trace the position of women in Irish society from the earliest times with particular emphasis on the last two centuries, to assess how and why women came to be discriminated against and the effect this has had on our consciousness, and to recount the deeds and achievements of ordinary women upon whose labour inside and outside the home society has long depended, though it consistently ignores this fact and renders women's work to invisibility.

In March of this year an Irish Women's History Seminar was held at the Centre. Five speakers covered the areas of: Women in Ireland in the Last Two Hundred Years; Irish Women and Emigration; Women and the War



Women viewing exhibitions at the 2nd London Irish Women's conference — experience has shown that unless we record our own experience and achievements, we will be ignored.

in Northern Ireland; Irish Women's Political Involvement in London from 1970, and the History of the Irish Women's Centre. Such was the success of this venture that an Irish Women's History Group was formed and a series of seminars dealing with each of the above subjects separately and in detail was planned. The first of these which examined the political involvement of Irish women in London in the seventies, has already taken place.

The History Group sees the resources and facilities of the Centre as vital to its education and development. The History section of the library houses a comprehensive collection of books on Irish history, with particular emphasis on women, to which the group will have easy access once the library is open, and which will afford women an opportunity to study their own history which is not easily available in London.

Community Radio is another area which offers the History Group scope for development. Contact has already been made with Glór Gael, the Irish Radio Group which will be broadcasting later this year as part of Spectrum Radio. It is envisaged that the facilities to make and broadcast radio programmes at the Centre will be used to the full by the History Group.

The London Irish Women's Centre regards continuity of struggle as a vital element in understanding and appreciating our historical identity. Realising the difficulties which lack of documentation has given rise to in the reasearch of women's history and in order to ensure that the progress of Irish women in London cannot be ignored, the London Irish Women's Centre Group has been vigilant in

recording its activity and development. This is an on-going process and will ensure that the lessons of our experience can be passed on to future generations of Irish women.

To date video recordings have been made of the 1985 Conference, the first history seminar at the Centre, events organised for International Women's Day 1986 — including a performance by Sheela Na Gig, the first all-women Ceili Band in London — the launch of the London Irish Women's Centre and it is hoped that those currently on the Video course can use their new skills to make a video recording of the work and activity of the Centre.

Audio recordings have been made of the first and subsequent Open Meetings in addition to written minutes. Similar recordings have been, and will be made of the History Seminars. Reportbacks from each subgroup meeting are published in the London Irish Women's Newsletter, which also details accounts of social and political activity organised by, or of interest to, Irish Women. A pamphlet on Irish Women and Emigration was published by the Centre after the first Conference which includes all the papers presented at the Conference. Another such pamphlet is currently being prepared by the 2nd Conference Planning Group. A photographic exhibition covering all areas of Irish women's activity has been made and is now on display at the Centre.

In addition to all of this, records of all speeches given and papers presented on various occasions by representatives of the Centre have been published; these are on file at the Centre and form the nucleus of a small but growing archive of material

relating to the history and activity of Irish women, in addition to research recently published on various aspects of Irish women's history.

The positive policy of

recording our history carried out by the London Irish Women's Centre will ensure that there is a wealth of valuable information available to present and future researchers and campaigners.

1st London Irish Women's Conference

Irish women fought hard for representation at the GLC Consultative Conference with the Irish Community in February 1984. A total of 16 resolutions on Irish women's issues were presented and passed at that conference, one of which called on all Irish organisations to become more accessible to Irish women and one which acknowledged the need for a separate Irish Women's Conference.

The first Irish Women's Conference in London was held in Camden in June 1984 — the main theme of which was "Our Experiences of Emigration". The conference brought together over 200 Irish women from all different backgrounds. It was a very moving and positive experience for all of us.

Mary Lennon gave the first talk. Using the research she had compiled, she placed the presence

of Irish women in this country into its historical context. Annie Green told the Conference of her experience of emigration, since leaving a small rural village outside Westport, Co. Mayo, to come to this country more than 20 years ago. Siobhan McNally from Belfast spoke about emigration in the context of the North of Ireland, the war in the North and its effects on Irish women here. Claire Keating spoke about the experience of second generation Irish women. All the women at the Conference then discussed these issues in smaller groups.

Existing Irish women's campaigns and groups were strengthened and many new groups emerged from the Conference. A report of the Conference (including the four papers presented to the February 1984 Conference) is available from the London Irish Women's Centre.



Annie Green and Aine Collins voting at the plenary

2nd London Irish Women's conference

The Second London Irish Women's Conference, entitled "Living in England" took place on Saturday 21 September 1985. The problems facing Irish women as emigrants living in this country and ways of tackling these

problems was the major theme of the Conference. Women at the Conference took the opportunity to consolidate and strengthen support networks and campaigns already established, to meet and share experiences on a social



basis, to mobilise new campaigns and to establish new contacts.

One theme of the Conference was bringing together struggles of Irish women in this country and in Ireland — and several women came from various campaigns in the north and south of Ireland.

Links were also established with ongoing struggles in the wider Irish community and with Black and other ethnic minority struggles here and throughout the world.

Dorothy Fergus from the London Irish Women's Centre opened the Conference. Dorothy recounted the advances Irish women had made in the fight against racism and sexism since the 1984 Conference and ended by hoping that this Conference would serve to renew our determination.

Rae Dowds and Brid Boland from the London Irish Women's Centre introduced the guest speakers, Marie O'Shea — one of the victims of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, who at the time of the Conference was being charged under Conspiracy laws. Marie spoke about her experiences of living in England and being active in Irish community politics for over 30 years. (We are happy to report that Marie O'Shea was cleared of all charges in early 1986 as a result of a massive year-long campaign to drop the false charges against her, in which the London Irish Women's Centre took an active part.)

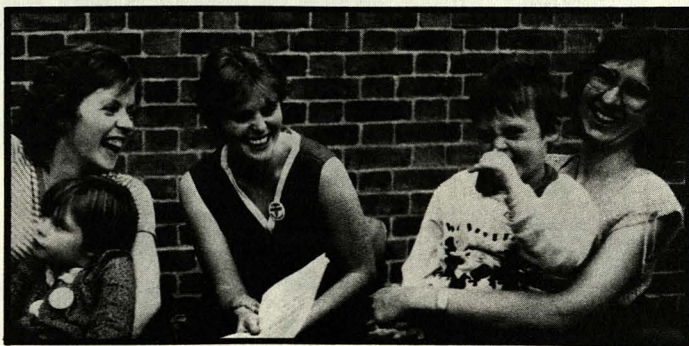
Margaret O'Neill, a second

generation Irish woman, was the second speaker. Another victim of the PTA (which allows the police to harass and terrorise the Irish community in England) — Margaret spoke of the horrific ordeal of being lifted under the PTA and the awful long term effects such an experience causes.

During the morning the conference broke up to smaller discussion groups to explore our experiences of living in England. Some of these groups were for first generation women only, some for second generation women only and some were mixed groups where first and second generation women explored the similarities and differences in their experiences.

