

*Irish women
our lives-our identity*



*report of the
1987
London Irish
womens conference*

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Introduction

Irish Women, Our Lives, Our Identity was the third and most successful conference of Irish women in London to date. The success of the conference was largely due to the speakers, from twenty five Irish women's groups and the women who attended the conference, but none of this could have happened without the efforts of a small dedicated working group and the volunteers who helped out on the day.

The conference was structured into two major parts.

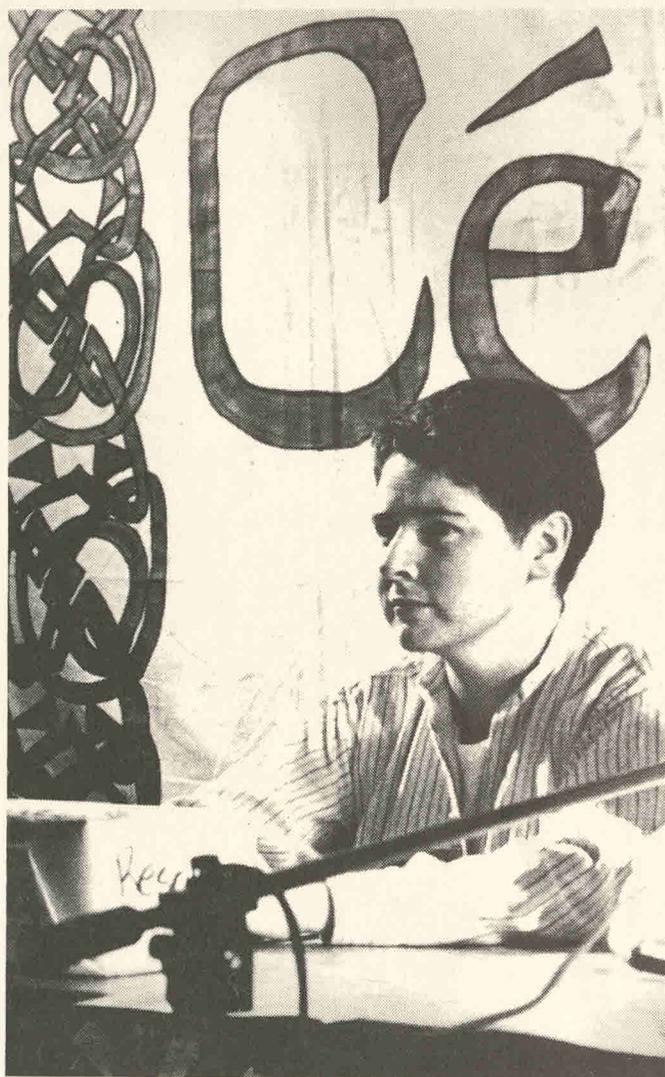
In the morning session speakers from Irish women's groups in London and Ireland provided up to the minute information on a wide range of subjects, from political campaigns, here and in Ireland, to local women's groups, from the Girls' Group to Older Women's Groups, to cultural and sporting activities.

Though the range of topics varied considerably, it became clearer as each speaker took the stage that, despite the diversity of interests, what we were listening to was the united voice of a single Irish Women's Movement which has emerged in London in recent years.

In the afternoon workshops gave women the opportunity to talk on what they felt about their lives and identity as Irish women. For many it was their first opportunity to do so in a supportive and encouraging environment and one where their experience was validated. As the workshops progressed and the reportbacks from these were given, it was clear that the need for this conference on identity was even greater than any of us had imagined. The very fact that over three hundred women came to Deptford on the day was itself an indication of the real need to explore the issues raised at the conference.

The afternoon session ended with a brief debate on the two resolutions tabled, which were then carried.

Celebrations started immediately after the conference with readings from the Irish Women's Writers Network, followed by the Simply Now Theatre Group's production of *Only The Rivers Run Free*. In the main hall musical entertainment included harpist Meabh McKeown, jazz vocalist and pianist Jane Gilmore, singer Joanne O'Brien and for the remainder of the evening women ceiled the night away to the music of the Sheelas.



Jean Cross from the C.P.G. presenting the introductory speech.

Irish Women, Aspects of Identity

Just as we are beginning, perhaps we'd like to contemplate — when was the last time any of us heard or read the word 'abortion' in the pages of the *Irish Post*? When have any of us ever seen the words "Irish lesbian" in the same paper? The editor apparently thinks this is a contradiction in terms. If the *Irish Post* plugged itself as the paper which perpetuated the Irish identity in Britain, it would be closer to the truth that the way it does, which is as the paper which *represents* the Irish in Britain. The identity which that paper does present is almost totally exclusive of Irish women's reality. Women, as far as the *Irish Post* is concerned, are decorative objects, and their presentation in that paper is merely a variation of the Page 3 phenomenon. We'll be waiting till the cows come home for the *Irish Post* or the community it represents to do anything about this situation. We've got to do it ourselves and this Conference here today is part of that process of change.

The Conference Planning Group which took on responsibility for organising and structuring this Conference first came together last September. The decision to centre the conference on the theme of identity was not made lightly. Although it seemed a natural progression from our previous two conferences which explored "Women and Emigration" and "Irish Women Living in England", we realised the potential conflict inherent in such an emotive and sensitive issue.

Despite this, we felt that the theme of "Identity" offered a tremendous opportunity to explore our identity in personal as well as collective terms. Indeed, it is precisely because the theme is so personal and so exploratory that it has the exciting capacity, not only to unite us as individuals and groups, but to provide a direction for our future. To help us to recap and to take stock of our progress and our present position, we will later be hearing from approximately 25 groups this morning, the vast majority of which are Irish women's groups operating in London. The very fact that so many groups exist means that we, as Irish women, feel we have a definite identity which has not yet been given recognition. The establishment of such groups creates a safe environment in which to explore and express our identity defined by and for ourselves. We hope that the information shared in the morning session will give us plenty to think about and provide a basis for our afternoon of discussion which will take place in the workshops. The fact that we are here at all today is an indication of our eagerness to explore this theme.

At this point it would perhaps be helpful to explain what exactly we mean by identity. By identity, we mean that image with which one identifies and which is validated by personal and historical experience. With that in mind, let's take a look at the historical experience which has shaped the Irish identity.

Historically the Irish identity has been shaped by cultural, economic and political imperialism. The result is a still intact but fragmented identity. One is left to for ever wonder how different the Irish identity might be had we not been through 800 years of oppression. Despite the fact that an Irish community has existed in this country for hundreds of

years, this has not yet given rise to a separate identity for the Irish in Britain. Though there are indications that this situation is beginning to change, the racism and hostility meted out to the Irish community through powerful institutions such as the media and educational establishment has successfully destroyed the historical base on which such an identity might have been built.

The dominant identity of the Irish in Britain therefore is that of the native Irish, in other words, of people born in Ireland. This dominant Irish identity has evolved from historical continuity down through the centuries, and has not only facilitated the emergence of a unique Irish heritage, expressed through myths, legends, literature, music, dance, traditional skills and customs, and art, but has developed from mutual interaction with these means of expression. Historical continuity has also had a very powerful influence on the shaping of our political identity. Religion has been a major historical factor in the evolution of a dominant Irish identity. The fact that the Catholic church was oppressed as the church of the people has given rise to its position of power which eventually enabled it to exert an enormous influence on the Irish imagination. Likewise the intermingling of religion, politics and economics placed the Protestant church in Ireland in an equally powerful position to mould the identity of its members.

Within these aspects of Irish identity, let us now look at the given images of Irish women with which we are supposed to identify. Irish women have no historical continuity on which to base our identity. The surviving images of Irish women of the past are those which do not threaten the male notion of Irish identity. The pre-Christian images of women include goddesses, warriors and the celebration of female sexuality in sheela na gigs. Later descriptions of these images distort their meaning and hide their true significance or mould them to suit the emerging religious or political ideology.

Christian ideology depicted contrasting and extreme images for Irish women to identify with. The woman was, on the one hand, blamed through Eve for the misfortunes of the human race, and on the other hand, elevated in the likeness of the Virgin Mary and given an image of female perfection in servility and motherhood to which she was expected to aspire. The historical images and myths thus presented as Irish women's history have no basis in the reality of our historic experience.

The lack of a strong documented historical identity allows these inhuman and extreme images to be perpetuated as the modern-day image of Irish woman. Today, the dominant images of Irish women are those of the house-bound married mother and the fallen sinful woman. These images are firmly rooted in historic and religious mythology and symbolise extremes of good and evil. The reality of Irish women's experience is not represented in this imagery which is all that a dominant Irish identity presents us with and yet this is the imagery reflected in mythology, legend, folklore, art and literature — an acclaimed literature, I might add, which has presented this imagery of Irish woman to the world.

Taking the definition of identity as mentioned earlier, that is, as identifying with a given image, validated by personal and historic experience, we have gone through

what we believe to be the dominant identity of the Irish in Britain and shown how that identity fails to give Irish women an identity which takes account of our aspirations and our experience. In other words, an image has been imposed upon us from without to which we are expected to conform. In the same way, the Irish community here has had a negative image imposed upon it from without which it is expected to accept and acquiesce to. The Irish community, including the Irish women's community, has chosen to reject that distorted image. We, as Irish women, similarly have the choice to reject the images of ourselves as presented by the dominant Irish identity. We would argue that to accept this dominant Irish identity is to sacrifice a great deal of our experience as Irish women. To reject it is to face the painful realisation that we are confronted with the long and arduous process through which we can explore and develop a valid identity.

This search for identity has already begun. Since the 1970's Irish women have been forming themselves into autonomous groups to seek recognition for our needs, and this Conference Planning Group is pleased to host such an array of Irish women's groups. Recent years have seen significant and necessary progress in the documentation of Irish women's experience. The process of forging a new identity is already under way. This is illustrated by the fact that we have already had two conferences, a three-week celebration of Irish women's culture, and a two-week play scheme in which Irish children explored their Irish identity. Irish women have also established for themselves a secure political, cultural and technical base in the form of the Irish Women's Centre.

We have realised that the lack of historical continuity has resulted in a huge gap between our experience and the identity imposed upon us. We now have the opportunity to develop our own identity and to present the images which reflect our reality. We are no longer dependent upon the likes of the *Irish Post* to present our images to the Irish community and indeed, to the community at large. We have recognised the importance of recording and documenting our history and we have the skills, the technology and the determination to take this task in hand. Future generations of Irish women in London will have that vital link with the past, that all important base from which to draw their identity.

This conference today is a significant step in the formulation of an identity for Irish women, which takes in and recognises all the reality of Irish women's experiences. In this it is revolutionary. It will be an identity forged by the strength of this experience; the painful lessons we have learned and the courage we have found within ourselves and each other to embark on an arduous journey of discovery. The identity we build will have its foundations firmly rooted in the pain and the joy of our reality. It will take into account the lives of our mothers and our grandmothers and hopefully it will emerge from a unity which recognises diversity as a strength.

Women around the world are struggling for their own liberation and for the liberation of their various peoples. Irish women too, are in the front line of this struggle for personal and national freedom. In asserting our place in the world I feel confident that we will incorporate into our identity an openness and acceptance born of common struggle, common oppression and common optimism for the future.

(Speech writers, Brid Boland and Jean Cross from the Conference Planning Group.)

Section One Groups

London Armagh Women's Group

My name is Marian Larragy and I'm a member of the London Armagh Women's Group. We started life before there were Irish Women's groups in London as such, and our group reflects that, in that we are not an Irish Women's Group — we are a group of women who live in Britain — Irish, Second Generation Irish, British and sometimes women of other nationalities as well. I won't go into the history of the group because we have a pamphlet about ourselves if anyone wants the information and probably people are quite familiar with the group.

During the time that we have worked, we have tried to analyse what precisely is the relationship between the colonisation of Ireland, the current National Question which remains unresolved and the position of Irish women. Now we are as aware as everybody else that it is a very complicated thing; all of the contradictions are there; it's not enough to say "Resolve the National Question and women's position will be OK". Our own position is that the resolution of the National Question is a pre-requisite to improving the situation of women in Ireland.

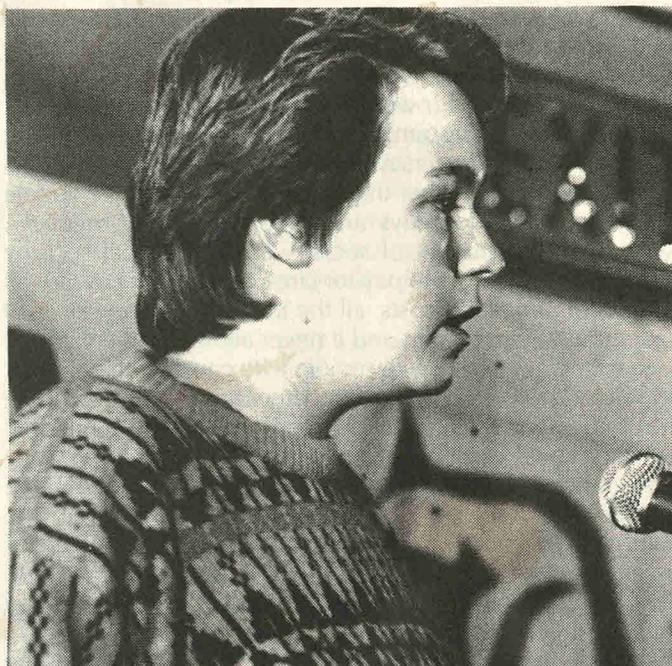
What we have found over the years is that there is a very strong underlying feeling from women on all of these issues; everybody has got very different views on it, but somehow we have never had a forum to discuss any of that. We don't have an Irish women's magazine as such; this is our third conference and the developments in recent years are phenomenal in that Irish women are actually beginning to be able to get together. We still feel that after all these years Irish women have not discussed what precisely we see as the relationship between the colonisation of Ireland and our position now in regard to what we want to do about it — how exactly do we relate to the National Question? What do we want to do about it? We feel and we sometimes get from people in the way they react to particular things that we do or say, a sense of the different opinions people have, and obviously we feel and experience all these contradictions ourselves.

The position is that we have been colonised and that colonisation has ultimately caused many of us to come to this country, and we suffer the hangovers of the attitudes here. Does that mean that we can't fight those attitudes, regardless of what is going on in Ireland, regardless of the war that is going on now? We would say that the war has heightened all the tensions, and I think that at this stage most people would agree. But how we resolve that is still a question that we need to discuss. And if there was anything that we wanted from Irish women, it would be that we would try our best to develop that debate and we try to develop forums at which we could evolve that debate.

Irish Prisoners' Appeal

My name is Claire Keatinge and I'm here on behalf of the Irish Prisoners' Appeal which takes responsibility for the welfare of Republican prisoners' families, while they are held on remand, particularly in Brixton Prison. We are a local south London group. We also have a large area of responsibility for

campaigning on the question of strip searching, which I'm sure most of you are aware has been carried out in Armagh Jail for a number of years, and in the last 18 months was brought very heavily to this country against two Irish women held in Brixton Prison, called Martina Anderson and Ella O'Dwyer.



Claire Keatinge, Irish Prisoners Appeal Group

The two sections of our work are interlinked. We see it quite clearly that the only reason there are Republican prisoners held in British jails at all is a direct product of the war in Northern Ireland, and the treatment that is meted out to those prisoners is a direct result of the need of British authorities to try and crush the spirit of those prisoners and make sure that they don't have the confidence and capacity to prepare a proper defence. And such is the reason for the strip searching, sleep deprivation, lack of exercise and other associated harassments that the Republican prisoners on remand consistently receive in Brixton and other British prisons.

The question of strip searching obviously directly affects women prisoners the most. It is women prisoners that are being strip searched at the highest level, although the men are also strip searched. We are quite clear that the reason for that is that the British authorities are fully aware of the psychological effects of strip searching on Irish women in particular. They understand quite well the different tactics and techniques which will work against different people under their control, if you like, and strip searching is one of those questions that has to be tackled head-on by a broad range of organisations in this country and in Ireland to get it stopped.

The whole question of strip searching is tantamount to the most degrading type of sexual assault. It's consistently applied over and over again. It's not once or twice and it's not

done with care or discretion and it's not done for any security cover or any finding of weapons or any drugs. It's designed quite clearly to degrade those prisoners, to humiliate them on a consistent basis, so that day in day out, over and over again, up to four, five or six times in a day, sometimes, women will have their clothes removed, they will be peered at, be examined. They will have, in some circumstances, to ask the governor for a clean pair of knickers. Strip searching goes on whether women are pregnant, whether they are menstruating, whether they have just had a baby — all those types of things, and it's a practice which has to be stopped.

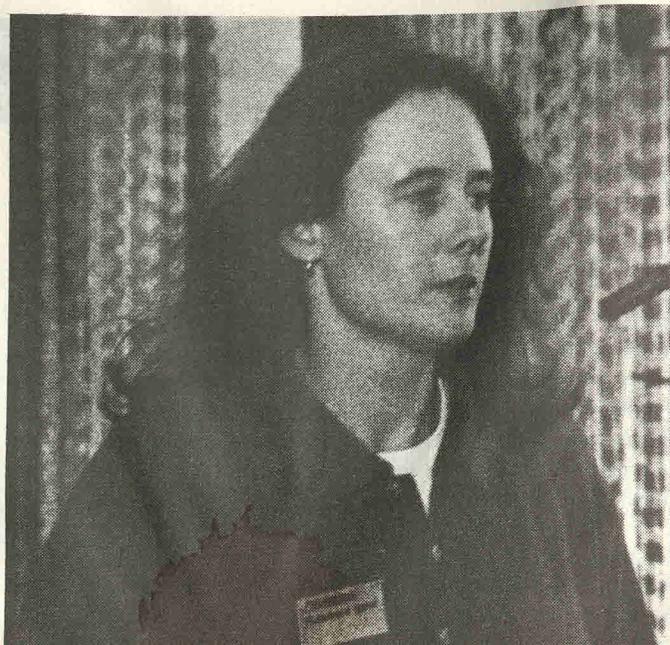
The second part of our area of responsibility is welfare for prisoners' families. Again, although prisoners are male and female, the burden for visiting prisoners in this country falls particularly heavily onto women. It's almost exclusively women relatives who we work with — almost exclusively. It's women travelling, and particularly women travelling with children who have a heavy burden to carry, visiting prisoners in this country, whether they are male prisoners or female prisoners. Huge journeys are undertaken, very regularly, with a limited amount of social welfare or social security assistance sometimes to pay for fares, but it never pays for all the accommodation costs, all the incidental expenses or to take parcels into prisons and it never allows for the fact that you may want to stay with people who care a little bit about the situation you are in. And the other thing is, these people travel month in month out to visit prisoners. They come over for the whole duration of trials. They bring children, they make arrangements for those children to be cared for; the children may get sick; they need looking after, then the mother or the parent can't go to the trial. It happens over and over and over again. You can see it — like a conveyor belt, the prisoners start being held on remand, they are held and held and held, they are harrassed the whole time they are held. The families come over — very often the families are harrassed as they come over. They are harrassed at the prison, or they are not allowed clearance to visit; they haven't got the money to travel and Britain is the only country in the EEC which has signed the declaration which allows prisoners the right to serve their sentence in a prison near their country of origin or habitual residence, and it is the only country, which in this instance, does not abide by what it agreed to.

We would sincerely request the British government to give these long-serving prisoners, serving their sentences in this country, the right to serve their sentences in Ireland — to repatriate prisoners on request. We would also reassure the conference that we are quite clear that none of those prisoners should be in any British jail, and the prisoners in British jails — male, female being strip searched, being held in solitary confinement, isolated, beaten, on long sentences — whatever it is, are only there as a direct product of this British government's policies on the North.

