

report
of the
second
London
Irish
women's
conference

september
1985

ERRATA:

We would like to apologise for the following errors in this Report:

CONTENTS PAGE: The Anti-Imperialist Ex-Protestant Women Paper is on page 31.

BACK COVER: Please note that the address of the London Irish Women's Centre is
59 Stoke Newington High Street London N16

contents

INTRODUCTION

Welcome Speech by Dorothy Fergus ~ page 3

SPEECHES

Margaret O'Neill ~ page 4

Máire O'Shea ~ page 4

LIVING IN ENGLAND DISCUSSION GROUPS

Discussion groups for First Generation Irish Women Only ~ page 8

Discussion groups for Second Generation Irish Women Only ~ page 10

Discussion groups for First and Second Generation Irish Women ~ page 10

THEATRE, VIDEOS AND EXHIBITIONS ~ page 11

AFTERNOON DISCUSSION GROUPS

Raising Children ~ page 12

Contacts between Ireland and England ~ page 12

Ex-Catholic Women ~ page 12

Anti-Imperialist Women from Protestant Backgrounds ~ page 12

Women and the National Question ~ page 13

Women and the National Question and The Prevention of Terrorism Act ~ page 13

Growing Old in Britain ~ page 13

Sexism in the Irish Community ~ page 13

Housing ~ page 14

Social Services and Irish Women ~ page 14

Sexuality ~ page 14

Racism ~ page 14

Class ~ page 14

Irish Lesbians ~ page 15

Irish Women's Writing ~ page 15

Women with Disabilities ~ page 15

Education of Irish Children in British Schools ~ page 15

Media ~ page 15

Travellers ~ page 16

Irish Women's Abortion Support Group ~ page 16

Mental Health ~ page 16

Alcoholism ~ page 16

REPORT ON RESOLUTIONS ~ page 17

PRESS CUTTINGS ~ page 20

RESOLUTIONS ~ page 22

PAPERS

1. National Liberation and Feminism in the Six Counties ~ page 24

2. Irish Women — Housing and Homelessness ~ page 27

3. On Women in Ireland ~ page 28

4. Letter from Ella O'Dwyer from Brixton Prison ~ page 29

5. Racism — Anti-Semitism ~ page 30

6. Anti-Imperialist Ex-Protestant Women ~ page 28

7. Social Services and Irish Women ~ page 32

8. Camden Irish Pensioners Group ~ page 33

9. Being Second Generation Irish ~ page 34

10. The Dublin Well Woman Centre ~ page 34

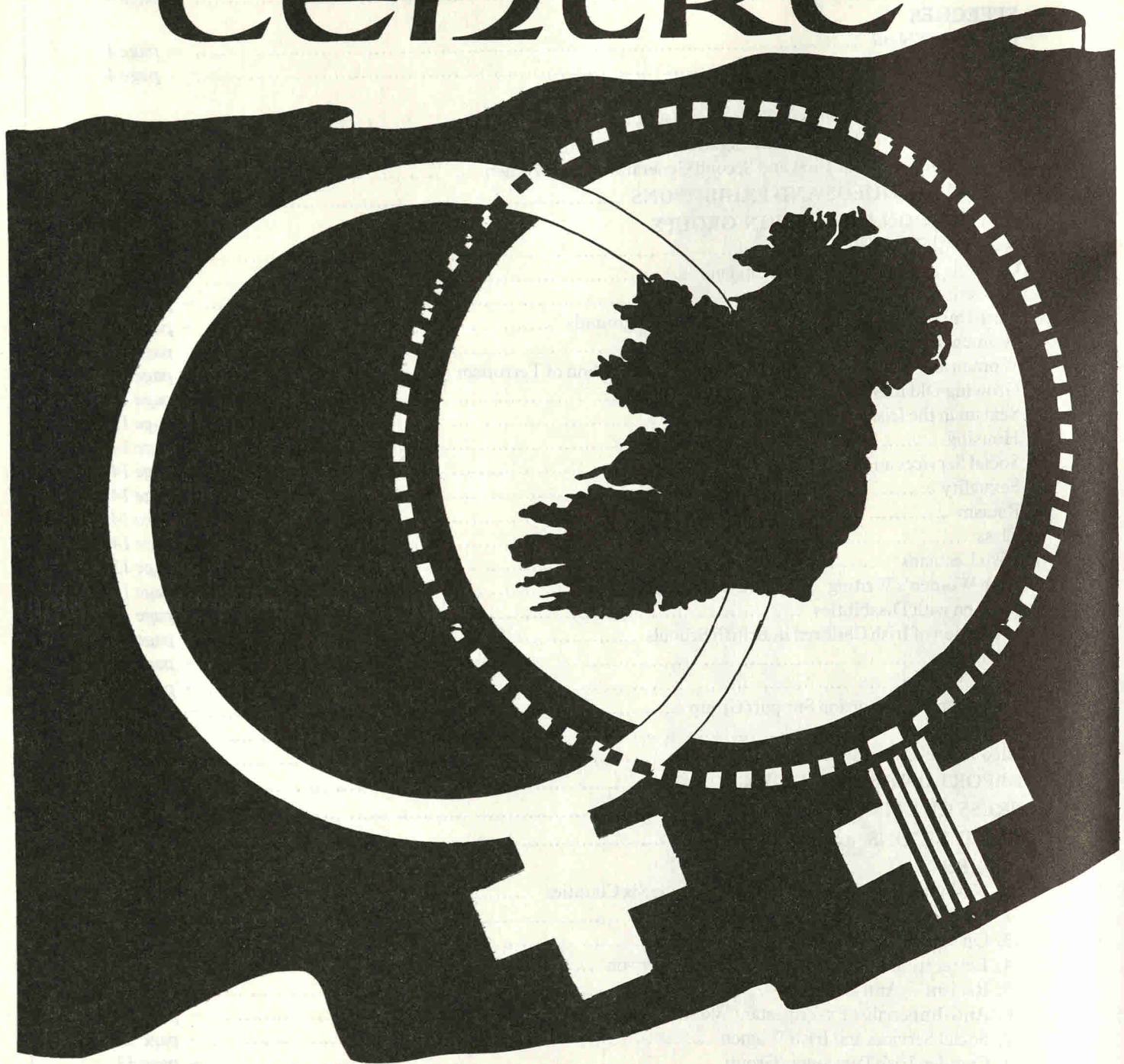
11. Letter to the Conference from Dublin ~ page 36

CREDITS AND CONTACTS ~ page 38

IRISH WOMEN'S CULTURE ~ page 40

All Photographs by Joanne O'Brien of FORMAT Photographers

LONDON IRISH WOMEN'S centre



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írish language,
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welfare advice and information,
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introduction

On Saturday 21st September 1985 more than 300 Irish women came together at Caxton House in North London for the Second London Irish Women's Conference, the theme of which was "Living in England". Dorothy Fergus, from the London Irish Women's Centre, gave everyone a warm welcome in Irish and English and started the Conference off by tracing the progress and setbacks Irish women had experienced over the past year since the first Irish Women's Conference in June 1984.

Past conferences held in the Irish community in London including the GLC Consultative Conference with the Irish community had been male-dominated affairs which ignored the specific needs of Irish women. Then the London Irish Women's Centre insisted on delegate representation for Irish Women's Groups at the GLC Consultative Conference with the Irish Community in February 1984. The First Irish Women's Conference in London followed in June 1984 — the main theme of which was "Our Experience of Emigration". That Conference brought together over 200 Irish women from all different backgrounds. It was a very moving and positive experience for all of us and we resolved to make it an annual event. (A report of the June '84 Conference is available from the London Irish Women's Centre).



Dorothy Fergus, from the LIWC opened the Conference. She described our achievements both here and in Ireland since the first Conference in June 84, like the growth of many new groups and of Irish Women's Publishing, the strengthening of networks and the solidarity with other peoples in struggle, e.g. as shown by the Dunnes Stores strikers in Dublin. She also traced the setbacks we have suffered like the continued harassment under the Prevention of Terrorism Act and pointed out the urgency of being able to maintain, strengthen and diversify our culture so that it is relevant to our lives over here in 1985.

WELCOME

Beannacht uirthi, a chairde agus tá fáilte romhaibh isteach anseo inniu. Is é seo an dara comhdháil ar feadh mná Eireannach i Londáin, agus tá súil agam go mbainigh sibh tannadh as. Tá alán ábhair chun scrudaigh againn san comhdháil seo. Beidh muid in ann caint, comhrá agus díospóireacht a dheanamh faoi na h-ábhair is mó tabhachta duinn, agus in ndeireamh na lá, tá súil againn go mbeidh muid in ann bia a bhaint as an chaint, mara deirtear. Go rabh maith agaibh.

Hello and welcome to the Second Irish Women's Conference to be held in London. The theme of this Conference is "Living in England", but we hope it will be just as relevant to those Irish women living in Scotland and Wales.

In this Conference we hope to bring together the varying experiences of the multitudes of Irish women living here. In doing this, we hope to acknowledge our accomplishments as Irish women, strengthen the campaigns with which we are already involved and examine in depth the situation we find ourselves in, so that we can move on with renewed strength to greater achievements.

Developments since our First Conference

The past year has been an important one for us. In Ireland the Kerry Babies Tribunal, the deaths of Ann Lovett and her sister, the Eileen Flynn case and the attempts of the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child to close the Well Woman Centre and Open

Line Counselling have all served as attempts to undermine our strength and confidence as Irish women.

In England, Ella O'Dwyer and Martina Anderson have been subjected to strip-searching and constant harassment in Brixton Prison, and Máire O'Shea is still out on very tentative bail. The GLC has been dismantled, with serious consequences for women, and particularly serious consequences for us, as well as black and other ethnic minority women.

But many positive things have happened in the last year as well. It is hoped that the strike by the Dunnes Stores women will result in an agreement that none of the major supermarket chains, who account for 99% of retail sales in the Republic, will handle South African goods. The strikers have proved an inspiration to us all.

We also had the growth of women's publishing in Ireland and the many welcome new books which that facilitated. And during International Women's Week, we had the pleasure of having Macalla over here — an all-women ceili band, who played for us.

Last year's Conference, which grew out of an awareness of our oppression, and the acknowledgement of our continued struggle against that oppression, heralded a very busy year for us. As well as continuing ongoing struggles, we have been at the forefront of many major campaigns. Some of these, which have started in the past year, and which are contributing to the betterment of Irish women's situations here, are: Irish Campaign against Racism in the Media, Irish Women's Mental Health Group, Irish Women's Media Group, an ex-Protestant Women's Group, a Radio Users' Group and many local-based groups. Information is available at this Conference on many of the campaigns or groups which are of relevance to Irish women.

The work of the Irish Women's Centre and the combined efforts of all the Irish women's groups in London have ensured that we have a higher profile now than ever before. Through this work, many broad-based community groups, pensioners' groups, women's groups and the general Irish community have become more aware of our existence, if nothing else.

Being Irish in England

But what about ourselves? In our struggle to fight racism and sexism, we may not have had the chance to examine our own identity. How much have we allowed ourselves to become stereotyped, not only by the outside world, but by ourselves? Do we, as Irish women living in England, reflect the diversity of our backgrounds, or are many of us conforming to a set idea of what being really Irish means?

Because over here we feel cut off from our roots, do we romanticise Ireland and refuse to explore the painful aspects of being Irish? What are the positive aspects of living in England? And, tying in with the romanticisation theme, have some of us assumed an Irish identity without having direct experience of what being Irish means? Who are the role models for second generation Irish women?

While maintaining links with women in Ireland and acknowledging the necessity for strengthening those links, have we acknowledged the very real differences in our situations? How have those differences affected us as Irish born and second generation Irish women? Have we been able to maintain, strengthen and diversify our culture so that it is relevant to our lives over here in 1985? And is there a particular Irish women's culture, or is it necessary to create one?

As well as these issues, there are practical ones which face us here, like poverty, poor housing, unemployment, sexism, heterosexism, ableism. We hope we will be able to explore these issues, and look at how the struggle in the Six Counties has progressed, and the campaign against the P.T.A. over here. We shall also listen to women's stories and direct experiences. We hope that this will be an enjoyable and constructive experience for everyone here, and that it will be of some benefit to Irish women living in England.

speeches



Rae Dowds and Brid Boland from the London Irish Women's Centre chaired the first part of the Conference and introduced the two guest speakers — Margaret O'Neill and Máire O'Shea. Margaret told the Conference of her horrific experiences while being held under the P.T.A. and of the awful long-term effects it had. Máire O'Shea, who was being charged under the P.T.A. talked about her experiences of living in England over the past 30 years. (All the charges were dropped against Máire in early 1986.)

MARGARET O'NEILL, a second generation Irish woman, then told the Conference of her first-hand experience — not just of the horrific ordeal of being lifted and held under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (an Act which allows the police to harass & terrorise the Irish community in England) — but also of the awful long-term effects that such an experience causes.

Psychological Torture

"I was arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act in 1981, along with about 13 other people. We were detained for seven days, in which time they tried to pin conspiracy charges on us. During the actual detention period they tried to break us down by various means. They usually tried to break you down by trying to find your weak point — for instance, I was married at the time, and they threatened both me and my husband with being excluded — one to Northern Ireland, which is where my husband came from, and me to being excluded to England, and also informing the para-militaries that we had informed on them, so that we would be dead fairly soon after we were released, if we didn't give them the information that they wanted.

This had a fairly bad effect on us and on the other people who were actually being detained. One person I know who was being detained at the time — he was taken out into a park and had his handcuffs taken off, and told he could walk away if he wanted. He said 'No thank you', as the Special Branch had guns and he didn't think it would be a good idea. So what they try to do when you are being detained is break you down. They try to make you feel very degraded — for instance, you don't get a clean change of clothes; you get interrogated at odd hours — you don't know what time it is; you have things like shoe laces taken away, so it's difficult to walk about in your shoes; you can be interrogated at any time in the whole 24 hours and it's a psychological sort of pressure.

Long-term Effects

When I came out, my husband had found the experience very traumatic, and he started to go paranoid. He started to think that what the Branch had been telling him was true, because part of what they tell you is that they're going to get the para-militaries to kill you, and he started to think this was true, and started distrusting everybody. And basically he started thinking if you were Irish, then you were part of the para-militaries and were going to kill him. And if you were British, you were part of the Special Branch and were going to kill him. This escalated and escalated until eventually he

also thought that, although he knew that I had been detained along with him and we'd both been held for seven days, that I also was trying to kill him — that I'd been trying to poison him. And as a consequence he started beating me up very violently, so that I had to leave him. Otherwise, I think he probably would have killed me because he wasn't really responsible any more for what he was doing.

And this ended ultimately with his death about a year ago. People aren't too certain as to whether he died or whether he committed suicide because he was found at the bottom of a block of flats. But he had tried to commit suicide on two or three previous occasions, and so therefore it seems quite likely that he did, in fact, commit suicide. But as I say, there is no actual evidence of this. Nobody saw him jump, and he could have slipped.

Since we were detained my husband never recovered. He did go into a mental hospital for a short stay, but he discharged himself and he always felt that his previous friends were either trying to kill him or would do something to him, and he had no trust left in anybody, not really even in his own family. His mother told me that he would sit there muttering to himself.

Campaign against the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

As for getting over being detained — it takes a long time. Once you're out, you still feel very drained for quite a while afterwards. You find yourself distrusting everybody, looking over your shoulder, inspecting people to see whether they've got shiny shoes (in case you don't know, that means they're probably police) and various things like that. You wander, you keep looking over your shoulder to see if you're being followed, and in fact, I am followed on various occasions and I feel very wary about taking up political work again because I know that since I've started taking up political work, my phone has been tapped, my post has been detained, and I feel that I am just simply a target. So it makes me very wary about the whole thing, and these are some of the consequences which the Act is designed to produce — it is designed to stop people from participating in Irish politics, and therefore I feel it is very necessary to get an effective national campaign which works consistently. It'll have to be over a number of years — nobody is going to say it's going to be managed overnight, but which works effectively to make sure that the P.T.A. is abolished and that it doesn't just slide through in another form — for instance the Police and Criminal Evidence Bill has used parts of the P.T.A. in that people can be detained, I think it is for up to 36 hours, before seeing a solicitor — before being allowed access, and it is in these methods that the P.T.A. will remain unless we are vigilant. And we have to ensure that not only is the P.T.A. abolished, but that it isn't allowed insidiously to become part of the Police State that Britain is very fast becoming."

Our last speaker was DR MAIRE O'SHEA. Máire is a psychiatrist and lives in Birmingham. She was born in Dublin and has been living in England and been active in Irish community politics here for over 30 years. She is one of the latest victims of the Prevention of Terrorism Act and is currently being charged under conspiracy laws.

Sharing our experiences as Irish women living in England

"Comrade Chair, and comrades and sisters, I am very pleased to be given the chance to share my experience of being an Irish woman in Britain with other Irish women, though in the ten minutes allotted to me in this session I can only hope to give you a few flash-backs, as it would be impossible to deal with or even touch on all the aspects of my experience. I hope that later on in the workshops, we can, by pooling our experiences, extract some common denominators — thereby increasing our awareness of our common heritage — how it

has conditioned our response to the multi-racial society we have found in British cities and the impact we have made on it. To make sense of our experiences, we must try to define our relationship with our own Irish community in Britain, with the community we have left behind in Ireland, with the host community in Britain and with the other minority communities in Britain. We must ask ourselves whether we should choose to segregate ourselves, living in an Irish area, maintaining our traditional attitudes and finding our social life exclusively in the Irish clubs, pubs and dance halls. Whether we should, on the other hand, attempt to assimilate wholly in British society, or decide to retain our essential cultural and political Irishness while rejecting the attitudes and ways of relating which are not appropriate to modern urban society.

Identity and Allegiances

Do we identify with the Ireland we left behind or with Ireland as it is today? With the Women's Movement in this country or specifically with Irish women, priding ourselves on superior moral standards; with the British Working Class Movement, which can include adopting the racist attitudes which are common in the British Movement and which come from generations of imperialist conditioning; or do we identify with the other large immigrant communities who differ from us by having black skins, but who share our experience of British colonialism and racial discrimination. Can we be flexible enough to contain such varied identities?

Recognising that the Irish government has failed to provide us with the means of life in Ireland, and now denies us the right to a say in Irish affairs, by refusing us a postal vote, and that the present generation in Ireland — seeing us as having chosen to leave Ireland, sees our children born here as British, must we see our role in this country as one of a grateful client or step-sister — grateful for being allowed to enjoy a higher standard of living, better social services and greater sexual freedom than we had in Ireland, and having no right to criticise the British system, defend our class or national interests, or make special demands as an ethnic minority?

Do we accept the view of the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain that Irish women being dominated by the Catholic Church, submit to the sexist attitudes of Irish men, and are more oppressed than their British sisters? Or do we remember that the development of Irish women was retarded due to living in a rural society, based on a colonial subsistence economy, and that sexual guilt and the spiritual value of suffering were instilled by Irish priests, trained by French Jansenists in the theological college of Maynooth, which was set up by the British in the 1840's when, having failed to separate the native Irish from the Catholic Church, they had decided to buy the Church's allegiance?

And do we remember that in spite of their handicaps, thousands of Irish women have managed small farms and family businesses in small towns; educated children to teach and nurse all over the world; that Irish women have played their part in pioneering higher education for the native Irish when the National University was set up; in the struggle for national independence up to and including the struggle in the Six Counties today, and in the Class Struggle — in the first place, through the Women Workers' Union which had no counterpart in this country.

Coming to England

I found myself faced with all these questions when I emigrated to England in 1953. My marriage had broken down, I had three children, I needed to earn a living and only doctors who had influence with powerful people could find jobs in Ireland, in an Ireland scandalously under-doctored. Having played a leading part while in Ireland, in the campaign for a Mother and Child Health Service, which was opposed by the medical profession and the Catholic hierarchy, I was unable to get references from any of the senior doctors for whom I had worked in hospitals. As I also had no contacts in the medical profession in Britain, and had not attended

the 'right' school or the 'right' university, I had to take junior jobs in poorly-staffed low-grade hospitals where I worked night and day in order to earn references.

Two years later, after I had brought my elder daughter, then aged nine, to England, I was restricted to jobs which did not entail night work and during the school holidays had to take my daughter to the hospital, where she helped to feed and titivate helpless patients.

Having understood that the 1945 Labour Government had introduced free secondary education for all, I was bitterly disillusioned when my daughter, having failed the 11+, was allocated to a Secondary Modern School in a depressing old Victorian building, where teachers had written off the children as failures. Geography lessons consisted of following the Queen's progress on her tours abroad. Being the only non-British girl in her class, my daughter was teased for being Irish and because she felt alienated, shut herself off — ending up by opting out of the educational system altogether. She tried to hide the fact that she was Irish until, when working as an au pair in Sweden, she found that people there were interested in her because she came from the country which had produced Sean O'Casey and Synge, whose plays they admired.

Class barriers

I was struck soon after I came to Britain by the rigid class barriers which made it impossible for professionals in hospitals to communicate with patients, let alone understand their problems, and I soon found that it was only with some nurses that I could share an understanding of patients' problems. I learned more from them than from any doctor, and I've always supported their right to be recognised as therapists. Many of these nurses, of course, were Irish in those days. Since then, most of them have either retired or been promoted into administration, which has taken them away from any contact with me. I've always tried to impress on nurses how they could use their power to gain equal professional status — if they were only prepared to use it.

My failure to conform to the professional image was suspect and my assertion that I was not British was met with amused tolerance. An Irish doctor once attacked me for reminding British colleagues that he was Irish. The Health Service, though giving us Irish something that we did not have at home, a comprehensive service open to all, was often conditional on submissiveness and gratitude, as though patients were receiving charity and the development of the Service was being restricted by the greed of professionals who gave priority to private practice over the NHS.

Position of Women

I found in the Labour movement that even the male militants, though paying lip-service to equality for women, still saw the roles of their wives as servicing the men, while complaining that the wives objected to their political activities. Coming from an Irish city where there was practically 100% unionisation and no-one dared pass a picket line, I found that unionisation in Britain was far behind, though some of the unions were more political. I was not surprised to find Irish people forming a high proportion of militant shop-stewards. But the male militants campaigned for equal pay, only to prevent jobs being given to women in preference to men, and many British women seemed to me to be more submissive than Irish women — often having gained two jobs instead of one by having the opportunity to work outside the home.

When I was in the north of England I experienced the total centering of activities in the home around the man of the house; all children being put out of the room when father came home to have his dinner, and any friends in the home talking to his wife withdrawing when the man of the house arrived to have his dinner — this was also very strange to me.

Working in Psychiatry

Having been advised that psychiatry, entailing only routine

ward-rounds, prescribing drugs and signing report books, and shorter hours than obtained in other specialities, I was advised that it was ideal for a woman with domestic responsibilities. When I found myself in a large psychiatric hospital in Sheffield, I was bored and frustrated by the deadening routine and shocked by the treatment of patients as objects, instead of individuals; the uncaring, if not punitive attitudes of many of the staff, though I will always remember how some of the Irish nurses cared for and even adopted as members of their families, some of the chronic patients who had no families of their own.