The range of topics explored in small discussion groups included: Growing old in Britain, Racism, Mental Health, Sexism in the Irish Community, Anti-Irish Racism, Ex-Catholic Women, Travellers, Irish Women and Writing, Sexuality, Social Services and Irish Women, Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, Class, PTA, Lesbians, Irish Language, Media, Housing, Education, Contacts between England and Ireland, Anti-Imperialist Women from Protestant Backgrounds, Irish Women's Abortion Support Group, Women and the National Question, and others.

A report from the Conference is available from the London Irish Women's Centre.



Women share a laugh.



Older women participate in the conference.

How the centre is run

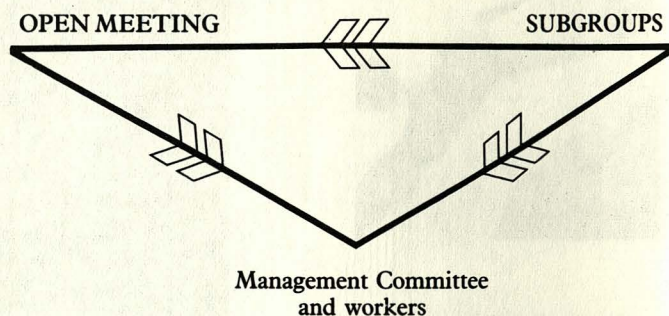
An elected Management group is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the aims of the centre are carried out: employing the centre's workers: and for formulating the details of the centre's policy in line with the stated aims. But in order to open the running of the centre to as many women as possible, consultative open meetings are held regularly for all Irish women in London to come along and have their say.

The first open meeting also set up another structure of subgroups around major areas of work eg, childcare, library, arts and recreation, newsletter, lesbians. These are working groups open to all Irish women and like the open meetings they can advise the management committee on policy. They report back to each open meeting: liaise with the management committee: and publish updates of their work in the newsletter.

articles to delivery to the post office. While it is not up to members of the sub-group to write the whole newsletter it is their individual responsibility to chase up contributions they have been promised or have asked for. These then have to be typed up, laid out, stencils made, duplicated, collated, wrapped and finally delivered to the post office.

It is very much a team effort. Women who are working during the day can lend a hand in the evening or at the weekend.

Experience has taught us that this whole process runs smoothly and fairly quickly if women are prepared to commit some time and to make a concentrated and collective effort. Obviously, the more women who are prepared to help, the less time it takes to finish the job. Previously this task has been done by the workers at the London Irish Womens Centre and in transferring the



SUBGROUPS

The Newsletter Sub-Group

Basically, it is the responsibility of the Newsletter Sub-Group to ensure that the London Irish Womens Newsletter is issued and distributed on a regular basis. The journal is an essential medium of communication for the growing community of Irish women in London, not only in relation to keeping Irish women up to date with what's going on, socially and politically, but in providing a forum for discussion and debate.

Providing this vital service for Irish women is no easy task and it takes commitment to see each issue through from ideas for

responsibility to the Newsletter sub-group it is hoped that the journal can be developed in ways which, due to work load, were just not possible before.

Membership of the sub group is open to all Irish women who are prepared to contribute to the production of the Newsletter and who are interested in developing it potential.

The Childcare Sub-Group

The childcare sub-group was set up at the centre with two main aims in mind:—

- (1) to ensure that good quality childcare be available at the women's centre for all the events that are put on and to expand on the existing provisions to cater for older children e.g. holiday playscheme and girls club.



Women at one of the workshops

- (2) To act as a pressure group to raise the issue of the position of Irish children within the education system and play provisions. To raise the awareness of people who work with children to the needs, (even the existence) of Irish children and to emphasise the importance of their cultural background.

The group meets approximately once a month during the day. There is always a creche and transport to the meeting.

The group is open to all 1st and 2nd generation Irish women who either have children, work with them or just have an interest in helping out.

Apart from the childcare subgroup there is also a group that was set up in order to try and obtain money to fund workers to run a girls group every Tuesday evening from 7-9. The organisation for the group is well underway and we intend the group to start on 1st July. We will be covering such areas as photography, video, drama, etc. Membership is open to all Irish women who are interested in ensuring that the facilities available at the women's centre are used by older girls.

The Library Sub-Group

The library at the London Irish Womens Centre now contains over 1,000 books. These range in subject from Prose to Politics and include History, Health, Education, Employment, Literary Criticism, Geography, Mythology, Current Affairs and Sexuality. There is also a substantial Fiction section, Irish language books and childrens books. The Music Library

contains over 200 L.P.s of Irish music and tapes, both of Irish music and for learning the Irish language.

This collection is probably unique in London and will be of tremendous value to Irish women in London for years to come. This is where the Library Sub-Group comes in. We would like to build up a comprehensive cataloguing system to ensure that things run smoothly and efficiently once the library is open for borrowing, and it is the responsibility of the Library Sub-Group to see that this is done. Cataloguing has already been started, but much remains to do.

Members of the sub-group are asked to give time on a regular basis as this is the only way we are going to be able to complete the cataloguing and open the library as the resource it has the potential to be.

Once the library is open it will be up to the sub-group to see that it stays that way, this means arranging borrowing times and making sure a librarian rota is worked out to ensure that someone is in attendance while the library is open. It will also be the responsibility of the sub-group to keep the collection up-to-date and generally to look after the books and records, see that they are being stored properly and that they are not being abused. Because of the uncertain funding situation for the centre, the sub-group may have to do some fund-raising in the future to keep the library open.

Membership of the library sub-group is open to all Irish women in London who are prepared to give the commitment outlined above. You don't have to have library experience to join the group, though, it is very

welcome. Commitment is of greater value.

Lesbian Sub-Group

Many lesbians leave Ireland because of the repressive attitude towards gay people that permeates every aspect of Irish society. Many Irish lesbians come to London to seek support, to sort themselves out, or simply to get away. Often they find that the situation here is not much better. Irish lesbians living here face discrimination — for being women, for being lesbians, and for being Irish. Because of the lack of recognition in the wider Irish community, many of us have been forced in the past to shed our Irish identity and

assimilate into English society to find support, but now, through the London Irish Women's Centre we can reclaim our Irish identity. The aims of Irish lesbian subgroup is to put an end to the isolation often felt by Irish lesbians in London, by offering support and friendship and by encouraging lesbians to make full use of the resources at the centre: and also to campaign in particular for the existence and experience of Irish lesbians to be recognised and for an end to discrimination against lesbians both within the Irish community and the wider London community.

For more information about the subgroups please contact the centre.

Access

When looking for a building in which to establish the London Irish Womens Centre every effort was made to ensure that it would be fully accessible to disabled women, in keeping with the aims and policy of the London Irish Women's Centre Group. Ideally a centre with everything on the ground floor was preferred, but because of the imminent demise of the GLC, funding restrictions and difficulties with planning permission the effort to establish the Centre became a race against time and some compromises had to be made.

