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# IRISH WOMEN



OUR EXPERIENCE  
OF EMIGRATION

THIS IS THE REPORT FROM THE LONDON IRISH WOMEN'S CONFERENCE HELD IN THE CAMDEN IRISH CENTRE, LONDON, ON THE 17TH JUNE 1984. MORE THAN 200 WOMEN ATTENDED THE CONFERENCE, THE FIRST OF ITS KIND TO BE HELD OUTSIDE OF IRELAND. THE REPORT WAS PUT TOGETHER BY THE WOMEN INVOLVED IN ORGANISING THIS UNIQUE AND HISTORIC EVENT.

SABINA SHARKEY GAVE THE WELCOME AND INTRODUCED THE CONFERENCE.

BA MAITH LIOM FAILTE A CHUR ROIMH GACH AON BHEAN A THAINIG ANSEO INNIU, AR SON NA MNA A D'OBAIR CHUN AN COMH-DHAIL SEO A CHUR AR SIUL.

Ta muid thar a bheith sásta leis an meid againn ata bailithe le cheile. Ta 'fhios againn go maith chomh deacair agus ata se am saor a fhail, go mor mhóir leis an meid obair ata le deanamh sa bhaile agus inar bpostanna amuigh.

Ta síil againn go mbainfidh muid uilig eolas agus aoibhneas as.

WE, THE CONFERENCE PLANNING GROUP, THAT IS WOMEN FROM THE LONDON IRISH WOMEN'S CENTRE, FROM THE IRISH WOMEN'S ABORTION SUPPORT GROUP, FROM THE LONDON ARMAGH GROUP AND OTHER WOMEN, BOTH IRISH BORN AND SECOND GENERATION, WELCOME YOU ALL HERE TODAY.

We are delighted at the turn-out.

All of us know how difficult it is to take time off from the demands of work and home and outside. It's not easy getting here early on a Sunday morning, but we hope you'll agree that all our efforts are well spent.

This is an historic occasion. It is the first Irish Women's Conference to be held here in London.

Let us trace the making of this history.

Within the last year and a half the Ethnic Minority Unit of the GLC held two conferences to consult with the Irish Community in London, to identify the main problems we face and to explore methods of defeating them.

It was hoped that as a result of these conferences, a body would be established, representing the entire Irish Community, which would push the GLC and other appropriate bodies to serve the needs and interests of the Irish in London.



The first conference decided to set up Commissions covering three main areas — political, cultural and welfare, with as wide a representation as possible from Irish groups in London. Women present at the last conference welcomed the idea, but felt that a separate Women's Commission should be considered, to ensure that the specific needs and interests of Irish women would not be ignored or neglected, as has happened in the past. It was also felt that a larger number of Irish women should be consulted, to discover if there is enough support for setting up a Women's Commission, and if there are enough women willing to become involved in the work of the Commission.

This was one of the reasons for holding the Conference today, but obviously not the only one. The main purpose of the Conference is to provide a space and a network, for us as Irish women, to meet, make contact, and hopefully, create on-going working groups, where the issues that we identify as important will be worked on.

Our intention is not just to insist on our existence in English surroundings, but to insist on it within our own Irish community. We aim to defeat any remaining sexism, and to make it very plain that we, young and old, married and not, with children and without, lesbian and heterosexual, disabled and able-bodied, with any religion and with none, are ALL Irish, and essential to our community.

The theme of the Conference is: Our experience of Emigration. It is the experience we all share, whatever our reasons for coming here, or our reasons for staying.

The length of time over which we stretch that experience may vary. But all of us have stories to hear, and to tell, of loneliness and isolation, good times and disillusionment, and the struggle to survive, economically, culturally, and with an Irish identity which we sustain in the teeth of a hostile or at best, indifferent society.

This is our first Conference. We'll spend the day on discussion, and the evening in celebration with our Irish women musicians and dancers.

We are delighted to welcome you to what we hope, and believe to be the first of many.

Faillte.

## WE THEN HAD GUEST SPEAKERS

MARY LENNON TALKS ON THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT IN WHICH IRISH WOMEN'S EMMIGRATION BEGAN AND CONTINUES.



ON THE PROGRAMME I'M DOWN TO 'A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF IRISH WOMEN'S IMMIGRATION' BUT I DON'T FEEL IT WOULD BE POSSIBLE TO DO ANY JUSTICE TO IT IN 10 MINUTES SO INSTEAD I'VE PICKED OUT SOME POINTS WHICH I THINK ARE REALLY IMPORTANT AND I'LL TRY AND REFER THESE BACK TO SOME OF THE HISTORICAL FACTORS AFFECTING WOMEN'S IMMIGRATION.

The information I have put together is based on reading around the whole area and also on interviews that I've done with Irish women living here about their experiences of coming over. It is also based primarily on immigration from Southern Ireland because the bulk of emigration has been from there and the different economic development of the North of Ireland means that it needs to be looked at separately which I haven't been able to do.

### 1. THE ENORMITY OF THE LEVEL OF EMIGRATION:

Because emigration has become such a way of life in Ireland, it is difficult to remember sometimes just how enormous it has been, that it is a level of emigration completely unequalled in Europe. In fact, it is more than double the level of that of the next highest country i.e. Norway. This has obviously had a very fundamental effect on Irish society and on the countries that we have come to.

The largest wave of women's emigration was following the Great Hunger in the 1840's. This was the result of British colonial policies which created a totally exploitative land system and deliberately suppressed industries



wherever they posed a threat to Britain's own industrial development. In the second half of the nineteenth century the majority of Irish women had to leave to survive. A very high level of women's emigration continued right down to the 1970's.

By 1920, 43% of Irish born women and men were living outside Ireland.

## 2. IRISH WOMEN'S EMIGRATION IS QUITE UNIQUE

Within this general picture, Irish women's emigration is quite unusual in that at certain points, especially from the 1940's to 1970 more women left than men. This is a very untypical pattern amongst immigrant groups where it is more usual for the majority to be men. Yet this is rarely acknowledged, and it seems very important to understand some of the reasons why. Some of the factors I think are relevant are:

- a) the system of inheriting land favours sons not daughters. In the late 19th century there was a big change in the way the family land was passed on. This came about primarily as a reaction to the Great Hunger. Agitation for land reform grew through organisations like the Land League to ensure that there would be no repeat of the horror of the 1840's. People wanted security on their land and reforms led to a greater level of small farm ownership. Whereas before the Great Hunger farms might be divided up between several members of a family and they in turn might raise a family on their portion of the land, the new system operated by leaving/passing the land to only one member of the family – the eldest son usually, or some other son. This system dispossessed women and institutionalized their emigration since little job opportunities existed in small towns or cities.

After independence for the 26 counties, this system was never challenged by Free State governments. This acceptance of women having no rights to the land is made clear from the following quotes from the Land Commission. The Land Commission was involved during the 1930's, in redistributing the large estates which had been bought over from landlords. Extra portions of land were given to make small farms more viable etc. The commission drew up its criteria for distributing extra land and I quote :—

*'An old aged pensioner without family could not be considered for an addition of land, nor could a couple of spinsters.'*

And again :

*'Where the issue arises, a household consisting of father, mother and sons rather than daughters alone, would have prior claim.'*

b) after independence in the South the economic policies pursued by governments often discriminated against women. DeValera's government put a bar on married women working in State sector. Apprenticeships in women's areas of work e.g. in hairdressing, shopwork, nursing etc. all had to be paid for. Pay and conditions were bad in Dublin so that by the 1960's the South had one of the lowest standards of living in Europe. In the North, traditional areas of women's employment like the linen industry were in decline and unemployment rose.

c) the position of women in Irish society does not encourage women to stay. The 1937 Constitution is a good example of the hypocrisy of attitudes. This was the point at which the State formed an alliance with the Catholic Church. Women were enshrined in the constitution as 'Mothers' but this meant nothing in practice. The State offered no support to women who were mothers and totally ignored the fact that women were leaving in their thousands. To this day, the State's attitudes towards contraception, divorce, illegitimacy, homosexuality, abortion ignores women's needs. What's more, to be a single mother, a lesbian, to use contraception outside marriage etc. means you are considered deviant and many women feel forced to leave so that they can live more anonymously. In the North legislation passed in Britain has never been automatically extended to the North so Acts legalising homosexuality, abortion for example were not applied. It wasn't until the 1940's that the Irish government decided to set up a Commission to 'look into' emigration. It sat for five years and in its conclusions decided that the increase in women's emigration was 'insignificant' and also that emigration generally reflected 'the individual exercising his free will to leave...' and that it would be wrong for the State to interfere with this right '...except in the case of a national emergency or where the survival of the state is in jeopardy.'

d) self-perpetuating cycle has developed. This is a personal view that needs more discussion, but it seems to me that when a pattern of emigration is started of the sort that has developed from Ireland that it becomes easier for succeeding generations to leave. Most women will already know someone already living here, have relatives here, know of a job that might exist, have a place to stay and so you can think of yourself leaving for a 'short while' which then extends into years. I know that when I came I thought I would stay a year or two and I've been here ten years now. Some women have said that they came for 'a few weeks' and are here years. In this way, the decision to leave can be made almost casually in a way that would be considered very strange to people who have to decide to emigrate from a much further distance.



By the 1950's some of the effects of the high level of women's emigration were becoming more visible. A seminar was held in Dublin called 'The Vanishing Irish' in the 1950's and as far as I can make out all of the papers were written by men. At that time, Irish men had the highest marriage age rate in the world! The papers discuss the possibility that the Irish race could become extinct and try to examine the reasons why but don't seem to have come up with any analysis helpful to women. Obviously emigration had become a 'safety valve' for successive governments — a let out on the failure of their economic and social policies. Emigration had become one of the ways the Irish economy managed itself.

### 3. INVISIBILITY IN BRITAIN

Given the level of our emigration it seems extraordinary that our presence in Britain is almost exclusively invisible. Almost no documentation exists — hardly any books, plays, history. I don't think this invisibility is accidental:—

- i) the history of emigration which does exist refers to men's experience and assumes that women's story is covered or else tacks it on here and there. It has been told by men for men.
- ii) I think its an extension of th British colonial mentality which sees us as part of the furniture, we're here bcause that's the way things are. We are not even acknowledged as immigrants. I've had to argue with people for the right to be called an 'immigrant'. Ireland is seen as an extension of Britain when it's convenient to do so especially when a reserve pool of workers are needed.
- iii) It covers up the economic role that Irish women have played in Britain. Irish women work primarily in the public sector in service industries, the kinds of jobs that are the very basis of this society i.e. in 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 helped to bring another member of the family over and/or sent back money to help the family farm or whatever. In the 1950's the Irish government admitted that remittances sent from abroad constituted an important part of the national budget. Given the numbers of women away from home, their contributions to this must have been significant.
- iv) It reinforces the attitude which expects us to be 'grateful' for what we get instead of looking at what we have and continue to pay. This mentality became clearer recently when at the Tory Party Conference in 1982 there were over 30 resolutions calling for Irish people to lose the right to vote in British elections because of our bad behaviour.

get instead of looking at what we have and continue to pay. This mentality became clearer recently when at the Tory Party Conference in 1982 there were over 30 resolutions calling for Irish people to lose the right to vote in British elections because of our bad behaviour.