Stop the Strip Searches Campaign

I'm Anne Hennessey and I'm from the Stop the Strip Searches Campaign. I will begin by reading a prisoner's account of what in her experience strip searching is:

"Then the dreaded words — 'Right, strip'. I was hustled into a small cubicle and slowly began to undo the button of my shirt. This couldn't be happening to me. It can't. But of course it could. Item by item I removed my clothes. Each article was taken from me and scrutinised. I knew there was



Ann Hennessey, Stop The Strip Searches Campaign.

no need to search me. I'd been in custody for over a week. As I stood there naked, I grasped my ideals to my heart. I was stripped naked to confront me with their control, to enforce on me my own vulnerability, degrade me, but they were not going to succeed. I saw my nakedness as an indictment against them. As I felt a hand slowly moving down the calves of my legs, my skin crawled. They weren't content to jibe at my naked state; they had to search me. I steeled myself again as they searched through my hair.

Eventually they could draw out the search no longer. I slowly returned to the cubicle and started to dress. I felt drained and noticed a tremble in my hands. I felt violated, invaded and victimised, and very very angry."

Strip searching was introduced in Armagh Jail in 1982 without warning or explanation from the British government. It has since then been justified by the authorities in terms of security. It is a device used to degrade, humiliate and undermine the spirit of Irish Republican women. Up until the time of the opening of Maghaberry, the prison which was to replace Armagh Prison in March 1986, strip searching was used on those prisoners leaving or entering the prison. Because of this, it was remand prisoners who were mainly affected.

However, since March '86, women held on remand are searched at random, whether or not they are leaving or entering the prison. Presently all women in prison, whether convicted or on remand, are strip searched at random. Strip searching is to maximise the humiliation of the prisoner. Warders are almost entirely Protestants and to quote one prisoner, are there to settle a score. The motive is to put pressure on women to turn informer or to sign false confessions. The intention is to discourage women from being actively involved in the Irish struggle.

In Brixton prison Ella O'Dwyer and Martina Anderson were strip searched 767 times from June '85 to September '86. All this — justified on the grounds of security? These women are still being strip-searched in Durham Prison today. What is accepted practice for the Irish Republican women has become the norm for all women politically active today.

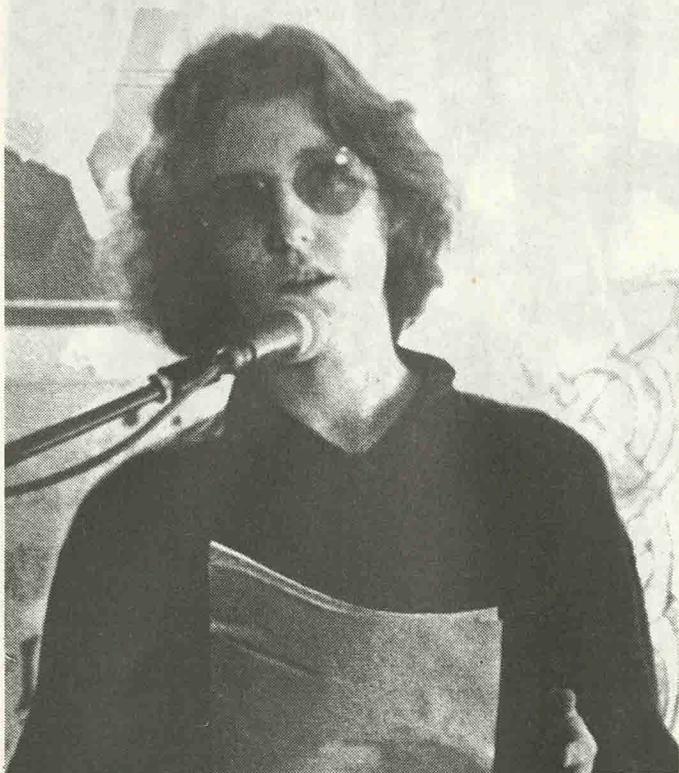
Our aim is to bring the practice of strip searching to an

end. Our motive is justice. Our intention is to continue to build up a body of information and use it in our campaign against strip searching in prisons, and to lobby Parliament. We need you to know more about us. Support us in our efforts to stop strip searching now.

Glor Gael

My name is Brid Dooley and I'm a member of Glor Gael. Glor Gael literally translated means "Irish Voice", and what we are essentially is the London Irish Community Radio Group.

We started back in July '84 and it was actually a member of the Irish Women's Centre who initiated our links with the campaign at the time. Some of you will probably remember there was a decision around then to hand out community radio licences to experimental groups in London. There was a campaign steadily from 1984 till the decision which took place a year later *not* to implement those licences, *not* to hand them out. There was a steady campaign to develop the Community Radio Network that existed.



Brid Dooley, Glor Gael.

We joined Spectrum, which was a north London radio group and became our umbrella body for about 2 years. During that time we were involved in making contact with different groups within the Irish community, both to increase our membership and to train people in an understanding of community radio. We also endeavoured to make links with other media, both at home in Ireland and here. Needless to say, the points made earlier are the many reasons why we set up in the first place — the fact that there is a total lack of broadcasting for the Irish community in London, and also that there's an essential lack of relevant broadcasting for Irish women in London.

After the licence was postponed, the decision to

abandon the community radio was taken. We were all fairly disappointed but nonetheless we had at any rate a "Plan B" ready, which was basically that we would go and work as a production studio, which would mean that the facilities we'd built up would become available to community groups for access to make programmes so they would look for outlets in other media, in existing media in London, which I know is probably not the best outlet, but nonetheless the pressure would be put on local radio, as well as radio in Ireland, to accept some of these programmes.

We have had links with one major women's group in London and that has been active in the group — the Irish Women in Islington Group. But essentially, our three main aims at the moment, continuing as a community radio group are these — to maintain the level of interest and commitment we have already achieved through our outreach work; to join in an intensive lobbying campaign with other community groups — this would be directed at the main political parties with an eye to the forthcoming General Election, to impress on them the widespread demand for community radio; and to build and maintain a programme library for future transmission or transmission on existing broadcasting facilities.

During the history of the group we have had a few stormy times. One of the most stormy times was our problem with Spectrum Radio. We did have 3 workers — well 4 workers actually in Spectrum, which was at Interchange in north London, and we had a studio built up which wasn't running, but essentially all the components were there. The employment contracts of the 3 women workers were not renewed and the 2 male workers' were. The constitution of Spectrum was altered at whim and without proper consultation. Special interest groups who were long-standing members of Spectrum were effectively locked out and the whole ethos of community radio with open access for the community was becoming increasingly eroded. We, and a number of other groups in Spectrum, took issue with what in effect had become a ruling clique within Spectrum, over the direction it was taking — abandoning its collective basis for a hierarchical one, its rampant sexism and its lack of honest commitment to an Equal Opportunities Policy.

In the following months, several investigative meetings were called by the funding body — Camden — the result of which was its withdrawal of funding from Spectrum as it existed. With the withdrawal of funding Camden made provision for community radio in north London which would truly adhere to the policy of Equal Opportunities and open access for all communities, at present ignored by the existing broadcasting authorities.

This project will grow out of an intensive consultation with existing radio groups and the various communities and will be developed on the recommendations of these consultative meetings.

Having said that, it has come to our attention this week that we now need to put a lot more pressure on the local authorities to sustain that commitment because in these days of rate-capping, and pressure on local authorities to trim their budgets, it is necessary to keep up the pressure constantly on a local authority's commitment — a written commitment to provide funding for the project.

As an organisation, we are looking for a fairly committed membership from members of the London Irish community. We are now a very small group because much of our membership fell away when the community radio licence

was abandoned, but we intend to continue to lobby along with the Community Radio Association and in consultation with the local authorities for a proper north London funding of community radio initiative to begin.

I'm aware that this today is being held in south London — it would seem that we are concentrating all our efforts up there. Essentially community radio has to be run on a fairly small basis. We aimed initially as a north London group, to set up there, but we would like to see a lot more women especially, and a lot of people from south London joining as well, because the initiative can be spread down here to make sure there is London-wide coverage for Irish women and Irish people in London on the broadcasting services.

Irish Women in Greenwich

My name is Sarah Kelleher, I work with the Irish in Greenwich Project. When I was asked to speak at this Conference the first thought that came to mind was — perhaps I should sing a song, it would be far more entertaining than what I've got to tell you about our Womens' Group!

First I'd like to welcome you to south-east London, because I don't think there's ever been such a large number of Irish women in this part of London. It's a very welcome sight. Unlike the other groups I feel I have to explain where we are in Greenwich in order for you to understand what we are doing.

If you came on the Tube today you will have realised that New Cross is the last stop for S.E. London. For that reason we are very dependent on British Rail and the Buses. But we also have the Thames on one side of us and with no transport on the other we are relatively isolated. We also live in a very closeknit indigenous community who consider themselves separated from the rest of London.

The Irish population in Greenwich is very different from most other Irish communities around London, we've a large population of elderly people — quite a lot of pensioners and very few young immigrants like myself. We also have a large number of second generation young people. Because there has been no history of the formation of Irish organisations in south-east London over the years to maintain and reinforce peoples own cultural identity, the only social gathering for the diffuse Irish population in Greenwich was under the auspices of the Catholic Church. Consequently, the community did not form a cohesive network of support in the same way as Irish people in north London did. But there were reasons for this too.

In the Borough of Greenwich we have one of the largest British Army Barracks and a military hospital which is famed for its treatment of burns especially dealing with soldiers injured in Northern Ireland. There is also the Naval College, the Seamen's Hospital and last but not least there is the memory of the Woolwich bombings in the mid '70's and early '80's. These factors have obviously helped to further our exclusion and maintain our silence. So, sometimes it's not very easy to stand up and tell people that I work with the Irish in Greenwich Project.

It was in this climate that the Irish in Greenwich Project was set up in 1983 thanks to GLC funding. But the Project has had only two workers since 1985. The womens' group began about a year ago and unfortunately is very small. We began by trying a variety of events such as afternoon groups, evening groups, social events, discussions, talks etc., but we found we were unable to form a cohesive core group of

women who were interested in being involved on a regular basis. One of the main reasons for this we feel is that people are afraid to join us. I don't know if other Irish groups have the same problem but when we approached people to tell them about the Project we would naturally be asked several questions about what we do etc, but the final question would always be, "Are you a political group?" and no matter how many times they were told the Project's funding does not allow us to be political we knew they didn't believe us.

I suppose the history of isolation combined with anti-Irish media bias together with the Woolwich bombings has made Irish people in Greenwich wary of any Irish group and so we feel many people may actually be afraid of joining us. But I hope there are some women here who will be interested in coming along and taking part in discussions, trips to Irish events in other parts of London, we are also



Sarah Kelleher, Irish Women in Greenwich Project.

planning an Irish Womens' Art Exhibition and it is hoped to try again to form a core group of Irish women in south-east London.

Irish Women in Islington

The Irish Women in Islington, as the name suggests, is a borough-based group within Islington. We started just under 2 years ago and since that time we've been based at 25 Horsell Road. At the moment we have got 2 full-time workers



Olga Buckely, Irish Women in Islington Group

and one part-time finance worker. Our main problem at the moment is with premises, which up till now has been a warehouse which has been converted into office units, and obviously it's not ideal for a drop-in centre. But we will be moving to new premises on the Hornsey Road, depending on how quickly we can wade our way through bureaucracy — hopefully within the next 2-3 months.

The main areas we are involved in this particular year are education and health. We are running a number of classes. We concentrated on trying to reach a lot of older women this year, both in the areas of health and fitness, and with that in mind we started a lot of swimming classes for older women, particularly women with arthritic problems, and keep fit classes for elderly women also. We work a lot with the local neighbourhood offices in Islington, and in particular the Social Services.

The result of that has been a whole range of programmes to, again, reach elderly housebound and Irish women. We are also involved in drawing up a lot of research and information work, and at the moment some of you who are in groups already will know this — we are drawing up an information handbook specifically aimed at Irish women in London — London-wide. The range of information in this includes all the voluntary groups directly relevant to Irish women; statutory bodies; emergency numbers for recent arrivals from Ireland; emergency numbers in the area of health and so on. This will hopefully be published in two months' time and will be available to everybody.

We also facilitate the Irish Community Radio — Glór Gael — and they can be contacted at our offices. We've also helped to set up an Irish Women's Artists Group. We have also published quite a lot of papers as well as our Annual Report, which will be available through the day.

Even though we are borough-based, we get a lot of enquiries from outside of our immediate catchment area and

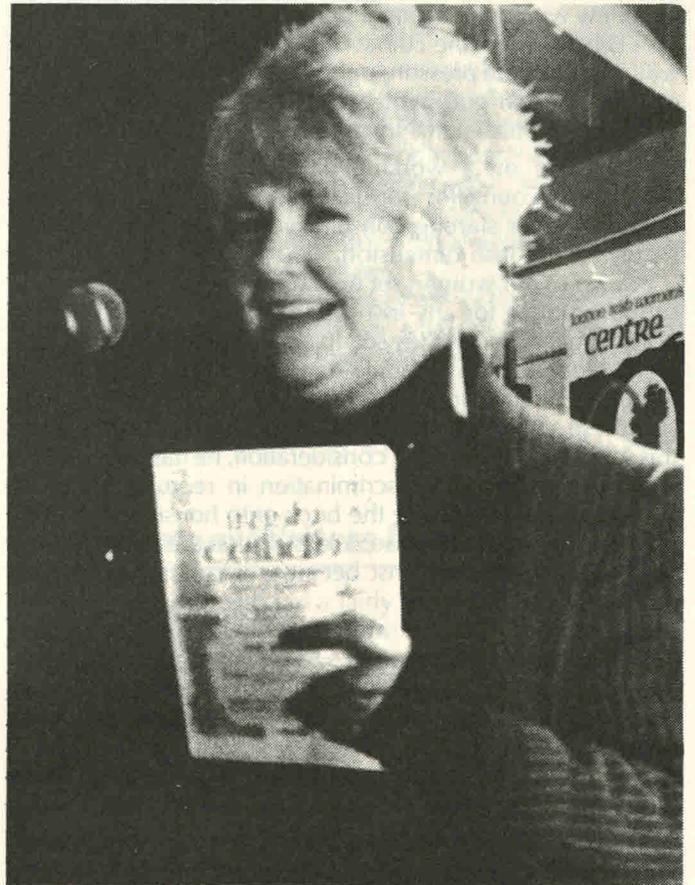
we've worked a lot with the Irish Women's Centre — both at the previous conferences and meetings they have held. Until we get the new premises in Hornsey Road, at the moment our welfare advice sessions are by appointment or by phone, and even though there's been a very high take-up on this particular service — obviously because we're very inaccessible, it's not as easy to talk to people as we would like — that women would just drop in and use the facilities.

We would urge a lot of women to take up the classes that are on offer in the Islington area at the moment, and obviously that applies to north London women, or indeed any women from south London who wish to travel up. There's quite a range of interesting things on. There is a literature class with the title "Introduction to Contemporary Irish Women Writers". That will be starting on 26th March at North London Poly, and will run for about 7 weeks.

Olga Buckley

Irish Women in Wandsworth

My name is Jean Rathbone and I'm from a group called Irish Women in Wandsworth. We're part of a larger women's group — the South London Irish Women's Group, but where it comes to activities in Wandsworth, obviously we decided to form ourselves into a smaller group in terms of getting



Jean Rathbone, Irish Women in Wandsworth Group.

funding from the Council — that sort of thing.

In Wandsworth there was a mixed group called the Battersea/Wandsworth Irish Group who we tried to work along with, but we found their concerns weren't the same as ours. We felt that there was no activity for women, so we set up our own group.

We got small funding for ceilis and such like in the area and a series of dialogues that we've organised. The first one was last week on multi-cultural education — something we've been involved with, because ILEA doesn't recognise the Irish and will do nothing for our children.

We wanted to become a focus for anything Irish in the area. We've been putting pressure on social services; we've been working with all the anti-racist groups, which we think is terribly important because we have to convince lots of people — even the committed, about anti-Irish racism. We know it's different from racism based on colour, but we still have a long way to go explaining to people.

Some of us are parents, and I was a school governor for 16 years and have been fighting for anti-racist working parties and anti-sexist working parties, and nowhere will they let the Irish in. So we just did our own thing and made contact with schools where we knew Heads and Deputies and did a series of assemblies called "A Taste of Ireland", and also took it to libraries.

We persuaded the ethnic librarian to get in books of relevance to Irish children. In fact she went out and got a load of books all in Irish (and now we're having to send our kids into the library very regularly to get out these Irish books!) That went down very well. We collected a lot of people that way. At the end of all this we wrote a long report and had an interview with our divisional officer called "The need for an Irish Dimension in the Ethnic Curriculum". That was just our way of putting the pressure on and doing it our way. Because of that we then got involved in a festival run by the Irish Cultural Commission in November, which I actually chaired.

We are on a working party with Councillor Hilda McCarthy, Councillor for Hammersmith and she's now responsible for starting consultative groups within ILEA to recognise the Irish dimension.

Two of our women set up a drop-in centre in the south of the borough for any Irish people of any age, and in the north of the borough they set up a pensioners' group. It's run by an older woman — single-handedly she's doing all there there is to be done in Wandsworth for Irish people. We have sent these sort of reports to the borough and I got a letter back this morning. After careful consideration, he has decided that we don't suffer from discrimination in recruitment to his Council, but he's passing the buck onto housing and social services, and did recognise at least in that area that the Irish were discriminated against because of cultural differences etc.

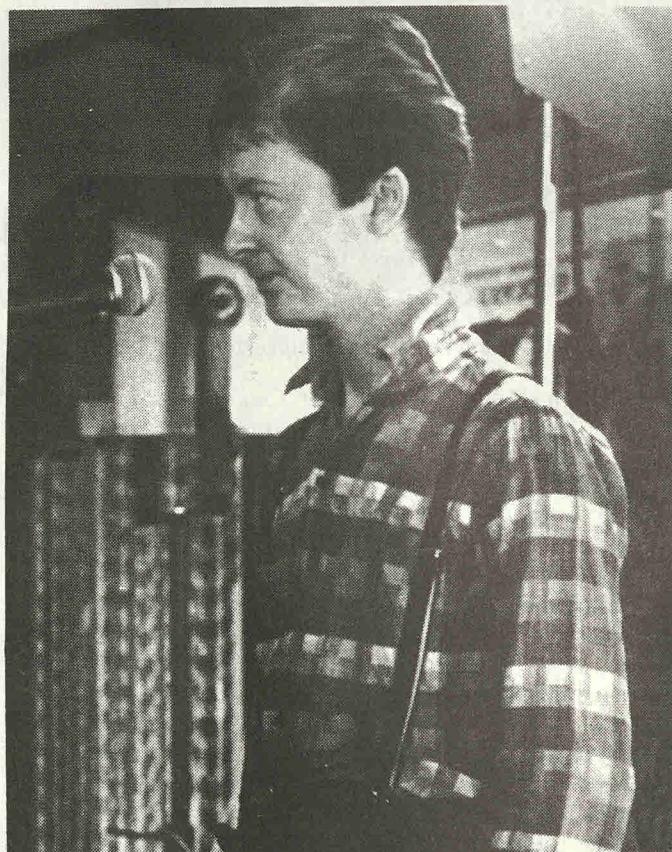
So, given that we are a small group, we are not concentrating just on women's issues. For support we go to the South London Irish Women's Group Centre. If Labour does finally get in, obviously we will consider starting a project and asking for funding.