The building has three floors with the Library on the first, and the Video and Radio equipment on the second floor. The ground floor is, however, on street level and includes the Reception Area, where women drop in for a chat and cup of tea, a toilet accessible to disabled women and the creche room. Classes are held on the ground floor whenever possible, and in practice this means nearly always. In addition when it is impossible to move equipment from the second floor to the ground floor arrangements will be made for disabled women to use similar equipment whether Radio, Video or Photography, at an alternative women's project. The library will be made available to disabled women by means of the catalogue which will be at reception. The Centre's minibus has a wheelchair lift and is available to offer transport to non able-bodied women.

Having acquired the building, the possibility of installing a lift

was examined at length.

Following consultation with various funding authorities and with our architects we were advised that the installation of a lift was totally impractical.

(ACCESS TO LONDON IRISH WOMEN'S CENTRE, 59 STOKE NEWINGTON CHURCH STREET, N.16)

Parking: Single yellow line outside entrance.

Public transport: Buses: 73 outside door; 106, 76, 67, 149 and 243 1/4 mile.

BR: Stoke Newington, 1/4 mile. Nearest tube: Finsbury Park, then 106 bus.

Entrance: Level, main door to reception area 33 inches wide.

Toilet: Disabled toilet door 31 inches wide; 2 horizontal hand rails 39 inches long, 3 feet off the ground; 1 vertical handrail 39 inches long, 7 inches off the ground.

Lift: None.

Stairs: 18 steps to first floor.

Floor surfaces: Carpet and tile.

Seating: Hard and soft.

Lighting: Quite bright.

Heating: Warm.

The following paper was presented by Brid Boland from the London Irish Women's Centre to a seminar on 'Women, Racism and Emigration' organised by JCARP — Jewish Cultural and Anti-Racist Project, on 10th December 1985.

Women, racism and emigration — a paper for discussion and debate

It is estimated that there are 24 million Irish people living in the world — 5 million of them live in Ireland. Women make up more than half of this number.

The Irish constitute 1/6 of London's population — 52% of these are women.

SUCH IS THE EXTENT OF IRISH WOMEN'S EMIGRATION!

Women — specifically Irish women, racism and emigration — well the story goes back a long way. It goes back so far that people have problems knowing when and how it began. But I feel it's necessary to go back with it in order to fully understand or explore such questions as "Why are we here?" — questions like this one are asked of us all the time.

British imperial pomposity has been fostered for over eight centuries by writers such as Gerald of Wales, the Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser, the poet John Milton, the 18th century philosopher John Hume, the Victorians Carlyle, Charles Kingsley and even Shakespeare himself.

The story begins back in the 12th century. At that time Gaelic Ireland used the legislature known as the Brehon Laws — where women, though not equal to men enjoyed a far better status than in present day legal systems. Ireland had its own vernacular — the Irish language — in which law tracts, medical books, etc. were written — the English language was not developed enough at the time and most parts of Europe used Latin (including England). The Norman invaders intermarried and settled down with the native Irish, adopting their customs etc., except for a small area around Dublin which became known as the 'Pal'. As the following centuries were to pass and further invasions to take place, this Gaelic system was to become more eroded and replaced by one which disinherited and dispossessed Irish women, culminating in the Great Famine of the 1840s and the

situation today where part of Ireland is still under British rule and millions of Irish women are scattered all over the globe.

It was in the 12th century that Gerald of Wales wrote his "History and Topography of Ireland" — a fabricated and falsified history and description



Women waiting for a train at Euston station, London (see Mary Lennon's paper on the historical background to emigration in the booklet "Irish Women — our experience of emigration").

of the Irish, painting us as barbarous, immoral and savage. The importance of this book is that this history was used for many centuries after that by the English as fact, and was translated in Elizabethan times into English once that language became established as the language of this country.

It was during these early years as well that the basis for future repressive legislation was laid — in the Statutes of Kilkenny (1366), laws which forbade settlers to adopt customs of the Irish, speak our language, intermarry, or host Irish entertainers.

During succeeding centuries the relationship between the English ruling classes and the

Irish remained the same — the Irish resisted whilst the English continued to try and subjugate Ireland.

The derogatory stereotypes were kept alive — resurrected in varying forms whenever the necessity arose — the Irish resisted.

The reconquest of Ireland began with the Tudors in the 16th century — it was at this time that English nationalism was born (as we today know it). In Mary Tudor's reign England adopted a policy known as "plantation" which involved driving the Irish from their land and replacing them with English settlers (one of the ways people were enticed to do this was 'it costs £50 a year to

our level ways are pawned for a penny by a crew from the land of Dover).

At this time also, racism in the modern sense was developed — to justify economic exploitation. England's involvement in colonising America and the slave trade began in Elizabeth's reign — the first laws against black people were introduced in 1596. By the end of her reign the plantation of Ulster was complete. By the end of the 17th century, 14% of the land was left in native's hands. This was also largely due to Cromwell, who thought he was sent by God to civilise the Irish. In Drogheda 3,000 people were slaughtered — 30 people were left in the town. In Wexford 2,000 were slaughtered. 100,000 were captured to be sent as slaves to the Barbados Caribbean. Oliver Cromwell's son justified the seizure of '1,000 wenches' by saying that "although we must use force in taking them up yet it was so much for their own good and likely to be of great advantage to the public". Oliver Cromwell's name is imprinted on the collective memory of the Irish — the order "To Hell or to Connaught" was his, when anyone found on the east side of the Shannon river after December, 1654 would be slain.

There followed the Penal Laws — which forbade women and men to own land, practice their religion, own a horse of greater value than £5 or speak their own language. The anguish of one woman, Eibhlin Dhuibh Ni Chonaill, is documented in one of the greatest poems written in any language called "Caoineadh Art Ui Laoighaire", or "The Lament of Art O Laoighaire". The poem describes how his wife Eibhlin knew he had been killed when she saw his horse return without him — he had been offered money for the horse and had refused to sell it — hence punishment by death. The way was set for rackrenting landlords and exorbitant rents. The destitution experienced by women is illustrated by this translated passage called 'The Widow's Lament' from the writer Amhlaoibh O Suilleabhain.

26 September 1828

As I had gone out by way of the Abha Bheag I decided to come home an easier way.

I went up to a miserable looking cabin at the edge of the bog to ask my way. A poor woman in her bare feet came out. She was tall and thin and red-eyed, in rags, with a mane of untidy black hair. She had neither bonnet nor scarf — nothing but a soiled and soot-stained rag. She was

keep a house in Ireland when it would cost £200 pa in England'). In that century there ensued a ferocious and continuous war — brutal to the extreme. For instance all 600 natives on Rathlin Island were slaughtered. This happened in Munster as well — not just those who fought were killed but as Sir Walter Raleigh's half brother states, everyone was killed, "men, women and children".

