



London Irish Women's Centre

**Annual Report
1988/89**

and

**'Irish Women Today'
Conference Report**

London Irish Women's Centre

59 Stoke Newington Church Street London N16 0AR

Tel: 01 249 7318

Annual Report 1988/89

and

'Irish Women Today' Conference Report

Annual Report

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the volunteers: Lyser, Josanne, Jassy and Adrienne for all their hard work in making the conference run so smoothly.

Our thanks also to the women from *Video Na mBan* who video-taped the conference: Angie Smith, Angela Garrigan, Siobhán Cleary, Heather Smith, Una Ní Chiosáin, Margaret Rooney, Celine Barry and Liz Masebo.

Photographers: Joanne O'Brien, Lynne Connolly and Alison McAneney.

Conference Planning Group: Brenda Carroll, Flora Kerrigan, Angie Smith, Patricia Sweeney and Caroline Butler.

Sister Joan Kane from CARA and Eithne O'Flynn from Action Group for Irish Youth also made contributions to this conference, but unfortunately their speeches are unavailable for this report.

New groups contact list

North London Irish Lesbian Network, c/o LIWC, 59 Stoke Newington Church Street, Hackney, London N16 0AR. T: 249 7318.

Irish Women's Housing Action Group, c/o LIWC, 59 Stoke Newington Church Street, Hackney, London N16 0AR.

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Annual Report



London Irish Women's Centre

The London Irish Women's Centre operates as a collective. In addition to carrying out their own particular job descriptions, the workers are responsible for running the Centre on the day-to-day basis. This involves a wide diversity of tasks ranging from telephone duty to building administration and press and publicity work.

The London Irish Women's Centre Management Committee is responsible for ensuring that the aims and objectives of the Centre are carried out. A committee drawn from Irish women who are members of the London Irish Women's Centre is elected annually and regular monthly meetings are held at which the staff report back on the work currently being undertaken at the Centre. The London Irish Women's Conference is held every year and attracts hundreds of Irish women. This provides the opportunity for policies to be reviewed and for new priorities to be set.

Management Committee: Introduction

The London Irish Women's Centre exists to counter the discrimination that Irish women in London face as a result of their nationality and sex.

The following reports outline the nature of the work undertaken by the Centre, now in its fourth year.

The Centre continues to survive despite enormous cuts in funding. The impact of the 25 per cent cut by the London Boroughs Grant Scheme has been offset largely by the workers who volunteered to go on a four-day week. Fundraising has now become a major part of the work and it is to their credit that the Centre continues to flourish.

It has been an active year dotted with successful Open Days and events, along with an expansion of classes and services offered. The ceili in December was a huge success, a showcase of Irish women's talent.

Funding pressure and demand has produced a radical change in focus, with more worker time now going into the provision and support of welfare initiatives. Although the cultural, skill-sharing and intellectual work of the Centre continues to thrive, the need to respond to the very pressing demands of Irish women living in poverty, fear and isolation have necessitated this change.

Whilst recognising that Irish lesbians are particularly discriminated against, it is also important to recognise the huge contribution lesbians have made and are making to the London Irish Women's Centre. Lesbian women have been continually active from the small nucleus of women who began to campaign to establish the Centre, to the diverse network of women currently involved.

It is important that a new, strong Management Committee be established to support the workers and represent each of the user groups of the Centre, so come along to the annual general meeting and vote for the Management Committee you want. At this time more than ever it is important for women to come forward and get actively involved. Due to recent cuts, the survival of the arts/media project will now largely depend on the active support of Irish women.

The Irish women's community and networks continue to expand. The more women from a greater variety of backgrounds involved, the more we can achieve together for all Irish women. So, whatever your experience, skill or need, come to the Centre and if a class or group isn't available — start it. There is a tremendous amount of pleasure and fun in working with other women around common issues.

We hope you enjoy the following reports and look forward to seeing you at the Centre.