Caring for patients was not rewarded and very often staff who started by trying to care for them, became discouraged and ended up going to work just for the money, or opting for promotion into administration, which took them away from the wards and from the patients. In the psychiatric unit in the Manchester area to which I was moved, and later while I was Psychiatric Registrar in a large general hospital in east London, I learned that patients who had taken overdoses or were depressed or anxious or hysterical had problems which could not be solved by drugs or by other physical treatments, and I then realised that I had to get some training in psychotherapy in order to be able to help patients with these problems.

This was very difficult for me, as I couldn't afford psychoanalytical training — either the time or the money for it, and so I had to find jobs in the few units which existed in the NHS, where psychotherapy was done, in order to get some experience and fit in some part-time courses in my spare time and at my own expense.

Some years later I set up and ran an in-patient therapeutic community, run on democratic lines with free interaction between patients and staff and encouragement for patients to take responsibility for their own treatment. This unit was closed down in '74 due to hostility from the consultants at the hospital, even though there was a strong campaign organised by patients and their relatives. A delegation from the campaign, which was received by the Regional Health Board, was told in no uncertain terms that if the consultants at the hospital didn't want psychotherapy, they couldn't impose it on them.

So I decided to get out, and had to shop around the country for somewhere to get my foot inside the door so as to get a consultant post, as the grade I was in in the Hertfordshire hospital was being abolished, and I had two choices then — either to get a consultant post or be unemployed. And as I had reached an age where interviewing committees expected anyone who was what they called 'consultant material' to have already got a consultant post, I was suspect, as they wouldn't accept my explanation for not having applied for consultant posts before — which was that I wanted to continue doing therapy, which is very difficult to do as a consultant. I eventually, after shopping around in Scotland and Manchester, ended up in Birmingham, in John Connolly Hospital, which was set up in 1966 as a therapeutic community, but met with a lot of hostility from Birmingham psychiatry, and shortly after I went to work there, it was threatened with closure.

By then the therapeutic community in the hospital had been considerably diluted, and was more diluted by bringing in staff who were opposed to it, while the threat of closure was hanging over it. I organised a campaign to keep the hospital open, which was successful, but the hospital has now been taken over by the Professional Psychiatric Department at Birmingham University for use as a geriatric unit.

Working with Irish and Asian Communities

I set up a Day Centre in part of the hospital's catchment area, which is an inner-city, decaying immigrant area, with a large Irish population of Irish people who have got on least well; the Irish people who consider themselves successes, either by exploiting other Irish people, by being subbies or whatever, had already moved out of the area, and there was also a sizeable Indian, Sikh and Pakistani — mainly Pakistani — population. I set up a therapeutic

community in the new Day Centre, with intensive psychotherapy. Most of the clients were Irish — the second generation suffering from identity conflicts, the elderly or older unmarried Irish women, especially if they were not attracted by the social life centred round the church, were isolated and got depressed. There were numbers of single Irish men, usually building workers who had drinking problems, due to having been able to find comfort only in the pub, while living in grotty, uncomfortable, cold, overcrowded lodgings. They were now unemployed or retired and didn't have the money to go to the pub, so they were just sitting at home and getting depressed, and some of them attempting suicide.

Also, I started a special community psychiatric service for Asian patients, which met a lot of opposition from the authorities. They said that the Asians, the Asian ladies in particular — many of whom don't speak English, should be encouraged to integrate and learn English, and providing a special service for them was encouraging them not to integrate. I did try to point out to some of them that I actually envied the Asian communities for still having a language which made it easier for them to preserve their own identity.

Arrested and Charged under the P.T.A.

I came to retiring age towards the end of last year, and was offered part-time sessions — first on an on-going basis to carry on running the Day Centre, which I was pleased to accept because I was very concerned that when I left, the psychotherapy service at the Centre would not be continued, because there is no national commitment on the part of the DHSS to providing psychotherapy on the NHS, and because very few trained psychotherapists are prepared to work full-time in the NHS, because there's too much money to be made in private practice.

But before Christmas I was given to understand that there had been a change of mind on the part of the Health Authority, who had decided that my sessions were to be terminated at the end of March, when the new consultant who was to take my place in the hospital would be taking over. I was very upset about this but decided to leave it until after Christmas to fight it, as it was impossible at that stage in December to take people's minds off Christmas for long enough to do anything about it. That was in December, but when I was in Ireland on holiday, on New Year's Eve I was informed on the phone by friends in Birmingham that my house had been searched and another member of the IBRG, to which I belong in Birmingham, had been arrested.

I decided, after some reflection, to return voluntarily to Birmingham, knowing I had nothing to hide and expecting that the worst I would have to face would be up to seven days held incommunicado in a police station. It never occurred to me then that I might be charged, as the usual pattern with the P.T.A has been detention in a police station, threats and intimidation, as Margaret O'Neill has told you, and then release without charge — the figures show that out of 6,000 arrests since 1974, plus 44,000 annual so-called security checks at the ports, many of which are really arrests in that although they last for less than 12 hours, involve a person being taken to the police station, having his or her property removed, being put in a cell, finger-printed and interrogated. But out of all those, only around 100 have ever been charged, and I was anxious to get back to Birmingham and get on with my life, to fight to get my sessions extended and to complain about the fact that the police had broken into my filing cabinet when they were searching my house — a filing cabinet which contained highly confidential papers relating to patients.

I was in fact arrested on the day after I arrived back in Birmingham, held incommunicado in the Liverpool Bridewell, and after four days I was charged with conspiracy to cause explosions in the UK, and was refused bail, which I now understand was illegal in view of the fact that the Crown had produced no evidence to the defence lawyers. I was refused bail on the grounds that the charge was so serious that if convicted, I would spend the rest of my life in prison, and as I had family connections in Dublin, I would be likely

to abscond. Also that I would interfere with investigations which were ongoing and also for my own protection — which made me smile because I live in an area where I don't expect any and I haven't had any harassment because of my situation — having been arrested under the P.T.A and being on a charge. In fact, my neighbours are more friendly, if anything, than they were before. I'm lucky, I suppose, in this.

Dismissal

I was remanded to what is known as Brizzly Rizzly and was kept in solitary confinement on Category A for five weeks until I got bail on 9th February. I was ready to go back to work as there were still two months left of the duration of my part-time sessions, and the staff and patients at the Day Centre were all looking forward to me coming back because the patients had been receiving no treatment while I was away. But on the Monday morning I had a letter from the Health Authority instructing me to remain on paid leave until 28th February when my sessions would be terminated. The District Medical Officer denied that there was any connection between the decision of the Health Authority and the charge which I was on, though I confronted him with my belief that the Health Authority was finding me guilty before the courts had the opportunity to do so. The D.M.O. said the decision had been taken in order to prevent the patients being confused and to prevent bad publicity. I tried to point out that the Health Authority would be subject to bad publicity because of their action because there would be a lot of angry patients and relatives in the area, but there would be no trouble and no confusion if they allowed me to go back.

I referred the matter to my Union, who took advice from their legal department which was that, as the sessions I was doing were concessionary, i.e. it was up to the Health Authority whether they continued them or not, and I had no rights, the Union didn't feel able to pursue it, apart from demanding an apology from the Health Authority for the very insensitive way in which they carried out the decision, and a statement that the decision was not taken because of the charge. There was a strong local campaign demanding my reinstatement; the Health Authority offices were picketed and Health Authority meetings were lobbied, and one of the members of the Health Authority who had expressed sympathy was asked to propose a resolution calling for my reinstatement, but she refused, saying she would be laughed at because the members of the Health Authority had already expressed the view that even if I was acquitted I would still be tainted and would be unsuitable for employment by the Authority.

“Unwanted member of the public”

Alex Kitson, the ex-Commanding Officer of the British forces in the Six Counties, said in his book or proposed in his book, that in my case the law is being used to dispose of an unwanted member of the public. I am an unwanted member of the public because I have consistently protested about British repression of the nationalist population in the six occupied counties, and demanded British withdrawal from Ireland through legitimate organisations — the Connolly Association, the Anti-Internment League, the Troops Out Movement, the Labour Committee on Ireland and most recently, the Irish in Britain Representation Group of which I am now President. The I.B.R.G. is seen, I think, as the greatest threat to the British state of all the organisations working around Ireland because of its aim to organise and its potential for organising the grass-roots of the Irish community; for the first time to use its tremendous potential and electoral strength to combat anti-Irish racism, which like other forms of racism, is an excuse for colonialism; to gain recognition of the Irish community as an ethnic minority, to gain facilities for preserving our cultural and political heritage by means of the study of the Irish language and history in schools and colleges in Britain and for meeting the special social needs of the Irish and to force the British state machine to withdraw

from Ireland; putting pressure on the Irish Embassy and government to take responsibility for the emigrants whom they had written off and to defend them against the P.T.A. — the I.B.R.G. is also seen as a threat by the Irish government, which is now colluding with the British to destroy its credibility as a legitimate organisation.

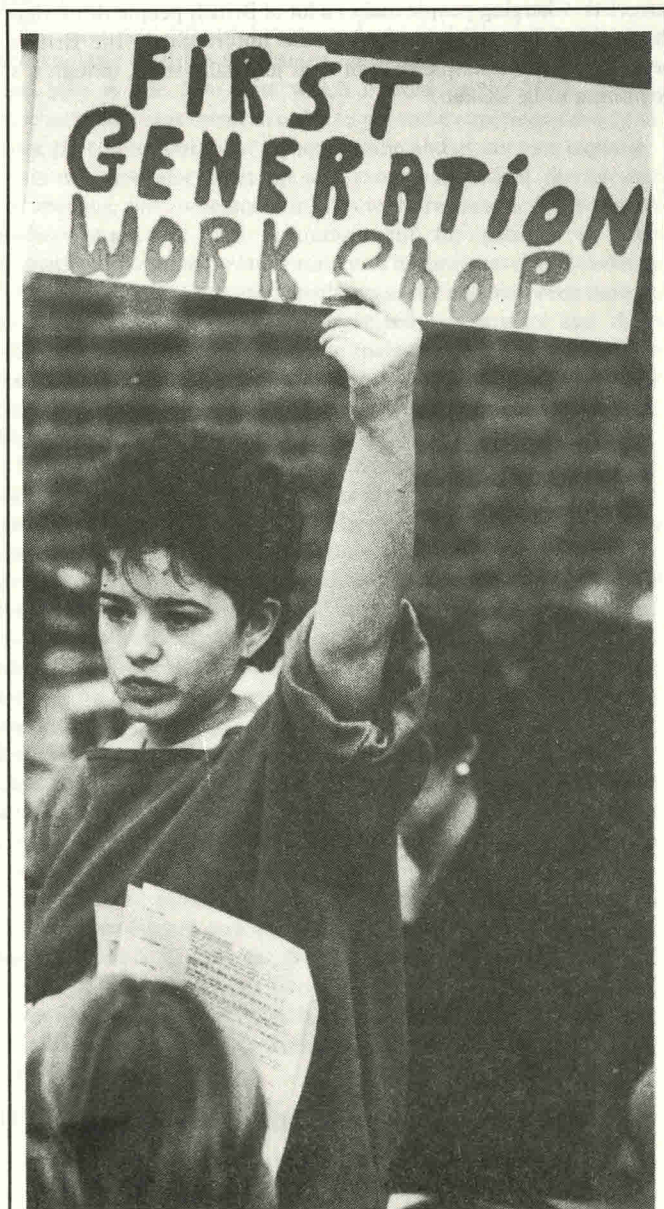
Deliberate increase in charges under P.T.A.

It is no coincidence that I was one of those selected to be charged under conspiracy laws, as I was one of those instrumental in formulating the policy of I.B.R.G. in support of British withdrawal, and had begun to work on the case of the six Irish men framed for the Birmingham bombings. I with a few others, have been singled out to be charged under conspiracy law which has been used to lock up Chartists, Irish Fenians, British Trade Unionists starting with the Tolpuddle Martyrs and including the Shrewsbury Pickets and the miners, anti-apartheid protestors and Irish Republicans against whom there has been no real evidence. The P.T.A. having been exposed as a means of silencing and intimidating the Irish, and the Labour Party having gone on record as opposing it, the state has found it necessary to charge people arrested under it to show that it is necessary to keep the P.T.A. on the statute book in order to catch terrorists. Charging people makes a lot of British people think that those charged must be guilty because unfortunately the British people still have a simple faith in their judicial system, though it's beginning to be shaken.”

Living in England

Discussion groups

Dorothy, Margaret and Máire had a warm reception from the Conference. Following their inspiring and very moving speeches we broke up into small discussion groups, each one taking the general theme of Living in England as a topic. Experiences, both positive and negative, and ideas for the future were shared as Irish women from all sorts of backgrounds became engrossed in the discussions. There were groups for First Generation Irish Women only, for Second Generation Irish women only; and groups for both First and Second Generation Irish women to explore our common and different experiences of living in England and the relationship between us. All these groups reported back individually to the Full Conference but for this Conference report we have put together all the reports from the First Generation discussion groups and summarised their main points and we have done the same with the Second Generation reports and with the reports from the First and Second Generation discussion groups.



Some of the 'Living in England' discussion groups were for first generation Irish women only, some for second generation Irish women only, and some were for both first and second generation Irish women to explore our common and different experiences and the relationship between us.

DISCUSSION GROUPS FOR FIRST GENERATION IRISH WOMEN ONLY

Generally women left Ireland because they were unhappy with their own circumstances at home. This was for various reasons: financial pressures, social pressures, the difficulties of being independent in Catholic Ireland, raising a child in the middle of the war in the North. There were class differences, and differences between younger and older women, in why women emigrated.

Most women came initially expecting not to be here permanently, but soon realised that once you move here it's for ever. For one woman, England became her home once her parents died in Ireland.

The number of people who emigrate is not spoken about, Ireland is being depopulated and Irish people are being Europeanised. Women felt that emigration suited the Irish government.

Women are made to feel guilty and ashamed particularly after what parents have done for them, and there was a feeling of resentment because they had to leave. The women in the workshops were in England from anything between six months to 50 years. Despite the guilty feelings, women felt that you could do things in England that you can't do at home. There were ambiguous feelings of liking some things and not others.

Some Irish women thought that there are pressures to succeed in England and an assumption that you are doing very well. There was a general feeling of alienation when living here. London is an alienating city, and there are big differences between English and Irish people. English people are reserved and very ignorant of Irish people. For Irish women there is a loss of support networks and problems of isolation. If you are going to live and survive in England, some women felt that you have to lose a certain amount of your Irish identity. The British don't recognise that the Irish are from a different culture and they constantly expect you to fit in with and adapt to their way of life, and of course the ever constant pressure to lose your accent. For one woman who came over in the 50's, she tried to assimilate and integrate, but the war in the North made her more politically aware and she became active in the Labour movement.

There are problems of living here and going back, in both cases, compromise is necessary.

Racism

Anti-Irish racism is experienced by Irish women in varying degrees and from different people. Even groups like the British women's movement and the Left, expect the Irish to fit in, they mock accents, ignore the Irish when they are accused of being racist, they do not recognise Anti-Irish racism. The left have to be constantly questioned as some people use the Irish Question for opportunistic reasons. It is important that the British challenge their racist ideas and understand the links between colonialism and imperialism.

The Irish are considered eccentric, and are not taken seriously. However it is difficult, as the English are not very politically aware of their own history of imperialism. We are viewed as either backward or very radical. We are pressurised to assimilate, but we cannot be accepted. The English are not even aware they are being racist because we are white and speak English. It is assumed that Ireland is an extension of England.

Patronising Attitudes

Paternalism and racism go hand in hand, typical reactions when you identify as Irish is 'what a nice accent' or on the other hand pure hostility.

There are constant pressures to change your accent as English people don't/don't want to understand. Survival for some means

losing your accent. When the Irish express any opinion on the war in the North it evokes very strong reactions in those we are talking to, as any political opinions and comments are considered extreme if they differ in any way from the British establishment view which is imperialist and anti-Irish. Irish people feel they are not being recognised when they try and raise particular issues in groups. Is there anything in between lack of recognition and expecting to have all the answers? There are, for some Irish women, the difficulties of getting support, as there is an absence of Irish culture on a visual level. This increases the feeling of isolation. It's made worse by the lack of access to traditional meeting places, which Irish men generally have access to.

It is very difficult for the Irish to be recognised as a minority ethnic group. We are often accused of getting on the 'ethnic bandwagon', of competing with other Black and minority ethnic groups for resources. Some people will not acknowledge the Irish as an oppressed minority, as there is some confusion over the definition of racism. Many people recognise anti-Black racism but fail to recognise racism against people of other races, cultures, etc. However, it is important to acknowledge Black people's experience of racism is different to Irish people's.

It is also important for the Irish not to marginalise themselves, but to forge links with other groups and to address our own anti-Black and anti-Semitic racism, and the racism that is inherent in the Irish educational system.

The War in the North

People are willing to talk about the North but are not willing to listen. The peace movement is silent about the war in the North, there is tokenistic acknowledgement at present. Those in the labour movement appear to acknowledge the issues but there is a reluctance to act on them. Pressure on us who express opinions to also offer a solution. Women feel strongly Irish coming over from the North. Education in the North tends to make Irish culture invisible, though it is being revived by the nationalist community.

Some women from the North felt that to come from southern Ireland meant you were more Irish.

The war in the North affects all women here, we get abused. The P.T.A. is used against us. Irish children are harassed in schools, and anti-Irish racism escalates when the IRA are successful. The North has been a training ground for soldiers and police to do the same things to the Irish, Black and working class peoples in England.

Is the war in the North too close for comfort? There seems to be an avoidance of examining the issues. The British will support freedom fighters elsewhere, but not the nationalist struggle in the North. We are constantly expected to justify the bombings, when there is an incident, we are expected to explain it. We don't ask the British to justify the violence of their troops against the Irish people for the past 17 years.

Sexism

Irish women experience double discrimination because they are Irish and women. Women working for local authorities should get together and look at ways in which boroughs treat Irish women, in particular the older women.

Women talked about sexism in the Irish community, jokes about rape from Irish men, etc. Some women feel more oppressed by sexism than English women, in particular the role the Catholic church plays in this. For some women it is only when they leave Ireland that they realise all the forces that combined to keep them down. Everything is geared towards coupledom in Ireland. Women are not accepted if they are not part of a family unit. There is a lot of fear surrounding women who choose to live on their own. This does not deter women from leaving marriage, younger women have more choices now, and need no longer take the abuse their foremothers took. Irish women take the responsibility of sorting out the family

problems. The church and poverty reinforce this.

There was concern expressed by some about Irish women and alcoholism, as it is very difficult to get help in England because of racist attitudes about Irish women's temperament and culture. There is an automatic assumption that they are aggressive.

Bringing up children in England

How do we pass on Irishness to our children? For some women it is going to Catholic schools, but others are put off by the expense and competitiveness. Some children don't want to say they are Irish, because of the racism. For many children growing up, they can only be Irish in the family. Children come home telling anti-Irish jokes, and this kind of racism is reinforced by the English educational system. For some children there are obvious conflicts in what they see at home and what they see in the outside world, and there are bound to be problems around an Irish identity. For women who came over as children, you learn to deny early on who you are. If you lose your Irish accent, some people feel you are no longer Irish, yet you feel Irish.

Identity

Living in England, it is easy to romanticise about Ireland, yet women often left because of conflicts. Women have a more heightened political consciousness, because of our awareness of our struggles in Ireland. There is the difficulty of accepting ourselves as emigrants, that is an admission that we are staying in England. A lot of women, however, felt a loss of identity. How can we be part of the Irish community which has the traditional values we left Ireland for. Women feel excluded and don't belong to the Irish community, there are certain things we may not feel like taking on with Irish people.

There is the paradox of clinging to the church because it is the only connection with the Irish community, however this only increases our sense of alienation. Why do Irish people have to be Catholic?

Changing accents when living here, because you are told you have an Irish accent, going back to Ireland, told you have an English accent. Choosing which culture? How do we fit in? The Irish pub and music scene tends to be male dominated, women enjoy the scene, but recognise traditions and aspects of that which are negative.

Single mothers and lesbians

Single mothers and Irish lesbians have come to live in England because of hostile attitudes in Ireland. Single mothers have found their own Irish community very unsupportive. Lesbians feel more accepted here, although alienated from English lesbians, who they feel are not sociable and friendly. The last thing you want to do when you come over here is find the Irish community. Being a lesbian is as important as being Irish.

The Women's Movement

Women feel there is no support from the British women's movement, particularly if there have been recent bombings. Irish women ally with Irish men, there is great conflict there. We have to find our own brand of feminism, because if we encompass feminism from the British women's movement it means anglicisation.

White English middle class feminists assume we are all working class because we are emigrants. English feminists don't want to know about the North. They are only interested in what's happening in Ireland, if there is the possibility of it happening to them next. English women are indoctrinated about Ireland, there is very little information available to them.

It is not popular to support the Irish struggle, but it is popular to be Irish. Armagh is a feminist issue, women want to support Armagh but not armed struggle. This is a continual struggle for English feminists. English women cannot appreciate our differing

backgrounds, just because we are Irish does not mean we are all the same.

Going Home

Women feel that they are seen as traitors when they go back, for a holiday or whatever. People in Ireland assume you are doing well in England, yet they do not want to know the details, certainly there is a denial that life may be difficult here. Although the women's movement has grown in strength in Ireland, could we go back there? There is the joy of a small place, but it is also oppressive. It's great when women at home fight this, but for women going back there it feels hopeless and exclusive. We do miss the sense of community and the warmth.

Irish women are different, we identify now, more as a strong group, a distinct group. We are becoming a force to be reckoned with. We feel there is a need for confrontation politics and for our politics to be turned outwards.

DISCUSSION GROUPS FOR SECOND GENERATION IRISH WOMEN ONLY

Women discussed feeling a conflict of identity or had felt a conflict at some time in their lives. Many women had experienced a split between their lives at home and at school, and had felt pressure to assimilate into mainstream English culture and deny their origins. Some women's parents had encouraged assimilation, while other women said their parents had encouraged a strong Irish identification in them. Working class second generation women who were upwardly mobile because of their education talked about the effects on them of experiencing the racism directed at their families, which had led them to make links between anti-Irish racism and racism directed at other communities living in England. Women also discussed the links between anti-Catholic attitudes here and anti-Irish racism.

Some women discussed the fact that second generation people can choose to deny their origins and assimilate. When we choose not to do this and assert our identity, the response from English people is often hostile. While anti-Irish racism is not directed at us in the same way as at Irish-born people, many women had had bad experiences.

DISCUSSION GROUPS FOR BOTH FIRST AND SECOND GENERATION IRISH WOMEN

A lot of discussion centred around the use of terms such as "first generation Irish" and "second generation Irish". Is there any real need to use such terminology? Although there was general dissatisfaction with the terms in themselves, there was felt to be a great need to distinguish between the experience of growing up in Ireland and of growing up in England.