Many Irish women doubtless shared the sentiments of the Gaelic poet whose words were later translated into English:

Wave-shaken is my brain, my chief hope gone.
There's a hole in my gut, there are fowl spikes through my bowels.
Our land, our shelter, our woods and

Irish women's

DAUGHTERS OF ERIN



Champagne mixes with sisterhood at new Irish centre

From Maeve Binchy, in London

The first Irish women's centre in London was opened officially on Saturday by Ms. Nell McCafferty. In a room in North London where the organisers had expected perhaps 50 women, more than 100 were packed in for a day-long celebration. There were more on the footpath trying to get in than passers-by in the busy street. They were there to see what was going on and why there was so much excitement from within.

It has been estimated that there are almost 750,000 Irishwomen in the Greater London area. They have made an important contribution to the life of the city, as nurses, teachers, cleaners and caterers, but nothing has been done to identify their special needs. The group that has now emerged as the LIWC (London Irish Women's Centre) felt the cultural differences between Irish and English women were immense.

Many emigrate from Ireland because of political situation, but any part of Irish attitudes, women, sing, dance, and so on. Some Londoners think they are Irish, but they are not. The new centre is still in the early stages, but it is a place where Irish women can find each other and share their experiences.

special groups can meet and organise their activities. They have been funded by the Greater London Council, whose days are numbered, but the London Irish Women's Centre is not going to worry too much about that now. They have had grants totalling £32,000 from the GLC and with that money they bought and did up the house they bought and did up the house. They are optimistic that it will survive.

A crowd of women of all ages waited for Nell McCafferty to declare the centre open. Even those who had not been back in Ireland for years knew her and all about her, and she was a familiar figure from her appearances on the "Late Late Show." A great many Irish people watch the edited highlights of the show in its Monday afternoon slot on Channel 4.

Nell addressed the group as her beloved sisters and said it was a strange, lonely thing for anyone, man or woman, to arrive in London. But she felt that men might have it a little easier because there were ready-made communities of their own culture waiting for them — the pubs, the clubs, the sports — lived

Grand Opening of the London Irish Womens Centre

and see the
es of the centre,
re entertainment
day and find out
there for you and
ildren

ing Ceremony
1pm
with
McCafferty

of 'A Woman to
er



An anti-Irish cartoon which appeared in the London Standard after the London Irish Women's Centre opened.

Saturday 1st February 1986
59 Church St. Stoke Newington
Buses 73, 106, 253
British Rail Station Stoke Newington

Facilities: childcare ♦ signer ♦ refreshments ♦
Ord. Floor wheelchair accessible incl. toilet. For
information on access code and help
transport phone 249 7318

Entertainment: Videos
traditional music
prose and

And now...grant for Irish lesbians

Irish lesbians are the latest minority group to benefit from a grant by the London Irish Women's Centre. The grant is for a project called 'The Lesbian Project' which aims to provide a safe space for Irish lesbians to meet and share their experiences. The project is funded by the London Irish Women's Centre and the Greater London Council. The project is a response to the need for a safe space for Irish lesbians to meet and share their experiences. The project is a response to the need for a safe space for Irish lesbians to meet and share their experiences.

since was links with women and lesbian groups in Ireland, several of whom had come over for the conference. Already a campaign has got underway from the conference to save the Well Woman and Open Line Counselling centres in Dublin from threatened closure (see separate article for details).

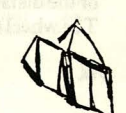
The day ended in a celebration with the singing of songs and the playing of music. The day was a success and the London Irish Women's Centre was proud to have been able to provide a safe space for Irish lesbians to meet and share their experiences.

March 86

Bad Reviews



International
Womens Week
Edition



IRISH WOMEN

DRUID
MARCH
RETURN TO THE
HOUSE
THEATRE
GARDEN

crying bitterly.

"I am looking for the short-cut to Callan," I said. I'll show it to you and welcome," the poor woman said. "We can go through the potato field here, in the path, along by the fence. Those potatoes: I planted them. But it is Paid Devereux* will dig them".

As we passed through a wheatfield she said: "It was my family planted that seed but it was Paidin Devereux who reaped the harvest, my curse on him!"

As we passed through the yard: "Those little woodpigeons used to belong to me, but they'll boil in Devereux' pot. It was my husband built our house — it was I sent the soot into the rafters — but Paidin Na gCeann's grandson took the door off the jamb and the hinges off the books. He left the cabin without a door and the window without glass, the heart without fire and the chimney without smoke, the pigsty without piglet or sow, young or old — without a pig or a boar, big or little, fat or lean.

"I'll never hear a cow of mine calling to her calf or young again, nor a more of mine snorting to her foal or colt, nor sheep of mine baaing to her lamb, nor goat bleating to her kid, nor my hen clucking to her pullets and chickens, nor my cock crowing. And I won't see my white duck or my speckled drake again, or my hatching goose or my lovely white gander, nor the lake out on the bog. And I won't hear the crane calling in the marsh, nor the scream of the wild goose, or the marsh-plover piping or the moor-plover whistling or the bleat of the jacksnipe. I won't see the cormorant and I won't hear the moorhen bubbling. And I'll never drain the pool again for eel or pike.

"He has put me far from all that, that man who murdered Pog Ni tSeafra and my poor tormented husband and my poor ruined family. The sweet mint with the white tips won't grow again for me in the meadow by the pool, nor the white or

the ditch. My cupboard is out in the sandy trench, and my table out on the bare bank; my cooking-pot is on the waste ground and my chair is out in the rain; my bed-straw is coverless, without a sheet or a blanket. I've no cap for my head and no cloak or covering for my body. The rent collector took them with him for the arrears, o it's wretched hard...."

*Paid Devereux is a Rent Collector

The Great Famine of the 1840s was a direct result of economic exploitation of Ireland — thousands of pounds worth of grain was sent from Ireland to pay exorbitant rents to absentee landlords whilst the Irish starved. One and a half million emigrated and one million died of hunger. The image comes to mind of a woman, having safely made it in the 'coffin' ship to Liverpool writing home to tell her loved ones left that her sisters and friends died on the boat before reaching land and how she had found domestic service.

The image comes to mind of groups of women walking to a boat or a train to go 'tatie-hoking' in Scotland and England; of the thousands of Irish women who took up street trading in London's East End — and the subsequent anti-Irish riots in Shoreditch and Ball Pond Road; or of a girl waiting in line at a hiring fair in Strabane for a farmer to pick her out for work.

The image comes to mind of "The Rat Pit" in Glasgow — a hostel for homeless women, the majority of whom were Irish — they were the ones who didn't return home from the 'tatie-hoking'. Their poverty and destitution is described by Patrick McGill in his writing at the turn of this century.

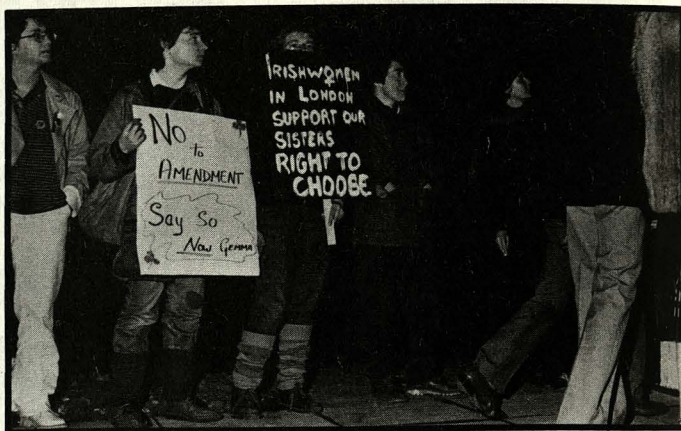
Of women looking at the signs "No Coloureds, No Irish, No Dogs" — this is an image which is in the living memory of many thousands of Irish women living here today.