#### 4. PRESSURES WOMEN FACE LIVING HERE

Once here, the pressures that women are under are often, I think, different from those faced by men.

Women are under greater pressure to assimilate. Very few women have the choice to work in an all Irish job situation in the way that many Irish men do e.g. in construction work. Most women would have to deal with British institutions whether they like it or not — schools, health centres, social services, hospitals etc. For Irish women who have kids there is a contradictory pressure to transmit Irish culture to their kids so that they relate positively to their roots. Though many Irish men will feel that passing on a sense of Irish cultural identity is important, it is more than likely that the practical work of carrying this out will actually fall on Irish women. It is them who will organise dancing classes, take kids and collect them, organise their uniforms.

Single women are under different pressures. The Irish community in Britain is very family centred as are many of the social events organised in it. Therefore many organisations do not cater for the needs of single women. In addition, many aspects of Irish social life such as going to pubs, music sessions are very male dominated and it is very difficult for a woman to go to these alone.

#### 5. EMIGRATION IS INEVITABLE AGAIN?

The final point I would like to make is that although since 1970 net immigration had stopped i.e. no more people were leaving than the number returning, that situation is changing again. Many people will have seen in the Irish Post last week that the Southern government have now got a policy (unofficially) of encouraging emigration. Fitzgerald has apparently spoken to Reagan about the possibility of widening the quota of visas to

the States and given the British unemployment, European markets are being encouraged. Alongside that, the Irish Post also carried another report that last year, foreign companies, presumably multinationals, exported £500 million profit out of Ireland. This profit was of course produced by Irish people. The Irish government's solution to all this is to offer potential emigrants 'training courses' so that Irish women leaving will be better educated for emigration. No doubt women will be largely affected by this since there's been no radical changes to a situation that forced women to emigrate before.



## ANNIE GIVES A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF HER EXPERIENCE OF EMIGRATION



### INTRODUCTION

THIS PAPER IS ABOUT MY OWN EXPERIENCE OF COMING TO ENGLAND, AND RECORDS THE TALK I GAVE TO THE IRISH WOMENS CONFERENCE, THE IRISH CENTRE, CAMDEN ON 17 JULY 1984 ABOUT 'IMMIGRATION'.

'WHY ARE YOU HERE?' IS THE QUESTION THAT I AM MOST OFTEN ASKED. Today. I would like to share with you some of my reasons for and experiences of coming to England.

The contents of this brief piece of writing are as follows:—

- i) My Background;
- ii) Why I came to England;
- iii) Anti-Irish Feelings Towards Me;
- iv) Conclusions: My analysis Of My Experience.

## i) MY BACKGROUND

I was born in Drummin, a village just outside of Westport, County Mayo, in the West of Ireland. I have five brothers, four sisters and two adopted sisters. I left school at the age of fourteen – I wanted to stay on at school as my ambition was then to become a school teacher, but my parents could not afford to send me to college at that time. I went to work in a shoe factory for a year where I earned £2 a week. After that I moved to Westport (the town) to work as a nanny as I wanted to work with children. I lived in with the family and worked from 8am to 8pm – for £2 a week!

At the age of seventeen I felt that there were no opportunities for me to earn a decent living and that I had no choice but to come to England. Dad gave me the boat fare and £10 to keep me going until I found a job. I came to Slough, Buckinghamshire, as that was where most of the people from my part of the country went to, or so I had heard!

## ii) MY ARRIVAL IN ENGLAND

I arrived in Slough and immediately began to look around for a place to stay as that was my main priority at the time. I can remember that day so well: I had a lot to take in. I went around looking at the notice boards and eventually found a room in Windsor. The next day I went looking for work, and found a job in a factory making Mars bars!

I had a lot to get used to in this strange country. There were big houses, trains, zebra crossings, traffic lights... and lots of people from all over the world. I was ill equipped mentally for this experience.

## iii) ANTI-IRISH FEELING TOWARDS ME

I never knew the English hated us (the Irish!) *I did not hate them!* I could not understand the hostility I received – I was not prepared for it. For example, I constantly had to listen to people telling me how thick and stupid the Irish were. I was always told – and was made to feel – that I was different. The jokes on the telly and everywhere reinforced this negative attitude. I felt isolated, and seriously thought about going back home.

In fact I did go home, and stayed there for a month, but I was disappointed to find that I was a stranger there. People treated me very differently because I had been to England. I returned to Slough and worked there for a period, then went to live in Henley in Oxfordshire. In the late 1960s I moved to London. This was about the time of the Civil Rights Movement in the North of Ireland.

It was in Battersea, South London, that I came up against the strongest anti-Irish feelings. I used to go to a certain paper shop/post office, the only one in that area. The English woman who served there was very rude to me. Every time I went there to buy a paper or a stamp, she told me I should go back to my own country. 'Enock Powell was right:' she used to say 'the bloody Irish should all be sent back!'



By this time I felt anger, hate, frustration, and laughter, all at once. I had now been in England for about three years.

I met and married an English man but to my dismay I found that his attitudes about the Irish were in no way different to those of the shop keeper.

Possibly the most awful memory for me was then I had my daughter Claire in hospital. There was a young woman from Limerick in the same ward as myself. We both gave birth to our daughters on the same day. The young woman kept herself to herself and talked a lot to her baby. The night before we were due to leave the hospital the nurses came and took her baby away. The woman cried and I went to console her and asked her what the problem was. She told me that she had come over from Ireland to have her baby and that she was going to have her daughter adopted. She had told her parents that she was just coming over for a holiday. Once she had signed the adoption papers she was going back home to live. She felt she had no choice but to give her baby away as the father of the child did not anything to do with her, and her parents – because of their up-bringing – would not understand her pregnancy. I, as an Irish woman, understood the feelings of this woman, and up to this day I feel an anger inside me about the awful experience that young woman had encountered. I think of that woman often and I feel strongly that this is one issue that we Irish should be looking at.

What support does a woman in such circumstances get? Is genuine support and counselling given to young women who have to leave their country because they are pregnant?

When Claire was six months old, I decided to do community work. I got involved with a community centre in Balham, South London, and was eventually offered a job there. That was ten years ago, in the days when white middle-class English women were 'doing their bit for the "poor" '. I felt very much the 'tokenist' worker there: I was Irish; I was working-class, and I was the local mum. I was therefore supposed to relate to all the working-class people and to bring them in to the centre. I was 'on show' for the councillors and trustees whenever they came to visit the centre, and I was introduced to them as the 'local working-class mum'.

No one ever allowed me, or thought of giving me, the opportunity of discussing my experiences of being an Irish woman in England. When I did try to explain the differences between me, and them and other English working-class people, I was told that I had 'a chip on my shoulder'. I remember once that I wrote a note to my co-worker – she was English – and she remarked to me the next day that she found it difficult to understand what I had written, as it was 'written all back to front'. I challenged her on this but she just laughed at me.

I began to believe that maybe I *did* have 'a chip on my shoulder' and that maybe I could not write. I became less confident at writing articles for the news letters and reports I had to produce.

I applied for, and was accepted on, a two-year community work course at Goldsmiths College in South London. I was very scared to write my essays, but my tutors and the two community workers at the Albany Centre where I had done my placements encouraged me with my writing.

I was the only Irish person on the course. I found that whenever discussions were held, Irish topics were never covered; it seemed that everyone assumed that we were the same as the English. I asked – and fought – for Irish issues to be put on the list of discussion topics. Eventually I got my space and we (as a group) did two half-day projects on the Irish experience.

Before I conclude, I want to say that now I am a single parent *and* an Irish woman, I am just discovering that whenever I mention the word 'divorce' to Irish people, they tend to steer clear of me. My family are unhappy about my situation so therefore feel unable to offer me any support. I understand them when they ask that I should keep quiet about my life when I go home, but I also feel cheated by not being allowed to have the freedom of choice to live *my* life in the way that suits *me* best. Being an Irish single parent is a new experience for me, but I am sure there are a few of us about; maybe we should get together and support each other?

#### iv) CONCLUSION: ANALYSIS OF MY EXPERIENCE

I conclude now with a quote from a woman I met on a train some time ago. She came from Cork, and has lived in England for thirty years. She said 'Sure we (the Irish) are all over the world. Immigration is our fate. I married an English man – that does not make me any less Irish. England is my home now. That is where my family are. All my children have grown up and are married here. I cannot go back'.

I would also like to end by saying that if I had stayed in Ireland, I would never have to think about being Irish. My experiences in England have taught me that I am Irish first and I am a woman second. I am no longer shocked at how ignorant the majority of English people are about our culture. I went to Morocco in North Africa last year, and I was impressed by how much the people *there* knew about the Irish and Irish politics!

Although I was born in Ireland and I 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.



## SHOBHAN McNALLY TALKS ABOUT THE WAR IN THE NORTH AND HOW IT AFFECTS IRISH WOMEN HERE



WHEN TALKING ABOUT EMIGRATION FROM IRELAND IT IS NECESSARY TO LOOK AT BOTH PARTS OF THE COUNTRY SEPARATELY. While there are reasons for emigration which apply to Ireland as a whole there are also factors unique to Northern Ireland.

I would like to talk about how what is happening in Northern Ireland leads to emigration of northern Irish people to places like Britain and also how the situation in Northern Ireland affects Irish emigrants in Britain.

Britain has a long history of colonial oppression in Ireland. Britain colonised Ireland and this colonial relationship goes back hundreds of years: however I am only going to go back as far as the 1918 election and the formation of northern Ireland in 1921.

In the 1918 general election Sinn Fein won 73 out of 105 Irish seats in the British parliament. These representatives boycotted Westminster and set up the parliament of the Irish Republic (Dail Eireann) in Dublin. Britain outlawed both Sinn Fein and the Dail which resulted in war between the Irish volunteers and the British Black and Tans. In 1921, a narrow majority of members of the Dail voted to accept a peace treaty with Britain which resulted in the formation of an Irish Free State i.e. 26 of the 32 counties of Ireland had political independence within the British Empire: the other 6 north eastern counties of Ireland were partitioned off into a 6 county 'statelet' with a parliament at Stormont, Belfast.