People born in England of Irish parents, brought up in an Irish environment, going to Catholic schools where they meet, on the whole, children from similar backgrounds, often feel confused about their identity as they grow older and, maybe, go to Ireland where they are considered to be English, because of their accents; or because they are very anxious to fit into the English society they later find themselves in, hesitate before admitting their Irishness. Because of the intimidation of the Irish by the British State, a strong sense of identity has been denied to second generation Irish people. This can clearly be seen when you think of how strongly Irish Americans identify with Ireland.

It was also felt that Irishness and Catholicism are inextricably bound up, with the result that when a "second generation" Irish person rejects Catholicism, they also reject their Irishness.



One of the morning discussion groups exploring our experiences of 'Living in England'.

theatre, videos and exhibitions

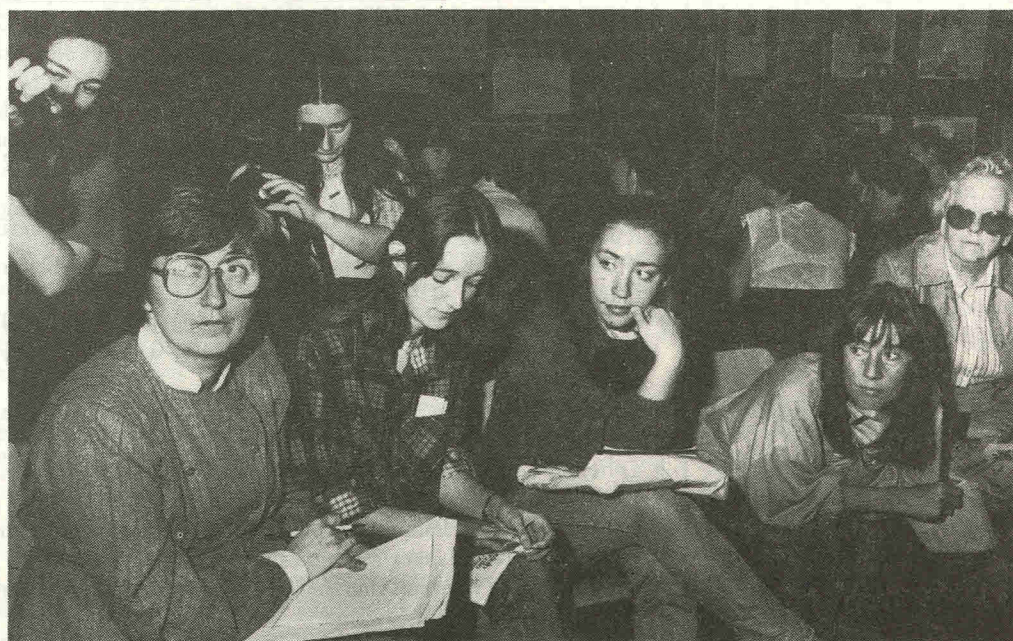
Throughout the day the overall atmosphere was one of excitement, enthusiasm and enjoyment. During lunch women chatted and continued their discussions from the morning sessions. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed the performance from Charabanc, the Belfast Women's Theatre Group. They performed two sketches about emigration which managed to be both hysterically funny and politically astute. Some women watched videos organised by Eileen McNulty from Cinema of Women. There were *Maire O'Shea is Innocent* and *Plastic Bullets — The Deadly Truth*. Other women took the opportunity to look at some of the exhibitions on display all over Caxton house. They included "Bin Lids and Barricades" by the London Armagh Group and two exhibitions put together by the GLC Ethnic Minority Unit — one on "Travellers" and one on "Anti-Irish Racism".



One of the members of Charabanc, the Belfast Women's Theatre Group, who performed two riveting sketches about emigration during lunch. Charabanc can be contacted c/o The Ulster Hall, Linen Hall Street, Belfast. Tel: 0232 234 242.



Women view exhibitions at the Conference.

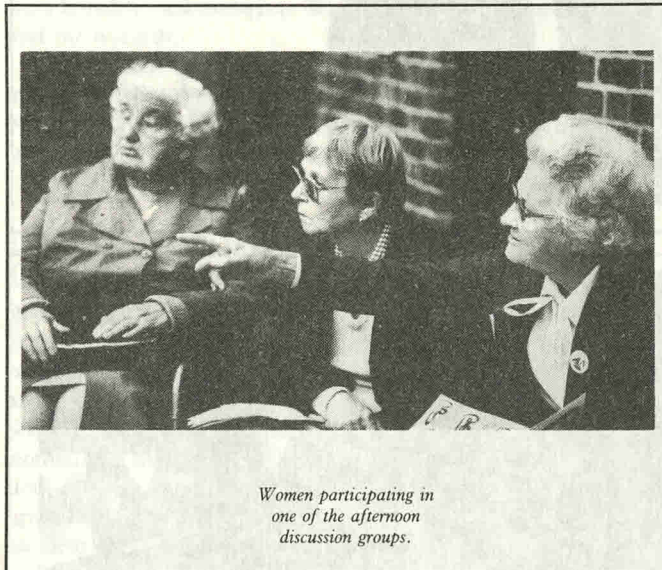


The Irish Women's Media Group made a video of the Conference. Here we see Margaret Gillan and Siobhan McNally at work.

afternoon discussion groups

After lunch women came together again in small groups, each one discussing a specialised topic. There were 23 afternoon discussion groups. Reportbacks from all the discussion groups follow except for the "Irish Language" discussion which took the form of a practical workshop. The group presented a Resolution to Conference which was passed (see *Resolutions*).

The following reports are an account of both the minutes taken at each discussion group and the group's reportback to the whole conference.



Women participating in one of the afternoon discussion groups.

RAISING CHILDREN

Women talked about the sense of isolation and lack of support that Irish women with children feel here, the problems of raising a child in a different culture, and also the difficulty for a second generation woman with her child — one further stage removed — what does that child call her/himself?

Some women thought that there was a great difference in the attitudes to child-bearing in England and Ireland, and felt mothers are mainly made to feel outcasts in England and that children in Ireland are much more a part of the landscape. Children are forbidden into so many situations in England, and this isolates women even further.

Women talked about their lack of choice re their children's education. Sending children to a Catholic school was seen by some as a way of maintaining their Irishness. There is a Catch 22 situation in that dates of registering are announced from the altar, so you have to go to Mass to find out these dates.

There are often legal difficulties for women married to or sharing custody with men from other countries, as it may not be possible to take their children out of England or Wales; other women in this position are afraid to take the children to Ireland because the father could then also take them to his country with no guarantee of bringing them back. There is not much information available on this issue and it was felt that more should be provided, possibly by the LIWC.

CONTACTS BETWEEN IRELAND AND ENGLAND

At this workshop women from the South and from the North of Ireland exchanged information with Irish women living in England about their situations. The situation for women in the South was outlined as follows:

Dublin's Women's Centre has not been utilised by enough women in Dublin; not used by women who need it; women have

tended to go more to left-wing groups.

Tralee Women's Centre opened as a result of Joanna Hayes; got well set up within a year; 15 women involved.

Cases like Joanna Hayes and Eileen Flynn draw everyone together, but leftie men still try to dictate what women should do.

It was decided to set up a women's network; 150 women came to a meeting; representing a wide strata of groups — disabled women, Ballymun, Tralee, Galway: Communication is important.

Then Resource, Education and Information groups started meeting.

Women in the country have set up on their own, disregarding what was happening in Dublin.

D.W.C. £3000 in debt; has lost a lot of support; has to move premises.

D.W.C. is a drop-in centre; not much connection between it and ordinary women, except it is the only group listed in the phone book; entirely voluntary.

As regards women in the North, there was discussion around the fact that the Women's movement in the North is very split; the leadership very middle class and professional; but many small groups are now setting up.

There was then discussion on how best Irish women in England and Ireland can keep in contact and build up an information and support network.

One suggestion was to make use of computer services and have a large computerised mailing list for our various newsletters.

(Microsystem, a women's collective in London, may be able to help us with this.)

A directory of all women's groups in Ireland is available from :
The Irish Women in Islington Group,
Cabin X, 25 Horsell Road,
London N5. Tel: 609-8916.

EX-CATHOLIC WOMEN

The workshop discussed the contradiction between the fact that all religions are patriarchal and designed to keep women in their places (i.e. subordinate to men), and the need for some form of spirituality, especially at times of bereavement. There was also discussion on how you separate Catholicism and Irishness.

ANTI-IMPERIALIST WOMEN FROM PROTESTANT BACKGROUNDS

Discussion was wide ranging and the following points were made:

- ▶ Are there two cultures?
- ▶ Protestants in North don't get Irish perspective, e.g. history, Irish dancing, music frowned on.
- ▶ Does traditional music cross the divide? Not really, sang republican folk songs, but no idea of history behind them.
- ▶ Throw your lot in with England, but only because it was better than the South — "Ulster" identity.
- ▶ Or London was "mecca" — looked to England, South hardly existed; great respect for English — no matter what class, they were "gentry".
- ▶ Or England "godless" place, "women even buy men drinks in England".
- ▶ Different kinds of Protestantism — some envy of Catholicism, which was just "one".
- ▶ English sees Protestant as reactionary — Protestant church in North anti-divorce, abortion etc. as much as Catholics.
- ▶ Very different Protestant churches brought together by necessity of keeping union with England.
- ▶ Is Orangeism nearest thing to a Protestant culture?

- ▶ Catholic ideas — you're not going to heaven because you're Protestant.
- ▶ Prods in South better off than Catholics; not allowed to mix; encouraged as children to keep apart from Irish issue; ask questions — no answers.
- ▶ Changing with women — ICA etc.
- ▶ Siege mentality binds Protestants together; don't want to see Irish or English as options — back Paisley in last analysis.
- ▶ Protestants in South afraid Catholic Church's morality will be imposed on them.
- ▶ Protestant business interests — hemmed in by their prejudices.
- ▶ Protestant Working Class in North oppressed.
- ▶ What is difference between talking about Protestantism & Protestant reactionary ideas?
- ▶ Fear of trusting too much — just because someone is same religion, or just Irish.
- ▶ Same in South — makes difficulties for anti-imperialist Protestants to overcome this prejudice and mistrust.
- ▶ Minority in England; most Irish people from Catholic backgrounds.
- ▶ Interest when English discover you're not a Catholic, and then more when they discover you're anti-imperialist.
- ▶ Protestants fear a 32-county Republic more than Catholicism.
- ▶ Full of contradictions, very hopeful.
- ▶ Belfast people have a better chance of being politically involved.
- ▶ Political privileges really small; Protestants aren't going to suddenly cop on and say we've been conned by England.
- ▶ Protestant upbringing affects views on abortion, sexuality — not the same as being a Protestant in England.
- ▶ People in England assume that Protestant upbringing means they didn't have a religious upbringing.
- ▶ Important in anti-imperialist discussions on the future of Ireland to include the question of Protestants.

WOMEN AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION

The following opinions were expressed at this workshop:

It is important to remember that the N. Ireland State is based on Protestant privilege; religion is not the basis — rather it is an economic state falsely created to keep Socialism at bay. The Irish government has a great interest in maintaining partition, as they will lose their positions if the border goes.

British imperialism props up the system, even if Protestants are manipulated or really are bigoted. Does the Protestant Working Class realise that they are being bought off? It's important to note that the Protestant WC are making contact with fascist groups.

Many Working Class Protestants support Ian Paisley, and think they get something from the Union, but in fact they don't. There are no political parties in Ireland which represent the Working Class interests, other than Sinn Fein. The Irish WC had no representation in SDLP which was set up and is being maintained by business men from the Republic.

We in the Women's Movement need to work with Sinn Fein and take up issues such as abortion with the Party. We also need to meet together as women. Women politicians whose competence far exceeded that of the men of their day were lost; we shouldn't let this happen again.

Sinn Fein is now doing more in S Ireland, but face a lot of harassment. The Irish State is no better than the English State in this respect. The Republic is now a Police State — strip searches are routine in all Republic prisons.

People in this country ask for the Labour Party to organise in N. Ireland. This is a mistake.

Some women have tried working through Trade Unions; trade unionists from the North are Unionists because they are the ones with jobs, so TU's in England won't tackle the real issues. There is a fear of the P.T.A. if you become active in Irish politics.

Other Points

- ▶ Irish Interest Group meets once a month; get political writers and politicians to talk and have question sessions.
- ▶ There is a group in Brent that does dramatisations of Irish politics.

WOMEN AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION AND THE PREVENTION OF TERRORISM ACT

The leader introduced this workshop by outlining the involvement of women in Nationalist struggles in the North — for example, in the Relatives Action Group. The workshop noted that issues specific to women are very much seen as “by the way” within the Nationalist movement, but at the same time the involvement of women in that movement is growing. Women at the workshop felt that the situation of women will change dramatically with British withdrawal, but the women's issues must be fought for along the way. The workshop also discussed the avoidance of the issue of British imperialism in Ireland among many British feminists.

The extent of misinformation about the war in the North put out by the British media was also brought up. Most people in Britain do not understand the reasons for the war. People in Britain, and to some extent in the south of Ireland, are complacent about the war and the workshop discussed the role of the Irish government in this. The lack of involvement of the Irish community here was also brought up, which led on to discussion of the effects of the P.T.A.

Of the seven women who attended this workshop, five had been arrested under this most repressive Act. Some had been arrested on more than one occasion. “Most people would do anything rather than think how one day the P.T.A. might affect them.”

We talked about the tactics the police had used to isolate/break us and found that although there are basic similarities, they worked on our weaknesses, e.g. sexuality. A lesbian was threatened with disclosure of this information to her family/community. All the arrested women had been degraded, humiliated and psychologically tortured. Some were strip-searched and physically tortured. Nearly all were threatened with rape.

We then discussed the effects this had on our lives, and it was obvious we all felt a bit paranoid, although this was often justified since we had evidence of being followed, having post opened and telephone taps. We all agreed we lived in constant fear of being re-arrested, and some of us were reluctant to travel back and forth to Ireland because of possible detention. Many women had problems getting jobs after arrest, even with supposedly sympathetic organisations.

We went on to discuss the need to campaign for the repeal of the P.T.A. Some people suggested lobbying Unions, Councils, MP's and other interested bodies, and to support national campaigns such as the Máire O'Shea one.

We drew strength from each other's experiences and felt it was good to talk to women who had suffered the same. We felt saddened that the P.T.A. was having an effect on the women at the Conference in that it had hindered many from attending this workshop.

GROWING OLD IN BRITAIN

Women at this workshop discussed their feelings about the prospect of dying in England. Many Irish people feel strongly that they want to be buried in Ireland, but this is often difficult because it is so expensive.

SEXISM IN THE IRISH COMMUNITY

In this workshop women felt that the Irish community organisations here encourage people to hold on uncritically to traditional values, and that Irish organisations do not generally make links with other oppressed communities. Some women thought demand for the separation of community organisations from Church control might

help in challenging their sexism, and also make it easier to develop links with other communities.

Women expressed concern that there are no women journalists employed by *The Irish Post* (the only newspaper for the Irish in Britain) to give realistic and regular reports on Irish women's lives and experiences.

HOUSING

Irish women find it difficult to get information on housing. It is important to know your rights. However, some women don't want to go through the bureaucracy of statutory bodies.

There is definite discrimination against Irish women in housing, which is of course one of the causes of homelessness. Single women are not entitled to accommodation from the Council. It is important to make mainstream housing available to single women.

Homeless Action will help women who have the least possibility of finding housing.

A huge percentage of families in B&B are Irish. Often families, particularly those from the North, are refused help.

Irish women use the private sector a lot, yet it is the worst available.

LIWC should have information on housing and resources for legal advice.

It would be very useful if links were established back home and that women get advice before coming here.

Irish groups should create Housing Associations of their own. CARA has been set up recently, but some women felt it was not helpful.

SOCIAL SERVICES AND IRISH WOMEN

We began our workshop by looking at current Local Authority Social Services provision and discussing how sexism in general is all pervasive. This was held to be true even of those more left-wing boroughs who often had well developed rhetoric about their anti-racist and anti-sexist approach.

Sexism was evident, both for women as consumers of the service and as employees where they were mainly represented in lower status jobs.

In terms of the various aspects of social service provision such as day care provision and residential care and services for the elderly and disabled, the level and type of resource left much to be desired. Also, those more repressive functions of a social services department — of reception into care, commitment to a mental hospital and measures to deal with child abuse tended to discriminate particularly against women. *In considering all of the services provided, none adequately acknowledged the particular difficulties experienced by Irish women or the distinct nature of our background and culture.*

Anti-racist policies tended to focus on Black groups (entirely appropriate) — but to the exclusion of other ethnic groups. Because we are white we are assumed to be British and are judged by their standards.

However, on those occasions when the Irish are acknowledged as different then we can see anti-Irish stereotyping at work. Workshop members talked of young Irish women coming to England — often for economic reasons or to escape from repressive Church-dominated attitudes, to find a hostile environment with those agencies offering help giving only very general advice or pushing the women to seek help from established sources for 'Irish Emigrants' — the Church or through social centres.

We discussed the need for Irish women here to be able to meet and discuss common experiences and oppression and to become a more assertive force in seeking funding. It was pointed out that the GLC have made funds available in the past (and presumably will continue to be sympathetic until its demise in March 1986) and there remained the problem of publicising these services. We need to tackle our own internalised oppression and can only do this through contact and discussion with others in a similar situation.

There was regret expressed that the present Irish Government seems to adopt an 'ostrich' approach to the level of emigration and plight of the Irish in Britain.

The workshop concluded by recognising that established social services did not meet the needs of Irish women and a call was made for the setting up of a *Central Advisory Service*, well publicised here and in Ireland — specifically for the Irish; run by people who had come over recently with links back in Ireland.

SEXUALITY

About 20 women attended this workshop. We were all white, able-bodied, predominantly heterosexual and all the opinions voiced centred around the Catholic Church. Our discussion was limited to these experiences though it need not necessarily have been. We were all a bit shy, and it took us a while to get warmed up. We began by talking about:

Our memories as children: no positive images of sex... something which is done when we are older... done by a man to a woman. Masturbation and questioning sex was presented as wrong and dirty.

Our experiences at school: convent school education... several women reported being told not to wear patent shoes in case they reflected their knickers... to feel responsible if a man makes advances to us... to regard rape as part of sexuality.

The Catholic Church: presents us with images of the Virgin Mary contrasting with the "bad" woman who enjoys sex... sex is only acceptable for the purpose of having children. If we enjoy sex we may suffer from guilt over it... facts of life unmentionable, everything has to be found out in secrecy.

Our mothers: how much choice do they have in their lives? ... denied access to choice over use of contraceptives/abortion ... possible feelings of jealousy/conflict towards their daughters... difficulties of going out to work and having an income... lack of adequate child care.

Lesbians: women talked about the invisibility of lesbians... lack of knowledge and difficulties facing us within the Irish community.

Conflicting Cultures: conflict between our culture and that of school/college/workplace ... discovering that other people have sexual relationships and can be open about them... one woman questioned that all Irish families are so repressive... she lived in the country in Ireland and her family have a very open attitude.

Proposals:

That we should all support each other in the choices we make for our own sexuality.

Women felt that they would like workshops on sexuality to be held at the Irish Women's Centre.

RACISM

Women at this workshop discussed anti-Black racism and anti-semitism, and the differences between these forms of racism and anti-Irish racism. They talked about the ways in which Irish people have taken on anti-Black racist and anti-semitic attitudes, and are part of a white, gentile power structure. Ways in which Irish women could become more involved in struggles against anti-Black racism and anti-semitism were also discussed.

CLASS

Women came to this workshop for many different reasons, and the discussion was very wide-ranging. We talked about our reasons for coming to the workshop and there was a lot of discussion about the differences in class structure between Ireland and England, and between rural and urban areas of Ireland. Some women, especially women from rural backgrounds, said they were not sure how they fitted into the class system in England. They had only been aware of class as a political issue since coming to England. Other women, particularly those who had acquired higher education and become

upwardly mobile said they had found it difficult to make contact with other working class Irish people here. There was general agreement that an individual's class was determined by their background and loyalties, rather than by what kind of education they had now. We discussed differences in values between second generation and English working class people, and felt the all-important difference was often the degree of importance given to education among working class Irish communities here. Many women felt that there tended to be fewer stereotyped ideas about class among Irish people.

IRISH LESBIANS

Women in this workshop talked about the need for and the problems around "coming out" as lesbians to our families and especially to our mothers and of how we found it easier to live in London as lesbians than to live in Ireland and whether this was because it was more liberal or just more anonymous and removed from family pressures. There was discussion on whether or not there was a more liberal attitude in the North of Ireland than in the South. We discussed the importance of telling our mothers in particular about our sexuality and why it was so crucial. Because we need her approval or because we want an honest relationship with her? Are we mothering her? It was also said how some of our mothers often know our lives are women-orientated but will not mention the word lesbian. Mothers have a responsibility to acknowledge us. One woman spoke of the closeness engendered by telling her mother — it opened up the possibility of real honesty.

Some women in the workshop were mothers and spoke about the discrimination they suffered as Irish women, lesbians and single parents. Also the specific problems around the education of their children accepting their mother's lesbianism. It was felt there was a great need for a support network for Irish lesbians and particularly for lesbian mothers.

IRISH WOMEN'S WRITING

The group discussed Irish women's experience of writing in England; being published or writing for yourself, coping with a male dominated publishing world and the value of writing in a women's group and an Irish women's group.

Women talked about problems of confidence in writing — daring to admit that you might be a writer, and the difficulties for women who might not be highly educated or might feel isolated. It was agreed to advertise a meeting for Irish women interested in joining the Irish Women's Writing Group in the London Irish Women's Newsletter and also to circulate a couple of pages of Irish Women's writing in the Newsletter as well.

WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

Women with disabilities said they were angry because they felt that they were unable to fully participate in the conference, as they felt hemmed in and ignored in a downstairs room. They were also angry at what they felt to be a lack of concern about the experiences and problems of Irish women with disabilities, on the part of able-bodied women and the following statement was read out to the conference.

"We are very angry and we are hurting. We were asked to come today and run a Workshop. No-one turned up. We can only conclude that Irish women do not think disability is an issue. Disability is not out there somewhere. Any of you can become disabled, and probably will as you become older. Sure, it is very frightening to think of becoming disabled. Have you ever asked yourself why you think it's frightening? Is it to do with attitudes like yours? To marginalise disability, parcel it off in a closet which reads "that's not to do with me; I've got more important things to think about". I'm glad you've got that choice. What about Irish women with disabilities, living in England? Presumably that's

not an important issue. How dare you presume, from your privileged position as able-bodied women, that women with disabilities do not merit political thought or energy. As Irish women with disabilities, we are ashamed at the lack of solidarity and support by our so-called Irish sisters here today."