The anti-Irish joke has always been a powerful weapon of the establishment especially as there is no access to answer back. Cartoons have been amongst the most vicious of anti-Irish propaganda. These forms which present the English as civilised and non-violent represent a gigantic and deliberate psychological distortion, as the British have one of the most violent and uncivilised histories of any European country. These jokes/cartoons are often deeply misogynist as well as racist. The anti-Irish joke shows us how deeply embedded in British

culture anti-Irish prejudice has become.

The task of transmitting culture from one generation to the next most often falls to the mother. Considering the total exclusion of any Irish material in the Educational system, the exclusion/distortion in the media, and the 800 years of negative stereotyping it is difficult for women to pass onto their children this culture: it is difficult to feel proud of our culture: feeling proud of it alienates and isolates one from the native population

Ireland was left devastated and impoverished. De Valera's Government set about trying to build an economically independent country. Discrimination against women became part of the system. KA bar was put on married women working in the public service. Apprenticeships for women, e.g. in hairdressing, shopwork, nursing etc., had to be paid for. In the North, the traditional areas of women's work such as the linen industry were in decline and unemployment rose.



Picket outside Camden Irish Centre, on 17th March, 1983, where Gemma Hussey (Irish Minister of Education) was present, in protest against her refusal to officially oppose an amendment to the Irish Constitution, which would make abortion officially illegal in Ireland. Unfortunately, despite a broadbased, widely-supported campaign, the constitution was amended. This was a great blow to Irish women, because although Irish women were already denied access to contraception and abortion before the amendment, after it, abortion was actually illegal.

who either don't realise it exists or despise it.

The prevention of Terrorism Act, which was brought in in 1974, is a direct result of the war in the North. It is designed to silence the Irish community here and prevent it from becoming politically active around the role of Britain in Ireland.

When held under this act women face the added humiliation of being strip searched, such as the two women, Ella ODwyer and Martina Anderson held at present in Brixton prison. Every Irish woman is aware that whenever she speaks about our situation here or Britain in Ireland, she is liable as a target for arrest — and possible exclusion from this country even though she may have lived here for up to 20 years.

Earlier I mentioned that 52% of the Irish community here were women, this pattern is untypical amongst immigrant groups, and there are reasons as to why this happened.

Most of this emmigration has been from the rural areas of Ireland, especially from the West. After the Treaty, the South of

The position of women in Irish society did not encourage women to stay. The 1937 Constitution formed an alliance with the Catholic Church. Women were enshrined as "Mothers" and nothing else.

The Land Commission which was set up to divide land left by English landlords stated: 'Where the issue arises, a household consisting of father, mother and children, sons rather than daughters alone would have prior claim'. Once again Irish women were dispossessed from their land. On the other hand, Irish women sent home money from working abroad to help rear families. In the 1950's the Irish Government admitted that a substantial amount of the National income came from remittances abroad.

Despite our numbers and the fact that many of us arrive here alone, we face the constant struggle to be recognised — both inside and outside our own community — the constant struggle against "invisibility" as women, the struggle to record our history, the struggle to gain proper representation and to have our contribution recognised.

The London Irish Women's Centre & Islington Irish Women's Group present

Sheela-na-gig

London's all-women ceili band

Traditional Irish music and song

Events for International Women's Week, 1986

- March 8: Canton House, 129 St John's Way, N19
- March 12: Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, WC1
- March 16: Albany Empire, Douglas Way, Deptford, SE8

Information: 01-249 7310

GLC

red clover in the dry meadow. I'll plant no more flax-seed, nor lift the flax nor steep it in the pool. I'll never again draw the thread from the wheel or the distaff, or make any more yarn. The wheel for my flax and wool is in

I will conclude with a quote from a paper given by a woman called Annie Green at the Irish Womens Conference in 1984, it goes: "Although I was born in Ireland and dearly love my people, I feel I now belong to the world. As an Irish immigrant, I feel that once you leave your country, you do not belong anywhere anymore".

On behalf of the London Irish Womens Centre I would like to add that as Irish women we are happy to have been invited to speak and talk here today. For too long the ruling establishment has succeeded to divide and rule oppressed groups. Our weakness lies in not standing side by side with each other.

We don't suffer racism on the grounds of the colour of our skin but our colonial history parallels the black colonial history — and this is all the more reason why Irish people should fight white racism — we've suffered under the same system, but not to the same extent.

Again, we acknowledge the vast extent of the suffering of the Jewish community which has

been perpetrated by almost every country in the world, and as another people who have suffered oppression we abhor anti-semitism.

Tonights meeting will have been worthwhile if we all make a sincere commitment to developing the links we've already made between and among black women and other ethnic minority women, by, for example:

- (i) organising further discussion meetings like this,
- (ii) supporting each others particular campaigns, and
- (iii) challenging the racism we come up against inside our own particular communities as well as outside, against other oppressed groups.

If we are to fight racism effectively, we need to unite our struggles: we need to fight it together.

As Irish women we pledge to challenge white racism and anti-semitism within our own community and we urge you to challenge anti-Irish racism within yours.

Irish women and employment

This paper was presented to the GLC conference on "The Irish and Employment" on 10th February 1986 by Rae Dowds the Welfare Advice Worker at the London Irish Women's Centre.

I'm not just going to talk about the service industries because I don't want this conference to reinforce the traditional divide, especially in the Irish community, of women entering into the service industries and men into the construction industries. I'd rather we ask why it is that women have been largely confined to the lower status and lower paid jobs in the service industries and excluded from other areas like the construction industry, and that we consider how this situation should and could be changed and work opportunities for Irish women opened up, as well as considering how the conditions of women working in service industries can be improved.

The Irish are the largest ethnic minority group in London and more than half are women. Many

of the needs and problems facing Irish men and Irish women living in London are common ones, but it must be recognised that Irish women have special problems and needs which are not shared by Irish men. Many Irish people feel they have been forced to leave Ireland to seek employment. This is common to men and women, but the special problems of Irish women can be demonstrated by looking at some past and present day examples of the additional pressures on Irish women forcing them to leave Ireland and seek employment in England which do not apply to Irish men. For example, the system of inheriting land changed in the late 19th century and a new system gave it to sons not daughters. This system dispossessed women and institutionalised their emigration since little job opportunities existed in small towns and cities. Some economic policies pursued by governments after independence in the South often discriminated against women. The Irish government put a ban on married women working in the

public sector, and apprenticeships and women's areas of work like hairdressing, shop work and nursing all had to be paid for.