The statelet, called Northern Ireland, was created by GERRYMANDER in order to ensure a permanent protestant, loyalist majority. The boundary was specifically drawn to exclude the Ulster counties of Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan where Catholics were a majority. A Unionist state was created which was an unviable political and economic entity. Its industry depended on British capital and the link with Britain was seen as vital to its economy. The majority of British industry was situated in the ports of Belfast and Larne (in two counties which had Unionist majorities – these were less investment in industry in areas which had Catholic majorities, such as Derry City, and the counties of Fermanagh and Tyrone). The majority of industry was controlled by Ulster Protestants/Unionists who did not want to lose their privileges in an independent 32 county Ireland and, obviously, Britain had a vested interest in keeping Northern Ireland under its control. While Britain held economic control, political control was held by the Unionist government at Stormont: although Britain still ruled Northern Ireland, it was not by direct rule. Sir James Craig was elected as its first Prime Minister and out of 52 seats the Unionist party held 40, the Nationalists 6 and Sinn Féin 6. However, the self-government of Northern Ireland was limited as the Stormont government had no control over foreign policy, customs, defence etc.

It is obvious that from the start Northern Ireland was an unviable political state which was unable to be governed. There was a large Catholic minority within it who were not prepared to accept a Unionist government.

There was/is no consensus – the opposition (i.e. Nationalist/Catholic) party could/can never hope to obtain power – it was/is effectively a one-party state based on sectarianism, bigotry and Protestant privilege. Neither was/is it a democratic state in terms of its structures (a one-party monopoly): its aims (the preservation of Protestant privilege) or its laws which criminalize all opposition. In 1934 Craigavon said 'we are a Protestant parliament and a Protestant state'.

In such a state the Roman Catholic minority was discriminated against. This minority was opposed to the creation of Northern Ireland, so Britain and the Stormont government decided to silence any political opposition to the state by the introduction of special emergency legislation. In 1922 the Special Powers Act was brought in which allowed for the total suspension of civil liberties, arrest without charge or warrant, the placing of civil and military powers in the Stormont Minister for Home Affairs and the creation of an armed sectarian police force, the 'B' Specials which was used to suppress Catholics. The S.P.A. remains to this day in the forms of the E.P.A. (Emergency Powers Act). The fact that an officially created state with a artificially created majority of Protestants has had to be maintained by the suppression of the Catholic minority and the oppression of this minority by special legislation proves just how unstable Northern Ireland really is.



Catholics in Northern Ireland have suffered discrimination since its creation. They have been denied access to good education and jobs, decent housing and, until recently, votes in local elections – in effect they have been denied civil rights. This came about through the gerrymandering of political boundaries which ensured a Unionist majority on local councils. These councils were responsible for discrimination against Catholics: more and better housing was allocated to Protestants: job promotion was denied to Catholics: only householders could have a real election vote and housing policy ensured that very few working class Catholics were householders. So it was a vicious circle – if Catholics couldn't vote in local elections then Unionists got elected all the time and even if they had had a vote the boundaries would have been gerrymandered anyway. It was working class Catholics who suffered the most. All of this was backed up by state violence and special legislation. The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) which grew up in the 1960's, peacefully demanded civil rights for Catholics only to be met with state violence at the hands of the 'B' Specials: most Northern Irish Catholics have suffered under this sectarian force.

I am going to concentrate on what is happening to the working class Catholic community in N.I., especially the women. The level of poverty and economic deprivation in this community is terrible and this is not helped by the fact that we have to live through an imperialist war every day. The war in N.I. is the most important thing affecting peoples lives – the national question overshadows everything.

Britain responded to demands for civil rights by bringing in the British Army to N.I. in 1969. But it was in the Catholic areas such as West Belfast that huge army forts were built and thousands of armed troops were put on the streets. Catholics were arrested without warrant or charge – they were picked up off the streets by the army or dragged from their houses at all hours of the morning at gunpoint. In 1971 internment was introduced – hundreds of Catholics, mostly men, but including some women, were lifted and interned without charge or trial. A lot of the women, in these communities, having their families forcibly broken up, began to politicize, and they became active in relative action committees and other political groups. Catholic women in areas like West Belfast, which are mostly Catholic, suffer from the military oppression of the British army, The Royal Ulster Constabulary (R.U.C.) and the Ulster Defence Regiment (U.D.R.), as well as from extreme poverty and high levels of unemployment. However, Catholic women who live in working class Protestant ghettos of East Belfast don't have to put up with military presence but they do have to put up with threats from Protestant paramilitaries, sectarian beatings and killings (such as the Shankill Butcher murders): many are intimidated and/or burnt out of their houses. There is no sense of community or belonging for these Catholics. The bigotry and sectarianism of some working class Ulster Unionists can never be underestimated – they think they are British and they have a 'siege mentality' which comes from a fear that they are going to be sold out to the Irish Republic and be consumed into an Irish state – they are also afraid of losing whatever privileges they have.

Therefore, Catholics living in their communities suffer intimidation and threats and extreme alienation – many are less well off than Protestants and will not get jobs in these areas. Another frightening development is the close links that some elements of the working class Protestant community have made with fascist organisations such as the National Front in Britain.

N.I. is a sectarian state and its working class is divided. Even though it is a Catholic/Protestant division the problem is not religious. When N.I. was created it was to safeguard Unionist/Protestant privileges – the sectarianism was based on economic considerations. However, because of its history, religion and politics are closely linked. This has led to the churches having immense power in both parts of Ireland. Roman Catholicism is seen as having repressive attitudes towards women, but in Northern Ireland the Protestant churches, particularly free Presbyterianism, are equally, if not more, puritanical. Whilst the National Question remains unsolved, the churches will continue to have such a strong ideological hold. People will identify with a particular religion in N.I. and defend it because it represents a certain political standpoint rather than a religious one. This situation makes it extremely difficult to make changes in laws which are oppressive to women.

People therefore emigrate from N.I. for many reasons. For many it is the political situation which forces them to leave – for others it is this and other reasons, such as being gay/lesbian, or an unmarried mother. Many go to Britain. In 1974, 16,000 people, both Catholic and Protestant, emigrated from N.I. – 60% were Catholic, 40% were Protestant. Northern Irish people who emigrate to Britain have to put up with appalling racism, (Protestants are seen as Irish even though they think they're British) even though after World War Two Britain actively encouraged the Irish to emigrate. The reason for this was that Irish people provided cheap labour to build up the country after the war: they were also expected to assimilate.

The racism Irish people experience in Britain comes directly from the colonization and imperialist oppression of Ireland by Britain. While the war in the North continues, anti-Irish racism will continue. Irish people will continue to be seen as 'terrorists' and political suspects etc.

The most oppressive thing affecting Irish people in Britain is the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) which is used to intimidate and harass the Irish community. This act was brought in in 1974 and is a direct consequence of the war in the North. Under the PTA Irish people can be arrested and held for up to seven days and can also be deported and excluded from Britain. The PTA makes Irish people afraid to become involved in any political work around Ireland and most of us have to live in fear that we are going to be arrested. Irish people have to speak out against the PTA and also against British imperialism in the North. While the war in the North goes on Irish people in Britain will continue to suffer the consequences. However, this is not the only reason for condemning British imperialism in the North. Irish people have to condemn what Britain is doing to people in Ireland.

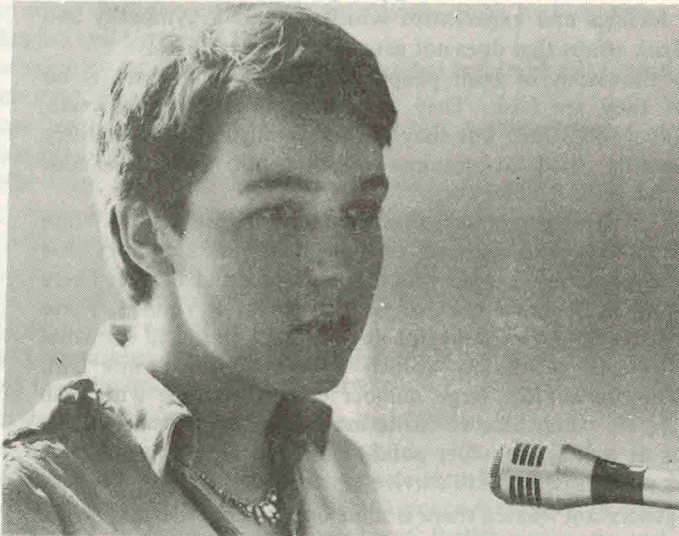


Obvious allies in our fight against racism in Britain, are Black people who have a common history of colonization and consequently suffer from the racism of the British state and British people. The forms of racism both communities suffer is very different but what is important is that racism in Britain is not just a black/white issue and that racism will continue as long as colonialism continues. Irish and Black women in Britain should be making links and looking at colonialism. Ireland has never colonized another country — it has been a colony and all anti-racists and anti-imperialists should be trying to end colonization in Ireland as well as in other countries.

Although Irish women make up 51% of the Irish community in Britain, we are often extremely isolated within this community. As well as being isolated within our own communities we are also isolated in British society including the British Women's Movement, where we have to put up with the racism of British feminists who try to portray the National Struggle as a male struggle and deny the importance of that struggle for Irish women. Many Irish women in Britain have been slow to challenge this ignorant denial of our reality. As a working class woman from the North who was brought up Catholic in Belfast, I think it is time that more Irish women started to speak out about what is happening in N.I., and I ask the women at this conference to attack the cause of the problem — which is British imperialism — as well as its effect such as racism and emigration.

I also feel it is important that Irish women have come together at this conference to actually talk to each other about our politics and what we can do about the problems facing us in all areas of our lives. This is the first conference of Irish women in Britain and it is a sign that not only are we making links with each other but also that we are becoming more confident in asserting our identity in British society.

## AND CLAIRE KEATING ON THE POSITION OF SECOND GENERATION WOMEN



WERE IT NOT FOR THE ECONOMIC AND MILITARY EXPLOITATION OF IRELAND BY BRITAIN, THE MANY THOUSANDS OF 2ND GENERATION IRISH PEOPLE WOULD NOT BE "SECOND GENERATION". We would be Irish. Ireland is unique in Europe as being the only country with a smaller population now than in the late 1800's.

The systematic waves of emigration to Britain from Ireland have been a clear result of British economic and military exploitations of Ireland.

The children of immigrants who came to Britain to serve the British economy or to escape repression are caught in a bizarre situation. We have some choice to escape from the reasons that made our parents' generation leave Ireland. We are also aware, though, that to escape repression as Irish people in England, we have to actively participate in an English society and things Irish. This is the context in which we are looking at the situation of being 2nd generation Irish women living in a hostile country with over 800 years of active attempts at domination of Ireland.

The whole business of being "of Irish descent" means many things to many people.

To Ronnie Reagan it is an emotional homecoming or blatant electioneering depending on your point of view.

For some of us, it is something that is forgotten about as often as possible and to some others, it brings a serious culture clash between the values and aspirations of an older generation versus those of our own generation. For others again, it is a clear source of identity — mixed in with a feeling of being Irish inside and with the English wrapping paper outside of an English accent.