As regards the accessibility of the conference for women with disabilities the conference planning group apologised and said that greater effort must go into the planning of the next conference, to ensure women with disabilities could fully participate. However this conference planning group did prioritise participation by women with disabilities in the conference, and ensured that a venue was booked that was largely wheelchair accessible. That as many as possible of the workshops were held on the ground floor. That there were signers for women who could not hear and readers and guides for blind women, and transport provided for women with disabilities to and from the conference and socials.

The conference planning group also wrote to individuals and groups of women with disabilities asking for additional advice and requests about how best to organise things to include women with disabilities in the conference. But obviously this was not enough. In particular we feel that there should have been more discussion between the planning group and women with disabilities who were running workshops before the conference and that there should have been more direct communication and support networks on the day of the conference, between the planning group and women with disabilities. The next conference planning group must take things further: the participation of women with disabilities must be given a higher priority in the planning of the next conference. Conference planning meetings should always be accessible; and a dialogue between able bodied Irish women and Irish women with disabilities should be initiated by the next conference planning group.

EDUCATION OF IRISH CHILDREN IN BRITISH SCHOOLS

The discussion centred on the position of Catholic schools in Britain. They are seen as being basically for migrants who are marginalised and invisible; a familiar institution offering the carrot of social mobility in areas where this mobility already exists; the result of a trade-off between the English hierarchy and the government; places where the Irish would be neutralised and good British citizens produced.

It was felt that there ought to be a change of curriculum in all schools. The textbooks have been analysed for their portrayal of the Irish and our history. It is just the same old story: the rebellious Irish. Also there are no books available for younger children on Ireland.

Why have we not protested much before? The P.T.A. was one reason offered, but it was felt that this did not really answer the question.

MEDIA

We need to recognise the power of the media, without feeling intimidated and paralysed by this power. When there has been, e.g. a bombing, the level of anti-Irish racism increases. The "Irish joke" is the standard form of anti-Irish feeling, and of course as a "joke", is seen as acceptable.

We need to organise and challenge all racism within our own community. Some of the things we can do to challenge anti-Irish attitudes are: use radio phone-ins to record an objection; phone or write to a TV Channel or Radio Station or newspaper to register disgust when you come across something offensive; campaign for radio time and more access to the media.

Anti-Irish racism is a feminist issue and a Union issue.

ICARM — Irish Campaign Against Racism in the Media
c/o Neighbourhood Advice Centre
Greenland Road
Camden Town

TRAVELLERS

No travelling women were able to come to the Conference. Some of the issues which affect travelling women are the discrimination they suffer from the Irish community, who feel that travellers epitomise everything we want to escape from; the fact that they are regarded as second class citizens by other travelling groups who say the Irish travellers are not true blood Romany; and the way in which they are used as scapegoats by the police.

To date, the only Irish organisation to support the travellers has been the I.B.R.G.

It was thought that the LIWC should organise a mobile creche which could go round the travellers' sites.

IRISH WOMEN'S ABORTION SUPPORT GROUP

IWASG is a network which supports women who come here from Ireland in need of abortions. It was felt that in order to enable the Group to be more effective, more members were needed, fundraising should be stepped up and a trust should be set up.

There was discussion of the court case in which the Dublin Well Woman Clinic is involved, for pregnancy counselling.

Also on the revolution within the Church in terms of liberation theology, which in Ireland is concerned more than anything with inner-city poverty, and not women's health. The Church refuses to take on board the issue of women's health; the only aspect on which they have initiated debate is reproductive technology — in order to define the debate.

MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is an issue which concerns us all. It is incredible that we have any mental health, considering the hostility and deprivation experienced by women growing up either in Ireland or here in England. Mental illness is about emotional and psychological pain and hurt, often suffered by women as a direct result of our inferior position in this society.

Women are often victims of the "tenderness trap" whereby we are expected to care for men and children. This caring is, however, devalued and no allowance is made for the fact that women need to be cared for too. When we feel the pressures we need to talk and not pretend everything is all right. We need to refuse to be victims and stop glorifying suffering. We believe we can heal each other by coming together to support each other as women and as Irish women.

ALCOHOLISM

The subject exclusively covered was alcohol abuse. It was a very small group. The people who attended felt that most people who would have seen the sign "Alcoholism" would have deliberately stayed away. They did not like the words alcoholism and alcoholic and their connotations.

It was felt that it is not known how widespread alcohol use and abuse is among Irish women. At one centre 75% of women registered were Irish. The people at the group felt it is underestimated especially among Irish women for the following reasons.

It is not talked about honestly among Irish women. There is a fear of speaking out about alcohol use among Irish women. There is a great conspiracy of silence because so many of us use alcohol and back away if it is suggested that someone has a drinking problem — the fear of labelling.

Drink plays a big part in Irish society. It is a big cultural bond for the Irish and this makes it very easy for Irish women to slide into alcohol use and abuse. Also alcohol is big business. It was also felt that there is a strong link between drinking and being an immigrant; English socialising habits are different so Irish women react by drinking more as a reaction to stress, isolation and racism.

It was felt to be especially relevant to women for the following reasons. Firstly it can start at home, women having a little drink to find some personal space. It grows to dependence on alcohol. It was thought that Irish women come from very strict backgrounds which expect them to be angels, i.e. nurses. It was also considered that Irish women take on a bigger role regarding home responsibility than English women. It was thought to be a rebellion of women. It is known that women are more prone to disease caused by alcohol due to the difference in body weight. It was felt that P.M.T. affects alcohol use. It is known that drink gives confidence but it also destroys it.

It was decided that women should become more aware of how much we drink, what it is doing to us, and what it means for us. The workshop was also reminded of the danger of getting on the merry-go-round of having alcohol abuse treated by tranquillisers, and the implications of having a medical history of alcohol abuse.

It was suggested that there should be an Irish Women's Alcohol Group. The workshop said that they backed any research done into alcohol abuse by Irish women as long as it was carried out by Irish women. An address of a centre for help if required was given as follows:

Women's Alcohol Centre,
254 St Paul's Road,
Islington N1.
Tel: 226 4581.



Noreen Byrne, telling the Conference how the services for Irish women provided by the Well Woman Clinic and Open Line Counselling are under threat as a direct result of the Constitutional Amendment of 1983. A campaign to defend the clinics was launched from the Conference.

report on resolutions

REVIEWING THE PAST YEAR

The following report on the resolutions from the First London Irish Women's Conference in June 84 was written by the London Irish Women's Centre and available for all Irish women at this Conference so that we could all trace the development of our campaigns over the last year; identify our successes and failures; and so consolidate our gains and put more effort into campaigns which proved to be less effective.

RESOLUTION 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.

Report on Resolution 1

The four papers presented to the GLC Consultative Conference with the Irish community were subsequently published in the pamphlet *Irish Women, Our Experience of Emigration*, and distributed to all Irish groups, including the Women's Commission.

The Commission itself began by forming a constitution and investigating funding.

The Commission also functioned as a London-wide open meeting for all Irish women and an umbrella organisation for various Irish Women's groups. After some meetings it was suggested that the format might be changed and each meeting focus on one issue of particular relevance to Irish women.

The P.T.A. was chosen as a main issue and due to its central importance a series of meetings on this issue was held.

The Commission has changed direction more than once over the past year, as is often the case with a newly set-up organisation.

The Commission was set up after the last Conference's questionnaire results showed that there was a definite will for it. It is still in an early stage of development and needs your support and ideas if it is to continue.

RESOLUTION 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.

Report on Resolution 2

The first few open meetings were not well attended and the overall feeling was that most women were already very committed to ongoing meetings and community activity. Many women pointed out that it would be more sensible to use existing organisations and groups to seek direction and report back on GLC Women's Committee activity.

Sabina therefore attended the Irish Women's Commission meetings, a London-wide umbrella organisation for Irish women, and gave regular report-backs on the Women's Committee. She also attended regular meetings with L.I.W.C. and I.W.I.G. when the activities of Irish women and the GLC Women's Committee were discussed and further activities planned.

The L.I.W. newsletter was used to publicise all issues and events of the women's Committee of interest to Irish women.

Having a representative on Committee has proved of great advantage to Irish women, both in terms of policy-making and of funding. We have been well-represented at Committee, and large numbers of Irish women have taken part in open meetings of the GLC Women's Committee.

International Women's Week activities supported by the GLC Women's Committee included a fine range of Irish women's celebrations, including three concerts by 'Macalla', the women's orchestra from Ireland.

We are therefore very pleased that our representative was re-elected in the June '85 elections.

RESOLUTION 3

Recognising 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.

Report on Resolution 3

Throughout the year Irish women have, as members of Irish organisations and as individuals, been involved in campaigns with black and other ethnic minority organisations.

Irish women played an active role in the Anti-Racist Year Women's Working Group and provided input to a number of Black and Ethnic Minority festivals and Conferences.

Irish women marched under our own banner at Anti-Apartheid and Anti-Deportation demonstrations.

Groups of Irish women have organised and are organising further two-day courses for Irish women on Anti-Racist initiatives and strategies.

We repeat our greetings of solidarity and commit ourselves to active support of our black sisters in struggle.

RESOLUTION 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.

Report on Resolution 4

The voting on this proposal was close and confused. It was carried by three votes and women counting the votes thought later that a mistake may have been made in the count. There was no debate or exploration of the issues involved before the vote was taken. And the Conference Planning Group for the First Conference decided it needed to be discussed further.

RESOLUTION 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.

Report on Resolution 5

The Welfare/Advice worker (and the other two workers at the London Irish Women's Centre) double-check the information they give with solicitors and with specialised advice-giving agencies like CPAG, Law Centres and CAB's. The Welfare/Advice worker has attended established welfare rights and housing courses and periodically attends refresher courses.

RESOLUTION 6

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

Report on Resolution 6

The Irish Women's Centre, through its regular mailing, has been circulating information about various campaigns and appeals around the National Question since the last Conference and when the Centre opens (hopefully in Oct '85) regular discussions around it will be initiated and women's groups already organising around issues arising from the War in the North will be encouraged to use the Centre and its resources for meetings and campaigning and publicity work.

RESOLUTIONS 7 & 8

7. That the Conference liaise with Feminist Publishers to produce an anthology of first and second generation Irish women's writing.
8. That the Conference should approach the *Irish Post* for a Women's Page, to encourage prose, political and fictional writing.

Report on Resolutions 7 & 8

Since the last Conference a few women have met sporadically to talk about their own writing and other women have expressed interest in forming a group to find ways of getting Irish women's writing published but they all hope that an Irish women's writing group will be formed at this conference which would give women a chance to talk about their own writing and explore ways of getting this work published including through a women's page in the *Irish Post*.

RESOLUTIONS 9 & 10

9. a) to set up a working group to provide material for Irish input to multicultural 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.
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.

Report on Resolutions 9 & 10

Immediately following last year's conference a letter was drawn up which included this resolution, strongly urging ILEA to develop its policies on the education of Irish children in conjunction with the development of its policies on Black and other Ethnic minorities.

Whilst it seems that we have, on the whole, made some progress or at least some small beginnings in other areas, the field of education is one where perhaps the least, if any, progress has been made during the past year.

A working group was not set up and ILEA did not reply to the letter. As an Education Authority (and one of the most progressive in the country) ILEA has not developed its policies or practices with regard to an Irish dimension in its school curricula in the past year. Of funds that have been made available to schools, for instance, as part of anti-racist initiatives, none has been allocated specifically for Irish materials/books. This is despite ILEA's 1983 statement that any anti-racist initiatives must include other ethnic minorities as well as Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities.

As a result the inclusion of an Irish dimension in curricula has been entirely dependent on individual teachers and/or schools. One exception to this has been Haringey (outer London) where the education committee has produced a report (June 1985) on Irish studies within the curriculum. The report advocates changes in the areas of teacher training and recommends the use of ILEA's Irish bibliography for extending teaching materials in schools.

In July 1984 the Working Party on Catholic Education in a Multi-Cultural and Multiracial Society produced a report which is perhaps of particular interest to the Irish community, as it contains an appendix on the Irish experience. In a survey of 50 primary and secondary schools it was found that the vast majority had between 20% and 50% children from Irish backgrounds. The survey found almost no evidence of the use of Irish literature, music or drama in the curricula of either primary or secondary schools. Although the 'Irish Question' had been discussed in Social Studies lessons in some schools, this was generally in the context of violence in Northern Ireland. A reluctance to deal with Irish issues was found, because of the political controversy surrounding Northern Ireland, and this

complemented the view held that it was better not to discuss racial issues as this might 'stir up trouble' in what was otherwise felt to be a peaceful situation. Irish history was rarely taught.

The report states that there seems to be little attempt in most schools to help children reflect on the prejudice encountered by the Irish community in the past. It is unclear as to whether the writers feel that the Irish still encounter hostility or racism.

The general impression of the researchers was that even schools which were aware of the need to educate their pupils for life in a diverse society and which had taken some steps towards such a policy being implemented, had not yet considered this in relation to their pupils of Irish origin, and were largely unaware of the assistance available in this field.

While it may be encouraging to see a report has been produced from a working party for Catholic Education with a special section on the Irish experience, as Irish women we are constantly reminded of the continual dual struggle we carry, being Irish and being women. Because of the task of looking after our children's needs — and this usually includes their educational needs as well — we know too well as carers and as mothers of the appallingly poor reputation that Catholic schools have for out-of-school care. This includes holidays and after school hours. So while we welcome with open arms the vitally important changes in education, we also deeply resent the continual neglect of this area of child care: it means we are the ones who are expected to stay at home to look after the children, reinforcing the traditional attitude that the woman's place is in the home.

1985 sees at last the publishing of ILEA's report with its policy statement on equal opportunities placing anti-sexism alongside anti-racism in good educational practice. The report identifies sexism and unconscious sexist attitudes as the twin barriers to equal opportunities between the sexes.

RESOLUTION 11

That this Conference:

- a) recognises 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 recognises 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) recognises 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) recognises the vital importance of Irish women working to challenge our white racism and anti-semitism.
- e) recognises 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.

Report on Resolution 11

Since the last Conference the Irish Lesbian group has been meeting regularly. The group provides a support network for lesbians and campaigns to fight anti-lesbianism. Irish lesbians have been active in a wide spectrum of campaigns. We have been in the forefront in such campaigns as the abortion campaign and in making stronger links between women from black and ethnic minorities e.g. Irish lesbians have been involved in the debate around racism awareness training and in discussions with Spare Rib about their coverage of Irish women's issues. Though as Irish lesbians we have been growing in our sense of strength and identity we still bear the brunt of vicious anti-Irish and anti-lesbian attacks by the media, e.g. the article that appeared in the *Evening Standard* in March '85.

The Irish Lesbian group can be contacted c/o. L.I.W.C.

RESOLUTION 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 — and it is for all the community's benefit. Make an effort to make links with Irish elderly, help pensioners 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).

Report on Resolution 12

A Fares Campaign Committee has been set up with its aim to obtain an agreement from the Irish Government to allow Irish pensioners who travel to Ireland on holiday to have free transport on CIE. The campaign committee consists of many pensioners and workers from various pensioners' groups (Irish) throughout London. Irish Pensioners' Groups now exist in Brent, Islington, Greenwich and Camden and are very successful. For instance, workers from Brent Pensioners Link organised an Irish Awareness Day for workers in Pensioners Link which was very successful.

RESOLUTION 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.

Report on Resolution 13

Throughout the year since the last conference the LIWC and IWIG have been building links and contacts with women throughout Ireland and Britain. During this conference (between 2.30-4.00) there will be a workshop and information will be available.

The London Irish Women's Centre has acted as a point of contact and has put individual women in touch with groups of particular interest to them, and has also provided a facility whereby information can be exchanged between groups. A mailing is produced approx. every six weeks from the Women's Centre which goes to Irish women in London. Some women from Ireland and around Britain are also on this list. The mailing list is always extending to reach more women.

The L.I.W.C. acts as a first contact for women arriving in London, giving them support and advice. With the anticipated opening of the centre later this year we have increased our publicity throughout Ireland. There will be regular Welfare rights advice sessions at the centre.

RESOLUTION 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.

Report on Resolution 14

Though no specific Irish women's group has been set up to support travelling women many individual Irish women have become involved in campaigns to fight discrimination suffered by travellers. It is intended that when the London Irish Women's Centre opens later this year a more cohesive campaign will be organised.

RESOLUTION 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 of religious background, class, sexuality and generation that exist 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.

Report on Resolution 15

Over the past six months the fund-raising and organisation for the Second London Irish Women's Conference has been underway.

The Conference planning group meetings have been widely advertised and have been taking place on a fortnightly, and over recent months, weekly basis. Activities have included extensive fund-raising, including applications to race-relations units within London, to the GLC and to local councils.

Preparatory discussions were held as they arose on a practical level, relating to the format of the conference and the range of workshops offered.

Issues of religion, class, sexuality and generation have also been discussed as they arose within various Irish Women's groups throughout the year.

The L.I.W.C. have encouraged and offered to publicise details of any discussion groups within the L.I.W. newsletter and hope that with the opening of the Centre in Oct/Nov these will really get off the ground.

troops out



Photo: Joanne O'Brien/Format

London Irish Women's Conference 'Living in England'

More than 300 women attended the second highly successful Irish women's conference in London, which took place on 21st September.

Dorothy Fergus from the London Irish Women's Centre opened the conference by welcoming everyone in Irish and English. She traced the developments since the first conference in June 1984. She described Irish women's achievements both here and in Ireland, such as the growth of publishing, the strengthening of networks, the rise of many new groups and the solidarity with other peoples in struggle such as the Dunnes Stores strike in Ireland. She raised many urgent issues: the continual harassment by the Prevention of Terrorism Act, such as that suffered by Máire O'Shea, Ella O'Dwyer and Martina Anderson, and many others, and the need to "main-tain, strengthen and diversify" Irish culture so it is relevant to women's lives over here in 1985.

Dr Máire O'Shea, currently charged under the PTA, talked about her experiences living in England for the past 30 years, of her work in Irish and com-munity politics, and in the union movement, and in the psychiatric health service in a deprived area of Birmingham. The conference decided to give the wholehearted support to the demonstration on 9th Novem-ber, demanding that the charges

against her are dropped (see back page and interview).

Margaret O'Neill spoke about being held under the PTA and the horrific effects this has had on her and those close to her. It was very clear that the PTA is used to intimidate and harass the Irish community; of 6,000 people arrested to date, only a tiny minority have been charged or convicted.

Then women divided into discussion groups with the theme 'Living in England'. Women from all sorts of back-grounds became engrossed in discussion on many issues.

During lunch the Belfast Women's Theatre Group performed two excellent sketches about emigration. Afternoon discussion topics ranged from abortion support, contact with groups and individuals in Ireland, media, education, raising chil-dren, alcoholism, and housing to strip searches, the PTA, Travellers, lesbians, and older women.

The conference "sent soli-darity greetings to all women in Ireland fighting for national liberation and women's lib-eration", and resolved that "women's liberation are inter-national liberation are inter-dependent". It was decided to sponsor the demonstration next year on the anniversary of Bloody Sunday 1972 in Derry. This demonstration, which is being organised by a broad-based committee, is taking as

its main demand British with-drawal from Ireland.

The overall atmosphere was one of excitement and enthu-siasm. A major theme was establishing new links with groups in Ireland. Many women had come over, for instance, from Dublin and Falls Woman Women's Centres, Well Woman and Open Line in Dublin. There were stalls and exhibi-tions all day. A video was made of the conference by the Irish Women's Media Group; and a video which IWMG had made of Irish women's events during 1985 International Women's Week was on show.

The day rounded off with a ceili. The Hairy Marys, an Irish Women's Drama and Dance Group, gave a wonderful per-formance and finished off with a precise and imaginative sketch about the role of Britain in Ireland. Numerous women from the floor sang, and the dancing continued till late into the evening.

A report from the confer-ence will soon be available and will also be on tape. Already, one campaign has got under way — to save the Well Woman Centre and Open Line Counselling centres in Dublin, which are being threat-ened with closure by right wing groups. For more details, con-tact 609 8916.

The address of the London Irish Women's Centre is: Cabin Y, 25 Horsell Road, London N5.

October 1985

STRONGER ALLIANCES as a way forward

outwrite

Saturday September 21st saw the second highly success-ful London Irish Women's Conference, when more than 300 women came together at Caxton House in North London

Dorothy Fergus of the London Irish Women's Centre gave everyone a warm welcome in Irish and English. She continued by tracing the many developments Irish women have made in the past year — and the setbacks

we've suffered. Her talk posed numerous questions of urgency to us as Irish women daily, and those on identity — "have we been able to main-tain, strengthen and diversify relevant to our lives here, in 1985?"

Dr Máire O'Shea, currently facing charges under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), talked about her experiences of living in England and being active in

Irish community politics for over 30 years. She also talked of her involvement in the trade union movement and her work as a psychiatrist in a run-down area of Birmingham. Another speaker, Margaret O'Neill, told of her frightening experiences under the PTA, and on close members of her family. Of more than 6000 people arrested under the Act to date, only a handful have been charged and convicted, which demonstrates how it

is used to harass and intimi-date the Irish community. Women then got together in groups (some first or second generation only, some mixed) to discuss 'living in England' — how the war in the North affects us here, challenging racism and forging alliances with other ethnic minorities, class differences, sexuality...

After a lunchtime perfor-mance by CHARABANC, group, women went into workshops on issues such as abortion support work, housing, employment, mental health, the war in the North/ writing, travellers, lesbians, sexuality etc. One strong theme throughout the confer-ence was links with women and feminist groups in Ireland, several of whom had come over for the conference.

Already a campaign has got underway from the confer-ence to save the Well Woman and Open Line Counselling centres in Dublin from threatened closure (see sep-ar-ate article for details).

The day ended in a celebration with the singer, Maria Lolly, and the Hairy Marys — an Irish women's drama and dance group. A video of the conference was made by the Irish Women's Media Group and all the discussion are available on tape for hearing impaired women.

For more information contact the London Irish Women's Centre on 01-609 916.

October 1985

October 1985

Abortion figures at record levels

A total of 1,448 women from Ireland had legal abortions in England or Wales during the first three months of this year, according to figures just issued by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys.

Of the total, 1,008 of the women were from the Republic and 440 from Northern Ireland. The vast majority of the women (1,004) were aged between 20 and 34.

Last year 3,946 women resident in the Republic and 1,530 women resident in Northern Ireland

came to England or Wales to have their pregnancies terminated.

The numbers have been increasing steadily each year. The figures for the first quarter of this year suggest that last year's record total of 5,476 is likely to be exceeded.

It is accepted that the official figures represent but a proportion of Irish women who come to Britain for abortions. The official figures are based on those who give a home address in Ireland. The vast majority, it is suggested, give the address of a relative or friend in Britain.

28 September 1985

Women stress need for ethnic minority status

Ethnic minority status for the Irish in Britain and the need to reclaim the Irish language were two of the main issues discussed on Saturday at the annual London Irish women's conference, writes CAROLINE QUINN.

The day-long conference which took place at Caxton House, St. John's Way, in north London, was organised by the London Irish Women's Centre and attracted more than 300 Irish-born and second-generation women of all ages.