The position of women in Irish society did not encourage women to stay. The Southern Constitution formed an alliance with the Catholic church; women were enshrined as mothers and nothing else. Many single women, who for one reason or another found themselves on the fringes of Irish society, for example, for being a single mother or a lesbian, were and still are forced to come to England to find people in a similar position to themselves or simply to find anonymity.

When they get to London there are other difficulties for Irish women. Finding work is one of the first problems we face, as it is for Irish men, but unless we have relatives here it is a hard battle for Irish women because we do not have the social network that Irish men have where they can go to certain pubs, get a start, and usually find accommodation through the same channels. There are no normal, understood places for Irish women to go and get support and help from each other, and there have never been Irish women contractors to employ Irish women.

In common with Irish men we are confronted with different accents, a different culture which either ignores or despises us, plus all the added shock of being in a huge and alienating city. In common with Irish men we are discriminated against in employment and other areas such as housing, the law etc. because of anti-Irish racism. In addition we face discrimination in employment and other areas on the grounds of our sex because of the deeply rooted sexism in this society. Many of these areas overlap and Irish women may find themselves, for example, losing a job because they are Irish

and women.

Given the level of Irish emigration, which is on a scale completely unequalled in Europe, it seems extraordinary that our presence in Britain is almost exclusively invisible. Almost no documentation exists. This is not an accident, it is an extension of the British colonial mentality which often does not even acknowledge the Irish as immigrants. Ireland is seen as an extension of Britain when it is convenient to do so, especially when a reserve pool of workers are needed. Any history of emigration (until very recently) which does exist refers to Irish men's experience and either assumes that this includes women's experience or else tacks it on here and there, and any research which has been done concentrates on Irish men. This invisibility of Irish women here covers up the economic role that Irish women have played in Britain. Irish women work primarily in the public sector and service industries in the kinds of jobs that are the very basis of this society, like nursing, transport, catering, school meals, social services, teaching etc.

Acknowledging this means acknowledging that Irish women have not come to Britain as somebody's wife, somebody's mother or somebody's daughter, but instead have in the main come to make our own living and very often have probably had to bring another member of the family over and/or sent back money to help the family at home. In the 1950s the Irish Government admitted that remittances sent from abroad constituted an important part of the national budget, and given the number of women away from home their contributions to this must have been significant.

I am not able to offer lots of statistics and figures today because as I have said there has been very little previous study on

Brid Hartigan and Rae Dowds of the London Irish Women's Centre.

London calling Irish women

NEXT Saturday several hundred women will come together at London's Irish Centre to discuss, to analyse, and to celebrate being Irish.

The second London Irish Women's Conference will be looking at 'Living in England' — perhaps a more positive perspective

It's the season for conferences. Even in London, Irish women are coming together to talk about their lives. Kate Holman reports.

provide a cafe and meeting rooms, crèche, library and bookshop with material not widely available outside Ireland. lenging sexism in the Irish community itself. "The existing Irish community and cultural organisations are dominated by men. Not only

Women's centre

The London Irish Women's Centre Group is in the process of setting up a centre where Irish women can come for support and advice on a range of issues such as health, welfare and the law.

The group recently got a grant from the GLC towards the purchase of a premises and it hopes to have a permanent centre open in the near future which

Education Centre is due to open in January and it aims to provide day-time courses in micro-electronics and computing, technical skills, carpentry, plumbing and electricals, as well as evening adult education classes.

All of the courses are free, with childcare allowances and grants for trainees. There are no entrance qualifications and courses will be open to women of 25 years and over. Priority will be given to ethnic groups, working-class women and single parents.

The aim of the centre is to encourage women to learn non-traditional skills and to increase their confidence at the same time. All courses will include classes in general education and business skills.

The Centre, which will have a staff of 12, is being funded by the F.E.C., the GLC and the Borough of Haringey.

Readers in the Haringey area who

present cheques for £100 each to the local Irish Welfare Bureau, run by Fr. Brian Lawlor, and to the local Council for Racial Equality.

Should your group ever be asked to make the Irish contribution to a local multi-cultural festival and you are not too sure how best to go about it, then might I suggest that you contact the Hammersmith and Fulham Irish Association. Telephone its chairman, J. Connolly, on 01-385 9488.

They have the formula in Fulham.

MAYO

The Mayo Association in Manchester has a dance this Friday, December 2, at the English Martyrs' Club, Whalley Range. It's going to be quite an evening because they have brought over the Tony Chambers Band from the home county. That is, of course, the band which played in William Trevor's television film *The Ballroom of Romance*. It is a real

DOWN YOUR WAY with

the situation of Irish women in employment, as indeed is the case for a lot of other areas as well. I hope, however, to combine the knowledge and information the London Irish Women Centre has gathered from our welfare work and talks with individual Irish women and groups, with the research which has been done on the General London Women's Community as we share many problems in the field of employment with other non-Irish women.

Some of the areas I will touch on are equal pay and opportunities at work, the links between the family and women's employment, cuts, new technology, training and unemployment.

Equal pay and opportunity at work is one of the first and central demands of the Women's Movement. When the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination acts came into force at the end of 1975 many women felt that at last there would be an improvement in the position of women in paid employment and their opportunities to work. Ten years later little has changed. Irish women, along with women in other communities, are still segregated in low grade, low paid, traditionally female occupations, and are concentrated in a narrow range of industries especially the service industries.

According to research compiled by the GLC's Women's Committee more than three-quarters of all the women employed in London work as secretaries, nurses, cleaning and catering assistants and in other female dominated jobs. Despite legislation and the efforts of the GLC in recent years there has been little increase in women entering non-traditional areas of work, and this of course includes Irish women. Women are still under-represented in skilled manual occupations; scientific and technical jobs; in the higher

professions; in supervision and management; and in the higher grades of administration. Despite the Equal Pay Act women in London still earn only two-thirds of men's average hourly earnings. Because of segregation women are in jobs where there are no men with whom to directly compare themselves, for example, nursing, and where there is no job evaluation and thus women have found it very difficult to use the Equal Pay Act.

Another factor is that many women's skills are unrecognised and under-valued simply because it is women who possess them, for example, the caring professions. Also many Irish women work in part-time occupations like cleaning and pub work, characterised by little or no union organisation, and in times of recession like now rates of pay for this work fail to keep up with inflation thus making the situation of many already low paid, and vulnerable women workers worse.

The European Court of Justice ruled in 1982 that the UK does not comply with the EEC directive on equal pay, because the Equal Pay Act in 1970 did not provide for "equal pay for work with equal value" unless the woman was covered by a job evaluation scheme. Under pressure from the GLC Women's Committee, women's organisations and Equal Opportunities Commission the government revised this to enable a woman to claim equal pay with men doing different work. However, these changes are only at the beginning and will take many years and hard effort to implement, but this is a very welcome piece of legislation and could have far reaching effects for women.