I've also just recently been appointed Women's Officer with the newly established Women's Dept in Hammersmith Council and obviously I was appointed on the basis that I was Irish. I was making it very clear to them that I thought they had neglected a very large Irish community. So if there's any women here from the Hammersmith area, I'd be very pleased if they'd get in touch with us.

South London Irish Women's Group

My name is Noelle Egan and I'm a member of the South London Irish Women's Group. We got together about 3 years ago and it was in the good old days of the GLC who around International Women's Day that year, were funding applications for cultural events from ethnic groups, including Irish groups. So a number of women set up an ad hoc group and applied for funding from them.

We got together an exhibition; we picked a woman called Charlotte Despard, a well known suffragette, or suffragist. She had strong links with Wandsworth and also with Ireland, so she seemed like a very good subject for an exhibition. When we were doing research into that, we came across the wealth of other material which lies hidden about Irish women in history, and we kept up an interest in that.



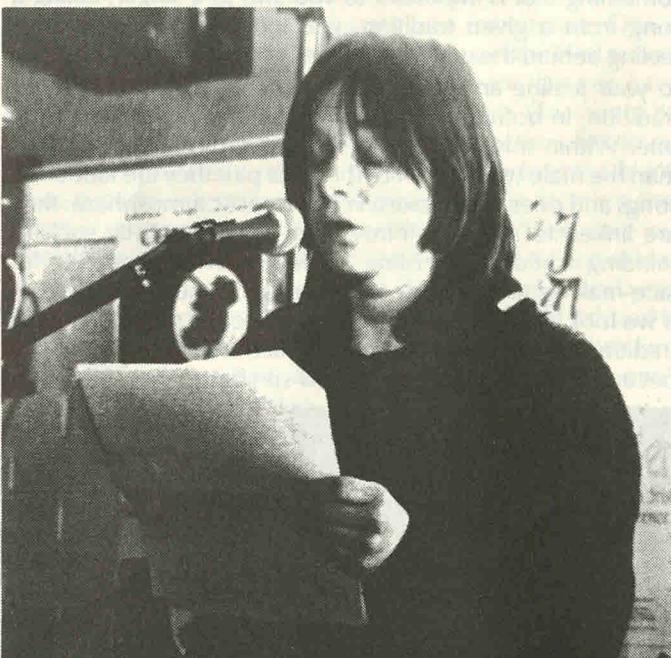
Noelle Egan, South London Irish Womens Group.

We are a group of Irish born women (we made a decision to remain a group of Irish born women). We started meeting in each other's houses and then we went on to meet in the South London Women's Centre, based at Acre Lane in Brixton. We meet on the first Monday of every month and I guess we'd be described as a support group cum discussion group. We discuss almost anything that comes up, anything that affects our lives as women. Some of us have children, so obviously we are concerned with how our children are being educated in this country, namely the lack of an Irish dimension in education. And we have a good crack — we do laugh a bit. Anyone who feels able to get to South London Women's Centre — we'd love to have them.

The Irish Women Artists Group

The Irish Women Artists Group was formed last summer to help break down the isolation of Irish women artists working in this country, to provide support and to raise the profile of their work. Equally it aims to facilitate Irish women normally denied access to art practise, to develop skills and gain access to resources. We have been supported, since we formed, by the Irish Women in Islington Group and have worked together on various projects including workshops and communications.

Very soon after the group started meeting we were asked by the London Irish Womens Centre to take part in their cultural festival "Carraig agus an Farrage". This provided us with a very valuable context in which to put some of our aims and objectives into practice. We organised "Prism", the first major exhibition of Irish women artists work to be seen in this country. We received a grant from GLAA which enabled us to spread the show between the London Irish Womens Centre and 52-54 Featherstone Street womens resource building and like LIWC a non art space, and to run a programme of slide talks and discussion evenings. Some of the women exhibiting in the show ran art workshops which is in line with our commitment to an ongoing educational programme which we are setting up with the Irish Women in



Ann Tallentyre, Irish Women's Artist Group.

Islington, details of which you can see in the green leaflet we have here today.

We hope we are creating an opportunity for more Irish women to enter into art activity in their own right and we challenge the usual colonialist, classist and sexist stereotyping which has pigeonholed us all, as well as additional disadvantage of attitude to disability, sexual orientation and age.

Our next venture is another exhibition next August in The Chisenhale Studios during which we will have performance, discussion evenings and a film programme. Nearer the time details will be published and we hope you will all be able to come and celebrate with us.

Anne Tallentyre

London Camogie Board



Etta Kelly, London Camogie Board.

My name is Etta Kelly and I'm Chairperson of the London Camogie Board. 30 years ago I came to London and joined a club called Sarsfields, whose headquarters was at Archway. We played from 1956-'62. I left after I had a baby. The Camogie faded away. But then last year a few girls from Ireland started a club up in London — the London Irish Camogie Club, and from there another team stemmed and they're the Croydon Camogie Club.

I live in Forest Gate, east London and we started a club last June. They are all children of Irish parents, apart from a girl from Hong Kong. We run dances to fundraise and buy the kids some head gear etc, and we're hoping to get some money from the Sports Council. We're running a dance on 14th March in the East London Rugby Club — we're having a tournament that day. We have two teams coming over — one from Dublin and one from Westmeath, and we're hoping to have a good day there.

If anyone is interested in joining any of the clubs, I'll give you a contact. I'm delighted we have the camogie going again in London and I hope that we'll have more teams. Then we can have a league and get into the All Ireland. We did play in the quarter finals of the All Ireland in 1959, against Waterford, and got beaten by a point, but we had a good weekend.

Irish Womens Writers Network

My name is Roisin and I'm a fairly recent recruit to the Irish Womens Writers Network.

Instead of a long speech, we thought we'd practice what we preach,
and write a little ditty — nothing pretty,
something even witty,
to liven up your day.

We'd like to reach those ones of you who like to write a page or two,

who aspire to be poets, and don't know it,
who want to write plays that stun and amaze,
or learn to tell tales with a good turn of phrase.

If you think this is bad verse, and you couldn't do worse,

don't wait to be inspired, or say you're too tired. If you're keen at all, give us a call.

We are a network rather than a group. We don't have regular meetings, we have each other's phone numbers and we contact each other to do something specific like a reading or to discuss something we've written. Some of us like to be read and some of us like to be heard. So we write to express all our emotions, our feelings, to explore our identity and also to have fun with words like that.

If any of you think you'd like to get involved, do some writing, get some encouragement, have chats, laughs — we'll be doing a reading at 5.30, so come and talk to us then and we can give you our phone numbers, and hopefully you'll join us.



Rosin making her recitation and speech on behalf of the Irish Women's Writers Network.

The Sheelas

My name is Brid Boland and I'm a member of The Sheelas. We're an all-women band playing Irish music and we consist of five members. We've been together now for almost a year. We formed as an all-women band, because we share a love for Irish music and because it was a means of obtaining recognition that was due but not forthcoming to us as women musicians. It turned out to be a good decision because we very much enjoy working together and it gives us a supportive space to develop musically.

If we're talking a bit about the band, I'd like to speak about the musical tradition within which we work. We play Irish music and sing Irish songs. It's a song and dance music that comes from a very old tradition within Irish culture. Like other art forms in Ireland, it's a tradition which has taken its

share of battering from the impact of colonialism in Ireland. It had, for centuries been such a vital expression of a distinctly Irish identity and ... as such has played a huge role in keeping that identity alive and intact in the face of destruction ... Rather than go into the particular fortunes of this tradition I think it's sufficient to say that it's one that has suffered greatly. It has suffered because it is and always has been a folk expression — coming from the people and therefore it suffered to the same extent as people whose expression it was, suffered.

The successive waves of emigration that swept the Irish countryside down through the years, means that today you can see and hear Irish music being played as far away as North America and Australia, and is why we have here in London today an ever increasing number of people who play Irish music. So whilst the natural flowering of the tradition was violently interrupted, it is still a very vibrant one.

For the most part, the Irish musical tradition is an instrumental one and that's not problematic, as long as you can play an instrument well and you know the melody and have an understanding of the rhythms of Irish music — there is no problem. As a woman, however, it's when you come to the singing tradition that problems present themselves and this is the problem we have in the band.

It's natural that when you sing a song, you express something that is important to you and as a singer, taking a song from a given tradition, you interpret the mood and feeling behind the melody and the lyrics in a way that relates to your feeling and your experience. The Irish singing tradition, in both the Irish and English languages, is a strong one. Within this, the female song type has fewer survivals than the male type song. For the most part they are labouring songs and ones that evoke a very domestic atmosphere: they are linked to a sort of introverted social creativity such as minding children, herding cows, weaving, spinning or lace-making, and as a rule are not for social performance. But if we look at the overall image of women in the Irish singing tradition certain patterns emerge which are easily identifiable because they're so recurrent and so strong.



Brid Boland, The Sheelas.

In songs which celebrate figures who have fought against British domination of Ireland there is a stark absence of any images of women. The one or two songs which have been written about Grainne Mhaol are the exception rather than the rule. In other nationalist types of songs woman is presented as being synonymous with her country under subjugation — such as the song *Roisin Dubh*. In the *Aisling* or vision songs, you find the woman presented as an unreal or mysterious figure who comes to the poet in a dream, tells him her woes and disappears as quickly as she came. Again, she is identified with her country.

The love songs or songs of desire, which make up a very large body of the Irish singing tradition, give us the image of a helpless woman lamenting her unrequited love or a lover's exit to a foreign land to fight in wars or to create a new life. Another common image in that is the woman who has caused extreme anguish and pain because she has proven fickle or untrustworthy. And, lastly, there is the body of songs which celebrates the existence of the Irish woman and pays homage to her beauty. In this we find the particular image of beauty portrayed is a weakness and a mildness — a woman with a slender neck and a small waist with fair skin, pink cheeks and ruby lips, heterosexual and young and imbued with the power to cause extreme grief and pain.

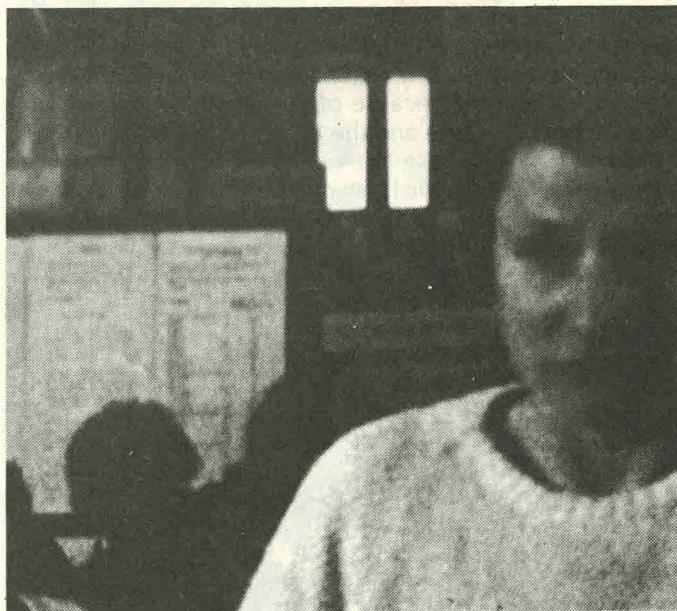
So there's a problem as you can see — a very big problem, when you can't identify with the images presented to you because they don't express your experience. One is placed in a dilemma and forced to make a choice to accept or reject the images. But to reject them means that you have to be a song-writer or poet, as well as a singer. One has to be brave enough to break the mould of that culture, but to do this means that one runs the risk of this assertiveness being seen as nothing less than sacrilegious. And so there's a fear there — a fear of facing the accusative finger 'How dare you interfere with the sanctity of the tradition that is so embedded in time, and anyway who do you think you are?' And yet it seems to me as if there is no option but to take that risk and to turn the images around and rebuild them, because they limit so severely the extent to which one can express one's identity as an Irish woman.

But to get back to the band — the formation of the band was very timely. We are fortunate that at the moment in London Irish music is popular in some circles outside the Irish community and since we are the only all-women band playing Irish music, we are even more popular. Because we're an all-women band our appearance turned up a lot of interest and not a little controversy. We have often been asked why we formed as an all-women band, and yet I feel if we were to ask that question of the numerous all-male bands, we'd probably receive the reply that it was not a conscious act, it just happened like that. I would myself prefer to ask the question of whether doing something unconsciously relieves one of the responsibility for that act. I feel too that this illustrates the isolation which women experience within the Irish music scene. It's interesting to analyse the pattern in the bookings we've had in the band. We made a conscious decision to try and tap the market outside the Irish community as well as inside. The vast majority of our bookings are from left wing Labour councils and authorities and from women's groups. I do feel however, that the overall response to the band has been a very positive one, but in saying this I don't want to take away from the fact that as an all-women band we face enormous difficulties in working in the Irish music scene in London.

I'd like to finish on a positive note, because I feel that what I have illustrated sounds very discouraging. The work to be done is overwhelming and involves a great deal of frustration. But things are changing for women and Irish music. For instance, we're very fortunate for a band in having probably the only Irish woman sound engineer in London — the technical side of the music is often one which is overlooked, and it's rarely known that the quality of the music when heard through amplification as it usually is today, depends as much on the skill of the technician operating the sound equipment, as it does on the skill of the musicians. As Irish women we have resources at our disposal. There is every reason to believe that in five year's time, there will be fifty women sound engineers and ten women's bands playing Irish music and what we have to do is tap the raw creative potential that is within us. On that note, I hope you can stay to see *The Sheelas* tonight!

Brent Irish Pensioners Group

My name is Marian O'Keefe. Speaking as a relatively young Irish woman of 37, I'm aware that inevitably to some, I'm relatively old. I'm here to talk about older Irish women. Because obviously I'm not living on a pension, so I don't know what it's like to have to live on a pension in this country. But I believe it's important for all of us to be aware



Marian O'Keefe, Brent Irish Pensioners Group.

that we are the older women of the future. Over the past 3 years I've seen several pensioners groups emerge — one in Brent, two in Camden, one in Greenwich, one in Haringey. I'm probably leaving some out, but most of these groups have emerged because women have organised them.

There was an older women's project set up in Pensioners' Link specifically to look at the needs of elderly women in London. And the first Older Irish Women's Conference took place last year. They talked about what life had been like as an Irish immigrant, the extent of their contribution within the workforce, and the special loneliness of the aged and ageing. Looking around here today, there are very few elderly women and I think we should look into the reasons why, and why there is such a gap between the younger women and the older women.

Irish Women from Protestant Backgrounds

My name is Iris. A couple of us wrote the paper at the Conference last year — that was raising the whole issue of Irish women from Protestant backgrounds and we did that in the hope that the issue could then start to be part of a more general debate. Since then a few of us have been meeting occasionally and trying to do some work to discuss our own contradictory history. We're not a group as such. We don't see that as a very appropriate thing to be, but nevertheless I should say that the contact we've had with each other has been very important to us. Bearing in mind the limited sense that we are a group, we can be contacted through the Irish Women's Centre.

Irish Girls' Group

One

Hello, we are the Irish Girls' Group and we are going to talk a little about what we do in the group. My name is Siobhan Hendricks. The Girls' Group is a group for Irish girls aged eleven upwards. The Group started after Hallowe'en with only two girls; but now there are four. We come together on Monday evenings. The van comes and picks us up. I go because I enjoy it. I learn things and discuss topics. As the weeks pass, everyone knows each other a little better.

I'm not Irish, but my parents are, but I feel more Irish than English, mainly because of the things I do which are Irish. I learn Irish music and the language. At the Centre we play games, learn to use the video & the radio, cook and many things. So far we've been on two outings. The workers, Mary and Eilish, take part in everything and have excellent funny ideas. For the future, I'd hope to see it still going.



Sonia Clayton, Karen Hendricks and Siobhan Hendricks spoke about the Girls Group at the London Irish Womens Centre. Sonia read out Sheena Phelan's speech for her as she could not attend the conference.

Two

My name is Sonia Clayton. I've been going to the London Irish Women's Centre since summer '86. I started going to the summer play school and got more involved with the things that go on. After the Hallowe'en party, the Girls' Group started.

It started off with two girls and now there are four. We do different topics each week. We do radio and video which is enjoyable and interesting. Both workers, Mary and Eilish, are very keen about the Girls' Group. They would like to see more girls involved and hope that different things will happen in the future.

Three

On behalf of Sheena, who can't be here this afternoon, I'm going to read her speech. 'My name is Sheena Phelan and I belong to the Girls' Group at the London Irish Women's Centre. I recently became a member. Our Girls' Group takes place on Monday evenings between 7 and 9. We are picked up from our houses and dropped off at our doors afterwards. We look forward to Monday nights because we meet Irish friends. It's such a change to meet people of my nationality, because at school I mix with such a variety of nationalities. We do a lot of activities at the Girls' Group, including video and radio. I like going to the Irish Girls' Group because it's funny and interesting and because you find out how to play unusual games'.

Four

Hello, my name is Karen Hendricks. The Girls' Group is very good. We don't always do the same things every week. The Girls' Group started after the Hallowe'en party at the London Irish Women's Centre in 1986. Both my parents are Irish and my mum's involved with the mother and toddler group, and my dad plays traditional Irish music. We have had one Halloween party and a Christmas party. The Girls' Group has had two outings, one to the theatre, which I didn't go to because I was only ten, and the Girls' Group is aged from eleven and up. The second outing was to the pictures which was very good.

We do games, radio and video and lots of other things. We play very unusual games, and Mary and Eilish usually join us. The best part of the Girls' Group is that the workers who are there with us become the age of us and like us. After every Girls' Group we write a diary of what we've done. Thank you for letting us speak.

Irish Lesbian Group

This Conference is about identity. I am an Irish woman and I am a lesbian. Or perhaps I should say I am a lesbian and I am an Irish woman. It doesn't really matter to me which I say first, as both facts are equally important to me — and together they make up my identity.

However, these two words 'Irish' and 'lesbian' are generally thought of within the Irish community to be complete opposites, to cancel each other out. There is no such acknowledged identity. If an Irish woman calls herself a lesbian this is somehow taken as a denial of her Irishness, when in fact she is not denying any part of herself at all but inevitably it is she who is denied and rejected by the Irish community.

There is no such thing as an Irish lesbian — so the Irish

community has insisted and still tries to insist. But here I am today to tell you that unlike leprechauns, Irish lesbians do exist and I am an Irish lesbian. The Irish Women's Movement in London and in Ireland is full of Irish lesbians; this hall is full of Irish lesbians (don't presume the woman sitting beside you is heterosexual), and what's more there have always been Irish lesbians. We have of course been denied, ignored, silenced, written out of history and cast out by our Irish communities both at home and in London but we have always existed. The only thing that is new is that we have begun to demand our own rights. In addition to fighting for the rights of all Irish women we demand recognition and respect from other Irish women and from the Irish community here and at home for both our Irish identity and our lesbian identity. We will not have them separated any longer.

It has already been pointed out today what a narrow and restrictive range of identities there are for all of us as Irish women — and these images of Irish womanhood presented to us from birth are exclusively and compulsorily heterosexual. As women we can perhaps have a life devoted to God or a life devoted to husband, children and other dependents. There is not much left after that except perhaps a life devoted to sin and debauchery. There is no image here of Irish lesbians although I am sure that we would be put in the 'sin and debauchery' category if it were not for the pretence that we don't exist.