There was unanimity that Irish women in Britain should push for ethnic minority status — although this was not to be achieved at the expense of other ethnic minority groups. The conference also agreed on the need to encourage Irish language teaching throughout Britain and to make books in Irish, as well as teaching aids, available in public libraries.

Other topics discussed included housing, alcoholism, disability, the PTA, sexism, abortion and the media's role in re-inforcing anti-Irish racism.

Dr. Máire O'Shea and Margaret O'Neill addressed the conference and told of their personal experiences under the PTA. Dr. O'Shea said that the conference was "very emotive and stimulating. I find it heartening that Irish women in this country are getting together to share ideas and help each other", she added.

Among the many resolutions passed by the conference was one pledging support for Dr. O'Shea and for the national rally concerning her case which takes place in Birmingham on November 9.

The conference called for the repeal of the PTA, which was described as "a means of silencing and intimidating the Irish". The daily strip-searching of women in Armagh and Brixton prisons was also roundly condemned. Another resolution called on the British and Irish governments to impose sanctions and trade embargoes on South Africa.

The conference was sponsored by the GLC, whose impending abolition forces the London Irish Women's Centre to seek alternative funding for next year's conference.

14 September 1985

London Irish women hold conference

Dr. Máire O'Shea is one of the main speakers at the second annual conference of the London Irish Women's Centre, on Saturday, September 21.

The conference, which will have as its theme 'Living in England', will continue from 10.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. at Caxton House, 129 St. John's Way, N19. Attendance is confined to women.

Dr. O'Shea will discuss her work in Britain during the past 30 years and the various causes she has been identified with.

Among the other speakers will be Margaret O'Neill, whose husband, Leo, committed suicide

some time after they both were detained under the PTA in November 1981.

Emphasis will be placed at the conference on strengthening links between London Irish women's organisations and similar organisations in Ireland. Representatives of women's centres in Dublin and Belfast will attend.

The centre was formed four years ago and offers advice on a wide range of issues, including welfare and housing. It has three full-time workers and receives funding from the GLC.

resolutions

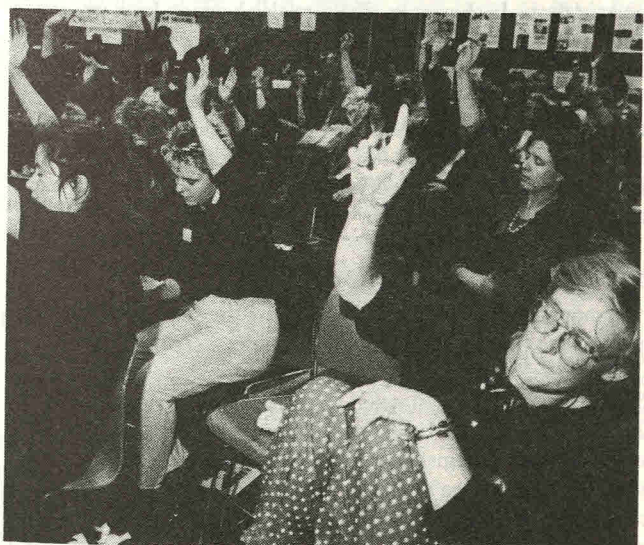


23 Resolutions were passed at the Conference. One of them was a pledge of support and solidarity for Martina Anderson and Ella O'Dwyer who are being strip-searched daily in Brixton and a call for an official inquiry into the situation.

RESOLUTIONS FROM THE SECOND CONFERENCE

1. We believe that as Irish women, we have more in common than separates us, and we feel that a division of Irish women according to birth place should be avoided. If a division needs to be made between those who were born in Ireland and those who were not, the terms 'Irish born' and 'of Irish descent' should be used in preference, as the terms 1st and 2nd Generation imply a hierarchy of Irishness.
Proposed by PAMELA TREVITHICK
Seconded by MARION WARD
The motion was not carried.
2. This Conference resolves to strengthen our links with women in both parts of Ireland in order to enable a better understanding to develop with us.
Proposed by MAGGIE MCBRIDE
Seconded by ANNE TOLLINTINE
The motion was carried.
3. This Conference resolves that there is a great need for a heightened awareness of the use of alcohol among women and for better services; and that research by Irish women needs to be done into alcohol use and abuse among Irish women in England, and urges any Irish women in the position to do so to do research in this area.
Proposed by FRAN LACKEN
Seconded by SUSAN JEFFERS
The motion was carried.
4. This Conference proposes that sexuality workshops should be held at the Irish Women's Centre.
Proposed by STEPHANIE BURNS
Seconded by NICOLETTE BURNS
The motion was carried.
5. Conference agrees on the need to recognise that established social services do not meet the needs of Irish women and call for a central Advisory Service specifically for Irish women, run by people with strong links with Ireland, and which is well-publicised here and in Ireland.
Proposed by MARGARET CLARKE
Seconded by MARGARET KELLY
The motion was carried.
6. That the Irish Women's Centre will take concrete steps in providing information and advice on housing and Irish women (i) we recognise the need for Irish women to identify their needs in terms of housing and homelessness (ii) to campaign for better housing for Irish women.
Proposed by BRID BOLAND
Seconded by SUSAN PAUL
The motion was carried.
7. The Irish Women's Centre should provide some information on women's legal rights in this country in regards to their children, when marrying English or other nationals, and their rights while being a single parent. And that IWC sets up a Forum for discussion and support for Irish women with children.
Proposed and seconded by the WORKSHOP ON RAISING CHILDREN IN ENGLAND
The motion was carried.
8. That this Conference supports the repeal of the P.T.A.
Proposed by ANNE DOYLE
Seconded by SHARON JENNINGS
The motion was carried.
9. That this Conference gives support and backing to national and local campaigns against the P.T.A., including the campaign in support of Dr Máire O'Shea, and calls for an effective campaign to lead up to the removal of the P.T.A. legislation which widens and informs more people as to the use of the P.T.A.
Proposed by MARGARET O'NEILL
Seconded by ANNE DOYLE
The motion was carried.

10. That this Conference deplores that the last two women arrested under the P.T.A., Martina Anderson and Ella O'Dwyer, are being strip-searched daily in Brixton, and pledges support and solidarity and calls upon the women present to lobby their local councils and MPs and TU groups to call for an official inquiry into the situation.
Proposed by DOROTHY MARCADO
Seconded by LINDA MAGUIRE
The motion was carried.
11. That this Conference recognises our existence as lesbians and lesbian mothers and recognises the need to challenge heterosexism — not just in the community at large, but especially in the Irish community itself;
(b) supports and recognises the need for Irish lesbians to form themselves into groups to make and maintain contact with each other;
(c) supports the need for the formation of an Irish lesbian mothers' group to discuss the threefold difficulties of being (i) Irish, (ii) a single parent, (iii) a lesbian.
Proposed and seconded by the LESBIAN WORKSHOP
The motion was carried.
12. This Conference recognises that the Irish language has been taken away from the Irish people as part of the impact of colonialism. We recognise the need to reclaim the Irish language as a political act. As part of reclaiming our heritage, we recommend that the teaching and learning of the Irish language be encouraged in all parts of the country through (i) Irish literature and technical aids being made available in public libraries, (ii) Irish language being taught in local authority classes.
Proposed by JEAN BYRNE
Seconded by ROSIE BRENNAN
The motion was carried.
13. This Conference supports the struggle of black women and women of colour against racism and the struggle of Jewish women against anti-Semitism; we recognise the necessity for Irish women to challenge our own anti-black racism and anti-Semitism.
Proposed by ROISIN NI MHAILLE
Seconded by ANN COLLINS
The motion was carried.
14. The IWC should look at the needs of Irish Travelling women and investigate the possibility of a mobile creche.
Proposed and seconded by the TRAVELLERS WORKSHOP
The motion was carried.
15. Conference condemns the lack of official sites in most London boroughs, despite the legal obligation to provide them in the 1968 Caravans Act.
Proposed and seconded by the TRAVELLERS WORKSHOP
The motion was carried.
16. A positive education and history programme should be undertaken by Irish organisations, race-relations units, libraries etc. to counteract anti-traveller racism.
Proposed and seconded by the EDUCATION OF IRISH CHILDREN IN BRITISH SCHOOLS WORKSHOP
The motion was carried.
17. Conference condemns the humiliating and degrading strip searches of the women in Armagh and Brixton.
Proposed and seconded by WOMEN AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION WORKSHOP
The motion was carried.
18. This Conference agrees that women's liberation and national liberation in Ireland are interdependent.
Proposed and seconded by the WOMEN AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION WORKSHOP
The motion was carried.
19. This Conference sends solidarity greetings to all women in Ireland who are fighting for national liberation and for women's liberation.
Proposed and seconded by WOMEN AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION AND THE P.T.A. WORKSHOP
The motion was carried.
20. Conference agrees to support and sponsor the demonstration for Dr Máire O'Shea which is being called in Birmingham on November 9th.
Proposed and seconded by WOMEN AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION AND THE P.T.A. WORKSHOP
The motion was carried.
21. Conference agrees to sponsor and support the demonstration for British withdrawal from Ireland, which is being organised by a broad-based committee on the anniversary of Bloody Sunday, on February 2nd 1986.
Proposed and seconded by WOMEN AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION WORKSHOP
The motion was carried.
22. This Conference sends a warm message of support to the women and men involved in the strike at Dunnes Stores over the last year; we admire and are encouraged by your fight for the principle of international solidarity and against racist oppression.
Proposed and seconded by the RACISM WORKSHOP
The motion was carried.
23. Conference calls on the British and Irish governments to impose sanctions and trade embargoes with South Africa.
Proposed and seconded by the RACISM WORKSHOP
The motion was carried.



Women voting at the General Session. One of the many resolutions passed by the Conference declared that the struggles of National Liberation and Women's Liberation are interdependent.



Women and children participating in the Conference. There were more than 300 women at the Conference and a great proportion of these had children. This proves that women do of course want to get involved in politics but the usual absence of adequate child care prevents this.

1. NATIONAL LIBERATION AND FEMINISM IN THE SIX COUNTIES

This article looks at the campaigns which women in the six counties (of Northern Ireland) have been involved in as a direct consequence of the war there; at the broad politics of different feminist and anti-imperialist groups and the relationship between republicanism and feminism in the six counties. It also challenges British feminists' attitudes about Irish women and the political situation in Ireland.

British Feminism

If British feminists do take an interest in Ireland and Irish women at all they either become involved in solidarity work or often dismiss the national struggle in the six counties as being male dominated and having nothing to do with women. Many British feminists also regard Irish women as being just like themselves without taking into account that they are in a relationship of oppression (colonizer) to oppressed (colonized) with Irish women. The political situation in the six counties is totally different to that of Britain. The six counties are occupied by Britain and a national liberation struggle is being fought there. British feminists are supporting a state which has colonized Ireland and is oppressing Irish people, especially women; yet they try to impose their brand of feminism, which is largely imperialist, white-dominated and middle class, onto us. They have been quick to condemn and dismiss women involved in the Anti-Internment Campaign and the Relatives Action Committees as not being feminist and therefore unworthy of their support. Yet, ironically, they supported the Women's Peace Movement in the six counties, which was totally engineered by men in the British army to provide a smokescreen for the introduction of Britain's 'criminalization' policy and the removal of political status from Irish prisoners. The Peace Movement got a lot of support from British feminists yet this so-called Peace Movement never condemned British Army and RUC violence; it never condemned the atrocities being carried out by the British Government on Irish women and men. Here we have

a good example of British feminists' ability to 'choose' what they want to support about Ireland and to 'choose' which Irish women are politically acceptable to them. Many Irish women probably wonder why we should take so much interest in what the British feminist movement thinks about Ireland and about us. We have to challenge it because it does have a lot of power and can influence people's thinking. By dismissing the national liberation struggle in the six counties as male dominated and by dismissing the struggles and campaigns of many working class nationalist women there British feminists are assuming some kind of right to decide what is important for us Irish women; they are also keeping Irish women in Britain ignorant about what Britain is really doing in Ireland. It is a total denial of our reality by women who have access to publishing etc. and often get the opportunity to put their ideas into print. This article will therefore look briefly at the struggles which women in the six counties have had to become involved in as a direct consequence of British Imperialism — imperialism which many British feminists collude with.

Political opposition silenced.

(For a more detailed look at why and how the six county 'statelet' was set up see the article in the first pamphlet — *Irish Women — our Experience of Emigration.*)

Since the six county 'statelet' (Northern Ireland) was set up in 1921 the British and Unionist Governments have always used Special Emergency legislation and armed military to try to silence any political opposition by Roman Catholics (R.C.s) to the state — a state in which we were totally discriminated against and in which we had no civil rights. Working class R.C. women have borne the brunt of state oppression and have always fought back against it. (In July 1967 the emergence of Bernadette Devlin in the Civil Rights Movement was an inspiration to many women.) In 1969 British

troops were sent into the six counties and it soon became obvious that their role was to oppress the working class R.C. community. However, women fought back against them — both within the I.R.A. and outside of it. One example of women organising against British Army repression was when they broke the 'Falls Curfew' imposed by the army in 1970; between 3rd-5th July there was a 24 hours a day curfew imposed on the Falls Road — an urgent food problem rapidly developed and during that time the army shot three people dead. Women in the area organised against this and around 3000 marched across the boundaries of the curfew and ended it.

Women run local campaigns and groups

As British repression increased with the army carrying out arrests, house searches, p. checks (i.e. identity checks), beatings etc. the R.C. communities established 'no-go' areas (i.e. areas where the military couldn't enter) and ran their own lives through street committees and grass roots organisations. More and more people were arrested under the Special Powers Act and prisoners' welfare groups were set up. A lot of women were arrested but the majority of arrests were mostly on men so a situation developed where families were forcibly broken up and women were left to cope on their own; because of this working class R.C. women quickly became highly politicized and organised, setting up and becoming actively involved in campaigns against British oppression. As well as a heavy military presence in R.C. areas in cities such as Belfast and Derry, the working class R.C. communities there had to (and still do) endure extreme poverty and discrimination.

Internment without trial

In 1971 Britain introduced internment without trial into the six counties and in the first six months over 500 R.C.'s (women and men) were detained. The first woman to be interned (in Jan 1971) was Liz McKee. Internment provoked widespread protest throughout the six counties and R.C. women formed the Anti-Internment Campaign, the aim of which was to end internment. R.C.'s went on a Rent and Rates strike as a protest against internment but the British Government answered this by bringing in the Repayment of Debt Act which still exists to this day. The act enables the government to deduct debts incurred during the Rent and Rates strike from people's social security benefits. The Act has caused even more poverty and hardship for the R.C. community.

Women joining the armed struggle

Roman Catholic women were organising on the outside against British oppression but they were also joining the armed struggle where the men in the I.R.A. wanted them in on an equal basis. Many women went to Armagh Gaol through the 'conveyor belt' system. This meant arrest under the Special Emergency legislation (Special Powers Act 1922, Emergency Powers Act 1973 and Prevention of Terrorism Act 1974), torture and interrogation in special interrogation centres, trial in a no-jury Diplock Court and long prison sentences. The RUC and British army have highly developed surveillance and information gathering techniques and often used information they got from bodies such as the DHSS to force women into signing confessions — regardless of whether they had carried out a political act or not. An example of this was in November 1977 when some women were arrested in Short Strand, Belfast. The RUC knew one of the women had had a miscarriage six months previously and they used this information in such a way as to break her down and make her sign a confession saying she had taken part in military operations against the British Army.

British criminalisation policy and the Relatives Action Committee

In 1973 Republican prisoners in the six counties, both women and men, were granted Special Category (i.e. Political Status) but this was taken away in March 1976 when Britain introduced its

'criminalization' policy; Britain had now decided that the situation in the six counties was no longer political and that subsequent political prisoners would be treated as criminals. R.C. women campaigned for the restoration of political status as they believed, rightly, that a war was being fought in the six counties and that the prisoners were P.O.W.s. Relatives Action Committees (RAC's) were set up in 1976 to campaign for the restoration of political status; these were made up mainly of women relatives of Armagh and Long Kesh prisoners and their friends. The first group was formed in Derry but groups soon spread all over the six counties. They held demos, pickets, speaking tours and raised money for political work. They also provided a support network for prisoners' families.

The Hunger Strike

Meanwhile, women in Armagh had gone on the Blanket Protest after Kieran Nugent in Long Kesh started it in September 1976. The Blanket Protest was the prisoners' way of resisting criminalization; it escalated into the 'No Wash' Protest in 1978 and two years later into the first Hunger Strike. Three Armagh women went on Hunger Strike but it ended after promises of concessions from the British Government. These were not implemented and in March 1981 Bobby Sands started another Hunger Strike to protest against criminalization and to demand the restoration of Political Status. This Hunger Strike eventually ended after the British Government was responsible for the murders of Bobby Sands and nine other men. Britain has not restored political status to Irish republican prisoners but its barbarity during the Hunger Strike is known throughout the world. Throughout the Hunger Strike R.C. women were supporting and working for the prisoners. This was our reality — we believed in what the Hunger Strikers were dying for; we wanted political status for our prisoners and recognition that a war was going on in our country. For British feminists to dismiss this as us wasting energy on men and on a male dominated struggle is totally inexcusable. In the war in the six counties separation has no place; women and men have to fight together against British oppression.

Plastic bullets

R.C. women have also had to fight in other campaigns which have come about because of British oppression e.g. the Campaign against Plastic Bullets. Women have had their children murdered by plastic bullets fired by the British Army — they are afraid to let their children out to play on the streets. In the month after Bobby Sands died (June 1981) 16,656 plastic bullets were fired in an area of West Belfast alone!

Relatives for Justice/Anti Strip Search Committees

Britain has systematically introduced more and more repressive strategies into the six counties e.g. super grass trials. Many R.C. women have been arrested on the uncorroborated evidence of informers and taken to Armagh where they have been held on remand. Since November 1982 these remand prisoners have undergone humiliating and degrading strip searches which are used to try to break the women down. Again, women on the outside have organised against both the informer trials and the strip searches — setting up Relatives for Justice and becoming involved in anti-strip search committees.

Feminism and Republicanism

As well as organising around issues directly related to the war in the six counties women have also set up feminist women's groups and campaigns. The national liberation struggle and the issue of Armagh has divided women in the six counties and has also divided feminist groups. There is a tendency to polarize feminism and republicanism in the six counties — with both being seen in

opposition to each other. However, this is too simplistic; there are women in the six counties who are both republican and feminist and anti-imperialist women's groups such as Women Against Imperialism (WAI) have fought on both fronts. However, it has to be said that many (but not all) feminists and feminist groups in the six counties have been (and still are) hostile to the national liberation struggle and this makes it very difficult for women in these groups who do support the republican struggle but who also believe in women's liberation. This article will look at the main feminist groups which have emerged in the six counties and what their attitude has been to the national liberation struggle and to women involved in it. It seems that many feminists in the six counties have adopted British feminist attitudes to the political situation and to what campaigns women should be involved in without seeing that the situation in Ireland is totally different to that in Britain. This is not to say that women in the six counties should not fight for issues such as lesbian/gay rights, abortion, nurseries etc. but that women who also fight for prisoners rights, against plastic bullets and in other campaigns should not be dismissed by feminists. These campaigns arise out of the reality of women's lives under British oppression.

The Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement

In April 1975 the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement (NIWRM) was set up (it still exists today). This is a broad based movement, close to the Communist Party in the late '70's. It campaigns on issues such as employment, poverty, sex discrimination and demanded parity of rights with Britain. It is essentially a 'reformist' group and ignores the national question in that it does not take a public stand on it. By demanding parity of rights with Britain the NIWRM is accepting the British presence in Ireland and has had a hostile reaction from many R.C. and Republican women.

Socialist Women's Group/Belfast Women's Collective

In October 1975 the Socialist Women's Group (SWG) was set up. This was opposed to the NIWRM, saying it was pro-imperialist in the guise of non-sectarianism. The SWG believed in linking women's liberation with socialism. It was opposed to the peace movement and had links with the Andersonstown Women's Group which gave a working class input to the group. The SWG dissolved in April 1977 as it felt that a tight-knit socialist anti-imperialist group could not be the nucleus of a women's movement but it reformed again in September 1977 as the Belfast Women's Collective (BWC). The BWC did not give prominence to an anti-imperialist position. It was critical of the Republican Movement and held an ambivalent position on Armagh. It saw the struggle around Armagh as just one campaign amongst many and felt it should not be given prominence.

Women Against Imperialism

At this time Women Against Imperialism (WAI) had formed out of some members of the Andersonstown Women's Group and the BWC. WAI was an anti-imperialist women's group, based in working class areas of West Belfast and worked with the Relatives Action Committees. It linked women's liberation with national liberation and believed that the women's movement should show solidarity with the Armagh women. (This support did come from some British and Irish feminists in Britain and also from some feminists in the six counties.) WAI also felt that the involvement of feminists in the Armagh campaigns was helping to raise the question of women's liberation within the anti-imperialist movement thus building the links between national liberation and women's liberation. Gradually WAI's focus became Armagh. In 1979 eleven

women were arrested on a picket outside Armagh; they had the support of some feminists in Britain and the six counties but WAI increasingly distanced itself from feminism as it felt that it did not address a lot of the realities of women's lives in the war in the six counties. Unfortunately, WAI eventually fell apart in 1981 under a lot of pressure.

The stance of the Belfast Women's Collective towards Armagh was that some of its members did not see Armagh as a feminist issue and felt that if women supported it then that support would be interpreted as support for Republican prisoners and the Republican Movement instead of as support for women. The BWC was dismissed by many working class R.C. women as bourgeois and academic, concentrating on theories instead of reality, and it eventually dissolved in 1980, with its members going off into other feminist campaigns.

Sinn Féin Women's Department/The Peace Movement

The national liberation struggle and the struggle of women in Armagh Gaol brought the relationship between Republicanism and feminism to the fore and caused many splits within feminist groups. By late 1979 women in Sinn Féin (political wing of IRA) had decided to organise as women and feminists in their own party and a Sinn Féin Women's Department was set up. (The aims of the Republican Movement are British withdrawal from Ireland and a 32 county socialist republic.) Sinn Féin have a 'right to choose' policy on abortion. Many feminists within the six counties concede this but will not support the Republican Movement or its aims. It is interesting, though, that a lot of feminists supported the Peace Movement which was set up in 1976 and consisted mainly of women. This Peace Movement was deliberately engineered by the British Army as a cover for Britain's removal of Political Status and the introduction of 'Ulsterization' and was a deliberate use of women in Britain's counter-insurgency tactics in the six counties. Many women in the nationalist ghettos opposed the Peace Movement as it loudly condemned the Republican Movement yet did not condemn the violence of the British Army and the RUC. In October 1976 the British Army saturated Turf Lodge as a means of reprisal against the women there who opposed the Peace Movement; on 4th October the army shot 13-year-old Brian Stewart with a plastic bullet and he died six days later. The women in Turf Lodge demonstrated in protest. Betty Williams, a leader of the Peace Movement, attended one of the protest meetings in Turf Lodge and was asked to condemn the British Army's murder of Brian Stewart — she refused. Yet these women and their supporters were being lauded as 'feminists' and were receiving support from many feminists in Britain and Ireland.