The Management Committee

Funding

In 1981 discussions first started about setting up a London Irish Women's Centre. Camden and Islington councils were initially approached for funding, but to no avail. Finally, in 1983, the GLC Women's Committee gave a grant for a worker and some running costs. Fundraising then began for a building and the future plans were laid. In 1984, with the help of the GLC, a building was purchased in Stoke Newington Church Street. This was an important step in ensuring an Irish women's place, a base where Irish women could work, even if we had nothing else. After lengthy repair work the Centre officially opened in 1986.

The London Boroughs Grants Scheme undertook the funding of the Centre when the GLC was abolished in 1986. In May 1988 the scheme imposed a severe cut of 25 per cent on the yearly grant. This cut was in line with their new policy guidelines of only funding groups up to 75 per cent of their total budget. The Management Committee and workers spent some time deciding what could be offered within these funding constraints. Our priority was to continue to offer a wide range of services and an efficient one to all Irish women in London. Rather than cut any one area, we decided to go on a four-day week, closing the centre on Fridays. This has had a limiting effect on individuals' areas of work and also on access available to the public. Workers also suffered a pay cut. Obviously this is a temporary solution and the Centre is committed to returning to a five-day week as soon as finances allow.

The major emphasis over the past year has been on expanding the funding base of the Centre and also increasing revenue from our own resources, eg hire of equipment, hire of

meeting rooms, photocopier income and exhibition hire. We have also been building up the formal membership — and thus the subscriptions to the Centre. Membership is open to all Irish women and entitles you to use the facilities and attend classes, to vote in the election of the Management Committee and to receive regular mailings on activities and forthcoming events. Classes previously funded out of the general revenue have this year been funded by Hackney Adult Education Institute, Workers Educational Association, Greater London Arts and Inner London Education Authority.

Major efforts were put by the workers and management into a fundraising ceili in December which was held at the Camden Centre in Bidborough Street. Aer Lingus, B&I, Sealink, Headrock, Green Ink, Sisterwrite and the Duke of Wellington pub all contributed towards the success of this event, which netted over £1,500. An application to Thames Telethon secured £2,860 for creche provision.

This year we are actively seeking funding from the Irish Government towards the Welfare, Housing and Travellers posts. Constant efforts are being made to establish links with Irish businesses and agencies, charities and trusts and also local authorities. The present economic and political climate does not help organisations such as ours. Raising funds gets increasingly difficult as more organisations and individuals are now competing for an ever-decreasing pot.

We welcome individuals with fundraising experience in particular to come and help us to keep the Centre in existence.

Childcare/Youth Work

This section of the Centre's work covers three main areas: work with women with children, work with children and work with young women.

Women with children

One of the most important aspects is the work around women with children and the Centre's continued commitment, despite the cuts, to provide creches for women with children whenever they are needed, so that they can be encouraged to fully participate in all the classes, courses and activities of the Centre. Creches may be needed for on-going classes at the Centre, for workers, volunteers or users to attend meetings at the Centre or other venues, or for the larger events organised by the Centre, eg conferences, AGMs, festivals and benefits. An on-going task is the outreach and developmental work to establish and encourage new Irish women with children groups. These groups are assisted and encouraged towards organising their own group activities, though often the Centre facilitates the bigger events, like the children's Christmas party and the children's fun day, which took place during the Hackney Irish Festival and the Centre's open day. The current group has five new women and children members. However, the Centre remains in contact with and continues to offer support to the old members of previous groups who are no longer able to attend regularly with their children.

There is a network list of contact names and addresses of Irish women with children in London which is updated regularly and which is available on request. This is part of a larger information network which has been collated. Other aspects include contact numbers and addresses of reliable Irish women creche workers and child minders and names and addresses of other groups of particular interest to Irish women with children.

Other services offered to women with children are a telephone information service and a drop-in service. The telephone information service can cover a wide range of needs and can involve anything from emergency welfare advice for homeless women with children to putting women in contact with other Irish women with children in their area.

The drop-in service can be by appointment or on a casual basis and can be anything from an informal chat and a cup of tea, to introducing them to the Centre and all its facilities or to giving particular advice and information on issues relating to women with children.