Irish lesbians have rejected the heterosexual identity which is forced on all Irish women. But this is often only achieved after much pain and nearly always at great cost, which for some women amounts to complete rejection by our friends, family and community. The courage and strength of Irish lesbians to acknowledge the truth of their own experience and feeling and to reject the dominant heterosexual identity should be applauded by all Irish women.

A London Irish Lesbian Network has been in existence now in one form or another for 12 years. Over this time it has given practical and emotional support to Irish lesbians living in London. It has also been an important link between Irish lesbians in London and Irish lesbians in the north and south of Ireland. More and more it has been exploring the particular pressures and discrimination facing Irish lesbians in London and how the Irish community itself participates in that oppression. The network also campaigns for our existence to be recognised for our needs to be met. New members are always welcome — women wishing to join or simply to find out more about the Irish lesbian group and its activities can leave their name and address at the London Irish Women's Centre stall today or alternatively, write to the Group c/o the Centre.

In the not too distant past, Irish lesbians involved in political campaigns have often been asked by our brothers and sometimes, unfortunately by our sisters also, to hide our sexual identity or keep it in the background because it might (1) embarrass a group; (2) damage a cause or (3) because it was simply thought to be irrelevant or certainly not as important as the campaign, whichever one it was — whether equal pay and job opportunities, issues connected to the war in the North, abortion, or right-on anti-sexism and anti-Irish racism in schools. Irish lesbians have a strong history of involvement in these and many other campaigns. Many of us have devoted long years of work to these causes and to initiating and sustaining many others.

But now we are fighting for these issues as Irish lesbians and not anonymously. We will not deny our identity. It is as valid as any other Irish woman's. We have a splendid history

of rebellion, courage and commitment to be proud of and we demand that this conference recognise all our efforts and massive contribution to the Irish women's movement and to the Irish community generally.

Our right to our sexuality is a political issue just as important as any other political issue. As we have become more visible and vocal within the Irish community we are now facing blatant and overt discrimination — one example of which is the Irish Post's refusal to print the words 'Irish lesbian'. The Irish Post has refused point blank to publicise any of the activities of the Irish Lesbian Group, or the fact of its existence, or even its name. No doubt the word 'lesbian' would burn through the paper! This is blatant discrimination against Irish lesbians — censorship of our thoughts, beliefs and feelings, and a total and blanket denial of our identity, of our very existence. The Irish Lesbian Group wants every woman here today to support us in our protest against this discrimination. We are asking for your support now. Please write to the editor of the Irish Post protesting against their refusal to publicise the Irish Lesbian Group and its activities, and please send a copy of your letter to the Group c/o the London Irish Women's Centre. In particular we ask our heterosexual sisters to support us in this. This is one small but very practical way you can show your support for us, your lesbian sisters. An injury to one group of women is an injury to all of us. As Irish women we can never achieve true equality unless our fight for our rights in all areas of our lives includes a woman's right to her own sexual identity, whether that be heterosexual or lesbian.



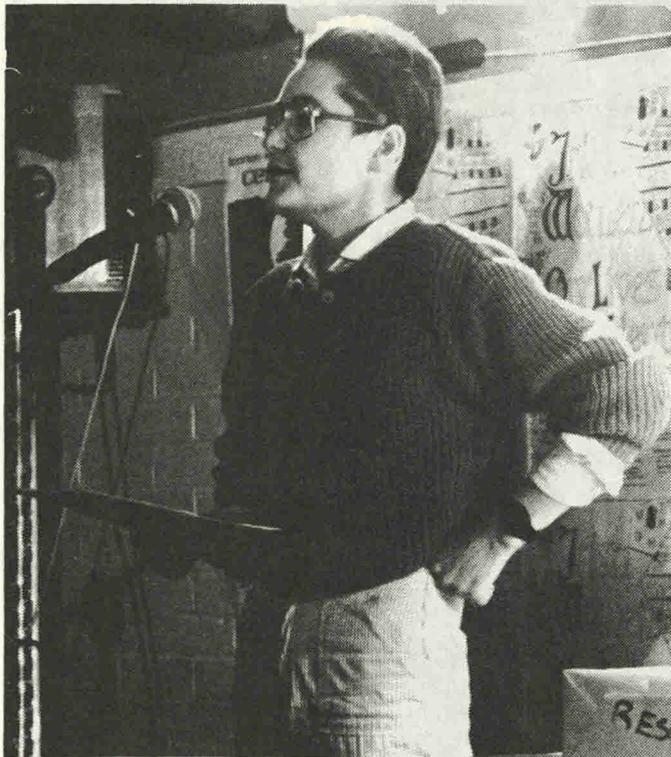
Rae Dowds, Irish Lesbian Group.

As Irish lesbians we have supported and do support all Irish women in their individual and collective attempts to improve the quality of life for Irish women in London and Ireland. We give this support freely and willingly, recognising the necessity to acknowledge and accept our differences, and to support each other's right to our own identities. And we ask our heterosexual sisters to show the same support for us in practical ways, like writing to the Irish Post but also and perhaps more importantly, by first learning to identify and then by challenging anti-lesbianism and homophobia in all its forms wherever you may find it — which may be within yourself, and which will certainly be within the Irish community both here and at home. Don't leave it for Irish lesbians to confront alone. And remember your silence is betrayal of us. But if we stand united nothing can stop us from winning our fight for true equality, which must include our right to our own identities.

Rae Dowds

London Irish Women's Centre

Good afternoon. My name is Mary Jennings and I'm on the Management Committee of the London Irish Women's Centre. This month is the first anniversary of the opening of the Irish Women's Centre. At the last conference we had, the Centre was still being renovated, but now Irish women have a place of their own in London — a most palatial house, as Nell McCafferty called it when she came to open the Centre on 1st February 1986.



Mary Jennings, London Irish Womens Centre.

Since the Centre opened last year, there has been a lot of activity going on, some of which you've heard about already. I think the Girls' Group is obviously very successful, and some of the other groups that have spoken here use the Centre. I'll just give you a very brief overview of things that have been going on there.

There are courses in video, photography, the Irish language; several groups meet regularly; there is the Radio and Video Group which evolved from classes at the Centre; there are welfare and housing advice sections; the library is being built up; we've recently bought a computer to help the constant information exchange that goes on at the Centre. Recently there was a 3 weeks long Arts Festival, which I'm sure many of you went to or heard about. I must add that I think it's great that there are courses available for everything. The Centre has very many thousands of pounds worth of technical equipment, some of it obviously here. I think we must be unique in the country as being the one Irish Women's Centre which employs an engineer.

The Centre has continued to campaign on issues of concern to Irish women, and supports the work of other groups working on these issues, many of whom you've heard this morning. Fund raising for the Centre takes up a lot of time and emotional energy, and the day to day running of the Centre also takes an enormous amount of time and effort. It is amazing how much general housekeeping work needs to be done. There is now a Management Committee which was set up in December to share the responsibility of running and managing the Centre. We want to help in making the Centre successful. We want the Centre to be a place where all of us can find something — from a welcome cup of tea to advice and guidance, to constructive argument and exciting social events.

It's there for all of us to use, but we have to consider how best to use the Centre. We can't do everything. We are but mere mortals. We have to decide priorities on a basis of money, workers' time and need, and some hard decisions have to be made. There is a questionnaire that you should have received with your registration papers. We would like you to fill this in some time during the day. We want to know what you want from the Centre and also your suggestions as to ways in which we can make the Centre open, accessible and accountable to the Irish women's community, and we want your involvement in some of the decisions we have to make.

On behalf of the Management Committee I'd like to thank the workers for all the effort they've put into the Centre this year. I'd like to thank those volunteers who contribute so much to the Centre; I'd like to thank the previous Management Committee for working so hard to provide us with the Centre, and finally I'd like to ask all of you here today for ideas, your support and goodwill, so we can all work together in the next phase of its development.

Irish Women & Housing

Hello, my name is Heather McAteer, from the Irish Women and Housing Group. We here in this part of the Irish community in Britain are the least likely to own our own houses of any other group of society. What we're most likely to be is very over-represented in the private rented sector.



Heather McAteer, Irish Women and Housing.

What that tends to imply is that it's in the worst quality housing and it's the worst condition of housing, and very often likely to lack basic amenities like hot water and a bath. We are also vastly over-represented among those who are homeless. Any statistics about hostel numbers in London show that the Irish community in London make up between a quarter and a third of those who are homeless. Having said all that it generally reflects men's homelessness. We have to look a lot deeper for the reasons why women are homeless, and women's homelessness is much more likely to be hidden, which is one of the reasons we formed a group, that we wanted to look at the reasons why women were becoming homeless, the reasons for Irish women's homelessness and how their homelessness was different from homelessness generally.

There are the kinds of things we've been looking at, but we are also very conscious that we're a support group for other Irish women working in housing, either in the voluntary sector or in housing associations, housing aid centres of local authorities. We first started to meet in April of last year, and we haven't met since October and sadly the group did dwindle off; there were only about four of us in the end, so this is partly to say what we have been doing and what we'd like to do and that we'd like more women to get involved in the group. What you can do is either see me at some point today or put your name on the list at the Irish Women's Centre stall.

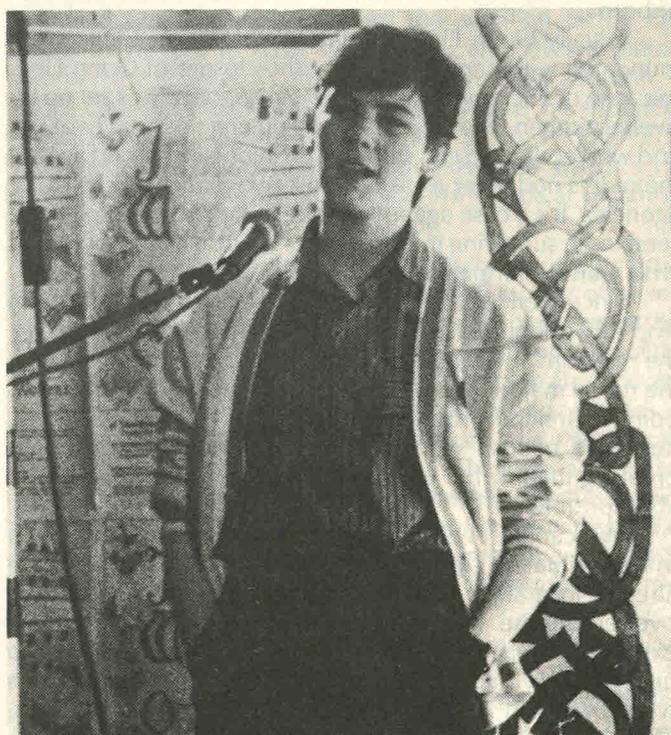
Dunnes Stores Strikers

My name is Karen Gearon and I am one of the Dunnes Stores Strikers. We've been on strike from 19th July 1984 for refusing to handle South African goods. Since that time quite a lot has happened to us. One of the biggest things was when we attempted to go to South Africa at the invitation of Bishop Tutu. When we arrived in Jan Smuts Airport we were held for 8 hours under prison guards — 32 of them at one stage, in fact 'till the plane was sent home. There have been so many things that happened since the strike began in 1984 that it would take from now 'till this evening to go into. What I'm going to do is just tell you what has been happening in the last 5 months.

The Irish government intervened in our strike and said if prison labour was being proven to be used in the production of S. African fruit and veg that they would ban it. They did so and on 1st January 1987 that stuff was banned from Ireland as a direct result of our strike. We had hoped to return to work on 5th January, but when we went into work in Dunnes Stores in Henry Street, the management welcomed us back, invited us to go upstairs and get new uniforms and new clock cards, and while we were waiting for those so-called new clock cards they gave us new contracts of employment saying that we would only get our jobs back if we signed these contracts saying that we must handle all goods in the store.

Obviously after two and a half years, we weren't prepared to do that. It also meant not even handling S. African goods but also dangerous goods. After that we took it as a dismissal because they were not allowing us to resume work under our original contracts of employment.

The management have stated, our jobs are there for us



Karen Gearon, Dunnes Stores Strikers.

so long as we fulfil those new so-called contracts. We asked Dunnes Stores to go to the Rights Commissioners, but they declined. We are now awaiting to go to the Unfair Dismissals Tribunal but don't have much hope of winning because Dunnes has so much power in Ireland.

What we feel now is total isolation. Most people think that the strike is over. It's not over until we get our jobs back from Dunnes Stores. We need your support over here very badly — now more than ever. There's a list for a support group to be set up again. We would very much appreciate it if you could support us now.

Defend the Clinics (I)

My name is Siobhan Lennon and I'm speaking on behalf of the Defend the Clinics Campaign in Dublin. We've come over today to try and emphasise to you how serious and how sinister the situation is in Dublin and in Ireland in general in relation to women's rights to fertility control and abortion referral.

Until December 1986 it was possible for any Irish woman who was worried or frightened about pregnancy to find a sympathetic ear in either the Open Line or the Well Women's Clinic. Since Justice Hamilton's judgement on the case, taken to the High Court by SPUC, an injunction has been issued to both agencies who were forced to cease their campaign and activities. Open Line has been forced to close its doors and the Well Woman's clinic has ceased to counsel any woman who might want to discuss abortion referral. In legal terms, non-directive pregnancy counselling with obviously the possibility of a referral to a clinic in England has been judged to contravene the 8th Amendment of the Constitution which enshrines the absolute right to life of the unborn.

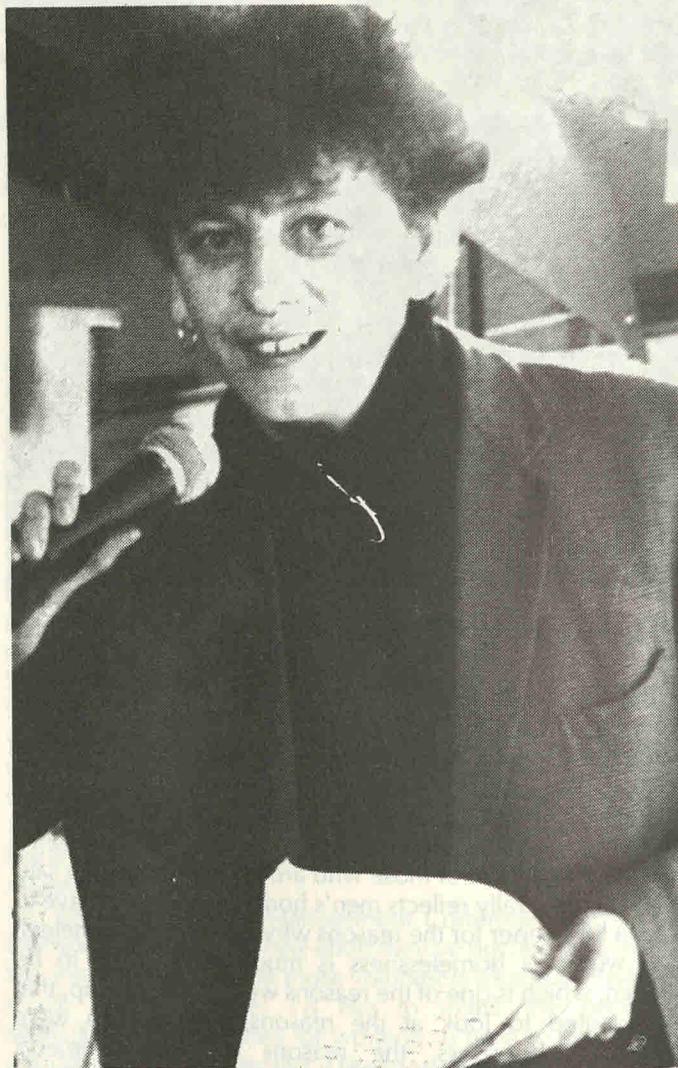
Initially Open Line and the Well Woman Clinic were inundated with panic calls. After the closure of Open Line, because of the injunction, a Help Line Service was set up by twelve women who were basically putting themselves at risk and who could and can still have an injunction issued against them. It is no longer a case against two particular clinics, or agencies. It's a case against anyone in Ireland who might be seen to be supplying information or counselling to a woman who wants information about abortion referral.

Since the Help Line Service has set up it was dealt with over 400 phone calls, 300 or which they feel are genuine — the rest from SPUC-backed Family Solidarity. The right wing, the moral majority, are crawling out of the woodwork at this point in Ireland. There are, according to the Help Line, hundreds of Irish women who aren't too worried about breaking the law but who desperately need to know about abortion referral.

We cannot over-emphasise the extra worry and strain that this situation is putting on a woman or women who are already in a state of stress about pregnancy. We cannot over-emphasise the importance of a counselling service existing in Ireland on home ground, with a person who understands your social and economic background and with whom you can have intimate and confidential discussions. Having to go it alone, a woman who takes the boat and goes through the motions of contacting a clinic here is far more likely to go ahead with an abortion — an abortion that perhaps she didn't really want and could have discovered she didn't really want if she'd had the chance to talk to someone at home.

Abortion is obviously illegal in Ireland, in the 1981 Offences Against the State Act. But abortion in Ireland is not just a matter for the Statute Book. It has become a Constitution issue since 1983 and with the present legal position, the situation is that the right of the foetus supercedes any democratic or civil rights in relation to access to information, freedom of association and rights to privacy. According to Justice Hamilton's judgement, and I quote: 'The qualified right to disseminate information cannot be invoked to intervene with such fundamental rights as the right to life of the unborn.'

The other legal implication is that any third party, independent of their relations with the woman involved, or to the foetus, can go to the court and take out an injunction if



Siobhan Lennon, Defend the Clinics Campaign.

they suspect that woman is going abroad to have an abortion. For example, if I wrote a telephone number up in O'Connell Street, with the phone number of an abortion clinic in England, I can have an injunction issued against me. If I say publicly, as a lot of people are prepared to do, that I'm prepared to give information to a woman about a service existing here, I can be injunctioned. If I say I'll be a nice girl and I'll go home and continue to behave myself, they'll drop the injunction, but if I say I'm not going to be a nice girl and I'm going to fight for Irish women's rights to abortion referral, I'll be done for contempt of court. That's basically it.

There's also a problem for women in relation to AIDS. AIDS is obviously a problem in Ireland because of the number of drug-abusing mothers who have anti-bodies etc. If a woman has anti-body positive status, there is an 80% risk of her developing full-blown AIDS if she goes ahead with a pregnancy. In Ireland at the moment, according to Gay Help Action that I spoke to before I came over, we have one of the highest rates of infants with AIDS in Western Europe, which is quite a shocking fact.

None of this information is coming through the media in Ireland, because the media is controlled by the moral majority, by Fianna Fail, by Fine Gael who have consistently shown that they intend women will take the brunt of the crisis in Ireland at the moment. We need your support and we need your help. Thank you.

Defend the Clinics (II) (Mary Flanagan)

Siobhan has outlined the actual implications of it, I'd like to inform you of what's happening in relation to the campaign against these very bad circumstances that are getting progressively worse and progressively more frightening in Ireland at the moment.

When SPUC first decided to take the case against Well Woman and Open Line, women mobilised around that



Mary Flanagan, Defend the Clinics Campaign.

issue. The whole thing took a long long time to come through; energies got dissipated. Once the ruling came through, what became popularly known as the Defend the

Clinics Campaign was established. The basis aims of the campaign hinge around the slogans 'Access to Information' 'Choice' 'A Woman's Right to Know'.

The activities of the campaign are manifold because once again the urgency of the situation demands activities which are designed first of all to publicise the farcical nature of the ruling. Because, for example, Ireland has a certain veneer of liberalism in its law, e.g. we ratified Article 19 of the UN Convention on Human Rights which supposedly guarantees freedom of information and speech within a country. Now a ruling such as this one passed in the High Court is in direct contradiction to such a treaty (or whatever). So one aspect of the campaign is to lobby in that fashion — to highlight the farcical nature of such a ruling.