Women's position at work is linked to their position at home, women's prime responsibility for housework, childcare, and increasingly the care of the elderly

limits the hours many women can work and the jobs they can take. Under the Thatcher government this situation is likely to get worse rather than better as is obvious from her attempts to introduce what she terms 'community care', which in effect means cuts in services, the erosion of the welfare state, and most menacingly the intention that women will be the ones to replace it by taking on the full responsibilities for looking after sick relatives, the elderly etc. The lack of adequate childcare, school holiday provision and day care for elderly dependants means that women have little or no choice in whether they work, when they work, where they work, and the type of work they do. Their lack of choice, low representation in trade unions and other factors all contribute to creating a pool of readily exploitable labour. Linked to the division of labour in the family is our relative lack of relevant skills and training, and this too reflects the underlying assumption by schools, employers etc. that a woman's primary role is that of wife and mother. Women are perceived and treated in a particular way in the labour market. Added to a lack of opportunity to work is the problem of sexual harassment, especially if women attempt to enter areas of work traditionally performed by men and as Irish women we face an additional obstacle of anti-Irish racism, especially during periods when anti-Irish feeling is running high.

Irish women are also often concentrated in jobs that are particularly vulnerable to changes in technology. For example, in offices, shops etc. New jobs that have been created as a result of new technology have largely gone to men, and there is an appalling lack of training facilities and encouragement for women to train in these areas as well as in the skilled manual trades industries.

Lastly, just to mention unemployment. Irish Women in London are being hard hit by unemployment. In September 1983 the number of women in the

general London community that were registered as unemployed was 109,900, and we can deduce that a significant number of these are Irish, and it is estimated that at least half again of that number are unemployed and available for work but are not registered as unemployed thus failing to show up on statistics and to acquire the benefits due to them.

Unemployment amongst ethnic minority women went up by 214% between 1979 and 1981. Unemployment has been proved to have an adverse effect on mental health. In addition because of the deep rooted sexism within the Welfare State women are discriminated against and they are often not allowed to sign on or are allowed to sign on only as dependants of their spouses. This makes the prospects and experience of unemployment a particularly horrific one for many Irish women.

The task for Irish women is two-fold: to break into those areas of work traditionally closed to women, and here education and training are vital, and then to gain equality within them. This conference, all of us today, Irish men and women, must fight for and demand that the English education system confronts and challenges anti-Irish racism and sexism both so deeply rooted in this society; that government training courses be required to hold a certain number of places for ethnic minorities and for women; that trade unions put more effort into involving women at all levels by having special training courses for women, women committees at branch and union level, reserve seats for women on Executive levels; that they avoid evening meetings and provide creche facilities for all meetings. We must also campaign for adequate childcare facilities without which women can never achieve full equality in employment, and an extension of services for the elderly to ensure adequate care for the elderly and to reduce the burden on those caring for them who are traditionally women.

Funding history

We felt that a written account of the history of our funding might be interesting and provide

some background information to the audited accounts.

The bulk of our funding

so far has come from the GLC Women's Committee but we have also had funding from other GLC departments and from other boroughs and bodies.

Funding from the GLC Women's Committee

We were funded in 1983/84 for

two part-time workers and running costs: in 1984/85 we were funded for two part-time workers up until January 1985 and then for three full-time workers from January to March 1985 plus running costs. We also received funding to purchase, repair and refurbish a building for use as an Irish women's centre, and money to buy capital equipment for the centre including a mini-bus, and to stage events for International Women's Day.

Funding for three full-time

workers was continued in 1985/86, plus funding for a one day a week book keeper, and capital money to set up video, photographic and music projects (with some running expenses for three months). This also included funding for one off projects like the Open Day, the Annual Report, and an Exhibition.

Also, we have received small amounts for one off projects like Conferences etc. from some boroughs including Camden, Basildon, Hackney and

Southwark totalling a few hundred pounds.

We have also applied to Hackney for money for one-off children's events like a children's summer festival and Girls Group and we don't yet know the outcome. We are also in the process of applying to the Equal Opportunities Commission for funding for an Irish Women's Conference later this year. And we are investigating the possibility of funding from the European Social Fund.

Report of our attempts at securing other means of funding apart from the GLC Women's Committee, and the results

Funding body approached	Financial year	Purpose of grant application	Funding successful	Amount received
(1) Hackney Women's Committee	1983/84	£2,058 to stock craft room	Yes	£1,000.00
(2) Hackney Community Development	1984/85	£7,500 for a computer	No	—
(3) Hackney Community Development	1985/86	£500 for library	No	—
(4) Hackney Inner City Partnership	1985/88	£20,061 for outreach worker for Hackney and running costs	No	—
(5) Hackney Council (Leisure, Social Services and CDU)	1986/87	£136,245: salaries for 4 full-time workers and engineers fees and part-time book-keeper and a housing project with two workers	Don't know yet	—
(6) Islington Women's Committee	1983/84	£3,000 for library & creche equipment	Yes	£3,000.00
(7) GLC Ethnic Minority Unit	1984/85	£2,177.75 for First London Irish Women's Conference in June 84	Yes	£2,177.75
(8) GLC Ethnic Minority Unit	1985/86	£4,190 for Second Irish Women's Conference, September 85	Yes	£4,190.00
(9) Islington Adult Education	1983/84	To fund three classes in Irish language, music and dancing	Yes	Paid tuition fees
(10) Islington Adult Education	1984/85	To fund three classes in Irish dancing, music and history	Yes	Paid tuition fees
(11) Islington Adult Education	1985/86	To fund four classes in Irish dancing, music, history and literature	Yes	Paid tuition fees
(12) Islington Adult Education	1986/87	To fund four classes in Irish dancing, music, history and literature	Don't know	—
(13) GLC Arts & Recreation Department	1984/85	£7,053 for Irish Women's events for International women's week	Yes	£7,053.00
(14) GLC Arts & Recreation Department	1985/86	Capital for Radio production and PA equipment plus running expenses for one year, including Arts worker salary	Yes	£24,765=Capital £12,045=Running expenses & salary for 1 quarter, Jan-Mar 86
(15) 92 Charitable Trusts	1986/87	Salaries & running costs at 1985/86 rates	No	—
(16) Migrant Workers Fund	1986/87	£10,000 (max. of grants given) for 1 salary & running costs	Don't know	—
(17) Gulbenkian Trust	1986/87	£15,000 1 salary & running costs	Don't know	—
(18) London Borough Grants Scheme	1986/87	£136,245=salaries for 4 full-time workers plus engineers fees plus 1 day a week book-keeper & running costs plus a Housing Project with 2 workers & running costs	Don't know	—
(19) Greater London Arts	1986/87	£50,980 for an Arts Project	Don't know	—
(20) Greater London Arts	1986/87	£2,500 for an Irish Women's film festival in November 86	Yes	Will get £1,500
(21) Dept of Foreign Affairs in Dublin (Cultural Section)	1986/87	For cultural events, e.g. ceilis during film festival in November 86	Don't know	—

Funding — Audited Accounts

ACCOUNTS 31 MARCH 1984

NOTES TO THE ACCOUNTS

1. Grant Aid

The Grant received from the Greater London Council comprises:

		£
Capital grant	1982/83 (received) April 1984)	800
Revenue grant	1983/84	9,320
Non-recurrent expenditure grant	1983/84	803
		<u>10,923</u>

2. Capital Fund

The London Irish Women's Centre received the sum of £67,150 after the year end from the Greater London Council being funds approved in 1983/84 for the purchase of their own premises.