Children

A very high priority is placed in developing supportive relationships with the children who visit the Centre regularly with their mothers. For these and other children who use our creche facilities we can claim a very high standard of creche care. A vital element of this high standard is the continued maintenance and re-stocking of the play equipment in the creche. The children's celebrations and events at the Centre have all focused on exploring Irish culture through play. The children have a wealth of talent ranging from Irish language, music, singing and dancing, through to Irish poetry and cooking. As another step towards strengthening Irish identity, we are continuing for the third year to run children's Irish Language classes.



Young women

In the past we have experimented with running a young Irish women's group. New activities have been centred around research and counselling. Research work has included a paper on the group run at the centre and the need for such groups and research work on the experience of second generation young Irish women. We have also collected research material being done by other agencies, eg papers on Irish youth and Irish homelessness and information packs.

We have continued our commitment to building an information network of contacts for youth provision in London and Ireland and making this information accessible to the Centre's users and staff.

We have also compiled information packs of more direct interest to young Irish women, eg an information pack on alcohol and information on basic sex education and contraception and pregnancy services. We are in the process of launching a new service for young Irish women: a drop-in counselling session every Thursday afternoon. We believe there is a great need for this type of service especially as the tide of youth emigration from Ireland continues to expand so enormously each year.

These sessions can include anything from emergency welfare advice to an on-going weekly counselling session to help young women sort out any deeper problems they may be facing.



Future plans/Goals

To continue to maintain the high standard of creche facilities and creche care; to continue to increase outreach work to Irish women with children; to continue to increase outreach work to Irish lesbians with children; develop work around young Irish lesbians, eg explore possibility of organising a workshop for young Irish lesbians in the autumn and to encourage young Irish lesbians to use the counselling sessions available at the Centre; to continue to develop the counselling services for young Irish women; work around the fifth London Irish women's conference in autumn; to continue to seek alternative funding for the Centre — this aspect has become more important since the cuts and takes a variety of forms.

Housing and Welfare Rights Report

Introduction

Irish women constitute up to half a million of London's population and 52 per cent of the Irish community here. As emigration from Ireland continues at a rate of 60,000 a year and as housing and other essential services are drastically reduced, the problems facing Irish women in London are becoming increasingly profound and diverse. The suffering and discrimination borne by the women who emigrated to London in the '40s and '50s is now being felt by a younger generation who are disproportionately represented amongst the homeless and unemployed. The real danger for all generations of Irish women is that these problems will remain both unrecognised and under-resourced. It is a central function of the London Irish Women's Centre not only to provide practical help to women in need but to expose and campaign against the injustices that our community face.

The London Irish Women's Centre receives thousands of enquiries every year from women who need assistance with housing and welfare problems. We receive requests for help over the phone from individuals/agencies in London and in Ireland. There are also weekly welfare rights sessions for women who are able to make an appointment.

Housing

An overwhelming number of enquiries come from women who are in housing need. Homelessness has increased dramatically among Irish women in recent years. Young single women have been affected mainly but there are also increasing numbers of older women who have nowhere to live. The London Irish Women's Centre has had to assist women between 17 and 25 years who are newly arrived from Ireland; we have provided help for women who have been fleeing domestic/sectarian violence. We have dealt with women who have spent months sleeping rough and who were weary and in poor health. We have given assistance to older women who have lived in London for years and who faced eviction from privately rented accommodation. We have helped women with children and others who are considered to be a 'priority' under Part 3 of the Housing Act 85 secure council accommodation.

Close co-operation with other agencies has been essential in order to provide effective help in many of these cases. The London Irish Women's Centre has a network of contacts throughout London and in Ireland. We have received invaluable help from other Irish agencies, particularly CARA, Irish in Islington Project,

Brent Irish Advisory Service, BIAS and the London Irish Centre. We have also strengthened our links with London-wide housing associations and have secured nomination rights to a number of these. Representations to Local Authorities are constantly made on behalf of women who require council housing and to hostels/refuges for those needing immediate shelter.