The second would be dissemination of information to women who need it most. That, as Siobhan has outlined, is very very difficult because the women who are affected most by the ruling in the sense that they might be faced with unwanted pregnancies have not access to the information. That has filtered right through to a lot of trepidation within the campaign — are we breaking the law? Is it tacitly correct to give information that's illegal? So in a way, it's fraught with a lot of problems at the moment.

The third aspect would be counselling, providing covert type of counselling for women. Again, that's very difficult because short of giving out individual numbers, which can result in injunctions and jail and so on, there's no way we can reach women who desperately need to be in touch with non-directive pregnancy counselling, which can only happen now in England.

So while the campaign is very active and positive in its approach, there's a lot of support for the Defend the Clinics Campaign. An example of that which again shows how divided Ireland is at the moment — a member of the Irish Medical Organisation described the situation facing GPs who, as he put it, have consistently and always offered women the chance of coming to England for an abortion, or refer them to Well Woman and Open Line, he explained how because of the ruling that would be so detrimental to doctor/patient relationships ... obviously this was not her opinion but was the opinion of the Irish Medical Organisation itself.

But the reality is that women are really bearing the brunt of the situation, and it is filtering through all aspects of society at the moment — from censorship of certain post, censorship of the media who don't take photos of the campaign, of the activists displaying phone numbers of clinics in England and who won't give full coverage of our slogans and activities — that form of censorship. More insidiously you have certain books being banned. Just last Monday 'The Joy of Sex' which I think is a very well accepted book, was taken off the shelves in Ireland, and it's that level of very insidious clawing back of anything that has been going for Irish women over the last 20 years. And in general ... as I say, there is a strong group of activists working against this.

There are so many things that compound the situation. So obviously we really need the support of our sisters in Britain, because while we can have stop-gap information or we can do our best, we're all working within an extremely fraught situation. We can't do it without your support and finally, one of the most frightening things I think, for women, is the post-abortion situation.

Say women do come over — they return to Ireland, they have fear of being found out, right now I imagine women are

very much afraid of the legal implications, so if a woman has complications after her abortion, she may be afraid to go to casualty in the situation where she might be bleeding heavily. I think that's one of the most frightening things. So, one aspect of the campaign is to try and have post-abortion counselling. Again, it has to be done covertly, through the grape-vine, through a system of networks.

So, in summary, the main message is the support we desperately need, both in terms of hard practical support and of course in terms of funds. Thank you.

Irish Women's Abortion Support Group

Hello, I'm Margaret Gillan and I'm speaking on behalf of the Irish Women's Abortion Support Group. We've heard the perspective from home in Dublin and I'm going to talk a bit about what it's like working in London.

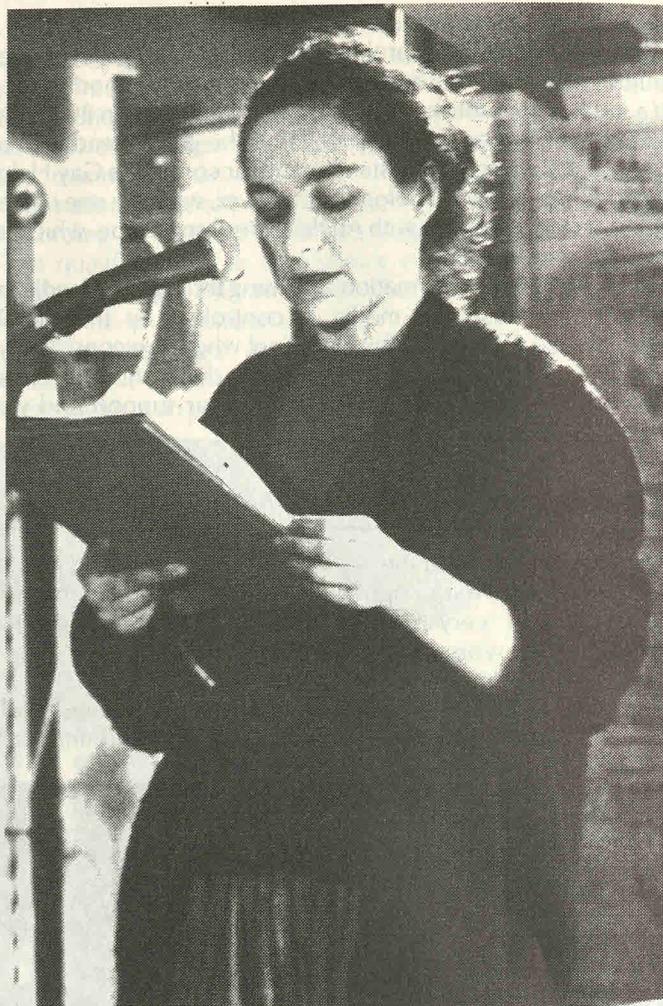
The group is made up of Irish women — and second generation who live in London. It was formally set up on 1981. Before that a network of safe contacts was already operating for women coming over for abortions. We have a small group of six women who organise the work and a wider group of 20–25 women who take part in the work of the group. Women come to us from all parts of Ireland, city and country, north and south. The legal position in the North is different both to here and the 26 counties. The 1967 Abortion Act ... was never extended to the North. There was a campaign there to get this Act extended ... in Northern Ireland.

We are prepared to give practical information and support to the women who contact us. Many will be arriving in this country for the first time and for a very short stay. We meet women at the airport, train or bus station, provide accommodation and accompany them to the clinic. We're also there as someone to talk to. More often than not women cannot talk to family or friends about their decision, so some women like to have the opportunity to talk about the abortion, what it involves and their feelings about it. We also fundraise to provide support for women who need it. We have strong links with the Well Woman and Open Line counselling services who have regularly put women in touch with us. When SPUC brought the injunction against the two clinics, we organised on this side of the water to raise funds for the campaign and to publicise the issues here.

We wrote articles, press releases and organised press conferences if someone was coming over to speak. Through benefits and appeals we raised well over £1,000 for the Defence Campaign last year and have sponsored swims for Open Line in which 22 women swam and raised over £700. Thanks to the swimmers.

SPUC's success in closing the only two non-directive pregnancy counselling services in Ireland has left us all in a really desperate situation. The High Court ruling means that it is illegal for anyone to give out information like phone numbers, and that means our number too. The women in Ireland who have responded to this and immediately organised a Help Line, are forced underground and work under stress. They need as much support as we can give them. We can be very cut off from the feelings and threats of being involved in this sort of work in Ireland itself. We need to develop stronger links.

There are now no counselling services in Ireland where a woman can find out about and discuss all the options, including abortion. Many more women will have unwanted



Margaret Gillan, Irish Women's Abortion Support Group.

babies. The only legal options in Ireland for a woman with an unwanted pregnancy are adoption, fostering or keeping it. Having the baby is unavoidable when the only support is organisations like Cara or Cherish. The loss of the two counselling services is dreadful. More Irish women than ever before are now arriving in this country for abortions, never having talked with anyone about her decision, the abortion or her feelings about it. She makes her decision in a completely hostile atmosphere and these hostilities face her daily — on TV, in the newspapers, on the radio, from the pulpit, in her family itself.

We feel it is extremely important that the woman should have access to someone who understands her social, economic and cultural background. Think of someone who is distressed, pregnant, forced into secrecy, arriving in England probably for the first time in her life. It's important that whoever talks to them understands the risk they are taking. These women are taking a strong and courageous step because they are risking their own lives, dealing alone with fears, doubts and anger, which cannot be voiced.

We want to let these women know that they can talk, at least while they are here with us, and that as Irish women we support them. When the other organisations go, so also will disappear any hope for financial support at all. We know that poor women will suffer the most. Long before Woman and Open Line, middle class women were able to come here for abortions. It was always bad; now it's worse.

The numbers of women coming over for abortions is steadily increasing. 1984 official statistics show 5,000 women with Irish addresses having abortions in English clinics. These figures do not count women who stay with relatives or friends here and give English addresses and that is a very large number of women. That figure should probably have been more like 8,000 or 9,000.



Iris Odea, Belfast Rape Crisis Centre.

Belfast Rape Crisis Centre

I'm Iris Odea from the Belfast Rape Crisis Centre, The Rape Crisis Centre in Belfast is part of the international movement of Rape Crisis Centres which have existed for only the past couple of decades. Before that there was absolutely no provision of any kind for women who had been raped or sexually assaulted, and while we don't affiliate or form associations, we are part of an international movement.

We started in Belfast on March 8th, International Women's Day 1982. The Centre opened for two evenings a week, 7.30 to 10 o'clock. We are now, five years later, open seven days a week, from 10 in the morning to 8 pm, so I think that's a fairly considerable advance. We have four full time paid workers. We do all the things that Rape Crisis Centres do in this country or any other country. We provide women with emotional, psychological support, will accompany them to doctors, special clinics; we will go to court with them, go through the whole trial process and assist them in any way we can. And we feel actually that this is having an unpublicised, but quite powerful effect. We will go with them to solicitors and even now we find we are helping with rehousing and a

number of quite wide practical issues.

But as well as that, the actual work with the women and children and the girls themselves, we are trying to carry out a lot of other work in an educational way in order to try and change social attitudes. For instance we are involved in a campaign to change the law on rape. We have seven points which we want changed in the law, and we have been doing this in conjunction with a group called the Women's Law and Research Group.

We take every opportunity we can to talk to any groups in an effort to change the social attitudes which are basically at the root of rape and sexual assault. We do feel that a lot of us should change our ideas about our pure Irish societies because our findings in Northern Ireland are that if anything, we probably have pro rata the population, which a very very small one, possibly the highest rate of incest in Europe. We cannot really quantify these, but that would be the way we feel our experience is showing.

We are also involved with a number of other groups. We give support to any group that is working in any way to further the cause of the Women's Movement, women's rights etc. NALRA has already been mentioned and some of us are active members of NALRA. Personally I'm involved with the setting up of a Well Woman's Centre in Belfast which is now going quite strongly. It's not exactly how I would like to see it, which is a good pressure group to be used partly for the position of women vis a vis the medical profession, which I think is generally diabolical, but it is getting there. And we are, as I say, working with the Women's Law and Research Group — anybody who is doing any kind of positive, progressive, radical work with women. We are a feminist organisation and we will support them.

More recently, in the last few weeks of January, one London clinic had 30-40 Irish women on their books each week. that's only one clinic. All these clinics advertise in the English papers and magazines which sell in Ireland and women go straight to them. Right now, not only are women talking about the loss of pre-abortion counselling for all these Irish women, but also an inevitable decrease in post-abortion care. There is little or no counselling, and medical care will be subject to the level of paranoia the doctor suffers from. Despite the Family Planning Association, there is still a lack of information about contraception.

We are a very small group. We are in crisis. We went to Dublin in early January to discuss with women the possible ways of continuing support for Irish women and ways of spreading information. We have started a phone line on Tuesday evenings from 6-9, for Irish women wanting abortions. We will arrange the abortion for her and put her in contact with a woman on our rota who will look after her. We are now dealing with a huge increase in women needing our support. A woman will ring us having got our phone number somehow or other. We are now in the position of referring women, we're actually doing referral work. Our workload is increasing and we need more skills. More and more counselling in a broad and in a specific sense is becoming our responsibility over here. We appeal to you for your interest and support.

We will be running educationals for women who would like to get involved in rota work. We also need women to train for phone line rotas. We need money; the Defence Campaign needs money and Irish women coming here for abortions need money. An early abortion costs £130, and

that's before you pay your fare and everything else, so it is a really expensive business. We all need massive publicity here. We're hoping to bring over speakers from Ireland very soon. Keep an eye out for the publicity. Here is where Irish women must come for abortions, from all over Ireland. In terms of reproductive rights, our control over our bodies and therefore our lives, links between Irish women at home and Irish women here have never been so important as in this crisis.

If you're interested in getting involved please ring us, or send a card with your name and address. You can support our events which we often organise with the Spanish Women's Abortion Support Group, who we work very closely with.

We are active in the Defend the Clinics Campaign and have been in Dublin for several of the meetings and have pledged our support. We are already giving our referral numbers and will take any referrals, and if they want to shake a stick at us, well we will just tell them to stuff your laws, we intend to continue. The day after the judgement was issued, we had a call from a 15 year old in the South who was pregnant by her father, and that is the kind of situation that you can find yourself faced with.

Just one correction — it was mentioned earlier that there are only two agencies in Ireland which were active in non-directive abortion referral. There is in fact, the Ulster Pregnancy Abortion Association which is very active — in fact this has now become the one remaining link that there is in Ireland for all Irish women, North or South. These are all the activities that are going on — there's quite a lot happening in the North, which as you probably know is a very politicised place, after 18 years it can't be otherwise, and we will support any movement or activity for the rights of women.

We are very very concerned about the position in the South at the moment, where the rights of women are being subjected to a very dangerous process of attrition, which really something must be done about now, or it will be extremely difficult to reverse, and we would also like to point out that for instance the Dublin government has stopped criminal injury compensation awards to victims of rape and sexual assault. This was slipped through so quietly that nobody seemed to know a thing about it. We ourselves only discovered it on reading Anne Roper's book on Women and Health. We think it is absolutely dreadful that they could do that. Apart from anything else this is completely trivialising the crime of rape and saying 'No, it isn't even worth criminal injury compensation.' We are very concerned about this and all the other methods that are being used to criminalise Irish women, so that women who are pursuing what we would see as their perfectly just rights will be seen as criminals.

I was asked to bring greetings to you all today, which I do, and pledge solidarity with all the women here and all women everywhere. We are a feminist group, totally non-sectarian. Our politics are feminism and we exist to serve all women and hope to be able to continue doing that.

Falls Road Women's Centre

My name is Una Maher and I'm from the Falls Road Women's Centre in Belfast. Before I tell you about the centre I'd just like to say that it's a long time since I've been in England — it's about 10 years since I was here last and the atmosphere then in the Irish community was one of fear and



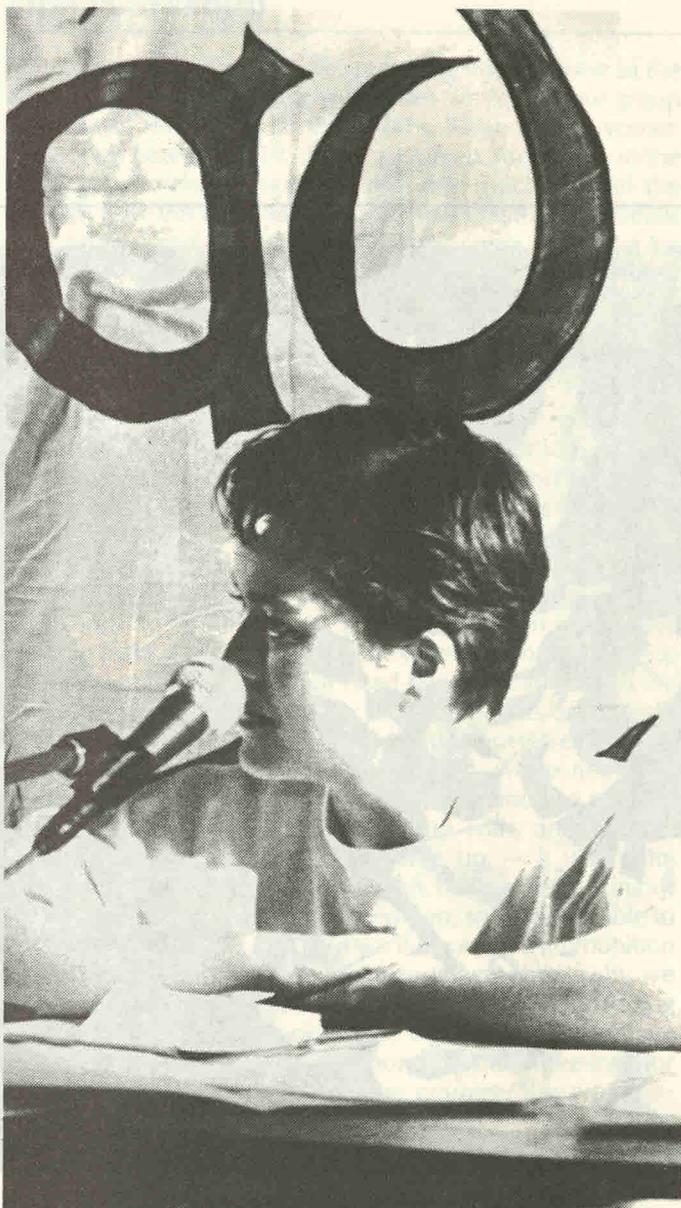
Una Maher, Falls Road Womens Centre.

intimidation and really it was keep your head down and hope you won't get noticed, and it's really heartening to be here today and to see the amount of Irish women that are organising themselves, that are starting up groups and that are actually taking the lead in the debate among the Irish community in Britain.

Our centre is now in it's 4th year. It was started by a small group of feminists who'd been involved in various women's campaigns within West Belfast, and who believe that if we're ever going to make sort of major impact on the problems women face within the community that we needed a women's centre — a women-only space where women could campaign from, and drop-in to share experiences and generally let each other know what was happening within their lives and what the problems within their lives were.

We've been going for 4 years: we now have 4 fulltime workers: we have been funded by a scheme there: I'm sure you have a similar scheme over here — Access to Community Employment. We deal with all sorts of work from advice on violence against women, bringing women to our hostels, doing court cases with them, to more simple things like problems with an electricity bill. I'd just like to add to what the other speaker was saying there — that you cannot underestimate the extent of the violence against women within the community. I mean that we find the cases that we are dealing with are horrific and the under current of violence

that is there is never expressed and is never talked about and is never allowed to be talked about — to break down those walls and to get women to get up and say 'Yes', I'm a victim of violence, this has happened to me and I demand that this community recognises it and deals with it and to break down those walls is really difficult.



Claire McElwee, Chair.

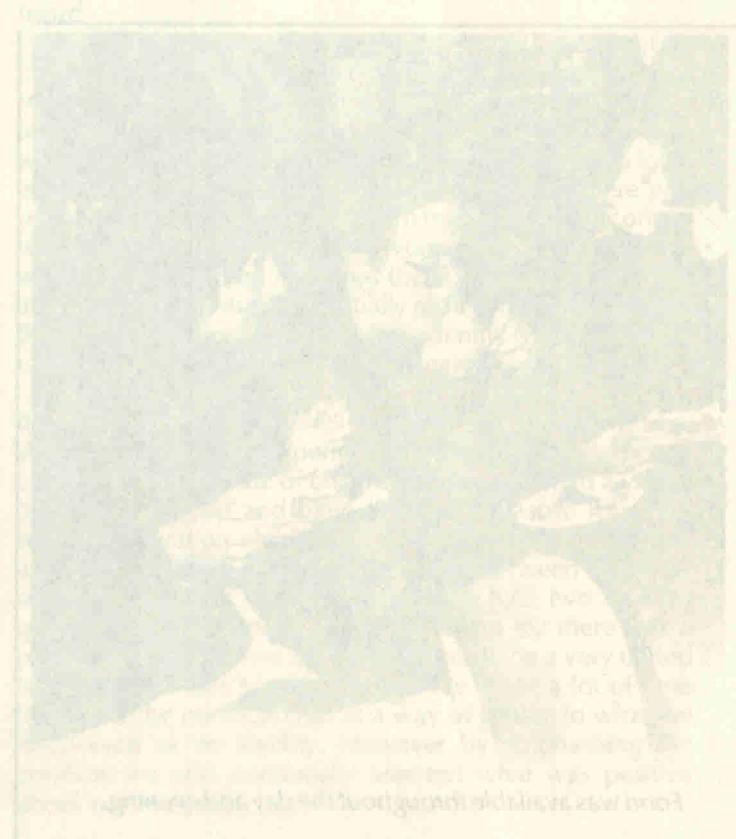
Recently we decided that we wanted to develop the centre more, that we want to actually go out to the communities themselves and to find out what women wanted off us and how we could supply their needs, and this weekend in fact we have an information weekend going on in the centre, to which we've invited referral agencies. We hope we can broaden the amount of information that women have access to, and coming out of that we hope to start a number of classes: Language, education, literacy programmes and young women's projects. So that's long term — we see that developing gradually over the next 4 years.