For all of us, there exists the potential of experiencing anti-Irish discrimination — an Irish name is enough to trigger off many anti-Irish attitudes and sections even if we are seemingly English.

We may have feelings and experiences which give us a sympathy and understanding of Irish affairs that does not get reflected in our lives.

For the many thousands of Irish people living in Britain there is no question but that they are Irish. They may have lived here for years, reared children and worked here but they are still immigrants to a country which has consistently tried to dominate Ireland but which has also consistently benefited from Irish labour.

The children of an Irish parent or parents are not. We are mostly White ostensibly British and can avail ourselves of that privilege in a country that discriminates so heavily against people who are not white and British. There are large numbers of black people born of an Irish parent or parents. These people do not have the opportunity to opt out of direct racism in the same way that we white 2nd generation women do. The largely white Irish community does not reflect the large number of black people with Irish family connections. We would like to make more links with black women with Irish families as well as the wider political links between repression of the Irish and Black peoples' struggle to survive in this racist society.

For white 2nd generation women there is some opportunity to avoid much direct anti-Irish hostility by assimilating into English society. The price of this blending into English society is either to leave all things Irish behind — as something that is an embarrassing legacy or leading a family split life, mixing with distinct sets of people — the Irish community — and the rest. The advantages are massive in material terms. It is easier to get a job, participate in the social security system, the health service and soon if we do not have the constant pressure of knowing that participation in anything will be tinged with hostility because we are Irish.

The pressure on women to assimilate is much weightier than it is for men. In general, it is women who register children in schools, deal with health visitors and doctors, social workers and the rest. Men are more likely to have Irish networks of workplaces and pubs to reinforce their Irishness.

For women also, the traditional way to climb the social scale is through a marriage. For Irish women marrying English men, the relationship is likely to reflect his job, his family and his culture at the expense of the woman's. While this is often the case in marriage — that the man's values and ideas are the dominant ones, it is particularly harsh when it means that the woman's identity has to be blotted out.

For working class women, the pressure of anti-Irish feeling is compounded by hostility to working class people generally in society. If working class women assimilate with British society, they have one less obvious oppression to contend with.

Our parents had a clear experience of immigration. We were all brought up to remember it, or to forget it – but somehow to know about it as a basis for why we are here.

For some 2nd generation it is an experience to be forgotten – we are now English and better off for it.

For some of us, it is a looking back at what had to be left behind in order to come over the water to earn a living.

Some parents keep the whole experience to themselves – and some children do not want to know.

While there are clear material advantages to assimilating into British society there is also a high price to pay. Self-silencing and assimilation, enable us to function more easily in British society for some, but more dangerously it gives Britain a chance to feel confident that while her policies of trying to control Ireland have never worked that it is easier to quell troublesome Ireland's off-spring in Britain.

The generations of people of Irish descent living in Britain, who have silenced their Irishness because of overwhelming hostility to Irish people only give in straight to Britain's assumption that "British is Best".

We want to reclaim the part of our identity that is Irish for our own understanding of our lives, but also restate that Britain does not, never has had and never will have any right to dominate Ireland or to oppress those people forced to leave Ireland because of British economic and military policies. We do not want to be party to the frightening level of silencing our understanding – personal, political, and historical of Ireland and our Irishness.

We are part of the broad Irish community in Britain and we want to relate our experience and understanding of being from an immigrant family to the wider struggles against poverty, racism, oppression of women and the colonial domination of Ireland by Britain.



THE ENTIRE CONFERENCE THEN SPLIT UP INTO SMALL GROUPS TO DISCUSS OUR EXPERIENCE OF EMIGRATION FOR 1½ HOURS: SOME GROUPS CONSISTED OF FIRST GENERATION WOMEN ONLY: OTHERS OF SECOND GENERATION WOMEN ONLY, AND ONE GROUP HAD A MIXTURE OF FIRST AND SECOND GENERATION WOMEN. THESE GROUPS THEN REPORTED BACK TO THE CONFERENCE THE ISSUES THEY HAD COVERED IN THESE MEETINGS.

## FIRST GENERATION REPORT

In all the workshops women discussed their reasons for leaving Ireland. Irish women come to England for many, many reasons, which is in itself an indication of our diversity e.g. class, age, religion, and whether we're from the north or the south. It became clear that there is not an homogenous group of Irish women immigrants.

Many women left to find work that was/is not available at home. Just as many women had social reasons for leaving. Unmarried pregnant women leave Ireland to escape social pressures, as do many lesbians. Others leave because of the political situation in the North.

In most workshops it was acknowledged that it is hard to identify a single reason for leaving, especially when the whole tradition and history of emigration makes it easier for us to go anyway, without clear-cut reasons.

Talking as we were about immigration, we inevitably discussed our reception on arrival, or more generally – English attitudes to us.

During the '60's, the English Left talked about Bolivia or Vietnam, while Ireland was not of as significant. These Irish were subsequently silenced. Today there is a tacit acceptance that there is an 'Irish issue', especially regarding the North. Some English do go further than merely acknowledging an 'Issue' exists (some do not...) and take up the 'Issue' because it is trendy to do so. Men and women in the Left and women in the Women's Movement can gain credibility for being seen to take an interest in the Irish Question.

Anti-Irish racism is rife within the Left and the Women's Movement. A few Irish women felt that some English were sincere in trying to take on their racism, but the need for us to be cautious was expressed.

Even in the Left the onus continues to be on us to justify/explain a London bombing (e.g. Harrods), rather than for them to justify/explain centuries of oppression.

Many English people adopt a patronizing attitude towards our language – 'it's so quaint' – but become hostile when we try to express our Irishness and separateness. The English react to us in a very oppressive, stereotypical way, which leads many of us to suppress our Irish identity. There is a lot of pressure on us to shut up and assimilate. In the meantime, England still refuses to note our different cultural background, e.g. Irish culture is rarely included in 'multi-cultural' events.

Apart from these two dominant themes, many other ideas came up. Most women felt they would return to Ireland at some stage. Some women felt guilty for 'escaping'. A few commented on the pressure on us to be successful over here. Some women felt it was important not to underestimate the opportunities available here.

There was a general feeling that we wanted to explore many of these issues further.

## SECOND GENERATION REPORT

Among the three groups of Second Generation Women a common experience became apparent, these were reflected in a feeling of being outside English and Irish society, not fitting into either or simply not being able to choose which to belong to. Some smothered their Irishness under pressure from their parents to integrate into British Society. Yet others were encouraged to be Irish; this diversity of experience was reaffirmed throughout the morning workshops of Second Generation.

Education in Britain also presented a dual expectation; many parents of second generation Women believed education to be very important, yet for many women it meant a double life — one of being Irish at home and English at school. It was felt that Catholicism played a large part in our education, many had gone to Convent schools and there came across the attitude that being Irish meant being Catholic.

Some Second Generation Women acknowledged that through their middle class accents they can gain attendant benefits of middle class employment. This coincided with the feeling of our accents being in the voice of the oppressor, which firstly raised the question of how do we deal with it and secondly how do first generation women accept us, given our accents. From one of the groups a suggestion arose that first and second generation women should meet to discuss these issues.

When Second Generation Women are confronted with Anti-Irish Racism we have the choice of whether or not to challenge that Racism. We feel that more work needs to be conducted on this issue.

Overall the Conference was seen as a very important Landmark, especially as it opened up space for Second Generation Women to discuss their position in British Society. We all hope to return to the Conference next year and be more vociferous.



## MIXED GROUP REPORT

The discussion was marked by a diverse range of opinions on several issues raised. With regard to an area directly affecting both 1st and 2nd generation women, some felt that it was crucial to nurture and sustain the interest in Irish culture in their children. Others were dubious about blind allegiance to Irish culture merely because it was Irish. Certain aspects of Irish traditions were not considered necessarily beneficial traits to pass on to future generations. On a similar note, some women stressed the importance of forging strong supportive links with the wider Irish community in England, whilst others, mindful of their experiences of oppression in Ireland, and their subsequent forced escape to England, were reluctant to participate in an oppressive social structure that had been carried/imported from Ireland and replicated within the Irish community here.

On the reasons for immigration, common factors included the search for employment, the escape from family constraints and the search for what was considered a more relatively liberated life-style and society. Having arrived in England however, the difficulty in finding suitable employment was recognised, this difficulty being compounded by communication problems. Though English was the mutual language, the usage of words and the different meanings assigned to those words, created barriers and confusion. The pressure to temper regular religious practice, which had been a way of life in Ireland, but viewed with suspicion in secular English society, also hindered adjustment and generated stress for some.

Finally, one woman emphasised that once here, regardless of race, religion or politics, it was important to maintain one's identity and to stand up as an individual in defence of one's belief.



The Conference then broke up again into smaller groups to discuss specialised topics:

**IRISH WOMEN AND MENTAL HEALTH**

**NATIONAL QUESTION (2 groups)**

**ADOPTION, ABORTION AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS**

**EDUCATION OF IRISH CHILDREN IN ENGLISH SCHOOLS**

**TRAVELLING WOMEN**

**ALCOHOLISM**

**MEDIA**

**TRADITIONAL IRISH MUSIC**

**IRISH LESBIANS (2 groups)**

**HOUSING**

**GROWING OLD IN BRITAIN**

**WOMEN AND WRITING.**

Each group then reported back to the entire conference what they had talked about in these groups.



## WOMEN AND MENTAL HEALTH WORKSHOP

The high incidence of mental breakdown amongst Irish women was recognized and the discussion revolved around identifying the reasons for this trend. The problem of identity – whether to express it or suppress it – was regarded as an important element contributing to breakdown. Modes of behaviour accepted as ‘normal’ in Ireland – gregariousness, openness, being emotionally expressive – could be misinterpreted in England, thereby leading to confusion, conflict and stress. Many women on leaving Ireland, no longer enjoyed the emotional support of the family. Once in England, their isolation made them more vulnerable to stress and more easily susceptible to mental breakdown as a result of this pressure. It was proposed to establish a mental health group.

## THE NATIONAL QUESTION

The discussion on the extent of oppression in the North. It was felt that Unionist bigotry was very underestimated and that the techniques of oppression against the Irish Catholic community were becoming increasingly sophisticated and continually mystified by the media. Women also talked about the impact of the Strip Searches. Certain links were identified between Unionism, Fascism and the NF (National Front). The issue of class in relation to the North was also discussed. With regard to the rest of Ireland women felt that many in the South were uninterested in the problems in the North and the question of unity. On past record the South showed little concern or support for those in struggle in the North.

Finally, the relationship or balance, between Nationalism and Feminism was raised. What is/should be the role of women in the National Struggle? While it was felt that many women underestimate the importance of the national question, it was also acknowledged that the republican organisations underestimate the importance of women's struggles. It was felt that regular discussions about women and the national question should be held at the London Irish Women's Centre when it is established.