National Liberation, Women's Liberation and Socialism

It is essential that National Liberation, Women's Liberation and Socialism be fought for hand in hand in the six counties. As the Republican Movement is the only progressive movement fighting for national liberation in Ireland then we must fight for women's liberation within that movement. There are an increasing number of women in the six counties who are both republican and feminist who can help to lessen the polarization between both movements and make links between them. The issue of strip searching may have superficially covered the splits between the Republican Movement and many feminist groups as some of these groups took their banners to the Armagh Picket this year to protest against strip searching.

Nationalist working class women have always been involved in the struggle against British oppression but we have to fight for our rights as women too. What is the point of having our country united and free from Britain if it is going to be a right-wing reactionary

country where women are still oppressed. A quote often used in other revolutionary struggles equally applies to Ireland; "There can be no National Liberation without Women's Liberation — there can be no Women's Liberation without National Liberation."

Siúbhan McNally

London Armagh Women's Group
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2.

IRISH WOMEN — HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

Lack of research

Very little research has been done about housing and homelessness of Irish women. Any available information concentrates on Irish people in general, and this general picture tends to be that of a 'hard drinking middle aged Irish man'. Most housing provision for the homeless actually reflects this. However, the truth is a lot different. There are more Irish women than men in England, as more women than men emigrate, and at an increasingly younger age. Indeed if statistics were available, I'm sure it would show that homelessness for Irish people occurs in greater percentages for those under 25 years and more than half would be women.

As there are no 'papers' or 'statistics' written about Irish women and homelessness, it is assumed that homelessness is not a problem for Irish women. In fact it is a very real problem. This paper will be an attempt to express the particular nature of homelessness of Irish women and the kinds of provision to housing that are accessible to Irish women. This will be based on my experiences as an Irish woman and a hostel worker and the experiences of other Irish women.

Hidden homelessness

I've touched on one of the reasons why homelessness amongst Irish women is not seen as an issue, namely lack of research and knowledge on the issue. Other reasons are firstly, that agencies that do have contact with Irish women in need of housing advice, e.g. the Irish Centre, Piccadilly Advice Centre, state that women generally phone in for advice, yet statistics only refer to actual numbers who call in person, and these tend to be men. The second reason is that women's homelessness is less visible than men's, for a lot of women would rather stay with friends/family, sleep on floors, stay in intolerable circumstances than be on the streets, or forced to sleep in a mixed hostel. Homelessness amongst Irish women is hidden and under-recorded. Given this situation, resources will put money into projects which house Irish men, and men in general, because they believe homelessness does not exist for Irish women.

Causes of Homelessness

Here are some possible causes of homelessness for Irish women:

1. *Emigration:* When women first come over to England, they may stay with friends or relatives, have a live-in job, stay in a hostel or just hope to find accommodation when they come over. The latter seems to be, now, the most common as Irish women are coming over at a much younger age with very little money, no job prospects, and consequently, end up sleeping rough. This is a very precarious existence for young Irish women, leaving them wide open to harassment and violence.

Unlike Irish men, Irish women do not have access to the traditional meeting places, which is so important in getting a job and a place to stay. This is compounded by the total lack of knowledge of how the system works in England, particularly welfare rights and housing rights. Coming from Ireland where a welfare state barely exists and as Irish women we don't expect 'help' from the state much less see such 'help' as our right.

2. *Harassment:* is one of the main causes of homelessness for Irish women. This can be harassment from friends, neighbours or a landlord. The latter is significant for Irish women who have live-in jobs. Harassment can be racial or sexual and is serious enough for women to leave their accommodation and become homeless.

3. *Violence:* again a very real cause of homelessness for Irish women as for all women. Violence can be sexual or physical, it can take place in the family home in the form of incest, or it can be from a partner, friends or landlord.

4. *Discrimination:* Irish women face the double discrimination of racism and sexism. Most Irish women tend to obtain housing in the private sector. This is becoming increasingly more expensive and competitive, particularly if you are on a low income or out of work, which is common for a lot of Irish women. Women are faced with the added difficulty of getting information about housing; this is often withheld or not made readily available.

Housing Co-ops and Housing Associations can make access to housing a problem for Irish women. Most workers and users of H.A. are white English and middle class, and they will inevitably have certain assumptions, racist notions of Irish women. Worse is that some housing agencies refer all Irish women to the Irish Centre, as 'they would know how to deal with their own kind'!

For Irish women who have families, and who have just come over, approaching their local Council for housing will often meet with the response that they have made themselves intentionally homeless, and that they should go back to where they came from. Often women and their families end up in sub standard, overcrowded private housing, because of this response from their council.

Inadequate Accommodation

Present accommodation for Irish women is wholly inadequate. As I have mentioned the private sector and how expensive and sub standard housing can be, I won't go into greater detail. Other forms of housing presently available to Irish women are:

1. Live in jobs. Quite a high percentage of Irish women come over to England and obtain live in jobs. However, there is always the possibility of retiring, being made redundant or being harassed by a landlord. For whatever reason, this type of accommodation can be very insecure.

2. Staying with friends or relatives is another option, one which makes women very powerless. It means where you are living is not your own, is unsafe and temporary.

3. Most hostels cater for men. Where they are mixed, they are dominated by men. These hostels are normally large, overcrowded and inhumane, and are unsafe for women.

4. Most Bed and Breakfasts are situated in 'red light' areas and are not a safe environment for women, because there is an even greater threat of sexual harassment from men.

5. There are hostels, mainly staffed by nuns, which house a large percentage of Irish women. While these hostels are invaluable, they operate a strict system of rules and in my opinion tend not to encourage Irish women to expect a decent standard of housing.

I have not mentioned the particular housing experiences of different Irish women, namely lesbian women, travelling women, single mothers, black women, older/younger women. However I think it is very important that these housing needs are also recognised and validated. Irish women need to campaign to ensure that this happens.

Identifying and campaigning for housing needs of Irish women

There is a definite need for some kind of research into what Irish women would like to see exist in terms of housing. It may be small single sexed hostels, self contained flats, or shared flats. Whatever it is, once Irish women's housing needs are established, we can then set about campaigning for those needs to be met.

I think it is very important to develop links with advice agencies

in Ireland so that they can give Irish women information on what's available in the housing sector in England, not just the traditional places Irish people go to, (which most Irish women do not want) but other agencies who are aware of the problems Irish women face, like the London Irish Women's Centre, Homeless Action, Piccadilly Advice Centre. Irish women should campaign for advice agencies in Ireland to give advice to women on housing rights and welfare rights existing in England. This would go a long way to equipping Irish women for survival in England.

Safe, secure hostel provision is also needed, with some degree of support. This would assist Irish women in establishing themselves independently, and advise them on the kinds of housing provision that exist and how to go about obtaining it.

It is very important that there is consultation by councils, housing co-ops and housing associations with Irish women as to what Irish women want in terms of housing, and the problems Irish women face when in housing need. A big problem is that most housing agencies, be they voluntary or local authority, do not recognise the Irish as being an ethnic minority group faced with racism and discrimination in the housing sector. It is vital that we insist on being recognised as an ethnic minority group.

Irish women should be active in campaigning for better housing for Irish women, and in publicising the problems Irish women face. We may get a better deal then.

Susan Paul

3.

ON WOMEN IN IRELAND

"Joanna Hayes, Eileen Flynn, Nancy O'Donnell, the Armagh women, all single women, all separated women, all married women, all widowed women, all pregnant women, all lesbian women, all unemployed women, all travelling women — ALL WOMEN — of all ages, all classes, all colours and creeds, lesbian and heterosexual, we are all on trial. WHY? Simply because we are women. Our sex is our crime. Our womanhood has been the pre-occupation of pulpits and parliaments, trials and tribunals, garda stations and prisons over the past number of years."

Thus ran the beginning of the declaration written on a poster to advertise the protest march held in March of this year in Dublin. The march itself was entitled "Irish women on trial, Women are angry". It was the culmination for many of us of frustration, anger and hurt at the way women's lives, sexuality and very being had been plastered across courtrooms and newspapers in a number of courtcases which had excited the prurient interest of some and had stirred others of us into counter-action.

Eileen Flynn

What were those cases? Firstly there was Eileen Flynn. Eileen Flynn was a schoolteacher in the local convent school in New Ross, Co. Wexford. She fell in love with a local married man whose wife had left him and their three children. Eileen Flynn moved in with this man and later became pregnant. She was subsequently fired by the nuns who employed her. Their argument was that her behaviour was not in line with the Catholic moral ethos of the school. Also it did not set a good example for the young girls that she was teaching. Divorce is not allowed in Ireland. Even if they had wanted to, Eileen Flynn and her lover could not have gotten married.

Eileen Flynn however was not willing to just 'go away'. She appealed her dismissal under the Unfair Dismissals Act. Eventually her appeals were to take her to the High Court. On International Women's Day of this year she lost her High Court appeal. The judge said that it was consistent that Catholic employers could demand that an employee would obey their moral ethos. Not only that, but costs were awarded to the nuns, a sum of £30,000 in all. Her next

course of appeal is to the Supreme Court, however the nuns could require her to pay the £30,000 if she were to take the case any higher. A telling remark during the case was made by one judge who said, and I quote "In other places women are being condemned to death for this sort of offence". Perhaps one of the most important aspects of the case was that there was no overall campaign by women's groups to get Eileen Flynn reinstated. Because of the lack of state-provided services for women in Ireland a lot of hard-working activist women have gone into providing those services thus leaving a gap in the amount of women able to put pressure for legal and social change. According to Noreen Byrne, Director of the Well-Woman Centre (a clinic that deals with all aspects of women's health) there are two strands to feminism in Ireland, one 'Political', and one she terms 'Service'. She says that there is almost a split to an extent between the two groups as for example the political women would believe that fighting for political change would eventually make services like the 'Well-Woman' free and available nationwide.

However conversely she says that any type of split at this stage may be very dangerous as while women are taking political sides all round, the ultra-right anti-woman movement gets stronger and even more confident.

Indeed the Joanna Hayes case was another example of where women yet again in Ireland ended up reacting to events as opposed to creating those events.

Joanna Hayes

The 'Kerry Babies' case as it has become known started off simple enough. The body of a baby was found on a beach in Kerry. The baby had been stabbed 27 times. Even the initial enquiry by the gardai into the case leaves one with a certain bad taste. Every woman in Kerry who had given birth recent to the discovery of the baby was now under suspicion. Eventually the Gardai tracked down what they thought was the ideal suspect. Joanna Hayes, a single mother, had been rumoured to be pregnant again by her lover, a married man. Along with her family she was taken in for questioning. Under questioning in which she later accused the gardai of ill-treating her, she confessed not to the murder of the Cahirciveen baby but to having concealed the birth of her own child whose body she said was buried on the family farm. Later the body of an infant was found on the farm, giving credence to the story. All of her family who had also been questioned individually and some of whom also claimed ill-treatment, ended up confessing to the murder of the Cahirciveen baby. The stories told by all were different. Blood tests were taken by Joanna and her lover showing that neither of them had the same blood grouping as the Cahirciveen baby. Eventually all charges against Joanna and her family were dropped. But the case had grabbed media attention. Questions were being asked. Why had a whole family confessed to a murder they didn't commit? What had happened to them in garda custody? Eventually a public enquiry was set up by the government. The reputations of 25 Gardai and three superintendents, including a member of the prestigious Murder Squad, were at stake. The garda barristers were to subject Joanna Hayes to three days of cross-examination in the witness box. Three days in which she broke down many times, three days in which she had to be put under sedation, three days in which every newspaper seemed to carry the headline 'Joanna breaks down', three days in which the most intimate details of her life were dragged around the court-room, three days in which many of us could not bear to read even the most 'conservative' accounts of the cross-examination.

Yellow roses

The garda case rested on the supposition that Joanna Hayes had had sexual intercourse with a man other than her lover within 72 hours and had become impregnated with twins of two different fathers with two different blood-groups. Thus they said both the Cahirciveen baby and the baby found on the farm were hers. Her

love for her lover, by whom she already had a child, was obvious. Where then was this other man? The argument put forward by counsel for the gardai was that Joanna Hayes was a woman of loose morals, a woman who could be capable of anything, if she had slept with one man outside the bonds of marriage then why not two? Thus the need for the brutal cross-examination. A group of women from the local Tralee women's group accompanied Joanna to the tribunal of enquiry every day. They would give her a bunch of yellow roses each day as a sign of friendship and support. During the days of the cross-questioning, yellow roses started to pour into the court-house for Joanna from women all over the country. Many carried messages of support, some enclosed mass-cards saying that a mass was being said for Joanna and her family to help them through their ordeal. At the same time people from her village, fifty in all, representing every family in the village arrived to demonstrate outside the court — one banner read 'stop this witch-hunt'. A couple of days later a protest by women was organised by the Tralee women's group. Women arrived by the bus and car load from all over the country, the chant outside the court-house being 'Who's on trial? Who's on trial?'. The judge was jeered as he left the tribunal. The following day a stern message was read from the bench, any-one demonstrating outside the court or attempting to influence the conduct of the court would be held in contempt of court, they would be imprisoned until the lengthy tribunal came to an end. The judge was not going to have any 'raucous' women outside his court. The Tribunal ended at the beginning of the summer. On the last day submissions were made by the Hayes family solicitors and the Garda solicitors. Women yet again were to seize their last chance. We prepared a women's submission to the Tribunal, written by the Tralee women's group, and signed by women's groups and individual women from around the country. A woman from the Tralee group, Bernie Fitzgerald, brought the submission up to the bench. 'Women of Ireland' the judge read and then raising his voice higher, said 'What has this case got to do with the women of Ireland — what have I got to do with the women of Ireland'. He asked Bernie to give him one good reason why she should not be immediately committed to Mountjoy prison. She thought of answering that she was breast-feeding her baby, but then thought better of it, knowing Irish justice that remark would probably have gotten her a life sentence. Eventually the judge had 'mercy' on her and told her to not be a 'silly' woman and to go home before she got into worse trouble...

Organising to fight the continuing attacks on Irish women's rights

If nothing else, the Joanna Hayes case brought women together. From the 'Women on trial, women are angry' march, a women's network was set up. It comprises many women's groups of many different political and social backgrounds and experiences. Its aim is that by meeting and sharing resources we can take action on the areas that affect us all.

Also a group of us who had been on a six-month employment scheme in the women's centre have started the basis for what we hope will be a women's directory of services and groups in Ireland, a directory which we hope will bring us closer together.

Yet the backlash has also started. In 1983 an amendment was added to the Irish constitution which guaranteed the right to life of the unborn child as being equal to that of the mother. This was canvassed for by right-wing 'pro-life' groups as a safeguard against abortion legislation being brought in by the back door. Not content with that, this year they have sought a high-court injunction against the two agencies which provide 'non-directive' pregnancy counselling, as this includes abortion referral to England. The case is still going through. If they win, as some people are predicting, it could mean a return to the era of the backstreet abortion. A campaign to defend the two clinics involved has already been started.

To finish on the words of the declaration of the 'women on trial, women are angry' march...

"It is hard to see a way out for ourselves given what has happened in recent times. But we must not stay on our knees. Our political and personal divisions are many, and all of them are important but they can sometimes make us forget who our greatest enemy is. Indeed we have two enemies: those who have the loudest voices and ourselves, because we have refused to believe in ourselves.

They have come for Anne Lovett, Joanna Hayes, Eileen Flynn, and the women in Armagh. Can we say that we stood with our sisters, we are all in the same dock".*

(Kate Shanahan)

*Anne Lovett was a fifteen year old girl who died giving birth to her baby alone (the baby died also) afraid to approach anyone for help — the stigma of being an unmarried mother still remains the same. There was no public enquiry.

4.

THIS IS A TYPED COPY OF AN ORIGINAL HANDWRITTEN LETTER FROM ELLA O'DWYER HELD ON REMAND AT BRIXTON PRISON WITH MARTINA ANDERSON ON EXPLOSIVES CHARGES.

Ella O'Dwyer,
D25134 CAT A,
Brixton Prison,
JE66 AVE,
PO Box 369,
London SW2 5XF

18.8.85

Dear

You asked for more detailed information on prison conditions.

I'm sending you a record of the week ending today so you'll realise we are not selecting the makings of the most alarming reading possible. On Monday 12th I received a strip search which entails removing all clothing in front of at least three warders. The prisoner must turn round slowly while the warder runs fingers through hair, and occasionally along the arms and hands. The bottom of the feet are also examined. At that stage the prisoner is put sitting on a chair outside the cell with only a dressing gown on. The warders then commence the time consuming process of searching everything in the cell right down to, at least partially, reading letters though they've already gone through the censorship board. Everything, including the mattress, is removed from the cell, and the cell door is closed while two warders in a most mysterious way, start to bang the walls with a stick. When this ritual has finished the prisoner must return everything to the cell after which the warders may return to tell us to remove everything again to enter a different cell. This filthy cell in turn must be cleaned and by the time the mess is cleared up it is lock up time again. While this is happening to one of us, the other person is left locked in her cell, thus we are both left locked up. On that Monday we were locked in for over twenty and a half hours. We had four body searches that day which also, of late, include the warder putting hands inside the trousers.

On Tuesday we each had four of these body searches and two and a half hours association in the morning and three hours in the afternoon. On Wednesday we had a strip search each and three body searches. We had two and a half hours association that day. Thursday was even more eventful as we had two strip searches each, before and after court, and three body searches. We had three hours association that afternoon. Martina had a strip search on Friday even though she was visibly sick with migraine and had been vomiting all morning. We requested a doctor and medication at least eight times that day and when about three o'clock I again requested the doctor, governor, my solicitor and the priest to whom I wished

to lodge a complaint, I was locked in my cell until the next morning when I found out that the doctor arrived at 4.15. That meant that Martina had been left sick all night and day until that Friday afternoon, when all she needed was a tablet to treat her migraine. By the time she got it, the vomiting was so continuous that she couldn't keep medicine down. We had forty-five minutes association that Friday morning and Martina was in her cell vomiting for the rest of the day.

Yesterday, Saturday, I had one strip search and we both had body searches, Martina having four and I had five. We had two and a half hours association that morning and a mere fifty minutes association in the afternoon. Today, Sunday, we have had six body searches each and went to mass flanked by five warders, one of whom sat at the end of our pew. They say 'the family that prays together always stays together', so you'll imagine our disenchantment with their proximity to us in church. Our association time is almost non-existent and spent washing and ironing. We spend almost all day alone in our cells and today I was speaking from the third floor down to one of the men in the yard when the S.O. reprimanded me and told me that I'm to be visited by the governor in the morning. I therefore anticipate a lively start to the following week, of which I'll be writing next week. I'm only allowed to write four pages and if I don't hear from you I'll presume you didn't get this, in which case I'll forward this information and more to you through my solicitor. I must add that we, the men, Martina and I are all in very good form and that we wish you and your friends all the best.

Best wishes,

Ella

P.S. This letter will be late in reaching you as I've just had it sent back up as the wing governor wants time to prepare any available excuses for the medical neglect of Martina, before the public find out about the matter. He suggests that there must be some reason. But the doctor was in the wing that morning and yet Martina didn't see her. They say we were out in the yard when the doctor was here. She could have been called up as has been done before for other reasons, i.e. visits, etc. They also said that the doctor was here at dinner time and that the cells can't be opened at that time. Then why should a prison doctor call at that time, or what happens if one has an emergency. I'll let you know if we are given any explanation.

10th September — Most recent news from relatives is that Martina is now in isolation, she received an apology for the doctor not arriving in time from the Governor and that if they are both "sent down" they may be sent to Durham, another male-only prison.

Lambeth I.B.R.G. have approached the local Police Committee who are prepared to support a campaign on behalf of these two women. The London Irish Women's Centre are also taking up the issue. Please contact the Centre for up to date news.

5.

RACISM — ANTI-SEMITISM

It is very important as we spend the day as Irish Women looking at our experiences of living in England that we include time for looking at the experiences of our Black Sisters. It is important that we think about *their* experiences of living here; about how we support the autonomous struggles of black women against racist practices and about how we can support and/or call for anti-racist activity in Ireland.

It is very important that we think about our Anti-Semitism coming as we do from such a strong Christian/Catholic background. In the same way that we have not been taught Anti-Black Racism but have still learned it we have learned Anti-Semitism without being taught it. How are we challenging it? How do we support our

Jewish sisters in their autonomous struggles? What links do we have with them?

I write from a position of trying to develop answers to those 'HOW'S?'

It is often difficult for us as Irish women to acknowledge our anti-black racism and our anti-Semitism given Britain's long colonial history in Ireland — still going on — and the anti-Irish racism we experience here in Britain. We may feel that, by being at the receiving end of Britain's imperialist and colonialist policies for far too long, we ourselves cannot be racist. It may seem inappropriate for us to look at ourselves as white people and as gentile people; "What power could we possibly have over anybody?"

Anti-black racism

Well we live in a society which is organised for the benefit of white people on the principle that one 'race' is superior to all others. All white people living in such a society experience the privileges of being white. White people do not suffer the degradations and insults that black people face on a daily basis by virtue of being black. We may be victimised and oppressed in other and different ways but not because we are black. As Barbara Smith says:

"Privilege and oppression can and do exist simultaneously. I know because they function together in my own life. As a well-educated, currently able-bodied individual from a working class family who is also black, a woman and a lesbian, I am constantly aware of how complex and contradictory these intersections are. Being honest about our differences is painful and requires large doses of integrity."

(Barbara Smith: *Between A Rock and A Hard Place; Relationships Between Black and Jewish Women in Elly Bulkin, Minnie Bruce Pratt and Barbara Smith (Eds), Yours in Struggle, Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism.*)

I certainly feel that being honest about our differences and our privileges is painful. But it is important that as women committed to the liberation of all women and oppressed peoples that we find ways of uniting and fighting the oppressors and of supporting each other's autonomous struggles. We are all probably familiar with the coalition of groups involved in the National Campaign Against the Police Bill (now the Police Act 1984). Irish groups joined with groups from Black, lesbian, gay, working class, peace camp ... communities (*not mutually exclusive categories, I hasten to add!!!*) All of us recognised the common threat the Bill contained, the way one Act legislated to give the police ever greater power over groups oppressed for different reasons, often for multiple reasons: imperialism, racism, sexism, capitalism, heterosexism. It was also recognised that much of what is in the Act has been practised in Northern Ireland for years.

It should be possible for us as white women to recognise our power and privileges in this white dominated society, take responsibility for them *and* be active in fighting racism.