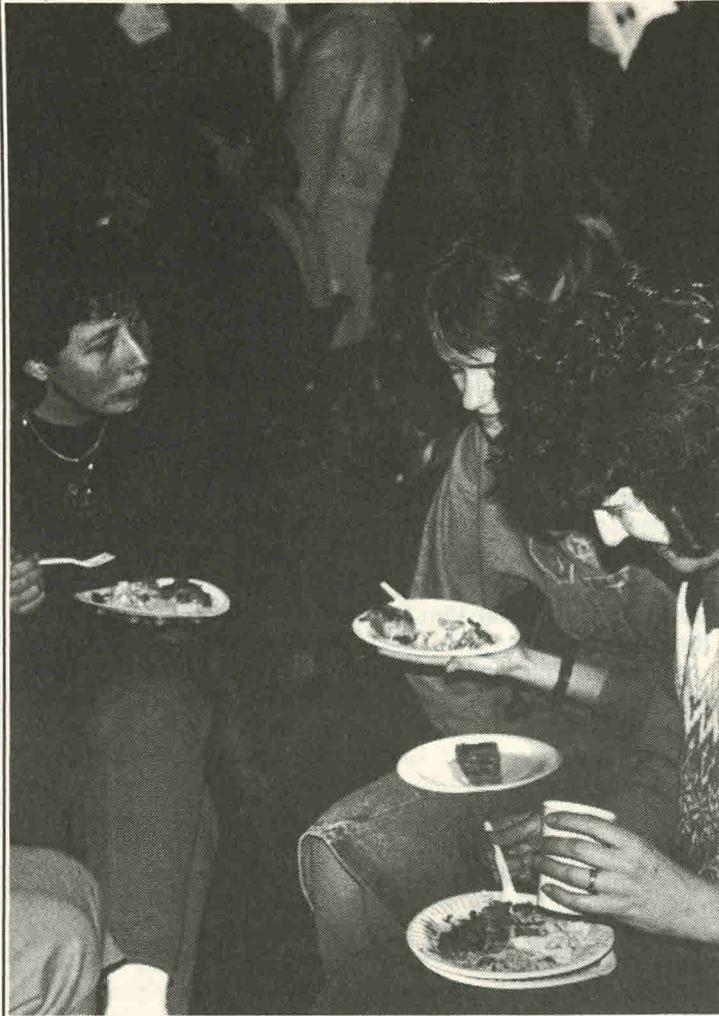
One of our biggest problems at the moment is that the government has taken the position of picking on small, politically independent groups: by politically independent I mean those that are not controlled by their policy or not controlled by the church and is threatening now to withdraw funding from all these small groups. We are one of the ones that is being targeted so there is the possibility that we will lose our workers, and that would force us back into relying on voluntary labour again. It will affect not only what we plan to do but it will affect the work that we are doing now.

We are also involved at the moment in the six counties in the Defend The Clinics Campaign and from our centre we hope to develop counselling skills ourselves so that our centre can actually be used for any women coming up from the 26 counties.

We are also heavily involved in the Stop The Strip Searches Campaign, and just as I would like to urge us all to vote for the resolutions which are in front of the conference, one from the Irish Prisoners Appeal and one from Stop The Strip Searches Campaign. I'd like the conference to carry these resolutions.

I think that's basically all I've got to say. Thank you very much for inviting me.





Women at lunch. By lunchtime 25 groups had addressed the conference.

Lunch



Two of the girls group having lunch.



Food was available throughout the day and evening.

Section Two

Workshop Reportbacks

First Workshop

My name is Roisin ni Mhaille, reporting back on one of the workshops. The range of experiences we had in our group dated from the 1930's to the 1980's. Some of the women have been here since 1937 and we talked about how in the past, the community was centred very much around the church; how this has changed a bit now that there are more Irish centres and how that had caused some problems for people who didn't want to get involved in church activities, and it could be very isolating.

We heard about how terribly strong anti-Irish racism was in the past; how it was very blatant and how some of the women felt it had changed a lot since the War, but we all agreed there was still a lot of it around. That helps us to understand black people and Jewish people and how they feel when they meet anti-semitism and racism and we felt we were perhaps a bit more accepted by them because they knew more about how we felt in this society.

The question of what being Irish is, was extremely difficult — we had a lot of problems; mixed feeling was what came back about that. We're intensely proud in some ways of being Irish, but there were also expressions of times when you just wanted to keep your head down because of all the anti-Irish stuff you were getting. The stereotypes of the Irish, like very often we found we were defining ourselves in terms of their stereotypes — we're not violent, we're not dirty, we're not stupid, but what are we? We found the positive things a lot more difficult to come up with, and a lot of personal feelings and emotions came up — it was quite difficult to talk about some of the stuff, but we felt safe in our own group, safe with other Irish women, so we were able to talk through this quite a lot, but we'd never give ammunition to English people to criticise us. We talked about why we came, why we stayed — some of us felt guilt about not going back and making the place better; we would love to have talked much longer. We want more informal meetings for Irish women all over London, the country, the world — everywhere.

Second Workshop

ELIZABETH FARRELL. We talked about how the first time we felt different was when we hit English soil. To be different in England is unacceptable, very negative. We talked about how much pain and distress we felt about this morning's lectures. We talked about history and history being very much part of the collective Irish consciousness; the various things about the duality of family — how we can feel submerged within the family but also how we have been very supported by our mothers and our grandmothers.

What came across as very important was the older women not being represented in this forum today. We felt that it was for an age group of from 20-45 and that older women's needs were not being identified. We had three

older women in our group who stayed for the first part of the session and then left because they felt they didn't fit in, and I think that is something that needs to be addressed. I think there is a different experience being an older Irish person and I think they have a very important story to tell. They should be and are a common part of our experience as Irish women.

Also people from the North have a different experience from people in the South. What we actually said was part of our identity was the reasons why we left Ireland and some of us still felt very stuck in the reasons we left — some very painful and distressing reasons, and some others said they had changed so much since they came here, that they were totally different and felt very alienated from their families. They felt that they didn't quite fit in in Ireland or England, so they were somewhere in between and couldn't quite work out their identity there.

Second generation women were feeling excluded from the group, being culturally displaced as women but their identity was also very much part of the Irish women's forum, and there was a woman from our group who'd like to speak.

Third Workshop

CATH GILLESPIE. We talked about emigration being a gradual process rather than being an actual decision very often; that the English Women's Movement generally is very racist and it is often an uphill struggle for Irish women to get heard.

There are often problems of going home because of the changes that have occurred here. The difficulties are in rearing children here — what sort of identity would they adopt. The Irish Women's Movement helps to explore other ways of being Irish in England, we thought. There was a lot of isolation for new women coming to England — there was one woman in our group for whom this was her first contact with Irish women en masse — a woman from Belfast felt the war was an important issue and the community was united around retaining what is essentially an Irish identity opposing British imperialism, and part of their identity was confronting racism and being involved in a struggle.

However that is not to say that we didn't discuss that there is racism among the Irish community back home. Women coming here experienced racism in jobs. Again we came back to the issue of children because we had a young baby in the group and often that there was no room for second generation children here to explore their Irishness and we talked about the differences between first and second generation Irish women. We had two second generation Irish women in the group who felt there was a problem of divisiveness against what could be a very united Movement. It didn't hold us back. We spent a lot of time looking at the conflicts first, as a way of getting to what we discovered as an identity. However by emphasising the conflicts we also continually asserted what was positive about our Irishness.

Fourth Workshop

NICOLETTE BURNS. We talked about what it means to be Irish, about the contradiction of things and having to stand up for things that we may not necessarily support, like the church; about going back to Ireland, and going back to a repressive rural life and feeling that we don't belong here and not belonging there either, and half living between Ireland and here.

And how shocking it was finding anti-Irish racism when we first arrived, how rife racism was and how we didn't necessarily recognise it as racism; about people accepting or rejecting racist comments to other groups, but not anti-Irish racism. We felt that we had to cast away our Irishness in order to find our identity. Schools: we talked about the ethnic minority status of Irish people not being recognised by ILEA.

What is identity — that was difficult to define; about rejecting Catholicism and yet finding ourselves in the position of guarding it against attack because it was so bound up in the Irish experience; about being alone in a group — the only Irish person in a group and therefore being considered to be the sole authority on Ireland; coming from a closed Catholic society it's very difficult to reject Catholicism because it feels like rejecting Irishness, a betrayal of ourselves.

We talked about being two people — one with our family and the other with our friends, nevertheless we rely on roles. We were a very diverse group. We had lots of different things in our identity — lots of things kept us apart — class differences, and experience differences, but we felt our identities were very individual but there were some elements of them which brought us all here to talk about them in the first place.

Fifth Workshop

In our group we found that women came from differing backgrounds, so our experience and our identities were different. We came because of our differences to the dominant culture; and feeling as an ethnic minority in England and that we experience some of these differences. We talked about identity being internal and external, children suffering the pain of second generation and being brought up in this country, and having identity crisis.

Some of us felt that being middle class made it easier to be more confident about our identity and our Irishness. We felt that we were proud of being Irish. We felt that racism is quite difficult and coming over here and receiving it is also a shock. We found it difficult in circumstances like running campaigns and having to defend our culture. Some of us felt that coming to Britain and coming out was also a problem, feeling alienated from our culture and not fitting in.

First Workshop

My name is Rosemary, reporting back on one of the workshops. The range of experiences we had in our group dated from the 1930s to the 1980s. Some of the women had been here since 1937 and we talked about how in the past the community was centred very much around the church, how the church changed a bit now but there are more first centres and how that had caused some problems for some of the women. We talked about the different ways of coming to Britain, the different ways of coming to Britain, the different ways of coming to Britain.

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Second Workshop

ELIZABETH FARRELL. We talked about how the first time we felt different was when we came to England. We talked about England is unrecognisable, very different. We talked about how much pain and distress we felt about the language, the culture, the history and history being very different. We talked about the collective Irish consciousness, the sense of things about the quality of work — how we can feel things about the quality of work, but also how we have been very submerged within the family, but also how we have been very supported by our mothers and our grandmothers.

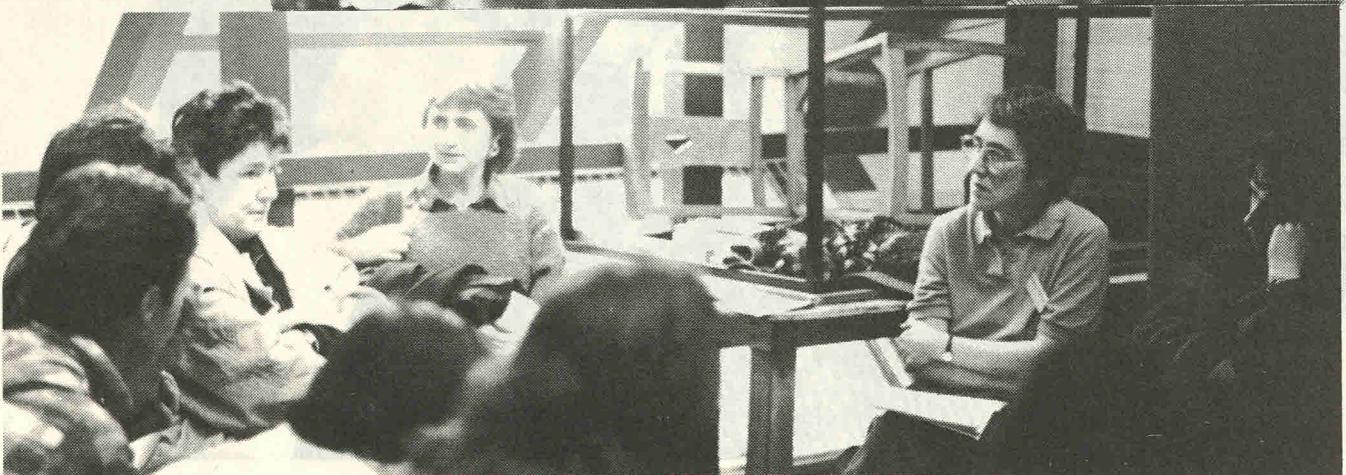
What came across as very important was the idea of women not being represented in the family today. We felt that it was for an age group of born 30-45 and that older women's needs were not being identified. We had three



Women Discussing Identity at the Workshops

Twelve workshops took place, each lead by a trained facilitator, and centred on the theme of Irish Women and Irish Identity.





Sixth Workshop

RITA O'REILLY. We started the session by asking two questions: What does identity mean? and Are you proud to be Irish? The first contribution came from a second generation person. She found it very confusing because she had a very religious background and at 15 or 16 she didn't want to know about her Irish thing — she had too much traditional music and ceilis. So it was only later that she liked to find Irishness herself, and she came here today.

We found that being Irish was the most important thing and the negative view of England makes one proud to be Irish. A patronising attitude to the Irish; being in Britain is quite specific — and also we're like a gypsy race, going from here to there, and we've an Irish psyche, whatever that means!

We come from Ireland loaded with guilt and in the '70's there was a mini boom and now there's an economic crisis and everybody involved in a family set-up, whether it's here or in Ireland, one parent families, lesbians, divorced people, living together feeling guilty and left out. Certain people need an environment to find themselves and the amount of potential of Irish women is underdeveloped. We've a better chance here. People have been forced out of Ireland by the stuffiness and religion. Racism is partly to blame for feelings of rejection and guilt.

Seventh Workshop

MOYA RUDDY. We started by speaking about religion and one woman had actually given up her religion before she left — it wasn't to do with why she left. She had brought up her children now with no religion and she felt they had nothing to fight against.

We went from that sort of attitude to another woman who was very proud of being a Catholic and felt that she couldn't do away with religion. We talked then about losing our identity over here, and finding things like hanging on to our accents, then going home and finding people saying we had English accents anyway.

A second generation woman brought up the point that she didn't feel English or Irish, and this for her was a great problem. This was mirrored also by a first generation woman who felt she didn't fit in here, doesn't fit in at home and couldn't talk about things. Other people had stories to tell of conflict with their family or friends.

Then there was the general idea that if you went home to live you would have to compromise. On the other hand we also felt that we perpetuated myths about Ireland and that in fact things were changing there, and that over here we had a very static view of Ireland, whereas lots of people are changing and parents are coming round and learning to deal with their daughters, and because we went home on holidays, we often didn't want to raise issues because we were just there for a few weeks. But if you lived there, you'd feel at home. Anyway we felt a sense of loss at not having our families near us and we are delighted that this sort of conference now exists.

This is some constructive criticism — we felt that we talked about everything and nothing and next year we'd like to be more specific, so we could really get into it.

Eighth Workshop

GEMMA CLARKE. Our group concentrated on accents for a while. We talked about how we are discriminated against with an accent, and not seen as Irish without one. We looked at our Irish identity and wondered if we only confront our Irish identity or look at it when we're faced with racism, rather than something we would want to look at anyway.

We talked about how we tend to leave Ireland out of a rejection for part of the culture — whether it be the Church or how women are viewed within the country, and in some ways when we get to England, we have a desperate need to identify with Irishness.

We also looked at the *Irish Post* and referred to the speaker earlier on, looking at how the *Irish Post* is not perhaps representing Irish women as much as it should and by the issue around lesbianism not being brought out into the open by the *Irish Post*.

One other thing was the creche. We felt there should have been more of an Irish input with the creche today — that if there was Irish music or stories — something to make a link so that the children will go away from here feeling that they had something to do with it, it might encourage them to come as adults.

We also spoke of the difficulty of bringing up children and providing them with positive Irish identities within London. We thought that having talks like today was absolutely wonderful. It was nice to be able to relax in Irish women's company, without even having to establish conclusions about national identity, and that just that can help you to be more confident about making changes or asserting things.

Ninth Workshop

My name is HEATHER. We discussed what being Irish means — particularly differences and similarities between first and second generation Irish women. We more or less all agreed that there were positive aspects about being Irish. Some first generation Irish women felt that initially they had rejected an Irish identity when they first moved to England because of oppressive experiences in Ireland, but that later they felt able to reclaim their Irish identity. And some women were going through that process at the moment. We discussed Irish women outside London — lack of support, lack of resources, different cultural values. We thought it might be a good idea to have some regional conferences for Irish women in England and perhaps a National Conference might be organised outside London some time.

We discussed anti-Irish racism, class difference, culture — what makes Irish culture different. We wanted to avoid stereotyping and romanticising — reinforcing myths, but we did mention things like ceremony and family ties, mother/daughter relationships, validation of emotion, oral history, a sense of the past, humour, music, art, and we felt we had some common experience as immigrant Irish women.

There were a lot of Irish lesbians in our group and we discussed whether or not we could come out to our families. Fear of rejection by the Irish community — some people felt they had rejected Ireland initially because their family rejected their sexuality, but when they came to terms with their sexuality then they'd come to terms with their Irish

identity. And we discussed lack of support from mothers of lesbians and homophobia generally in all communities.

Tenth Workshop

MAUREEN O'HARA. Our group was very mixed, both Irish-born and second generation; women from town and country; women from the North and the South of Ireland; lesbians and heterosexual women and we had quite a lot of differences in age and class. We spent a lot of time talking about our differences. We didn't really get round to defining our identity — we spent a lot of the time looking at different experiences that had contributed to them, and the main common experience we talked about was anti-Irish racism.

Then we went on to talk about how much of our identity is positive and how much is a reaction to anti-Irish racism in this country. All the women did feel a positive sense of Irish identity, but also said they didn't identify with the mainstream Irish community because of its sexism and anti-lesbianism, and also because of the domination of the community by the Church, whether Catholic or Protestant. Some women said they didn't go to Church here, but when they went home they went to Mass and said they felt that part of what the Church does in Ireland is train people to be hypocrites.

We talked a lot about differences in terms of class, religious backgrounds and the very different experiences of Irish-born women from the North and the South, and particularly about the double oppression of Working Class Catholics in the North — and about the conflicts between us e.g. some women from the North talked about women from the South telling them they weren't really Irish. Also about the way second generation people's Irish identity in this country is suppressed, partly by the Catholic Church and the English education system.

Generally we felt we didn't fit into any one place or group and that our identity, or different aspects of our identity came from very different sources — in a positive way, and we'd just got around to talking about that. So we said we'd carry on next year with the discussion.

Eleventh Workshop

BEA GAVIN. In a sense I don't really know why I'm coming to report because what I'm going to say would be exactly the same as all the other Workshops have focussed on. It seemed that we went round the houses — all the topics that people have talked about — and came back again.