## ADOPTION, ABORTION AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

The work of the Irish Women's Abortion Support Group was discussed. Women needing abortions in Ireland learn of the IWASG via Dublin agencies. On arrival in England they are met at the airport or train station and given a place to stay with one of the women in the group. It was felt that the Group needed to be more widely publicised. On the effects of abortion it was felt that the long term impact was often ignored. For years women still lived in fear that they would be found out.

There was discussion around the pressures facing women in Ireland — the difficulty in getting contraceptives and the lack of choice with regard to sexuality. As everywhere, contraception where it existed, was seen as a women's responsibility. 'He' was let off the hook. In England, if you are Irish, you are assumed to be Catholic and therefore assumed to be anti-abortion.

On adoption, women felt that counselling of prospective parents was insufficient and inadequate. The difference between English and Irish law was noticed e.g. with regard to the adopted child, tracing the mother, and the fact that children born within marriage cannot be adopted and therefore adopted children carry the stigma of illegitimacy.

## EDUCATION OF IRISH CHILDREN IN ENGLISH SCHOOLS

The English curriculum, school books and other materials lacked any, or inaccurate information on Irish culture or History. Existing material tended to be written and presented from a glorified imperialist perspective that failed to acknowledge/admit the consequences of imperialism on the colonised. The group were unanimous in demanding more books and educational material that reflected Irish culture, recognised the Irish community in England and that gave voice to anti-Imperialism.

## WORKSHOP ON TRAVELLING WOMEN

The travelling women who had been invited to the conference didn't arrive, nonetheless, the women who had met with the travelling women discussed the issues that had come up at the meeting with the travelling women the previous week. They told us about the hostility of both the English and the Irish community towards them. They said that in fact Irish Travellers in England were received more sympathetically by the English than by their common Irish citizens. The Travelling women felt that the Irish in England, by striving to gain advancement, 'respectability', acceptance and approval within English society, denied any common bondage with the Travellers and continued to divorce themselves from this separate, though Irish, community. To associate with, or support the rights of Travelling people, tainted their self-assumed image of 'respectability'. The Travelling women mentioned particularly the hostile attitude of Irish landlords and shopkeepers in England. In contrast, English landlords rarely denied them access and they were not turned away from English shops. Talking about the Travelling community itself, the women said that a recent trend in the last 2-3 years was a steady increase in broken marriages. This was unusual and rare in the past. More of the travelling women had become aware of their rights to benefits and assistance through the DSS and Local Councils. They had become less dependent on the men Travellers, some choosing to leave and get council flats. In terms of getting room on the good Council sites, the English Travellers were invariably given priority.



The discussion group urged all Irish women to recognise their prejudice towards the travelling people and to actively and practically help them in their struggle with local Councils for better sites and facilities.

### TRAVEL OR STAY, EITHER WAY THE METROPOLITAN 'POLICE' WON'T HAVE IT

At 12.00 o'clock Elizabeth drove in her car to pick up other Travelling women who were ready to go to the conference. She parked the car at the exit to the site to let the other women in. A 'policeman' told her she was causing an obstruction. She said she would only be a minute. As is routine treatment of Travellers by 'police', her car was checked over, the engine number couldn't be found. Elizabeth offered to go with the 'Police' to her flat where all the documents relating to the car were kept. He refused. By this time five 'police' cars and a bus full of 'police' had arrived. They arrested Elizabeth and took her and her son to the station in the 'police' van full of 'policemen'. We asked if she had been frightened by so many 'police' around and in the van? no? Hassles with the 'police' were an everyday event. She was used to it). Her son got the papers from the flat and took them to the 'police' station. Two hours later she was released. The car was only returned one month later after being cleared. No charges were made regarding Elizabeth or the car.



### WOMEN AND ALCOHOL

The women felt that it was hard for them to talk about alcoholism. In Ireland heavy drinking seemed acceptable. Once in England, women with a drink problem often end up homeless, and because of cultural differences and racist assumptions, it was often difficult to get help, even through the established agencies. The fundamental question arose as to why women ended up drinking so much and it was noted that many in the women's movement also centred their lives around drink. Reasons touched on include the built up stress as a result of being both Irish and a women in England.

## THE MEDIA

All agreed that the basic problem was the blatant and complete misrepresentation of Irish affairs by a powerful and institutionalised British Media. We talked about how to make complaints and get them taken seriously. Two avenues of attack were suggested:

- i) the establishment of a monitoring group to cover TV, radio and newspapers. It was felt that it need not necessarily be a women-only group.
- ii) the active promotion of positive Irish images in the Media.

## TRADITIONAL IRISH MUSIC

Women talked about the attitude of the English to Irish music. One woman told of a group that had been formed in Manchester, who, whilst playing Irish music, described it as 'folk' music. Women felt strongly that the distinction between folk and traditional Irish music was important and should be recognised. The role of Irish music in Northern Ireland was discussed and it was felt that it was of major importance in sustaining their strength in the struggle within a hostile community.

## GROWING OLD IN BRITAIN WORKSHOP

Irish women of all ages, both first and second generation, took part in this workshop. It was an emotional experience of all, as stories were exchanged about the harsh realities of life for Irish women immigrants in this country. One woman, now in a wheelchair after a stroke, spoke about how she felt at not going home since 1949, and another about her life as the mother of 17 children.

But after the personal reminiscences, discussion focused on how the problems facing London's Irish elderly could best be tackled; namely –

**ANTI-IRISH RACISM** – a life-time of being devalued and abused leaves scars. Mixing more with other Irish was seen positively as a way the elderly could retain their identity and self-esteem. Rather than seeing themselves as 'victims' of the racism and ageism, also deeply-embedded in English society, the older Irish could be given support by younger or more active members of the community. They should not be forgotten, but involved as much as possible.

**ISOLATION** – Strengthened unity amongst the Irish community would not only help break down the isolation that many elderly suffer, but would also mean that local councils were forced to take on board all the special needs of the Irish as an ethnic group. That includes facilities like meeting places.

**IDENTITY** – the difficulty of passing down Irish identity from generation to generation was also discussed.



**LOST RELATIVES AND FRIENDS, AND GOING HOME** - High fares were criticized and women spoke about the growing need as people get older to visit Ireland. The Irish Tourist Board has been approached by the Irish in Britain Representation Group on this question, but so far there has been no change. There was a need too, it was said, for people in Ireland to act as contacts for people visiting home after an absence of many years. A system of tracing people dispersed throughout the world by the process of emigration was also much-needed. This caused much pain to Irish elderly facing the prospect of death without the comfort of close friends or relatives around them.

The group was also informed about developments in some boroughs where Irish people were organising for the first time i.e. Greenwich, as well as other places. Applications have been encouraged by the GLC for Irish centres to be set up in different boroughs.

Finally a resolution was passed calling for some sort of working party to be set up to look at the needs of the Irish elderly in London. Women also agreed to call on younger Irish to make themselves more aware of those needs, as much for their own benefit in future years as for today's elderly Irish. It was asked that people make links with less active elderly Irish to enable them to take part more fully in groups and activities.

## **HOUSING WORKSHOP**

Although homelessness is a huge problem for the Irish, it is hard to find any statistics here. Local authorities are not obliged to keep ethnic records, which some women feel is just as well.

Absence of statistics and an unwillingness to acknowledge the position of the Irish with regard to housing, and homelessness makes the problems even more difficult for us.

Irish women who arrive in England are forced into shabby private bedsits. We are usually overcharged and exploited by the landlords. Sometimes these owners are other Irish people. Women often find themselves totally isolated in these rented rooms, and with no knowledge for women who've come from institutions in Ireland (e.g. orphanages).

It remains very difficult for single Irish women to get local authority housing. It's difficult for all single women, but our difficulty is increased by not knowing the system. This is especially the case for women who've come over from rural areas.

A knowledge of housing rights, housing departments and social security is essential. Sometimes agencies seem wilfully obstinate in releasing any of that information. Women said they've found some agencies over-bureaucratic, or hostile, or obstructive.

The existing Irish organisations are not always helpful either. Women

questioned where the resources of some of these groups were going. Women also expressed the hope that the more recently set up Irish organisations will depart from the 'traditional' approach of the more established.

## WOMEN AND WRITING

Most women are reluctant to describe themselves as 'writers' and lack confidence in themselves as writers. Women encounter great difficulties in getting their work published. Women are tentative about writing politically because of the divergence of views. There is silence around Irish women and the class issue.

Our experience is not being recorded and this is evident by the London of material available on Irish women's experience in London.

The results of colonisation have left Irish women with feelings of inferiority about their race, and as women themselves.

Writing can change lives, and we have the example of Black American women writers who are now having a strong influence on many women.

Why aren't Irish women standing up and fighting through the 'supposedly' superior intellectual barriers erected by men and a hostile society. More politicised Irish women writers are needed, and we need a network to support and encourage such writers.

## LESBIANS IN LONDON

Conflict between being 'out' in England and in 'the closet' at home. Ireland oppressive to lesbians, but so was England. Difference being that Catholic Church in Ireland fostered particularly repressive attitudes so, hard to stay in Ireland especially for rural lesbians. A first generation woman felt it hard to introduce lesbians to her mother therefore she did not talk about it. Second generation women romanticise Ireland yet complain about its oppressiveness to lesbians when they go on holiday there.

Irish lesbians find lifestyle here very different and returning home very painful. Lose identity when going home. Reasons for returning home — to see family and retain links. We pay a price to keep those links (loss of identity).

Relationships with English lesbians — Irish lesbians — small isolated group especially outside London. English lesbians sometimes try to make political mileage out of having relationships with Irish lesbians. Such relationships are increasingly fashionable. There is overt and covert Irish racism, but significant differences between working class/middle class English women. Working class women and more prepared to support the struggle of Irish women, to educate themselves on their racism. Links of solidarity need to be forged between Black and Jewish women. Can work jointly on campaigns against deportation, Police Bill.

As Irish women and lesbians we must challenge our own white racism and anti-Semitism. The Catholic Church has very negative attitude to issue of racism. British racists propaganda filters through to the Irish media, encouraging racism in Ireland.



- Previously Irish were the scapegoats, the excuses for unemployment in England, stealing English jobs. Now transition – Black people made the scapegoats.
- Lesbians have little contact with Irish community in England due to their hostility to lesbians. We are invisible in Irish community here, if at work in Irish context we express our lesbianism – this caused hostile reaction.

At work joint oppression – Irish and lesbian. Difficult choice, whether to come out or not.

- Need to join together and become a strong vocal group to fight against anti Irish and anti lesbianism within the dominant culture and the Irish community.
- Also need to share our cultural identity in safe places and combat our individual isolation.
- Irish lesbians – not homogenous group, all classes, north/south, first/second generation, physically challenged/able bodied, mothers/ single etc.
- One-sixth London population = Irish. 5% of that lesbian, as a political group we should demand that heterosexism and anti lesbianism be challenged in all its forms.