Anti-Semitism

In relation to anti-Semitism it is important to remind those of us who are Christian/reared as Christians in a Catholic dominated society that one of the beliefs of institutionalised Christianity is the invalidation of other systems of religious belief. This of course includes Judaism. I'm sure that if we all think back to our Catechism/religious instruction and to our religious services we will recall certain images and ideas of Jews being, subtly or otherwise, promoted. In addition we grew up and now live in a society where anti-Semitic stereotypes abound. We absorb these stereotypes without realising it. We have, therefore, to consciously familiarise ourselves with them to ensure that we never promote them and that we challenge them and other forms of anti-Semitism.

Anti-Semitism takes many forms. For centuries Christian dominated states have oppressed Jews in a variety of ways ranging from forbidding the practice of the Jewish religion and physical segregation to the Nazi Holocaust which killed one third of the world's Jews between 1933 and 1945.

Uniting our struggles: fighting together

To-day Anti-Semitism is promoted by the same reactionary forces that promote anti-Black racism and anti-Irish racism. As oppressed groups we have our differences but it is important that we make connections. Such connections are not at the expense of each group's autonomy but rather to the benefit of our various struggles and to the enhancement of mutual respect.

As well as thinking about what we do in our daily lives to challenge anti-Black racism and anti-Semitism the conference organisers are keen for us to think about what we can do from this conference.

Some clues to get us going:

1. A report in the Sunday Press August 25th 1985 made frightening reading. It opened:

"Dublin is being used as a base to report hatred, violence and racism to Britain, Europe and the rest of the world by the international Nazi movement. While most countries ban this type of seditious literature the Nazi movement in Ireland is free to print and publish then export it to other countries."

Ireland has no race relations laws. In 1977 it signed but never ratified the UN Convention on Racial Discrimination. The only laws to deal with the situation are incitement to violence and the anti-litter laws.

Joe Briscoe, Chair of the Public Affairs Committee of the Jewish Community in Ireland, has been campaigning for a Race Bill for years. In January 1985 he wrote to the Attorney General sending him a file containing NSIWP comics, magazines and leaflets all attacking Jews, Blacks and Asians. The Attorney General did nothing.

It seems that the source of the literature is the Nationalist Socialist Irish Workers Party organised from a house at 69 Eugene Street, Dublin 8. Their main aim seems to be to produce material to send abroad and to provide an international address so that Nazi organisations in countries like Britain can use it to avoid their own Race Relations Acts.

To condemn what the NSIWP is doing is to be labelled by them part of an international "Jew-Communist conspiracy". When the author of the article, Joe Walsh, wrote to 69 Eugene Street he received some vile anti-Semitic leaflets filled with hate.

The NSIWP also produce a particularly offensive "comic" which proclaims to be Britain's only nationalist "comic". The Gardai say this "comic" is produced in Spain, not in Dublin. Joe Walsh described the cartoons in this "comic" as "vicious, sickening and racist".

(What I've written here is adapted from Joe Walsh's report in the Sunday Press.) *What can we do from this Conference?*

Racist workers in Islington

2. One of three workers found guilty of Racial Harassment was moved to an important post involving lots of contact with the public in one of Islington's new about-to-open Neighbourhood Offices. Islington was embarking on its radical new programme of de-centralisation: making local government more accessible... Other workers in the office refused to work with her. Long negotiations took place about her presence. The Council had already refused to sack her and her two colleagues for Racial Harassment and now they refused to redeploy her to a post where she would be out of contact with the public. A petition is being circulated at this conference.

On August 5th 1985, 450 NALGO members walked out on strike

with the support of the rest of the Branch. *What can we do from this Conference?*

3. Last weekend the BBC news was telling us that Dunnes Stores was going to stop stocking South African produce provided it could find suitable replacement suppliers. This follows the strike of over one year by some Dunnes Stores staff in protest at the way Dunnes Stores persisted in selling South African produce. Those on strike had travelled to South Africa — the white name for Azania — earlier this year at the invitation of Bishop Desmond Tutu. They got as far as the customs in S. Africa where they were refused entry. (No-one was very surprised.)

Given Dunnes Stores' long reluctance to change its policy, can we trust them now? *Is there anything we can do from this conference to show solidarity with the strikers and/or to urge Dunnes to completely stop trading with South Africa immediately?*

4. There are always campaigns around Immigration and Deportation given the Immigration Rules of the day. At last year's Irish Women's Conference the Lesbian Workshop (or rather one of the Lesbian Workshops!!) said that there is joint work to be done on Campaigns against Deportations.

Currently Manda Kunda is fighting against deportation. The Home Office is arguing that because she left her violent husband she no longer has any right to stay in Britain. Manchester Council have set up an Anti-Deportation Working Party which is supporting Manda along with many others.

The Campaign Against the Deportation of Manda Kunda can be contacted at: Abraham Moss Centre, Youth Wing, Crescent Road, Crumpsall, Manchester, M8 6UF.

The Anti-Deportation Steering Group which aims to co-ordinate anti-deportation campaigns can be contacted at: 633 1535. On that number is Caroline Maldonado who is Secretary of the Steering Group. The Chair is Ronnie Moodley, c/o The Refugee Forum, 42 Albany Street, London NW1. *How can we from this Conference support anti-deportation campaigns?*

Aine Collins

6.

ANTI-IMPERIALIST EX-PROTESTANT WOMEN

We are anti-imperialist women from Protestant backgrounds, born in the North of Ireland, two of us now living in London, and one in Dublin. We want to state our identity and have our experience recognised among Irish anti-imperialist women, so that the anti-imperialist struggle can be widened out, in a way that creates space for more women from Protestant backgrounds to participate. We have no desire to set ourselves apart as a separate group. In stating our identity, we seek inclusion.

We feel that prevailing images of both Catholic and Protestant among the left in Britain are stereotyped. The only image available to us is as reactionary and pro-imperialist. This has meant being silent about our backgrounds when participating in political activities around Ireland.

Severing links with family and community

We came to anti-imperialist positions from different directions. It's obviously impossible to generalise from the experience of three people, but our common experiences include: periods spent out of the North, dialogue with other Irish people, exposure to the racist attitudes of the English to all Irish people regardless of religious or social background; and learning about Irish history. Reading about Irish history was a new experience for us, because in Protestant schools you get taught the history of the British Empire from Britain's point of view. Out of all this came a realisation of England's role in relation to Ireland.

To be anti-imperialist and from a Protestant background in the

North of Ireland not only means making a break from historical and cultural assumptions, but can mean severing all links with family and community. We are viewed as traitors to our own sides. It is of course easier to be anti-imperialist in England. Returning home to a working class Protestant area means keeping a low profile.

Women from the Catholic community have historically been very active in the liberation struggle. Where Protestant women have put their political energy is not so clear. But we believe Protestant women aren't just nurturers of sectarian killers, making tea for the UDA. Over the years Protestant women have been involved in trade union and community struggles, in formal political parties like the N. Ireland Labour Party, and the Communist Party, in CND in the sixties, and in the Civil Rights Association.

Catholic women are in the position of confronting the British state — in the form of the RUC and the British army. Protestant women who support the Union do not; they cannot challenge the state whose very existence they are defending. Undoubtedly this contradiction must determine the cut off points in their political struggles. Thus some Protestants dropped out of the Civil Rights movement when it became identified with the struggle for a United Ireland.

Protestant involvement in Ireland's struggle against England

However over the centuries there has been a strong tradition of Protestant involvement in Ireland's struggle against England's domination. This tradition is so weak at the moment that it is almost forgotten, but we think it might be useful here to look at a few examples of what has happened in the past, in order to take a longer historical view of the present situation. In the 18th century there were Ulster Presbyterian organisations called "Hearts of Oak" and "Hearts of Steel" which, like the "Whiteboys" in Munster, were secret societies that carried out agrarian guerilla warfare against evictions and other landlord abuses.

In fact, there was a strong Republican tradition amongst Ulster Presbyterians. The United Irishmen, Ireland's first major radical and anti-imperialist movement was founded by Wolfe Tone, a Protestant from Dublin, and he was invited in 1791 to Belfast to come and set up a branch. In the 1798 Rising, the majority who took up arms in Ulster were Protestants.

In the early 19th century, William Thompson, born of the Protestant Ascendancy in Cork, made an important contribution to the European socialist movement. He anticipated the theory of surplus value, later expounded by Marx, called for the emancipation of women, and helped set up agrarian communes.

Two of the leaders of the Young Ireland movement, which organised the 1848 Rising were Protestants (William Smith O'Brien and the Unitarian minister, John Mitchell). The rising failed, but Catholics and Protestants united in the Tenants Rights movement, and later in the Home Rule movement; Protestants Charles Stuart Parnell and Joseph Biggar (an Ulster MP secretly a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood) fought for Home Rule in the House of Commons, where they pioneered filibustering tactics. The unity between Catholics and Protestants was demonstrated in the elections of 1880 when an Ulster Presbyterian Minister was elected on a Land League ticket in Mayo — an almost wholly Catholic county.

Maud Gonne born 1866 was very active in the Land League, founded women's organisations, and was active in all phases of the Nationalist struggle. Countess Markievicz, daughter of a Protestant landowner, founded Fianna Erin, worked with James Connolly in the 1913 Dublin Lockout and fought in the 1916 Rising. Kathleen Clarke, widow of 1916 leader Tom Clarke, stood for election for Clann na Poblachta (MacBride's Coalition party). There were some Protestant Labour nominees standing for the elections in February 1949 and opposing partition.

Divide and rule

The British ruling class has always tried to sabotage any unity between the Catholic and Protestant working class. Yet there is a history that the anti-imperialist struggle needs to reclaim. Maybe the massive Protestant/Catholic unity of 1798 United Irishmen's Rising seems remote, but the tradition has not been extinguished; there are examples of working class solidarity in the North in living memory, e.g. the 1907 Belfast dock strike; support given by some Protestant workers to Catholic co-workers, when they were chased from the mills and shipyards in the pogroms of the 1920s and 30s; the outdoor relief riots of 1932 in Belfast; the linen strike of 1940, and the participation of some Protestants in the civil rights movement of the late sixties.

A strong anti-imperialist Protestant identity has existed in the past, and its re-emergence is desperately needed now, if a United Ireland is to be truly "united". We realise that the onus for transformation rests largely on the Protestant community itself, but in writing this, we hope to encourage discussion to begin around the whole question of what will happen to the Protestants in a future Ireland — where and how will they fit in? At the same time, in writing this, we hope to encourage other women from Protestant backgrounds to become visible and active in anti-imperialist politics around Ireland.

Contact LIWC for more information about the Anti-Imperialist Ex-Protestant Women's Group.

7.

SOCIAL SERVICES AND IRISH WOMEN

I work in an inner London borough which has the dubious accolade of being described as one of the most deprived areas of Western Europe. A quick walk around the borough and a swift glance at the Census statistics does nothing to challenge this description. All the characteristics of poverty — high unemployment, isolation and despondency — are there. Roads are dirty and pot-holed, housing notoriously bad (both in short supply and in poor repair) and there are the inevitable queues outside the dole office.

The Council is Labour controlled and in line for rate-capping. This year that means nil growth and 'rationalising' of resources. Next year the cuts will bite further. Scarce resources are becoming scarcer and, as frustration increases amongst the local communities, those at the 'bottom of the pile' are being given a particularly hard time (when you have little power yourself the tendency is to exercise what you do have over an agreed scapegoat — anyone different as well as poor).

My borough (like several other left-wing Councils) acknowledges prejudice and discrimination exists and would appear to work towards eliminating them. 'Ideologically sound' rhetoric abounds and policy statements are issued with monotonous regularity — unfortunately not always backed up by careful research, consultation with the groups concerned or money to effect change.

In this paper I would like to look in more detail at one Council's attempt to promote an anti-sexist, anti-racist social work service — and what this means for the Irish women who constitute a significant part of its community. The identity of the borough is unimportant as the story is a familiar one.

In focusing on Irish women's experience as consumers of social services, much of the sexism I identify applies to all women. Similarly, racist attitudes are shown towards other cultural registers. I am not competing on behalf of Irish women in England for first place in the league of oppressions. Divisive tactics are not going to bring about any improvement. However, Irish women experience their own particular brand of racism. It is often difficult to gain acceptance of this basic point. We look like white British and speak the same language — are we really so different?

I would like to consider Social Services attitudes and practices from two perspectives: firstly, as a consumer of Social Services, and, secondly, as a worker in the local authority bureaucracy.

The vast majority of consumers are women, the patriarchal system having firmly placed women in the role of housewife, and producer and carer of children. However most policies and legislation relating to Social Services were devised by middle class white males (British). Let us look at:

Child care provision

It is, by any standards, woefully inadequate. The waiting list for nursery places can be over a year. Childminders, too, are in short supply and can wait for months before their applications to register are processed. A great deal is said about developing ethnically sensitive child care provision. To date this has gone little further than ensuring that in nurseries there are black dolls and children's literature reflecting images of black people as well as white. This is to be applauded but goes nowhere near far enough. The recognition that Irish children have specific needs and the requirement to learn positively of their cultural background is absent.

Child abuse

A rare perspective in Social Work writings on child abuse is that of viewing the extensive procedures for identifying and monitoring incidents of abuse as repressive and controlling. Middle class children do not tend to feature on child abuse registers. Current child abuse procedures focus on individual women's parenting skills, and largely from a British ethnocentric perspective. Once a child's name is placed on the register the family must accept at least one year's monitoring from a social worker they probably have never met before. Statistics show that the 'family' in most instances is the woman carer. There is no right of appeal once your child's name is placed on the register and in most authorities parents cannot attend case conferences (a rather questionable form of parental participation in any case).

Many Irish women who have emigrated to England experience considerable pressure and cultural isolation — not to mention direct racism. Often they have left Ireland following disputes with partners or families — having found attitudes at home too repressive. Our children can bear the brunt of this. The consequence — a disproportionate number of Irish children being placed on the register. Today, in the wake of media inflamed panic about child abuse, children experiencing the most minor of injuries are being considered abused because they meet the 'criteria for registration'.

Receiving children into care

Research shows that if a boy and a girl commit a similar offence it is much more likely that the girl will be made the subject of a Care Order. In experiencing stress girls are shown to manifest disturbance by directing their aggression inwards (self mutilation is an extreme consequence). Women are only too ready to accept that they are at fault and so feed their already low self-esteem. Furthermore boys are rarely considered in moral danger — another reason for receiving youngsters into care. Given the strict moral code some Irish parents impose on their daughters, this can be a likely route into care for them. Of course, having your child received into care is an indictment of your parenting — an indication of failure. For parenting read mothering. The father (if he is not long gone) generally remains a shadowy figure and is usually unavailable when the Social Worker calls.

Caring for the elderly

Community care has become a euphemism for caring on the cheap. The pressure to provide care invariably falls on the woman. In Irish society the unspoken expectation of the single daughter caring for an elderly relative exists. British Social Services departments do little to discourage this.

Housing

Inflexible housing policies do little to improve the Irish emigrant's lot. I know of a family who fled Northern Ireland because of harassment and threats to their lives. My Council are still considering whether or not they have a responsibility to rehouse them as the family were thought to have made themselves 'intentionally homeless'.

Social Security

To list all the injustices and anomalies in the system of welfare payments is too great a task for this brief paper. What is clear, however, is that women bear the brunt of trying to live at subsistence level courtesy of DHSS. Increasingly, the DHSS are trying to engage Social Services Departments in supplementing claimants incomes where levels of benefits fail to meet their basic material needs. Irish women, not surprisingly find it difficult to fathom the social security system and contribute to the millions of pounds of unclaimed benefit each year.

Social Services establishments — Old People's Homes and Children's Homes etc.

It is now thought important, and rightly so, that the numbers of black staff reflect the numbers of black residents in the homes. Again, this does not become an issue where Irish residents are involved. Nor is it felt to be important that Irish residents can enjoy aspects of their own culture. In my experience the fact that Ireland has its own valuable and totally distinct culture is rarely accepted.

Racist assumptions

These notions inform attitudes to both Irish consumers and workers in the Social Services field. The racist stereotypes as encompassed in the many oft told Irish jokes have a firm foothold. A more sinister and more subtle form of anti-Irish racism is the unwillingness to accept Irish separateness and to acknowledge the problems experienced by Irish people when they come to England. This, of course, relates to most Britons' historical view of British current involvement in Ireland — an approach adopted not only in considering the Irish.

As employees of Social Services Irish women experience the lot of other women — for example women are over-represented in the lower grades and under-represented in the more senior posts. Women are believed to be more expressive than instrumental and have to work hard to convince those responsible for recruitment that they are equally able to men. Women may be in a majority within social work but they populate the bottom end of the hierarchy.

The issues I have raised in this paper, and of necessity have dealt with rather cursorily, are just some of those affecting Irish women in their contact with Social Services either as employees or consumers. Challenging sexism has always been low on local authorities' agendas. Racism has had a high profile only in the context of racism against the black community. We must continually challenge anti-Irish racism and work with other women to expose the inherent sexism that informs local authority structures and practices.

Jackie Byers

8.

THE CAMDEN IRISH PENSIONERS GROUP

Camden has been a well-known settling area for Irish people arriving in this country for some decades now. The largest influx was probably during the 1940s and 1950s; which can now be seen in the prevalent numbers of Irish born pensioners resident in the borough of Camden. Despite this, relatively few pensioners of Irish origin participate in existing social groups for pensioners. Although they have lived here for the greater part of their lives, memories of anti-Irish racism throughout the years, but particularly for so many the reception of 'no Irish need apply', has remained.

The Camden Irish Pensioners Group has been in existence since November 1984. It meets fortnightly at present, with some 20 to 30 people in attendance. However something in the region of 50 to 60 pensioners have joined, to date, and are in regular contact with the group. The Irish pensioners have had stalls at various street festivals throughout the Summer, they have set about fund-raising and already organised a day trip and a benefit. They are now involving themselves in the free fares campaign for Pensioners to travel in Ireland, and a Camden Town Pensioners Action Group. Through the group old acquaintances have re-met and new links have been made.

80% of the group are women, and needless to say they are the driving force behind the group's rapid growth and success. Many of them have worked long years in the caring professions and raised families. All of them have a great deal of energy which they have carried into the Irish Pensioners Group, to provide a pride of identity and a warmth of companionship.

Most important of all ... they are only just beginning ... all Irish Pensioners welcome.

Details from: Kathleen Dermondy, tel: 388 0792.

9.

BEING SECOND GENERATION IRISH

I grew up in a mixed working class area of Birmingham, with a big Irish population. Both my parents came from the South of Ireland and grew up in the country. They had gone first to Belfast, and then to England, looking for work. Both my parents were very aware of British imperialism in Ireland, and of anti-Irish racism here. My father especially consciously passed this on to me from more or less as soon as I could speak. At Primary School age, I knew quite a bit about the history of imperialism in Ireland and violence and discrimination against Catholics in the North. I spent a lot of time in Ireland as a child and had very little contact with any English adults until I went to school, as nearly everyone who came to our house was Irish. Since I went to Catholic schools, most of my friends came from the same background as myself. I never thought of myself as English.

As a young child I described myself as Irish partly because I came from, and identified with, an Irish community. Partly because my father had always impressed on us that we were Irish, and it would have felt like a denial of my family to say I was anything else. But as I grew older I didn't feel comfortable with just describing myself as Irish and leaving it at that. If asked, I would say that I was born here and my parents were Irish. I didn't say I was Irish, but I would never describe myself as English. I hadn't heard of the term Second Generation Irish at that time, and I was confused about how to put what I felt was my identity into words.

I call myself second generation Irish now because I think it expresses where I come from without ignoring the differences between myself and people who grew up in Ireland. I think that not to state that there are differences would be glossing over the advantages that I have in Britain as compared to Irish people who are immigrants here. I have never directly experienced living here as an immigrant, and I'm not directly subjected to anti-Irish racism in the way Irish-born people are. I don't mean that second generation women aren't affected by anti-Irish racism, but that we don't experience racist violence and discrimination here as Irish people who are immigrants do. Speaking with an English accent (even a working class one) and having grown up with an 'inside' knowledge of English culture can give a lot of advantages here which most Irish-born people don't have. For example, in employment, housing etc. I think this varies a lot with class, but in general being second generation has a lot of advantages in terms of surviving in Britain. Having dual nationality also gives second generation Irish

people more protection from the effects of the PTA and from police and state racism in general.

At the same time I think our experience of growing up in Britain is totally different than for people from English backgrounds. So is the experience of living here as adults if we maintain our Irish connections, and make our Irish identification clear to English people. Over the last couple of years, as I've become much clearer about my own identity, and more articulate about challenging anti-Irish racism, I've found that, in general, there is more of a gulf between me and English women* I'm friends with or work with in groups. There are exceptions to this, but in general, they become either defensive or uncomfortable and sometimes hostile if I challenge anti-Irish racism or make my Irish identification obvious.

There are strong pressures to assimilate into English culture and gloss over cultural and political differences on both second generation and Irish-born women living here, in the women's movement as everywhere else. For all of us to maintain our identities and to challenge the oppression of Irish people here and in Ireland, I think it's important that Irish-born and second generation women make links with each other. But I think that in doing so, we have to acknowledge our differences as well as our similarities. There are tensions between some of us about the relationship between Irish-born and second generation women, which I think should be more openly acknowledged and discussed.

Maureen O'Hara

*When I say English I mean white English women who aren't from oppressed racial or ethnic groups.

10.

THE DUBLIN WELL WOMAN CENTRE

The purpose of this paper is to give a potted history of the Well Woman Centre, its policies, structures and services provided and to bring Conference participants up to date with the situation regarding the Civil Court Action being taken against Well Woman and Open Line Counselling by SPUC in relation to Pregnancy Counselling and abortion referral.

The initiative to open a Well Woman Centre in Dublin came from the Marie Stopes Organisation. In 1977 Anne Connolly, then a student in Trinity College active on women's issues, was approached by the Marie Stopes with a view to opening a Well Woman in Dublin. In January 1978 the first centre was opened in Leeson Street. We now have a second centre on the northside of Dublin in Eccles Street. From the start Well Woman was different from the other eleven family planning clinics operating in the twenty six counties as it had a publicly stated policy on a woman's right to choose. Because abortion was illegal under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, Well Woman was confined to providing a non-directive pregnancy counselling and abortion referral service.

In the latter stages of 1979 when the Marie Stopes was taken over by an organisation called Population Services International (a multinational involved in population control programmes) Well Woman severed all connections with them and have only since last October finished paying to them the initial monies they gave to set us up. Since then we are completely independent. Like all other family planning clinics the Well Woman is a Company limited by guarantee. This means that there are no shareholders and the directors are staff members. Under Irish law we cannot become a registered charity because we offer goods for sale. We have 48 members of staff, 13 full time administrative employees, the remainder work on a sessional basis and are doctors, nurses and psychologists.

In 1984, 70,502 women and men used our services which include medical clinics for birth control, infection testing, PMS, Meno-

pause, smear testing, breast examinations, rubella testing and general gynaecological problems. We provide self help groups for PMS, Menopause and depression.

Although Well Woman as an organisation was never affiliated to the Women's Right to Choose Group we had a close organisational and political relationship. Our Constitution states quite clearly that we stand for a woman's right to control her fertility with abortion as an option.