So maybe the best thing we could do — we thought at the end we wanted to finish on a really positive note and said that we felt all the same confusions about identity and differences between first generation, second generation, a dominant identity which is very much tied up with Catholicism — we didn't actually want to swallow any more; we wanted something different, but that now there were a lot of different possibilities and we could be selective and create a positive identity, and coming here and knowing that there is an Irish Women's Network and conferences of this sort was very much part of that process. And so we started off in the beginning not being sure what there was or what it was we could be proud of in terms of Irishness and we see that what's happening in terms of the Women's Movement is something we can be very proud of. So that's our positive note to finish with.....

Twelfth Workshop

RACHEL. I'm afraid we haven't quite finished yet because our group was widely mixed and there were some women who'd been in England for quite a long time, and we talked about the isolation that women felt 20 years ago and felt that this had been improved, especially by conferences like this, but there was still a lot of room for improvement.

Some of the women felt that what we should be striving for was all women feeling equal, which we all agreed with, but felt this couldn't happen because of British imperialism. We talked about the class nature of our cultural identity and the discrimination against the majority of women who are working class and come over here.

Also a lot about accents, and how in Ireland if you were aspiring to be middle class, your accent was hammered out of you and you were told to speak properly etc, and that was perpetuated over here. And if you had an accent when you came, that you became invisible when you went into shops and asked for something in an Irish accent. I think we all identified with that.

We talked for a long time about the racism involved in it and how in the past we hadn't recognised it as being racism and how we felt very much stronger as a result of the recognition of racism, now with conferences like this.

We talked of parents and second generation children feeling inferior and wanting their children to fit in and that those children had great difficulties. And we thought they were still in evidence, especially now at times when they had to argue politically like at the death of Bobby Sands and things like that, which put great strains on the children of Irish parents.

Section Three Plenary

Resolutions

RESOLUTIONS

1. From: THE IRISH PRISONERS' APPEAL

The Irish Prisoners' Appeal recognises that Irish political prisoners are held in British prisons as a direct consequence of British military and economic oppression in Ireland. Specifically we totally condemn the practice of strip searching Irish women in British and Six County prisons. Strip searching has no security value whatsoever, and this is designed to degrade, humiliate and break the spirit of Republican women prisoners.

The Irish Prisoners' Appeal calls for an immediate end to strip searching of all women in prisons, police custody or immigration custody. Further, many Irish political prisoners are held in British prisons many miles from family and friends in Ireland. This causes vast suffering, especially for women, who carry the main burden of visiting with children.

The European Parliament states that prisoners should be given the possibility of serving their sentences in their country of origin or habitual residence, and the UK is a signatory to this agreement. We call for this agreement to be honoured. We call for the immediate repatriation of Irish political prisoners in British prisons to prisons near their homes.

PROPOSER: CLAIRE KEATING from the Irish Prisoners' Appeal.

I'd like to move the motion that's been read out, on the two quite clear grounds of the total condemnation of strip searching which directly affects many many Irish women in Six County and British prisons who are on Republican charges, and also the Irish Prisoners' Appeal would condemn strip searching of women across the board.

The second half of the motion is to do with the repatriation of prisoners to prisons near their homes. The prisoners themselves have made it quite clear that they do not wish to enter the debate about repatriation. They will serve their sentences wherever they are sent. They do not feel, and nor do we, that they should be serving the sentences in the first place. It's on purely humanitarian grounds and from the relatives' point of view that the second half of the motion is put.

It's so that relatives and women in particular, who are travelling with children, do not have to travel such vast and disgraceful distances, at appalling amounts of suffering to visit prisoners in prisons miles away from homes. I'd like you to support this motion.

FOR: 160 AGAINST: 0 ABSTENTIONS: 1

RESOLUTION CARRIED

Resolutions

2 From: THE IRISH WOMEN'S ABORTION SUPPORT GROUP

We deplore the recent High Court hearing which makes it now illegal in Ireland not only to have an abortion but also to counsel someone about an unwanted pregnancy, to give information about abortion or to refer women to clinics in England for terminations. One agency, Open Line Counselling, has been forced to close. The other, the Well Woman Centre has been hindered in the pregnancy counselling work it has done. This is another attack on Irish women by the Right.

We recognise that women will continue to travel to England despite it, for abortions. We ask the Conference to send a message of solidarity to the two clinics affected, to support any efforts made by women there to challenge the situation, and to register our protest with Dail Eireann.

PROPOSER: MARGARET GILLAN, Irish Women's Sup-

port Group.

The Open Line Clinic had to close on 12th January. We're all facing a really desperate situation. We need support; we need letters of protest — we have actually written letters of protest to papers and to TD's in Dail Eireann. As usual, they don't get anywhere. The more letters that can be written in protest and about the exportation of Irish problems, the better. As I said this morning, the women there who are struggling in a very hard situation, need as much support as possible, in any way — verbal, money, everything.

SECONDER: IRIS O'DEA

AGAINST: I'm RITA O'REILLY. I work for 'Let Live'. We are a group who help women who have become pregnant for whatever reason. We don't say to them 'You can't have an abortion', but we counsel them. We don't allow them to rush into an abortion. I was very sad to hear this

morning all about this abortion movement. There are just about 161 women here, but lying in some hospitals throughout Britain there are 5,000 potential Irish children. They are not allowed to speak here today. That's why I've taken the courage to come and speak for them.

And not all of us want abortions. We still have kept our religion and our principles. And what we should do is to have better prevention of pregnancy counselling, rather than pro-abortion counselling.

FOR: My name is VON McCLARY. I'm not representing any group, though I'm a member of the IBRG. I'd like to speak on this motion as a woman who's exactly half way through a pregnancy. I'd like to register my support for the motion because I'm a woman who's willingly pregnant. But I sympathise totally with the women in Ireland who haven't actually had that choice because of the fact that they've been denied the right to adequate contraception advice and the right to contraception on some occasions because the doctors won't prescribe it or because they can't get it from chemists.

I think that our hearts should go out to those women who are unwillingly pregnant and that we should do what we can in this country if those women have made the decision for themselves. I think it's important that women should have the choice, and a lot of the time, those women who are coming across from Ireland are coming to a country that is totally foreign and hostile to them, to a people who do not understand them, who are riddled with guilt because they cannot go back and tell their families, tell their neighbours or other people the experience that they have been through.

An abortion is not a pleasant experience to go through, I'm sure. I'm fortunate that I'm not one of those thousands of women who've come across from Ireland through the years on the boat, trying to raise the money and facing a hostile public in England, and a hostile reaction at home if they were to divulge their guilty secrets. Those women have had very rough time and I don't think that any of us are above criticism for the things that we do and certainly it's not our place to criticise those women who have made their decision.

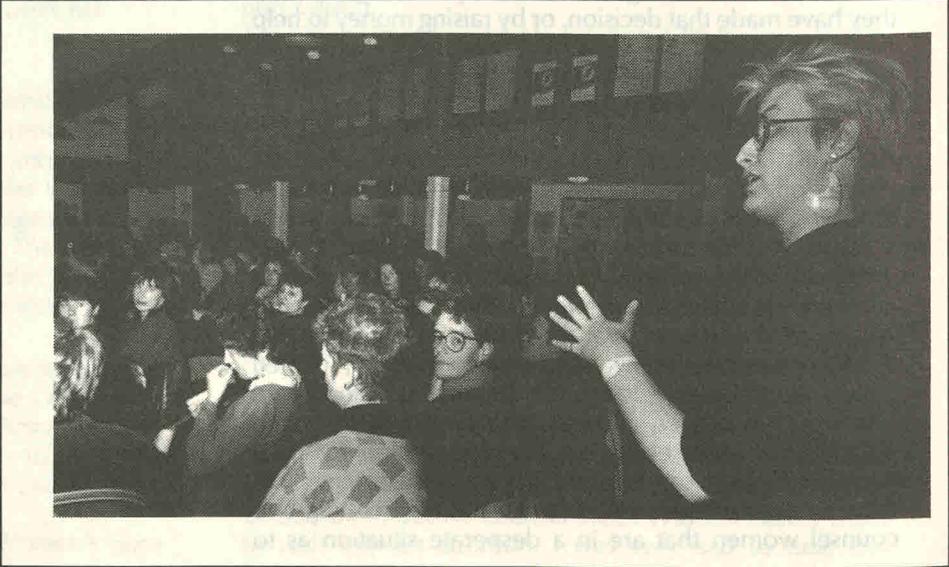
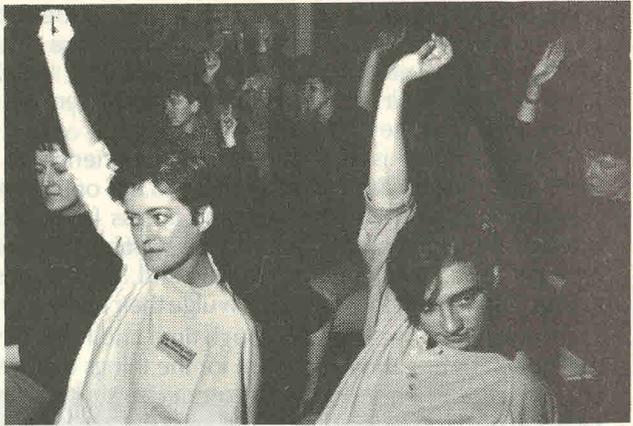
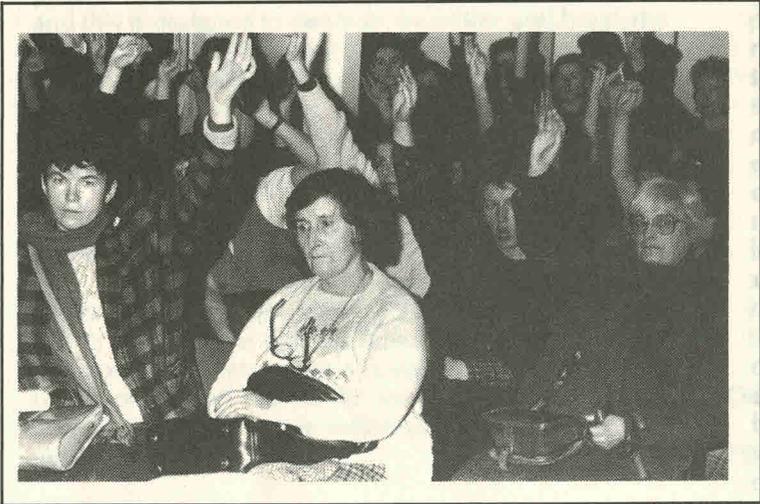
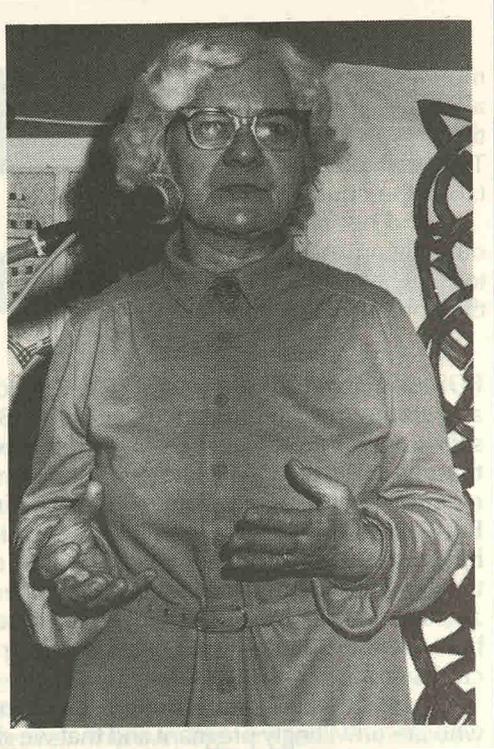
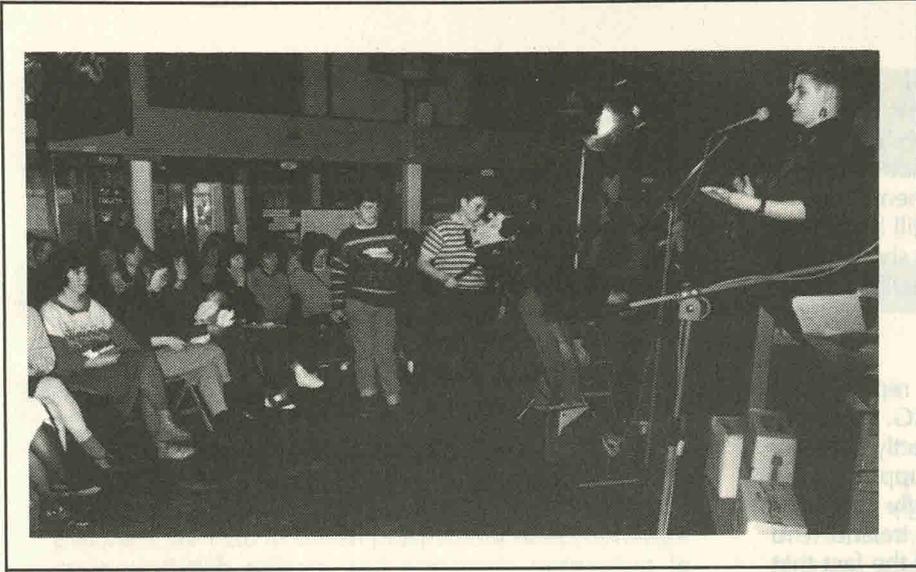
What we should be doing is trying to make it a bit easier for them, and if we can help by giving them things like a bed, or by helping them to find a place to go to once they have made that decision, or by raising money to help them once they've made that decision, then that's something we should be doing. It's important that we should have the choice.

AGAINST: I'm TERESA BURKE and I'm against abortion. I also belong to 'Life' which is to help women and young girls who wish to keep their babies. To me, abortion is murder. It's difficult to speak because I know of the animosity in the hall against me speaking, but to me, we are here to speak about our identities and about our culture, and to me, to hear this morning — to think that 9,000 babies are denied life, denied identity, denied culture or heritage — to me it's disgraceful. I don't care how you put it over, all I say is that we had the same difficulties as yourselves, but our prescription for non-pregnancy was to say 'No', and it is the best contraceptive there is. I'm not against clinics that will advise, help and counsel women that are in a desperate situation as to

know whether they want to keep their baby or not. I feel it must be an awful situation because it's bad enough here, but it must be worse in Ireland.

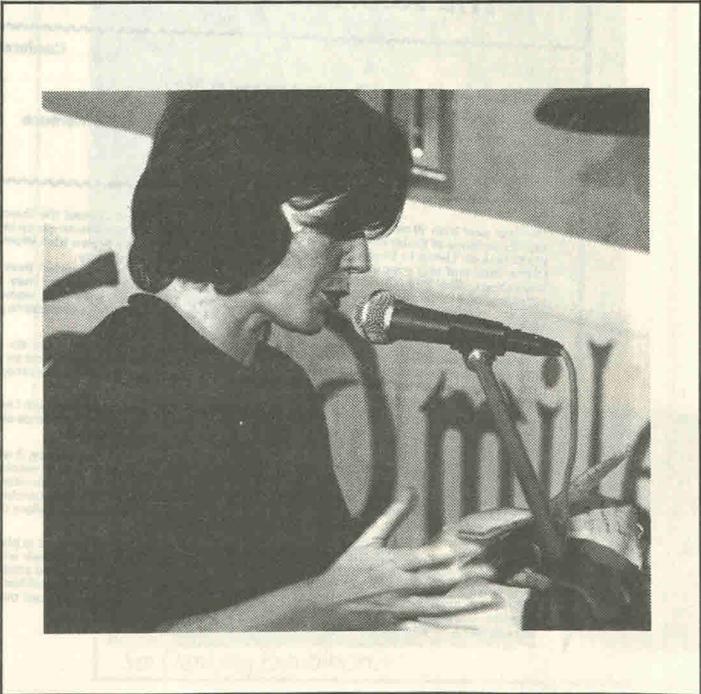
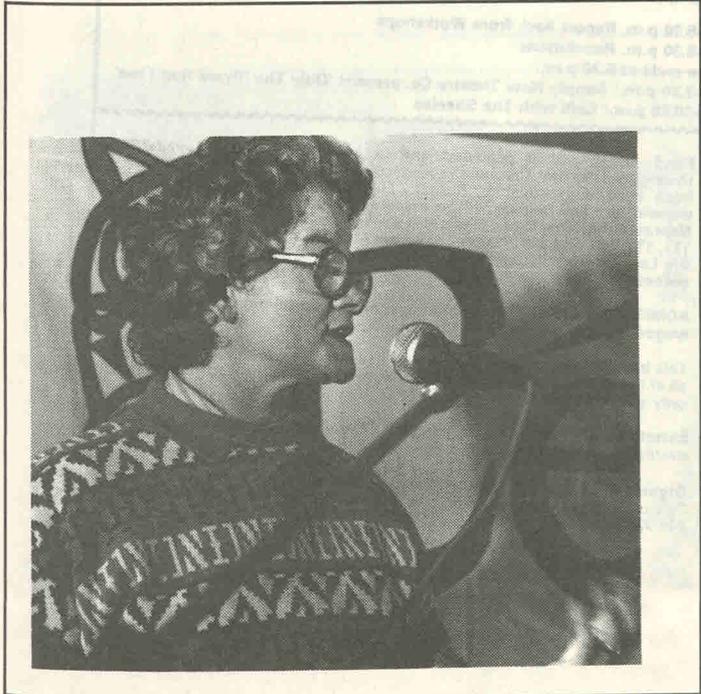
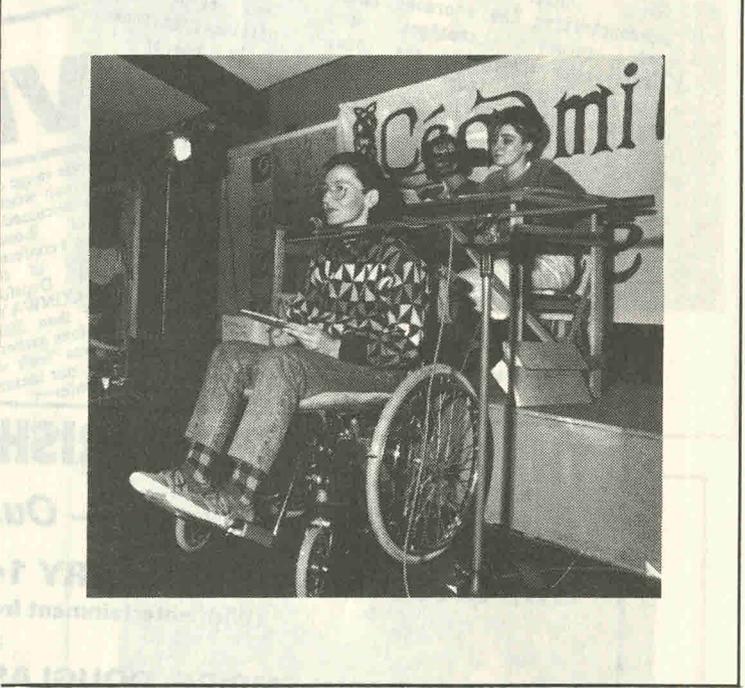
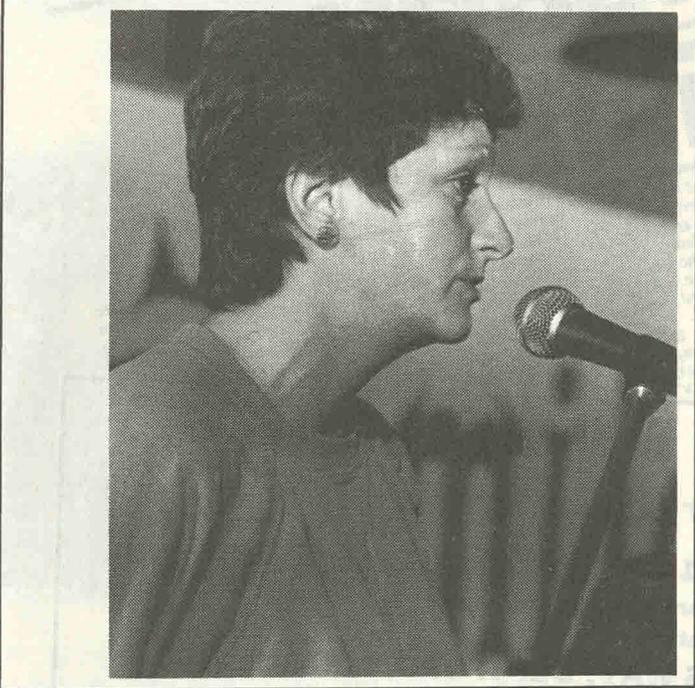
But I think myself that those women that counsel others to have an abortion — to me, that they are murderers, and they talk about British rule and all sorts of terrible things that happen to Irish people — to me it's the most disgraceful thing there is, to have this hall full of women to say that they agree with abortion.