## LESBIANS IN LONDON

Most women in group from Dublin. Different experience if we had come out in England or Ireland. Very hard to tell parents. If parents still did not know — had to act differently on holiday, created tension — double identity. Some thought Irish culture made it hard to be a lesbian in London — harder for working class women to come out. In London it is easier because there are more lesbians but there remains problem of isolation due to Irishness. Return to Ireland and be isolated as lesbians or stay here. Which was worst? If on holiday with family revert to role of child. It would be good to have contact with Irish lesbians at home — support. Stay with them rather than family.

Things changing in Ireland — more lesbians though not all politicized. Many women and lesbians left Dublin therefore difficult to force changes.

- Most Irish lesbians have relationships with other non-British women or other Irish. Difficult to have relations with English women because of communication problems. Much racism by English lesbians and in womens movement. Women labelled because of their accent. Our racism different from English racism because we have no imperialistic history. Irony that Irish immigrants to England were originally not welcomed here. Now Irish people join English in racist attitudes to Black people.

Lesbians in womens movement in Ireland find it hard to come out there.

Many women ambivalent towards Ireland. Some still harbour a notion of returning home. Others accept that they're here. Perhaps if women made a more positive decision/attitude to stay here, things would be better.

Important to keep links with Irish Women's Movement on returning to Ireland. Also need for stronger links here. Not just meet at annual conference. Need mutual support.

Also Irish women in England needed to be a part of the next womens conference in Ireland. Even if we live here, don't want to be forgotten, still want to maintain links with Irish women in Ireland.



## BEFORE THE NEXT SESSION TWO ANNOUNCEMENTS WERE MADE:--

1) On 16th June, the day before the conference, an Irish woman, Sabina Sharkey, was elected onto the GLC Women's Committee as an ethnic minority co-opted voting member. Four women from Black and Ethnic Minority groups are voted each year onto the GLC WOMEN'S Committee. This is the first time in the history of the GLC that an Irish woman has been elected. This means that we have a direct representative of our interests on the GLC Women's Committee.

2) The results of the Irish Women's Commission questionnaire which was filled in during the conference have been tabulated and show that an unanimous majority of the women present at the conference voted in favour of setting up a separate Irish Women's Commission which would make representation on behalf of Irish women to the GLC and other relevant bodies.

## RESOLUTIONS:

1) That the Conference accept that the four papers which were presented to the February GLC Consultative Conference with the Irish community by Irish women's groups, be guideline support for the Women's Commission.

Proposed by the London Irish Women's Centre Group.

Seconded by The Irish Women's Abortion Support Group.

The motion was carried.

2) That a series of open monthly meetings be held throughout the year where Irish women give direction to the Irish representative on the GLC Women's Committee and where she reports back on the work in progress on the committee.

Proposed by the London Irish Women's Centre

Seconded by the Irish Women's Abortion Support Group

The motion was carried.

3) Recognizing our common history of colonial oppression, the Irish Women's Conference sends greetings of solidarity to Black Women in struggle throughout the world and in Britain.

Proposed by the London Irish Women's Centre

Seconded by the London Armagh Group

The motion was carried.

- 4) This group of first generation Irish women object to the exclusion of others than first or second generation Irish women from the Conference. We feel that all Irish women identifying themselves as Irish should be included.

Proposed by Pat Finnegan

Seconded by Jean Sommers

The motion was carried by 3 votes.

This was a close and controversial proposal and will be further discussed in the future.

- 5) The London Irish Women's Centre should consult with a solicitor to help the welfare advisor at the Centre on issues such as a) Housing Acts (interpretation) and b) Family Legislation.

Proposed by Sally Mulready

Seconded by Marion O'Keefe

The motion was carried.

- 6) This Conference agrees that the Irish Women's Centre, when established, prioritize and make provision to hold regular discussions on women and the National Question.

Proposed by the Women and Nationality Workshop

Seconded by the London Armagh Group

The motion was carried.

- 7) That the Conference liaise with Feminist Publishers to produce an anthology of first and second generation Irish women's writing.

Proposed by E. Moore

Seconded by Emily Garrard

The motion was carried.

- 8) That the Conference should approach the Irish Post for a Women's Page, to encourage prose, political and fictional writing.

Proposed by Florence McCarthy

Seconded by Carmel Kelly

The motion was carried.



- 9) a. To set up a working group to provide material for Irish input to multi-cultural programmes for children at school and under fives.
- b. To set up a working group to look at ways of promoting positive images of being Irish.

Proposed by Annie Green

Seconded by First Generation Workshop.

- 10) We demand the development of a completely anti-racist curriculum which incorporates the history of British colonialism as from the viewpoint of the colonised. We would like to see books, resources and materials which reflect the experience of Irish people in Britain and aspects of life and culture in Ireland, particularly for nursery, infants and junior children. We recommend that these resolutions be sent to Frances Morrell, Head of ILEA.

Proposed and seconded by the Education of Irish in English Schools Workshop.

The motion was carried.

- 11) That this Conference

- a. recognizes that being lesbian is not a luxury and that we are not a homogenous group and that this Conference acknowledges that many of us face oppression through being Irish, lesbian or working class, or in some cases, all three.
- b. supports and recognizes the need for Irish lesbians in London to form themselves into a group to make contact with each other and with Irish lesbians in other parts of Britain.
- c. recognizes the importance and necessity of Irish lesbians and all Irish women setting up dialogue with and establishing stronger links with
  - i. Black women
  - ii. Jewish women.
- d. recognizes the vital importance of Irish women working to challenge our white racism and anti-semitism.
- e. recognizes that Irish lesbians must strengthen ourselves in our particular struggles as lesbians and Irish women and in doing so, consolidate our strength and sense of identity.

Proposed and seconded by The Irish Lesbians in London Group.

The motion was carried.

- 12) We call on this Conference to set up a working party to look at the needs of the Irish elderly in London and see how these needs could best be met in the future.

Also we call on all younger Irish people here to make themselves more aware on a personal and public scale of the needs of the Irish elderly. All of us will grow old — it is for all the community's benefit. Make an effort to make links with Irish elderly, help pensioners to get out and about, to join up in groups and to become involved in groups and centres for the elderly (pushing for better access at the same time).

Proposed by the Growing Old in Britain Workshop

Seconded by same

The motion was carried.

- 13) That a contact list of women be set up for Irish women either from different parts of Ireland or different parts of London, so that women living here will not be isolated. Also that the Irish Women's Centre should act as a first contact for women arriving in Britain and should give both practical, ideological and emotional support.

Proposed by Collette Cullen

Seconded by Caroline O'Shea

The motion was carried.

- 14) That

- a. Irish women acknowledge our prejudice towards travelling people and take steps to support travelling women.
- b. Irish Women's organisations put pressure on their local councils to provide facilities and sites for travellers.

Proposed by Eithne O'Flynn

Seconded by Ellen Reynolds

The motion was carried.

- 15) That a further Conference be organised to look specifically at the question of how we want to express ourselves and be seen as Irish women, given the differences or religious background, class, sexuality and generation that exists amongst us. Also, that discussion groups be organised from this Conference so that discussion on this issue can be started at once as a preparation for that Conference, in addition to discussion groups on any other topics which have come up at this Conference.

Proposed by Jean Sommers

Seconded by Joanna O'Brien

The motion was carried.





The motion was carried.  
Sponsored by Thomas D. Jones  
Introduced by John Zappone



## SCLEIP NA hOICHE

After our day of sharing and discussion the ceilidhe filled the evening with celebration. Elaine, Adrienne, Rebecca and Mary provided the music while Dorothy called the dances. Mary and Patricia sang along with countless others and the merriment could have lasted the whole night long.

NACH MBEIDH SI RO-FHADA NO GO MBEIDH<sup>MUID</sup>UILE LE  
CHEILE ARIS.



**IRISH WOMEN'S GROUPS  
INVOLVED IN PLANNING  
THE WOMEN'S CONFERENCE 1984**

1. **GRAINNE MHAOL** is a GLC Women's Committee funded Irish Women's publication group and we seek to delegate duties at the IWC in February. Marie McAdam, 2 Boscombe Road, London W12.
2. **IRISH WOMEN'S HEALTH GROUP** meeting for 10 months. Has 10 women at present.  
Aim: to work round health issues that particularly affect Irish women; want to promote greater awareness of health issues among Irish women; and intend to produce and distribute information leaflets, hold regular open meetings on health, e.g. depression, mental illness and alcoholism, and set up self-help groups.  
Brid Greally.
3. **SOUTH LONDON IRISH WOMENS GROUP** — recently formed to examine socio-economic and cultural aspects of women brought up in Britain in Irish backgrounds. To date, initiated discussion on 1) absence of any Irish input into education, 2) prevent racism against Irish in Britain and how second generation women experience it, 3) analysing experience of Irish immigration to Britain, 4) problems arising from a highly secular society and our highly religious upbringing. In future, hope to get more involved in Irish language and culture, as more classes available.  
A. Godfrey, 2 Colenso Road, London E5.
5. **IRISH LESBIANS IN LONDON** — is an active social and support group meeting over the last 10 years. Membership has never dropped below 50 women; liaise with Dublin branch of Liberation for Irish Lesbians.  
Eilis Stanley, c/o 44 Langham Road, London N15.
6. **IRISH WOMENS ABORTION SUPPORT GROUP** — gives practical and emotional support to Irish women coming to England for abortions. Meets once a month.  
John Neary, 7 Marriot Road, London N4.
7. **STRIP SEARCH CAMPAIGN**  
A Roche, c/o A Womans Place, Hungerford House, Victoria Embankment, London WC1.
8. **LONDON ARMAGH GROUP**, c/o 52-54 Featherstone Street, London EC1.
9. **LONDON IRISH WOMENS CENTRE GROUP**, Cabin Y, 25 Horsell Road, London N5.

## NEW GROUPS EMERGING FROM THE CONFERENCE

**Irish Images in the Media**  
Eileen Grogan – 445 5145

**Another Irish Lesbians Group**  
Eilis Stanley – 881 0983

**Irish Women in Mental Health Group**  
Brid Greally – Caxton House, St. John's Way, N.19, 263 3151

**Second Generation Irish Group**  
c/o DEptford & Lewisham Women's Centre  
74 Deptford High Street  
Deptford, London SE8 – 692 1851





## APPENDIX I

THE FOLLOWING ARE PAPERS PRESENTED TO THE GLC CONSULTATIVE CONFERENCE WITH THE IRISH COMMUNITY IN FEBRUARY 1984 BY IRISH WOMEN'S GROUPS.

### IRISH WOMEN DISCUSSION PAPER

THIS PAPER HAS BEEN PREPARED BY THE LONDON ARMAGH CO-ORDINATING GROUP FOR DISCUSSION AND DEBATE AT THE IRISH CONSULTATIVE CONFERENCE ON 12th FEBRUARY 1984, IN RESPONSE TO THE DEBATE AT THE LAST CONFERENCE THAT THE NEEDS OF IRISH WOMEN WERE NOT HIGHLIGHTED AND THAT THE SERIOUS OMISSION NEEDS TO BE REMEDIED. The Conference accepted the need for Irish Women to present their own case.