Anti-Amendment Campaign

When it became publicly known that the PLAC (Pro-Life Amendment Campaign — a conglomerate of Right Catholic Groups and Individuals) had extracted a commitment from both Fine Gael and Fianna Fail to hold a referendum to insert into the Constitution a right to life for the foetus, Well Woman was one of the prime movers in the setting up of the Anti Amendment Campaign, gave part of its premises at Eccles Street over as a headquarters, the time of some of our staff and at the end of a year's campaigning had committed around £10,000 to the campaign. Our political line in the Anti Amendment Campaign was based firmly on the five points of unity which were that this Constitutional Amendment would do nothing to solve the problems of unwanted pregnancies, allow for no exceptions, that it was sectarian and that it would prevent future legislation on abortion and that it was a waste of public funds. We believed that these five points laid the basis for the broadest possible support as it allowed those who weren't prepared to go as far as a woman's right to choose to join with the Anti Amendment Campaign.

Although Anne Connolly, Well Woman Co-ordinator was a prominent member of the Woman's Right to Choose Group she took a very low public profile in the campaign. However practically all Well Woman staff were involved in their local Action Groups and Dr. Maire Woods and myself were on the first Steering Committee.

The Anti Amendment Campaign was arguably the broadest single issue campaign since the foundation of the State. For the first time in Ireland abortion was discussed either positively or negatively in practically every household in the country. Almost all Trade Unions, Community and Professional Organisations including the medical profession were forced to discuss the fact that at least ten Irish women were going every day to Britain for abortions. Women's health, sex education and the right to contraception and indeed to information were debated ad nauseam for at least a year. In my view the fundamental error of the Anti Amendment Campaign was that it was Dublin centred and it never really challenged the Catholic Church in the battle for the hearts and minds of people living outside Dublin.

Attacks against clinics increase

On September 6, 1983, the day before the Referendum was held, our two centres were raided by the Gardai. We were charged with selling condoms illegally, something we and all the other family planning clinics had been doing since the 1979 Health & Family Planning Act was passed which stipulated that non medical contraceptives must be prescribed by a doctor and only to bona fide married persons — whatever they are! When we appeared in Court we argued that the Gardai had no right under health legislation to prosecute without the specific instruction from the Minister of Health. This case is still outstanding pending a decision from the High Court on our contention.

Following the passing of the Constitutional Amendment guaranteeing the right to life of the unborn, Well Woman continued as before providing a pregnancy and abortion referral service. Although we were always aware that SPUC intended the amendment to be just the beginning of a campaign to erode any gains made in the last twenty years in the area of reproductive health and sexuality we were quite surprised at the timing of the present case.

In February of this year the Minister of Health presented to the

Dail a Bill amending the 1979 Health & Family Planning Act making non medical contraceptives available to everybody over eighteen years old without a doctor's prescription at licensed outlets. More or less at the same time SPUC placed a picket on our Leeson Street Centre calling for us to be closed down as an abortion referral centre. It is arguable whether this was deliberate because they knew if this Bill became law we would become legal and their tactic was to make it as difficult as possible for us in advance of them taking us to Court. During the debate on this amendment to the Family Planning Act, the big guns of the Catholic Church, Archbishop of Dublin McNamara and Archbishop of Limerick Newman issued statements condemning the availability of condoms to 18 year olds. TD's who declared their intention to vote for the change received life threatening phone calls and an attempt was made to create an atmosphere of intimidation. Fianna Fail said they would vote against, several Fine Gael TD's and Labour TD's announced their intention to join with Fianna Fail and for two weeks the situation became very volatile. Heads were counted and it looked like a win of 2/3 votes.

During the debate a very long speech was made by the Fianna Fail TD for Limerick, Des O'Malley, in which he said he would vote for this change because he believed in a secular republic but only on condition that the Minister would say that he would refuse consent to operate a family planning clinic to any organisation who did abortion referral. Needless to say the Minister concurred and stated quite clearly that he would refuse his consent to any such individual or organisation.

As soon as the Bill was passed SPUC withdrew their picket and a few days later we received a letter from their Solicitor giving us seven days to stop doing pregnancy counselling and abortion referral or they would seek a declaration from the Courts that counselling and referral was illegal under the Constitution.

Finally on July 1 we received a summons to appear in Court on July 22 for an Interlocutory Injunction hearing to stop abortion referral and pregnancy counselling. SPUC wanted the Court to declare that pregnancy counselling, abortion referral and even referring women for further advice about abortion to foreign jurisdictions were illegal. They are also claiming that what we are doing is a conspiracy to corrupt public morals. Following two court hearings SPUC backed off on the Injunction and agreed to a constitutional Action where the Judge will be asked to interpret the new amendment to the Constitution and thereby say whether what ourselves and Open Line Counselling are doing is offending it. At the time of writing the case is due to be heard sometime in November or December — no date is yet fixed.

From the outset Well Woman staff thought it was important to build the broadest possible support to defend the two organisations on the basis that this case was the unfinished business of the amendment, that it was an attack on non-directive pregnancy counselling, an attempt to prevent women having access to information and of course on a woman's right to choose.

Building a broad campaign to defend the clinics

The Ad-hoc Group set up to defend the clinics has adopted a proposal for campaign issues which, except for one sentence Well Woman is in entire agreement with. The text is as follows:

1. The right of Irish women to access to agencies which provide non-directive pregnancy counselling independent of Church and State.
2. The right of agencies and individuals to provide information to women with unplanned pregnancies on all options including abortion.
3. The right to refer women to jurisdictions where abortion is legal, until such time as these services become available in Ireland.

The sentence "until such services are available in Ireland" is in our view an attempt to graft a campaign to legalise abortion on to the

defense campaign. This is not only political opportunism but political suicide in terms of trying to build broad support.

As feminists providing a service for women seeking abortion we must face the reality of our own political situation. In September 1983 the electorate voted by four to one to insert an anti-abortion amendment into the Constitution. Although only 50% of the electorate voted, this is not very different from previous referenda on all kinds of other issues. We lost this vote despite having the backing of the national media, the liberal establishment and even the Taoiseach of the day telling the people to vote in our favour. We are now under attack and we must consolidate whatever support we can instead of raising the political stakes — we must make it possible for as many people as possible to support us on whatever basis they can or wish to.

Well Woman has everything to lose by adopting the wrong strategy at this time — we have all those who use our services to consider and more importantly all those women who will continue to travel to Britain for abortions.

In all other countries the impetus to liberalise abortion laws has come from the numbers of backstreet abortions and the willingness of doctors to break anti abortion laws. In Ireland we are very far away from that situation — Britain is much too close geographically, we can always export our social problems.

This case must be won, if it is it will be a political victory, as feminists we have to adopt a strategy and tactics to suit our conditions.

Noreen Byrne

11.

LETTER TO THE SECOND LONDON IRISH WOMEN'S CONFERENCE, SEPTEMBER '85

Dublin
September 15th, '85

Dear Dolores,

Sorry for taking so long to reply to your card but I've been very busy this past week. This is the third time I've sat down to write to you so I am determined not to leave this spot until I'm heading to the Post Office with letter complete.

Quite a tall order you've been given, I don't know if it's possible to give any comprehensive account in a few hundred words. I asked Eilis for her view on the subject and she was very succinct — 'Bleeding poxy' — but I think I'll elaborate and expand a bit more. There have been a number of good books published in the past year. I'll give you a list later on.

Well you say 'what's the situation for women in Ireland?' Things have changed quite a lot since the heady days of the '70s. I've noticed changes over the past two years since I came home. Do you remember the time I stayed with you in London on my way back to Dublin? I was dying to get back here, I really needed a dose of Dublin reality after the years of Californian dreamy introspection. Well I got it. It's two years since that Amendment summer — in one way it doesn't seem that long, in another it's light years away. The reverberations of the amendment are still being felt here now, next month SPUC are taking the Well Woman and Open Line counselling to court to try to get an injunction against them as they claim they are contravening the law by providing information about abortion. A woman's body is not her own, least of all her womb. This was very clearly shown during the Kerry Babies tribunal. I used to get so angry reading the reports, I believe Nell McCafferty is writing a book on the whole affair which should make for very interesting reading.

Just above my desk here I have the front page of the Evening Press of the 8th of March last. International Women's Day ... the headline was 'Eileen Flynn loses appeal'. I wondered did they choose the day deliberately. It didn't make me feel very secure as the manager of the school was a conservative creep. I'm quite sure I'd have been out on my ear if he knew of either my sexuality or involvement in the women's movement. Anyway that job finished in May and since then I've only had a few hours here and there. Talking of teachers etc. Phil had a baby last year, her third in four years, so she's given up her teaching and her studying... Brian is doing his doctorate and can't help out at home. He says he wants to have six children before he's thirty-five and Phil sits without saying a word. I'm sure she's gone soft in the head.

Every other paper and magazine has a story lamenting the state of the country. It's in a state of economic chaos, and that's for sure. The people who get hit first are those at the bottom of the pile. I'm on the dole at the moment and make my weekly pilgrimage to Victoria Street, the only consolation is that at least I have just myself to worry about. I don't know how women with kids are surviving. Of course rising unemployment is frequently blamed on 'all those married women holding down jobs which men ought to have'. On that same front page there is a piece about a TD who said "the flight of women from the home is leading to escalating social disorder". Blame it on the women not on short sighted social policy or lack of policy.

In the wake of all the anti women feeling in the media and judiciary, last March a group of women organised a protest march. About 150 plus women walked down O'Connell Street shouting 'Irish women are angry', 'Lesbians are angry'. One thing is for sure, and that is I'd never have been seen outside the GPO chanting 'Lesbians are angry' even five years ago. Safety in numbers I suppose.

Speaking of lesbians, the country did very little else over the week-end. I'm sure you heard some rumblings of the furore the authors of Breaking Silence caused here. Such a circus. Customs seizures, hotels chucking them out, rosary reciting protesters outside RTE (complete with statue which moved all the way from town to Donnybrook). I spoke to some of the protesters in my capacity as reporter with OUT. "They're unnatural perverts and they're trying to lead our children astray". The word lesbian was all over the front pages of the papers but still I think people really believe that lesbians and gays exist only in foreign climes or if they're Irish that they must have caught 'IT' in England or one of those quare places. Unfortunately we couldn't rustle up anyone willing to go on telly and show that there were real live Irish lesbians alive and well and living in Dublin. But on Sunday night over a hundred of us got together to meet the women and it was good.

There's been a terrible lack of political activism recently and that's putting it mildly. There's a lack of oomph and enthusiasm. Some people say it's because so many of the battles have been WON, well I suppose the fact of equal pay legislation, changes in family law, contraception nearly legal and women becoming more visible in public life might seem like a battle won but the real fight is only beginning. The fight to change the attitudes and prejudices that lurk so near the surface — a difficult one that. I think a lot of people are tired and becoming very fatalistic so they decide to go ahead and plough their own personal furrow. I feel like that sometimes. Definitely the Amendment has left a deep scar on the women's movement here.

There are a few women trying to get a network going. They want to try and get something that will blend the best features of Irish Women United and the Feminist Federation ... time will tell. I missed the August meeting, I went to Galway for a holiday, enjoyed it despite the rain. Saw the Catalan theatre group Els Comedians, they were brilliant. There again the Mayor had objected as they had a nude scene in the show...

The Women's Centre have to move premises soon — as yet they

don't know where to. I don't think women appreciate what a resource a Women's Centre is.

Sometimes I fear that if we stay static much longer we'll start to slide backwards. I feel that personally too, but that is caused by my frustration at the lack of spondulicks. It definitely constricts one. I've just realised that it's exactly ten years since we first worked in England for the Summer and then went off to France. I felt life was really beginning then, eighteen, thinking I was the bee's knees drinking wine in Montparnasse. Do you remember the English couple who were surprised we were Irish because you spoke such good French and your man saying "Well at least you're not black". I think it was then I began to understand why Maire said she hated living in London.

Believe it or not I'm thinking of going to Britain myself. Frances needs to go back as her dad is unwell. (Yes we're still living together.) She does like it here but money problems are looming for her too. She's a bit worried that I won't like it there too much. Especially from the point of view of making friends. I always feel that the women's movement there is much more rigidly divided into strata and that it is important to identify with a particular group and style in order to get anywhere. It might be interesting to try. She also reckons that anti Irish feelings might make it difficult. I've never lived there, only visited, so I don't really know. The only time I felt it very strongly was when Mountbatten was killed. I was in a pub in South London and when I opened my mouth things got decidedly hostile.

Fran listens to the BBC 4 quite a bit and I feel like I'm listening at the keyhole of Britain. It's all so urbane and smooth — it drives me nuts at times. One thing is sure and that is that Ireland gets very little coverage. Recently they've picked up on the moving statue story and the Lesbian nun issue. Balanced reporting, how are you.

The moving statues have been big news all summer. It seems as if the whole country is going mad. I think that the rotten summer has disturbed everyone, that combined with rising unemployment, uncertainty and disillusionment has everyone looking for signs. Some of us consult the tarot and our astrological charts, others look to statues.

This is also fuel for the conservative backlash which is definitely starting to gather force. As always the right are more organised while the women's movement and the left are splintered and disorganised. We're still here though and I'd even say that there are greater numbers of women who identify as feminists, as lesbians, taking decisions about their own lives which were unthinkable even 15 years ago.

I haven't been to the North since 1978 so I am not going to have the nerve to make any comment on the situation there. It just

dawned on me how much our access to information is curtailed by laws like Section 31. Ann is much more up to date on the way things are there. Sometimes I feel bad that as an Irish woman I am not more concerned with the situation but there's only so much an individual can do.

I've just re-read some of what I've written and it sounds all gloom and doom. It's not. Even now people still go out and have a bit of crack. Funny that was one thing that Fran commented on when she first came over, the capacity people had to have a laugh even when the country was apparently falling down around their ears. I don't think I'd have stayed home so long unless I was enjoying myself. True some days I look at my minus bank balance, the grey sky, a grimy street and remember my pretty Californian apartment, my constant suntan and the variety of ice cream and beer and wonder "Why?" but these are inevitable and momentary. I used to miss smokey packed pubs and dirty pints of Guinness while I was there.

There are reasons to be cheerful (the sun is shining at this very moment) and I think one of the big ones is that there is now a burgeoning (love that word) women's publishing industry. Information is more widely available. I'd particularly recommend 'Who owns Ireland' and 'Personally Speaking' published by Attic Press and the Arlen House book on 'Irish Women; Image and Achievement'.

When you're preparing your talk, I'd concentrate on:

Economics: The particular problems women face as long as they are not seen as valuable and essential participants in the workforce.

Legislation: The fact that Ireland has no Divorce, women are seen as dependants, etc. Change in contraception laws.

Attitudes: The difficulties of being a radical woman in a society which is still profoundly conservative.

But while saying all that it is still possible to live the lifestyle one wants (if one has the money) and it is not all Moving Statues on the Dole.

I wish I could get to the conference myself because I know I've not said an eighth of what I should. Let me know how it goes because I think it's about time Irish women in Ireland had a conference. Well I'm off to the Post Office right now. Think I'll stop by the Green for a few minutes, maybe I can persuade one of the statues at the fountain at the Leeson Street end to come for a pint with me. That'd cause a stir. Or better again, Wolfe Tone might take a stroll down Baggot Street ... can't you see the headline ... "Protestant statue moves". Enough of this flippancy.

See ya.

Anne



One major aim of the Conference was to strengthen links and establish new ones between Irish women in England and Ireland. Pictured left are some of the women who came over for the Conference and who are involved in different campaigns in the North and South of Ireland. From left to right: Marie McRory (Falls Road Women's Centre, Belfast); Linda McGuire (Belfast); Judy O'Donohue (Dublin Women for Disarmament); Kate Shanahan (Dublin Women's Centre); Tina Keating (Dublin Well Woman Clinic); Noreen Byrne (Dublin Well Woman Clinic); and Ruth Riddick (Open Line Counselling, Dublin).

credits and contacts

CREDITS

We wish to thank the following for their support and help:

Squeals on Wheels Creche Workers

SugArcane Caterers

Caxton House, especially the Bar Staff

GLC Ethnic Minority Unit for funding the Conference (we are still waiting for full payment from the residuary body).

The Irish Women's Media Group who filmed the Conference.

Joanne O'Brien of FORMAT Photographers who photographed the Conference

Charabanc; The Hairy Marys; Brid Boland and Maria Tolly for their wonderful performances.

Chairs of the Discussion Groups and the General Sessions.

And last but not least — all the non-Irish women who were volunteers on the day of the Conference and who helped with registration, the creche, accommodation, transport and cleaning up.

This report is being put on tape for blind women. Contact the London Irish Women's Centre for details.

CONFERENCE PLANNING GROUP

Susan Paul

Ann Gilmartin

Maureen O'Hara

Rae Dowds

Stephanie Burns

Brid Boland

Marion Larraghy

Eileen McNulty

Sabina Sharkey

Ellen Reynolds

Olga Buckley

Imelda Redmond

Jackie Byers

CONFERENCE REPORT WORKING GROUP

Susan Paul

Ann Gilmartin

Maureen O'Hara

Rae Dowds

CAMPAIGNS/GROUPS

New groups and campaigns which emerged from the Conference included:

1. The Irish Women's Writing Group
c/o The London Irish Women's Centre
59 Stoke Newington Church Street
London N16. Tel: 249 7318
2. Defend the Clinics Campaign
(e.g. The Well Woman and Open Line clinics in Dublin)
c/o The Irish Women's Abortion Support Group
c/o 52-54 Featherstone Street
London EC1

Support the Dunnes Stores Strikers Campaign
c/o The London Irish Women's Centre
(address as above)

Existing campaigns were also strengthened and intensified as a result of the Conference, especially:

1. Stop the Strip Searches Campaign.

2. Máire O'Shea Is Innocent Campaign (This was successful and all the charges were dropped against Máire O'Shea in early 1986.)
 3. Repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act Campaign
 4. Defend the 33 Campaign (i.e. the 33 women who were arrested in Dublin when they picketed against Reagan's visit to Ireland and in particular on his nuclear arms policy).
 5. The Irish Campaign Against Racism in the Media.
- For more information on these campaigns and groups please contact the London Irish Women's Centre.

IRISH WOMEN'S GROUPS

The following are some Irish Women's Groups in London. Contact the London Irish Women's Centre for a full and up-to-date list of both Irish Women's groups and mixed Irish groups in London.

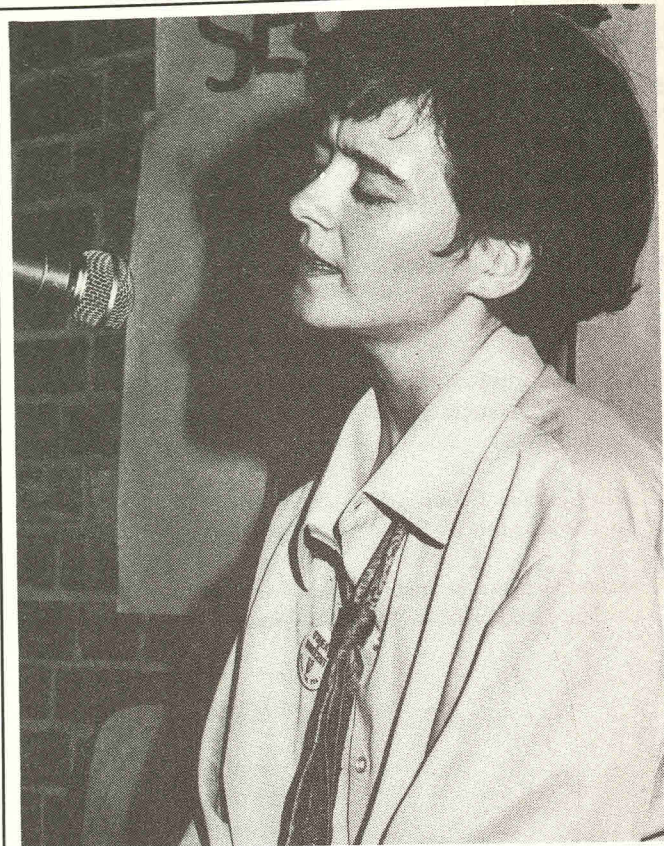
1. The London Irish Women's Centre
59 Stoke Newington Church Street
London N16. Tel: 249 7318.
2. Irish Women in Islington Group
Cabin X
25 Horsell Road
London N5. Tel: 609 8916
3. Irish Women in Brent Group
c/o Brent Women's Centre
232 Willesden High Road
London NW10. Tel: 459 7660
4. Irish Women and Mental Health Group
c/o The London Irish Women's Centre
5. South London Irish Women's Group
c/o South London Women's Centre
55 Acre Lane
Brixton. Tel: 274 7215
6. South-East London Irish Women's Group
(meet on first and third Thursday of each month at)
The Clockhouse Community Centre
Defiance Walk
Woolwich Church Street
Woolwich
7. East London Irish Women's Group
c/o 2A Windmill Lane
Stratford
London E15. Tel: 519 5089
8. Second Generation Irish Women's Group
c/o Deptford and Lewisham Women's Centre
74 Deptford High Street
London SE8. Tel: 692 1851
9. Anti-Imperialist ex-Protestant Women's Group
c/o The London Irish Women's Centre.
10. Grainne Mhaol (An Irish Women's Publication Group)
c/o Marie McAdam
2 Boscombe Road
London W12
11. Irish Women's Writing Group
c/o The London Irish Women's Centre.

Irish women's culture

Our Conference was not yet over. We had spent the day linking up the many individual campaigns and struggles that we, as Irish women living in England, have been involved in over the years and uniting these diverse strands so that we would have a stronger and more effective voice in demanding that our needs and aspirations be met in both the Irish community and in the wider English community: and we then spent the evening in a celebration of Irish women's culture.

There were more videos about Irish women like *Annie McGuire versus Regina* to be seen, and the Irish Women's Video Group had showings of their videos on *Máire O'Shea* and *Macalla at Caxton House* and other material they have recorded like Irish women's events during International Women's Week in March 1985.

Live entertainment followed from the Hairy Marys (an Irish Women's drama and dance troupe); Brid Boland (singing Sean Nos style); and Maria Tolly (a political folk singer singing protest songs about women and Ireland). And the evening was rounded off by a ceili with dancing continuing until late into the evening. Like the First London Irish Women's Conference, this Conference was a huge and exciting success. Over 300 women had come together, talked through issues and got support and direction from each other and we were now ready to renew our efforts to retain our unique and very rich Irish culture and identity and to improve the position of Irish women in England and Ireland.



Brid Boland singing Sean-Nos style at the Conference Social. Brid is now a member of the Sheelaghs, an all-women Irish Ceili Band who can be contacted through the London Irish Women's Centre. Maria Tolly also performed at the social. Maria has a tape called "Gonna Get Up" available from WRPM, Birmingham. Telephone: 021 449 7041.



The Hairy Marys performing an incisive and imaginative sketch about the role of Britain in Ireland. They can be contacted on 359 1024.