At the time of signing these accounts an offer had been accepted on some premises but contracts have not yet been exchanged. The funds are held on deposit in a building society account.

INCOME AND EXPENDITURE ACCOUNT

BALANCE SHEET

	£
INCOME	
Grant Aid: Greater London Council (Note 1)	10,923
Donations and Fundraising	<u>545</u>
	11,468
EXPENDITURE	
Salaries and National Insurance	7,734
Rent and services	567
Stationery and office supplies	596
Publicity	568
Hire of premises	348
Telephone	383
Courses and books	758
Travel	87
Postage	114
Insurance	26
Bank charges	27
Audit and accountancy	161
Miscellaneous	206
Office equipment	<u>950</u>
	<u>12,525</u>
DEFICIT FOR THE YEAR	<u>1,057</u>

	£
CURRENT ASSETS	
Cash at Bank	167
CURRENT LIABILITIES	
Creditors	<u>1,224</u>
EXCESS OF LIABILITIES OVER ASSETS	<u>1,057</u>
Represented by:	
DEFICIT FOR THE YEAR	<u>1,057</u>

ACCOUNTS 31 MARCH 1985

NOTES TO THE ACCOUNTS

1. Accounting Convention

The Accounts are prepared under the Historical Cost Accounting Convention.

2. Capital Fund

The London Irish Women's Centre received £107,266 from the Greater London

Council and £1,000 from the London Borough of Hackney for the purchase, refurbishment and equipping of a new centre. The new premises were purchased on 14 December 1984 and there remained £47,927 unspent at 31 March 1985.

BALANCE SHEET

	Notes	£	1984 £
CURRENT ASSETS			
Building Society Account		24,003	-
Cash at Bank and in Hand		<u>33,486</u>	<u>167</u>
		57,489	167
CURRENT LIABILITIES			
Creditors		<u>8,523</u>	<u>1,224</u>
		<u>48,996</u>	<u>(1,057)</u>
Represented by:			
ACCUMULATED FUNDS			
Surplus on Revenue		1,039	(1,057)
Surplus on Capital	2	<u>47,927</u>	<u>-</u>
		<u>48,966</u>	<u>(1,057)</u>

INCOME AND EXPENDITURE ACCOUNT — REVENUE

	£	£	1984 £
INCOME			
Grants Received: Greater London Council		33,460	10,923
London Borough of Islington		3,000	-
Donations		<u>208</u>	<u>545</u>
		36,668	<u>11,468</u>
EXPENDITURE			
Salaries and Related Costs	14,939		7,734
Rent, Rates and Services	1,573		567
Repairs and Cleaning	561		-
Stationery and Office Supplies	1,250		596
Publicity	1,726		568
Hire of Premises	298		348
Telephone	688		383
Courses, Library and Creche	3,053		758
Travel and Motor Expenses	376		87
Postage	619		114
Bank Charges	27		27
Audit and Accountancy	337		161
Professional Fees	602		-
Insurance	462		26
Office Equipment	-		950
Miscellaneous	608		206
International Women's Week	<u>7,453</u>		<u>-</u>
		34,572	12,525
SURPLUS/(DEFICIT) FOR YEAR		2,096	(1,057)
Deficit Brought Forward		<u>(1,057)</u>	<u>-</u>
SURPLUS/(DEFICIT) CARRIED FORWARD		<u>1,039</u>	<u>(1,057)</u>

INCOME AND EXPENDITURE ACCOUNT — CAPITAL

	£	£	1984 £
INCOME			
Grants Received: Greater London Council		107,266	-
London Borough of Hackney		1,000	-
		<u>2,918</u>	-
Interest Received		111,184	-
			<u>-</u>
EXPENDITURE			
Purchase of Property	45,000		-
Legal and Other Charges	1,066		-
Equipment	5,371		-
Mini Bus	<u>11,820</u>		-
		<u>63,257</u>	-
		<u>47,927</u>	-

ACCOUNTS 31 MARCH 1986

BALANCE SHEET			REVENUE FUND		
	£	1985 £		£	1985 £
CURRENT ASSETS			INCOME		
Debtors	2,076	-	Grants received —		
Building Society Account	3	24,003	Greater London Council	73,459	33,460
Cash at bank and in hand	<u>23,107</u>	<u>33,486</u>	London Borough of Islington	-	3,000
	25,186	57,489	Donations, fund raising and other grants	<u>541</u>	<u>208</u>
				<u>74,000</u>	<u>36,668</u>
CURRENT LIABILITIES			EXPENDITURE		
Creditors	<u>19,045</u>	<u>8,523</u>	Salaries and related costs	41,757	14,939
	<u>6,141</u>	<u>48,966</u>	Rent, rates and services	2,124	1,573
			Repairs and cleaning	1,831	561
Represented by:			Stationery and office supplies	1,185	1,250
ACCUMULATED FUNDS			Publicity and Annual Report	7,846	1,726
Revenue	5,106	1,039	Hire of premises	1,121	298
Capital	<u>1,035</u>	<u>47,927</u>	Telephone	1,837	688
	<u>6,141</u>	<u>48,966</u>	Courses, Library & Creche	3,007	3,053
			Travel and Motor Expenses	2,380	376
CAPTIAL FUND			Postage and Delivery	1,706	619
	£	1985 £	Audit and Accountancy	483	337
INCOME			Professional fees	-	602
Grants received —			Insurances	409	462
Greater London Council	60,007	107,266	Miscellaneous	594	608
London Borough of Hackney	-	1,000	International Women's Week	-	7,453
Interest received	<u>1,731</u>	<u>2,918</u>	Equipment Hire	238	-
	<u>61,738</u>	<u>111,184</u>	Open day	3,270	-
			Bank Charges	<u>145</u>	<u>27</u>
EXPENDITURE				<u>69,933</u>	<u>34,572</u>
Purchase of property	-	45,000	SURPLUS FOR THE YEAR	4,067	2,096
Refurbishment and redecoration	35,899	-	Balance brought forward	<u>1,039</u>	<u>(1,057)</u>
Equipment	68,256	5,371		<u>5,106</u>	<u>1,309</u>
Mini bus	-	11,820			
Professional Costs	<u>4,475</u>	<u>1,066</u>			
	<u>108,630</u>	<u>63,257</u>			
SURPLUS/(DEFICIT)					
FOR YEAR	(46,892)	47,927			
Balance brought forward	<u>47,927</u>	-			
	<u>1,035</u>	<u>47,927</u>			

The above shows the final draft of our accounts 31st March, 1986. The copy sent to press had not been audited. Copies of the audited accounts are available on request from the London Irish Women's Centre.

London Irish women's centre