### THE PTA

There is a large Irish community in Britain which is prevented from being politically active by the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). The PTA is used effectively by the British Government to harass Irish people here and to keep them silent. There is no need for this Act as the majority of the people arrested are released without any charge. Between 24.11.73 and 31.12.82 5,638 people were arrested in Britain under the PTA and out of this only 86 were charged and found guilty. The PTA is another form of British oppression and is a direct result of the war in the North of Ireland — it is used both in the North and in Britain to oppress and harass Irish people.

The situation in the North is important to Irish people here — they suffer under the PTA just as people in the North do. Also, there are many Northern Irish people in Britain who have left home to escape the military and economic oppression caused by the British Government. Ironically, they come to the land of their oppressor because it is here that there are more chances and more job opportunities. Britain has colonized the whole of Ireland and reduced it to the status of a third world country. Its most effective form of repression in the North is the military. Irish people here should oppose what Britain is doing in Ireland; they should condemn the use of plastic bullets in the North, which have killed young children, and the shoot to kill policy of the RUC.

### WOMEN

however, women are continually written out of the struggle in the North. We want their contribution recognised. Irish women have suffered under the  
40 military and economic oppression caused by the British presence in Northern

Ireland. Yet, they have fought back, both politically and socially and for years have been prominent in the struggle — organising themselves in Relatives Action Committees, Relatives Against the Show Trials and in grassroots tenants groups to campaign against the appalling conditions in which they find themselves.

We specifically want a condemnation of the treatment of Republican women prisoners in Armagh Gaol and call for the end of the degrading strip searches carried out on these women. Irish women are sexually harassed on Armagh Gaol and in Detention Centres such as Castlereagh. They have also been abused in Britain in Paddington Green Police Station, where they have been held after being picked up under the PTA.

We want Irish people in Britain to condemn this abuse and degradation of Irish women by the forces of the British Government and to recognize the part played by women in the struggle in the North.

We have to see that the racist and oppressive laws used against us in Britain are the same as those used in the North to silence political action and harass Irish people. Britain keeps us in a state of fear — fear of being arrested and deported back to Ireland, — fear of being picked up as a suspected terrorist felt by Irish people travelling back and forward to Ireland. We must therefore, condemn the PTA and its effects both in Britain and in Ireland.

We endorse the proposals in the Political Discussion Paper and add further proposals at the end of this paper.

## IMMIGRATION

One of the major difficulties in considering the Irish Community in Britain has been and continues to be that we see “taking the ferry across the water” as part of the natural course of events. We come or came in search of work, a better life, the bright lights or whatever. We see ourselves as living here temporarily, eventually to return home. However, most of us do not return home and it is only after 20–25 years that we accept that we are here to stay. This contradiction means that we frequently do not see ourselves as immigrants. After all how can we be immigrants if we do not envisage staying in Britain. However, the size of the Irish Community and the contribution that it has made over the years means that we must have stayed in large numbers.

The treatment we have received in this country is epitomized in the stereotypes of the Irish as “Paddies”, “Bog Irish” and “Pigs”. While on the one hand Britain has eagerly recruited Irish labour — both men and women — to take up low paid, low status and “dirty” jobs, at the same time we have been met with hostility. In the face of this hostility, and on account of failure to identify as a distinct immigrant group, we have been willing to integrate. Unfortunately, only realising belatedly that integration was not on offer, we have largely assimilated.

This is particularly relevant for women and second generation Irish people. It is worth noting that Irish immigration to Britain is unique in that since the early 1930's 1% more Irish women immigrated to Britain than Irish men. This despite the stereotype of the “Irish navy”.



Women who are forced out of Ireland by conservative attitudes find themselves in the position of being exiles from home and from the Irish communities here. For the children of Irish parents, a whole series of conservative attitudes seem part of an Irish identity — restrictive contraception, hostile images of homosexuality and colour prejudices. None of these attitudes are in themselves essentially Irish. Unfortunately for many women and second generation Irish people, the impression exists that to be part of the Irish community one has to adopt a whole series of conservative attitudes.

Against this, however, attitudes in Ireland have been changing more rapidly than in the Irish community in Britain. so that more recent immigrants are appalled by these attitudes which are frequently upheld to be "true" Irish characteristics. However, there is nothing admirable or worth retaining in an attitude which sees Irish people as being superior to black people. There is nothing praiseworthy in that thousands of Irish women come here for abortions, these women are as Irish as anyone else and are entitled to our care and support.

From RTE Radio discussions it is clear that Ireland has as large a homosexual population as any other nation. However, it is not uncommon for an Irish gay person to be verbally and physically assaulted after attending an Irish event and to be castigated for "not being Irish".

Therefore, if we wish to have a broadly based representation conference, to present a solid Irish voice, we must encourage the participation of Protestants and of people who do not go along with the teachings of the Catholic Church in relation to abortion, homosexuality and contraception. At the same time we do not deny the contribution of the Catholic Church in certain areas of welfare work, but we stress that if this Conference is to be broadly based representative of the Irish community, it must have a secular base.

## PROPOSALS

1. This Conference calls on the GLC to condemn the sexual harassment of women, especially in Armagh Gaol, Castelreagh Detention Centre and Paddington Green Police Station.
2. This Conference calls on the GLC to condemn and demand an end to the strip searches in Armagh Gaol.
3. This Conference agrees that Irish women's contribution to the struggle in the North be recognised.
4. This Conference accepts that Irish people in Britain should acknowledge the relevance of the struggle in the North.
5. This Conference condemns and calls on the GLC to condemn the Prevention of Terrorism Act.
6. This Conference accepts that all strands of Irish society should be harnessed to oppose the PTA.
7. This Conference condemns the Police Bill as a new device that can be used against black people, Asians, trade unionists, political activists, anti-nuclear campaigners, etc., as well as Irish people.
8. This Conference accepts the need for the Conference and its commission to have a secular base.

## IRISH LESBIANS IN LONDON

THIS PAPER HAS BEEN PREPARED BY THE IRISH LESBIANS IN LONDON GROUP. The issues raised in this paper are for discussion at the Irish Consultative Conference, 12th February 1984.

There was no such paper presented at the Conference last year not because there was no Lesbians in London Group but because the organising committee had failed to include ANY representation from Irish Women. An Irish Conference which excludes the views of Irish Women specifically can never be truly representative of Irish people living in London, and it just serves to highlight the blatant sexism of Irish Political Movements in this country. The Irish Lesbians in London group is here at the Conference this year as part of a larger group of women delegates representing different womens' organisations. We consider it timely that the Conference has accepted the need for Irish Women to speak of their oppression as women at such an event.

The Irish Lesbians in London Group was set up in 1974:—

1. To give practical and emotional support to Irish Lesbians living in London.
2. To provide a forum for Irish Lesbians to come together to overcome our isolation both as Irish women and as Lesbians.
3. To be a link between Irish Lesbians in London and Irish Lesbian Groups in the Republic and in the North of Ireland.
4. To give support and strength to our struggles against Anti-Irish racism, homophobia and sexism.
5. To form ourselves into a identifiable group to pressure the Irish community into recognising our existence firstly, secondly our oppression as Irish Lesbians living in London and thirdly the ways in which the Irish community itself participates in that oppression.



Coming to England has long been a no option choice for Irish Lesbians given the highly antagonistic attitudes towards Lesbians in Ireland. This coupled with employment needs drives Irish Lesbians to this country. However high unemployment and anti-Lesbianism and heterosexism are not the sole monopoly of the Irish at home. The same conditions prevail in this country for Irish Lesbians compounded by blatant anti-Irish racism in all its overt and covert forms. The attitudes of the Irish community towards Lesbians are... "you ought to be ashamed of yourselves" ..."you're perverted ..."you are not Irish". These attitudes are reinforced by the Catholic Church's teachings and are, in turn reflected in the way Irish Lesbians are made to be invisible by the Irish community. However, the Irish in London represent one sixth of the total population. 5% of whom are Lesbians, according to accepted statistics. AS Lesbians, whether we are young, old, Lesbian mothers, disabled, working class, middle class etc., WE EXIST AND WE ARE NOT going to go away!!!! We are a sizeable group and we demand to be recognised. As Irish women, we refuse to deny our Irishness, to bend to the constant pressures to assimilate. As Lesbians, we challenge heterosexism in all its forms.

## PROPOSALS

1. We call on this Conference to firstly, recognise the existence of Irish Lesbians and to secondly acknowledge that we are oppressed and discriminated against as a group because we are Lesbians.
2. We call on this Conference to challenge anti-Lesbianism within the Irish community.

THIS PAPER HAS BEEN PREPARED BY THE LONDON IRISH WOMEN'S CENTRE FOR DISCUSSION AND DEBATE AT THE IRISH CONSULTATIVE CONFERENCE ON 12th FEBRUARY, 1984.

## IRISH WOMEN SPEAK OUT

THE IRISH ARE THE LARGEST ETHNIC MINORITY GROUP IN LONDON AND MORE THAN HALF ARE WOMEN. Yet, until now, Irish women have been silenced, within the Irish community as well as outside it. It is, of course true that many of the needs and aspirations of Irish men and those of 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.

Some Irish people feel they have left Ireland by choice, but many feel they have been forced to leave, e.g. to seek employment. This is common to men and women, but the special needs of Irish woman can clearly be demonstrated by looking at some of the additional pressures on Irish women (which do not apply to Irish men), forcing them to leave Ireland; and by considering the added difficulties women face when they arrive in London.

In rural areas, land is passed on from father to son, therefore the possibility of inheriting land is very slim unless a woman has no brothers. If a woman wants to stay on the land, marrying into it is the only alternative open to her. Even when there are no brothers in the family, a woman's inheritance depends on her finding a suitable farmer/husband. To many women this choice, or rather, lack of choice, is unacceptable.

Again, many single mothers, who, for one reason or another, find themselves on the fringes of Irish Society, outcasts in their own country, come to England hoping to find people with similar aspirations to their own.

What is the reality when we arrive? Looking for work and living accommodation are the first problems, as they are for Irish men. BUT Irish women 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.



For Irish women, unless we have relatives here, it is a much harder battle — because there are no known or 'understood' places for Irish women to go to get support and help from each other and because there are no Irish women contractors willing to employ other Irish women. The search for a job and living accommodation has to be undertaken alone.

As we all know, it takes a long time in London for Irish people to find their feet. We are confronted with different accents, a different culture which either ignores or despises ours, plus all the added shock of being in a huge and alienating city. But men at least have their pubs to go to where they can often meet other Irish men in similar situations to themselves. But pubs are still very threatening places for women to go to, especially alone.