RESOLUTION CARRIED





Mary Cullinan, Stephanie Byrn, chair Plenary.



IRISH WOMEN ORGANISE!

LONDON IRISH WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

Attended by 300 women, the annual Irish Women's conference was based on "Our Lives, Our Identity". Jean Cross of the London Irish Women's Centre said, as she opened the event, "Irish women are now prepared to form themselves into organised groups and, as a result the extent of their contribution is clearly discernable".

Speakers from Irish Women's groups addressed the Conference on their achievements, demonstrating the enormous range of issues, campaigns and activities that they are today involved in, from Pensioners groups to the outstanding contribution of groups such as the Irish Women Artist and Writers Groups to the newly formed Irish Girls Group. Today there are Irish Women's Groups in Islington, Brent, Wandsworth, East and South London.

Clare Keating spoke on the strip-searching of Irish women prisoners, comparing it to "the most degrading sort of sexual assault". A resolution was passed



One of the speakers

later in the day when strip-searching of the re-patriated political prisoners in jails nearer Ireland.

Rae Dowds of the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organisation, Irish Post's and asked to complain newspaper represent Belfast and defend

'Women's input now clearly visible'

A wide range of issues affecting Irish women in Britain were discussed at the third annual London Irish women's conference, held on Saturday at the Albany Empire, Deptford, writes JOAN CONWAY.

More than 200 attended the day-long gathering whose theme was 'Irish women — our lives, our identity'. The conference was held during the month of March. "Irish women are now more prepared to form themselves into organised groups and, as a result, the extent of their contribution is clearly discernible", she said. She pointed out that the conference itself was recorded.

British authorities are aware that the psychological effects on women are tantamount to the most degrading sort of sexual assault". The conference was held at the Albany Empire, Deptford, London SE8.

THE 1987 LONDON IRISH WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

Irish Women — Our Lives, Our Identity

THIS SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 14 — From 10.00 a.m. to 5.30 p.m.

(With entertainment from 6.30 p.m.—10.30 p.m.)

at

THE ALBANY EMPIRE, DOUGLAS WAY, DEPTFORD, LONDON SE8

Conference programme

10.00 a.m.—10.30 a.m.: Registration and coffee
10.30 a.m.—11.00 a.m.: Introduction
11.00 a.m.—1.00 p.m.: Irish Women's Groups address Conference
1.00 p.m.—2.00 p.m.: Lunch
2.00 p.m.—4.30 p.m.: Workshops (2 sessions)

4.30 p.m.—5.00 p.m. Report back from Workshops
5.00 p.m.—5.30 p.m. Resolutions
Conference ends at 5.30 p.m.
6.30 p.m.—7.30 p.m.: Simply Now Theatre Co. present 'Only The Rivers Run Free'
8.00 p.m.—10.00 p.m.: Ceili with The Sheelas

The first ever Irish Women's Conference in London was organised around the theme of 'Our Experience of Emigration'; the second followed on from this discussion centering on the theme of 'Living in England'; February 1987 will see the third London Irish Women's Conference and this year we will focus on the vital question of identity. Workshops: The title 'Our Lives, Our Identity' is a recognition of the varied lives and identities of Irish women living in London. It also recognises that while we may have differences of Irish women living in London, we share, as Irish women, a cultural, religious, political or class differences between us we share, as Irish women, a basic Irish identity which can be a source of strength and unity and which can lead to great achievements and gains for us in the future.

In order to look ahead confidently we must first not only recognise that we do have differences, but be willing to listen to, and to learn from, each other and to accept as valid Irish identities which we may not necessarily share. For this reason all of the workshop will concentrate on the question of identity.

Irish Women's Groups: There is a wide range of Irish women's groups operating in London today and it is planned to give each group an opportunity to address the Conference so that we may be aware, not only of our history of struggle, but of the progress.

Resolutions: To allow as much time as possible for discussion at the Conference, it will not be possible to accept resolutions on the day. We have asked women to submit resolutions individually or as groups to the Conference Planning Group. Each resolution submitted was sent out to all Irish women and Irish women's groups on the mailing list of the London Irish Women's Centre prior to the Conference to facilitate discussion and debate before the big day.

Entertainment: Following the conference an evening of unique entertainment is planned. Members of the Irish Women's Writing Group will treat us to a selection of their writings. Simply Now Theatre Co. will present *Only the Rivers Run Free*, their acclaimed adaptation sent out to all Irish women and Irish women's groups on the mailing list of the London Irish Women's Centre prior to the Conference to facilitate discussion and debate before the big day.

Food: Lunch will be provided, and tea and coffee will be available throughout the day. Creche: Creche facilities are available but must have been booked in advance. Access: The venue is fully accessible to wheelchairs and helpers will be present. A signer will also be present. Nearest tube: New Cross (5 minutes walk). Buses 21, 36, 36b, 47, 53, 141, 171, 177, 181 and 199. Please phone the Albany Empire (01-691 3333) or the London Irish Women's Centre (01-249 7318) for further details of access:

ADMISSION CHARGES: Conference and Entertainment — £5 high waged; £3 low waged; £1.50 unwaged.

This includes entrance to the Conference, lunch and refreshments, and all of the evening entertainment. Because it includes the Conference it is only available for Irish women.

Entertainment only — £3 high waged; £2 low waged; £1 unwaged. The evening entertainment is open to all women.

Organised by the Conference Planning Group, London Irish Women's Centre, 59 Stoke Newington Church Street, London N16 0AR. Tel.: 01-249 7318.

Funded by the London Boroughs Grants Schemes



Maeve McKeown, harpist and singer.

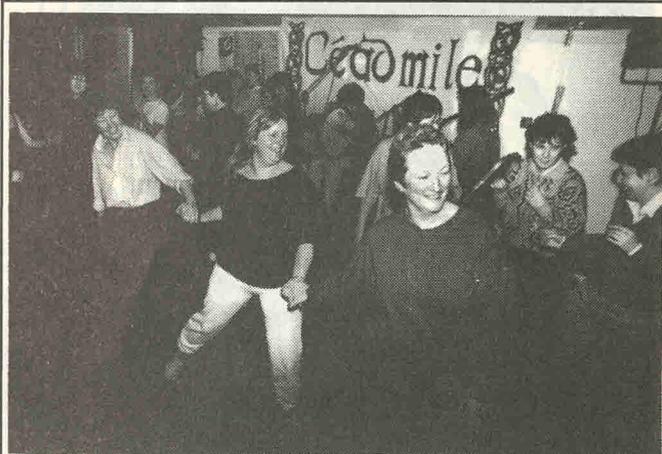
Non-stop entertainment followed the conference throughout the evening.



"Ceili in full swing".



"...we have often been asked why we formed as an all-women band..."



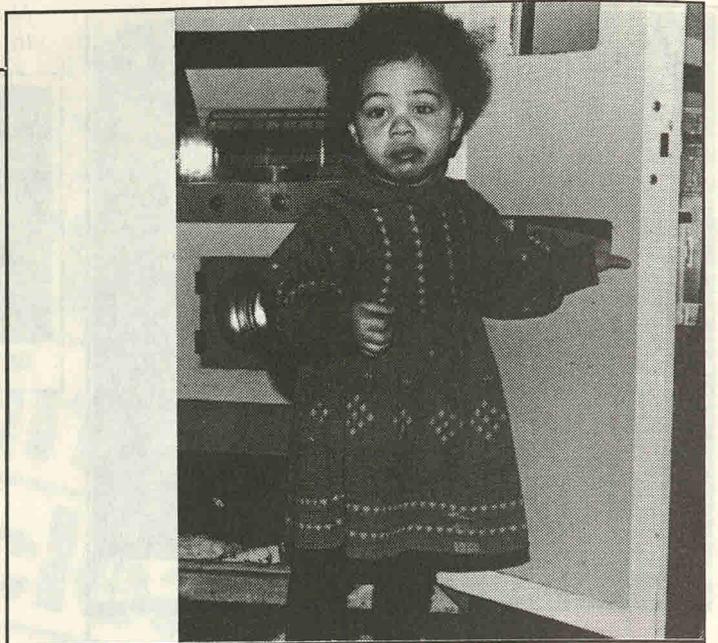
*The traditional Irish Ceili offers **everybody** the opportunity to participate. Maybe this is why they have become so popular in London in recent years.*



"...if we look at the overall image of women in the Irish singing tradition certain patterns emerge which are easily identifiable because they're so recurrent and so strong."

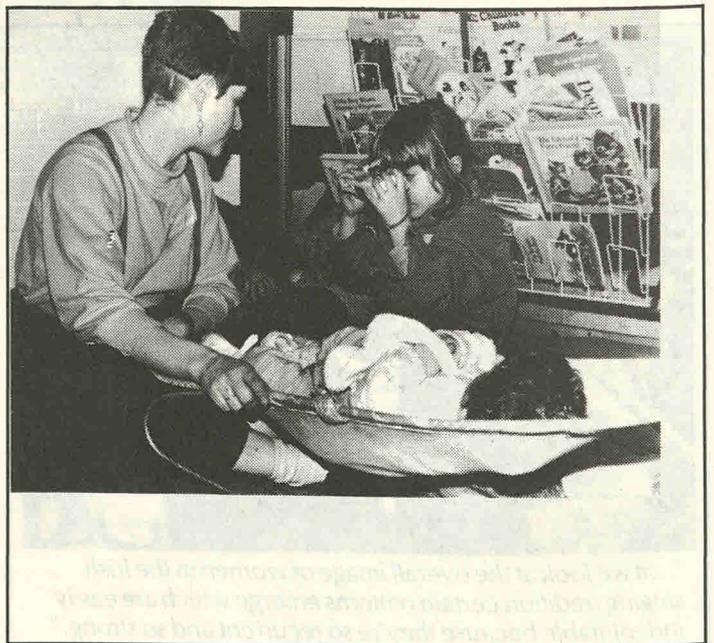
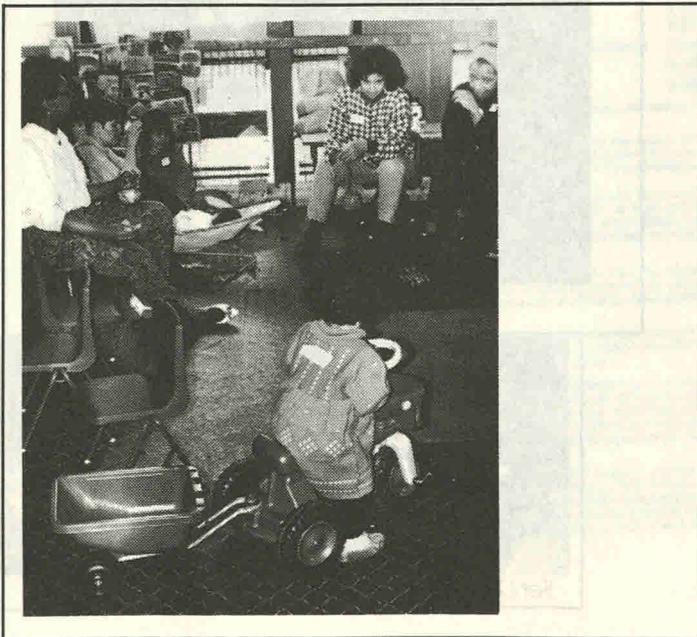
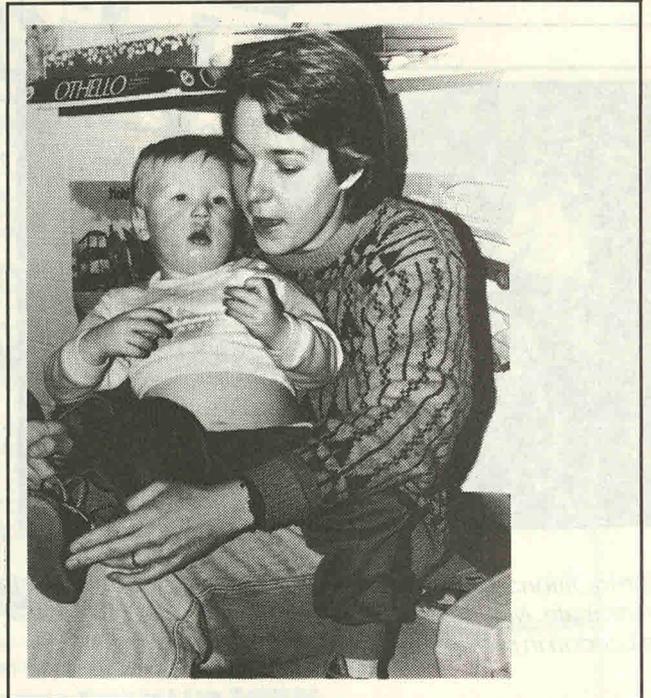


Set Dancing Exhibition.



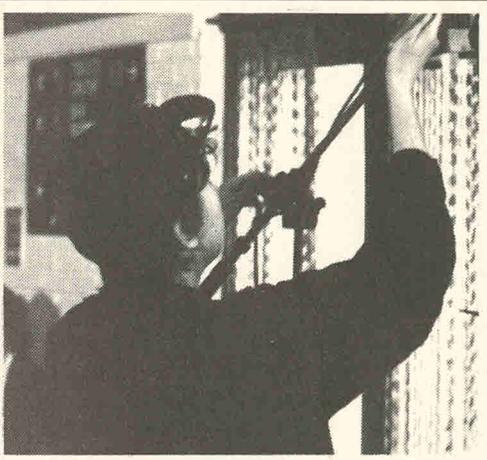
"I wanted to go out and change the world, but I couldn't find a babysitter."

More than 50 children made use of the creche, which ran continuously for 12 hours.



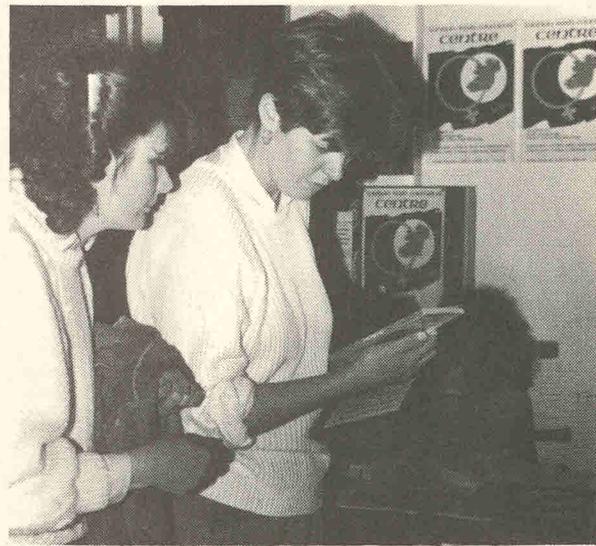
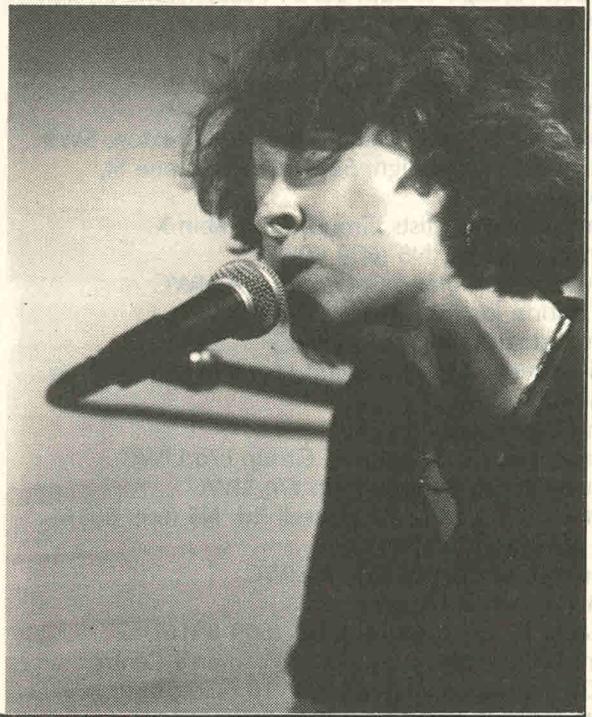


Video crew buckle up for the next shoot.



Viv operates the P.A. system.

Jane Gilmore opens the evenings entertainment in the Main Hall.



The growth of women's publishing has made information available to more and more women.



Sound engineer at work.



Joanne O'Brien



P.A. and video crew having hi-tech chat!

Contact List

London Armagh Group, 52/54 Featherstone St, EC1
Irish Women's Abortion Support Group,
c/o WRRRC, 52/54 Feathersone St, EC1 (251 6332)
Tues. Eve only.
Irish Prisoners' Appeal,
c/o IBRG, 245a Coldharbour Lane, Brixton, SW9
Strip Search Campaign, 52/54 Featherstone St,
London EC1
Irish Women's Artists Group, c/o Cabin X,
25 Horsell Rd, N5 (609 8916)
Irish Women's Housing Group, c/o LIWC
(London Irish Women's Centre)
Irish Lesbian Group (c/o LIWC)
Anti-Imperialist ex-Protestant Irish Women's Group,
c/o LIWC
Irish Girls Group c/o LIWC
Irish Mothers and Toddlers Group c/o LIWC
Irish Women's Radio Group c/o LIWC
Glor Gael, Cabin X, 25 Horsell Rd, N5 (609 8916)
The Sheelas, c/o LIWC
London Camogie Club, c/o LIWC
Irish Women in Islington,
Cabin X, 25 Horsell Rd, N5 (609 8916)
Brent Irish Women, c/o Brent Women's Centre,
232 Willesden High Rd, NW10 (459 7660)
South London Irish Women's Group,
c/o Women's Centre 55 Acre Lane, SW9.
Wandsworth Irish Women, c/o J. Rathbone,
123 Lavender Sweep, SW11.
Greenwich Irish Women, c/o S. Gallagher,
Irish In Greenwich Project, 115-128 Powis St. SE18 (317
1435)
London Irish Women's Centre,
59 Stoke Newington Church St. N16 OAR (249 7318)
East London Irish Women's Group, c/o Cairde na nGeal,
2 Windmill Lane, E15. (519 5089)
Belfast Rape Crisis Centre. P.O. Box 46, BT27 AR.
(084 23067)
Falls Rd. Women's Centre, 170a Falls Rd. Belfast 12.
Women's Community Press, 44 East Essex St., Dublin 2.
Well Woman Centre, 73 Lr. Leeson St., Dublin 2.