Again, a lot of organised social events in the Irish community are geared towards couples — the single woman is not catered for and Irish women, in common with Irish men, are discriminated against in areas such as housing, employment and under the law, because of the prevalence of anti-Irish racism. But Irish women also face discrimination on the grounds of their sex i.e. in the social security system and employment because of the deeply rooted sexism in this society.

Many of these areas overlap, and Irish women may find themselves losing a job or being brow-beaten by the health or legal system because they are Irish and women.

Coming to a political awareness of what it means to be Irish in England is sometimes very slow and painful because of the different types of racism Irish people face here. Blatant anti-Irish racism is intimidating and frightening and designed to keep us quiet and invisible, but the more subtle 'hidden' racism — like our culture and differences being ignored, e.g. in the education system and the media, and the very fact that anti-Irish racism is often not recognised as existing, even among so-called 'enlightened' people, is just as damaging, pressurizing us to 'forget' our culture and to fit in and conform to British culture.

Over the years the Irish in London (and all over the England) have got together to work around issues affecting ourselves — issues like the Prevention of Terrorism Act, anti-Irish racism, the war in the North of Ireland, Irish culture etc. All of these groups have women as well as men involved, but in all these groups the great majority of members are men.

We would like all the groups attending this conference to consider the reasons for this. It is not because women are incapable of or have no natural interest in organising politically or getting involved in community groups. This is obvious when you look at the hard work and commitment of those women who are involved in your groups. It is because women have traditionally and consistently been denied access to this sphere of life. It stems from the deep-rooted sexism in our society, whereby women are thought of as being there to serve and service men inside the home, not to work alongside them outside of it.

If the groups present at this conference seriously reject and want to challenge these attitudes, then we would ask them to re-examine the structure and ways of operating of their own groups to see how they might be discouraging women from becoming involved and further, to actively encourage more women to get involved and to take practical steps to make it possible, e.g. holding meetings at times more convenient to women with children and providing creche facilities for all meetings as a matter of course, so that women with children are not automatically excluded from attending. What is needed is positive discrimination in favour of women, and a radical change in men's attitudes.

The history of sexism is a long one – it goes back ever further than British imperialism, and we can see what effect that has had on the Irish psyche – and this deep-rooted sexism will not be defeated by any half-hearted tokenism towards women. This is not something that can be put off until after the revolution – we want to see changes now.

Groups can actively demonstrate their commitment to encouraging more women to become actively involved in this field so ensuring that Irish women's groups have adequate representation on the three commissions being set up by this conference (political, cultural and welfare), and by agreeing to a separate Women's Commission being set up in the future, if Irish women decide they want one after they have come together at an Irish Women's Conference to discuss this and other matters.

For some time now, Irish women have been organising autonomously to work around issues affecting Irish women in London – issues largely ignored by other Irish groups e.g. OUR HISTORY – so little of which has been recorded because of the presumption by male historians that the history of women is unimportant; ABORTION – an issue that affects thousands of Irish women; OUR EXPERIENCE OF BEING IRISH AND LIVING IN LONDON; THE EXPERIENCES OF SECOND GENERATION IRISH WOMEN; CAMPAIGNING AROUND THE REPUBLICAN WOMEN IN ARMAGH JAIL; THE EXPERIENCE OF IRISH LESBIANS IN LONDON.

The London Irish Women's Centre was set up to provide a focal point for individual Irish women and Irish Women's Groups to meet. The Centre will provide help, support and information to Irish women on subjects such as: welfare rights, the law, contraception, abortion, health issues etc, and will promote the interests of Irish women in London by campaigning around these areas and against the double discrimination Irish women face.

The Centre hopes to have a library and resource centre. It already runs classes in Irish music, language and dancing for Irish women, and holds regular social/cultural evenings where Irish women can relax and enjoy live Irish music in a supportive atmosphere.



We would ask this Conference to recognise the fact that Irish Women's Groups – 14 of which are present at this Conference – make a valuable contribution to the needs and aspirations of a largenumber of the Irish population in London.

However, the work Irish Women's Groups have begun is only touching the tip of the iceberg. There is much to do. There is a great need for Irish women from all walks of life and all political persuasions to come together to identify our needs and our expectations, and to develop a stronger voice for ourselves.

We want to have a conference for Irish women in 1984, and we are going to ask the GLC to fund it. We will use this conference to explore the many issues affecting Irish women in London, e.g. the needs of single women; married women at home; single mothers; women working outside the home; elderly women; rural women; second generation Irish women; women from N. Ireland. Irish women's health issues; cultural activities and education; women's art, writing and music; sexism within the Irish community and tackling it; our history as Irish women; imperialism and its effect on our lives; abortion; religion; mental health; homelessness; alcoholism; Irish women's involvement in the commissions being set up at this Conference, and the possibility of a Women's Commission.

We want all groups present to recognise the need for a conference for Irish women, and to support our application to the GLC Ethnic Minorities Committee to fund it.

## RESOLUTIONS

1. This Conference recognises that those elements of the Irish community that organise outside the predominant Catholic perspective – like the Irish Women's Groups at present at this Conference – make a valuable contribution to the needs and aspirations of a large number of the Irish population in London.
2. This Conference recognises the need for a conference for Irish women in London and urges the GLC to fund such a conference.
3. This Conference recognises that Irish women are doubly discriminated against – because of their nationality and because of their sex – and urges the GLC to take account of this in their policy and funding initiatives.
4. This Conference agrees to a separate Women's Commission being set up (in addition to the 3 already proposed) if the Irish Women's Conference requests it, and that the officers of that Commission will be elected at the Irish Women's Conference.
5. This Conference accepts that Irish women have been largely excluded from fully participating in the political life of the Irish community and urges all groups present to take firm action to encourage and enable Irish women to become actively involved in their groups.

THIS PAPER HAS BEEN PREPARED BY THE IRISH WOMEN'S ABORTION SUPPORT GROUP FOR DISCUSSION AND DEBATE AT THE IRISH CONSULTATIVE CONFERENCE ON 12 FEBRUARY 1984.

## IRISH WOMEN'S ABORTION SUPPORT GROUP

ACCORDING TO OFFICIAL STATISTICS TEN WOMEN A DAY COME TO ENGLAND FROM IRELAND FOR ABORTIONS, BUT THE ACTUAL NUMBER OF WOMEN WHO COME IS PROBABLY HIGHER. The decision to have an abortion is never easy, and for women who live in Ireland it is even more difficult. For them it is illegal, expensive, and involves travelling to a foreign country. For many women it is their first trip here and a daunting experience. In addition most women do it. Without telling either family or friends, for them it has to remain a well kept secret for the rest of their lives.

The Irish Women's Abortion Support Group (IWASG) was set up in

- 1) To give practical and emotional support to Irish women coming to London for abortions.
- 2) To offer solidarity to pro-abortion campaigns in Ireland.

IWASG is co-ordinated by a small group of women who meet on a regular basis. This group is responsible for policy making, contacting relevant organisations here and in Ireland e.g. agencies through which women are referred, collecting information about the abortion clinics to ensure that the women who use them get the best deal possible, fundraising, liaising with Release, specifically the abortion worker there who acts as a contact person for referral agencies and individual women in Ireland and the women in the IWASG group.

There is a larger group of women who provide practical support, like meeting women at the airport or station, providing overnight accommodation and accompanying women to the clinic etc. This is organised on a rotating basis. Women (one or two each week) go on the rota for a week at a time and during that time are prepared to provide whatever support the women who come need.

IWASG has no money apart from what the group manages to raise through fund-raising activities. Money is used for publicity and to subsidise those women who find themselves short when they get to London. Because of our limited resources, financial and woman power, we can only offer support to a limited number of women.

Although our activities are mainly orientated towards women currently resident in Ireland, we feel that these issues are important ones for the Irish in Britain. While successive Irish Governments are prepared to export what they see as 'problems' Irish women are forced into coming here to have abortions and dealing with the resulting alienation. It is important that we do not ignore these issues and the realities of many women's lives, it is therefore necessary that we take them up in both political and practical ways.



## RESOLUTION

We therefore ask this Conference to support the welfare aspects of the activities of the Irish Women's Abortion Support Group, acknowledging that abortion is an important issue for Irish women.

If you would like further information contact us at:

IWASG

c/o Release

1 Elgin Avenue

London W9.



The following are some Irish organisations and Irish Women's organisations in London:

London Irish Women's Centre,  
Cabin Y, 25 Horsell Road, London N5. (temporary address)  
59 Stoke Newington Church Street, London N16 (permanent address)  
Tel. 609 8916

Irish Women's Abortion Support Group,  
c/o London Irish Women's Centre, or  
c/o Comer Street Women's Centre, Cromer Street, London N1.

London Armagh Group, c/o 52/54 Featherstone Street, London EC1.

Irish Women in Islington Group, c/o (temporary address) 25 Horsell Road,  
London N5.  
Tel. 609 8916 (will be moving to new premises).

Women's Support Group,  
c/o Camden Irish Centre, Murray Street, London NW1.

Irish Women's Commission,  
c/o Maeve Wilkins, 38 Sutton Road, Muswell Hill, London N10 1HE.  
Tel. 883 0384

Irish Lesbians in London,  
c/o Eilis Stanley, 44 Langham Road, London N15  
Tel. 881 0983

Camden Irish Centre,  
Murray Street, London NW1  
Tel. 485 0051

Irish in Islington Project,  
Caxton House, St John's Way, London N19  
Tel. 263 3151

Battersea and Wandsworth Irish Committee,  
177 Lavender Hill, London SW11  
Tel. 350 0661

Waltham Forest Irish Project,  
181 Hoe Street, London E17  
Tel. 520 4789



**Irish Cultural Commission,**  
76/82 Salisbury Road, London NW6 4NU  
Tel. 624 3158

**Irish Political Commission**  
c/o Camden Irish Centre, Murray Street, London NW1

**Irish Welfare Commission,**  
c/o Camden Irish Centre, Murray Street, London NW1

**Irish Welfare Bureau**  
55 Fulham Palace Road, London SW6

**Brent Irish Advisory Service,**  
c/o Irish Cultural Centre, 76/82 Salisbury Road, London NW6 4NU  
Tel. 624 9991

**Irish in Britain History Group**  
c/o Maureen Hartigan  
76/82 Salisbury Road, London NW6 4NU

**Haringey Irish Association,**  
72 Stroud Green Road, London N4  
Tel. 272 7594

**Irish Video Project,**  
c/o Ken Lyham, 26 Boscombe Road, London W12  
Tel. 740 8223

**Green Ink Writers Group**  
c/o Pat Reynolds, Camden Irish Centre, Murray Street, London NW1

**Irish Images in the Media Group**  
c/o Eileen Grogan  
Tel. 445 5145

**Second Generation Irish Women's Group**  
c/o Deptford & Lewisham Women's Centre  
74 Deptford High Street, London SE8  
Tel. 692 1851

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