Homelessness is by no means the only housing problem facing Irish women and our Centre has taken up a range of housing problems over the past year. We have assisted women wanting transfers from their homes and tenants needing repairs carried out. We have supported women facing harassment in their homes; we have assisted lesbian women secure safe and compatible accommodation. We have also helped women wanting exchanges to other boroughs and women wanting to return to Ireland. An advertising board is available at the Centre for women wanting to arrange accommodation among themselves in London.

Welfare Problems

DHSS problems have taken up an increasingly large proportion of the Centre's time in the last 12 months. The 1988 Social Security changes have created enormous problems for claimants and our Centre has assisted women of all ages obtain benefits. Formal appeals have been made to the DHSS in cases but most of the work has involved arguing with and pressurising the DHSS into giving women benefits to which they are legally entitled. The cutbacks in housing benefits have led to an increase in the number of enquiries from elderly Irish women. The demand from younger women deprived of Income Support for information about their rights has also increased.

In addition to dealing with DHSS problems, our Centre has responded to a variety of Irish women's needs. We have assisted women needing advice and help with contraception and abortion by referring them to the appropriate agencies/groups. We have supported women at risk of violence at home secure legal help. We have arranged help for women seeking separation and divorce from their husbands as well as help for women whose children have been sexually abused. Our Centre has also assisted relatives of prisoners who have required financial and other help.

Travelling Women

Travelling women are among the most disadvantaged members of our community and over the last 12 months there has been a marked increase in the numbers of families moving into the immediate area. Our Centre recognises that the needs of these women must be targeted directly and for this reason we regularly visit the sites in Hackney and take up a number and variety of problems. Sheer poverty and discrimination are the main problems facing the women here and we have had to assist with DHSS, employment and legal problems.

Travelling women who have needed help securing accommodation for their families have been referred to the local authority with our support. Discrimination against Travellers by the DHSS and local employers has been challenged by the London Irish Women's Centre. We have found sympathetic solicitors for those women who needed legal help and assistance.

The lack of a permanent site and office facilities makes the co-ordination of our work at the sites very difficult. Close co-operation with the council's Travellers' officers and local



agencies is absolutely essential because of this.

The London Irish Women's Centre considers work with Travelling women to be of high priority. We are planning to extend this work in the coming year not only in Hackney but in other London boroughs.

Information Service

A London-wide service is provided by the London Irish Women's Centre. This has allowed us to build up an information system containing the policies of all local authorities and the services provided in different areas of London. This means that we have been able to compare and cross-reference different policy initiatives and to draw attention to inadequacies where they exist. The need to inform Irish women of the changes in housing and welfare benefits has been pressing and 'information sessions' on the Social Security changes and the Poll Tax have been organised to meet the increasing demands for information. The latter were organised with the help of West Hampstead Law Centre and with Bow Citizens Advice Bureau and were extremely well attended.

Outreach/Research

On average, about four women per week approach the London Irish Women's Centre for help and assistance on projects researching the conditions of Irish women in London/Britain. Some are completing degree dissertations, some post-graduate studies and some are compiling primary school projects. Most are Irish or of Irish origin, whilst others are not Irish — one researcher came from a French university and another from Alaska. One was a six-week placement from University College Cork. We see this as an indication of an ever-increasing awareness of the existence of Irish women and a recognition of needs that must be met.

During 1988 workers at the Centre compiled the Irish in Hackney Report and submitted it to Hackney Council. The aim of the report was to highlight the presence of a large and mainly ignored population in the borough. The report has so far not fared very well within council bureaucracy, being delayed/postponed several times at committee stage in the council. The coming year, we hope, will see the final pushing through of the report.

Workers at the Centre participated in an advisory capacity to the Irish Women in London Report by Bronwen Walter and published by the Strategic Policy Unit in March 1988. The report brings together and analyses all existing available information and

Campaign Work

The London Irish Women's Centre moved a motion at the last London Irish Women's Conference calling for the setting up of a campaign group to draw attention to the growing problems of homelessness among Irish women. The Irish Women's Housing Action Group is co-ordinated by the Centre and has met regularly at Wesley House since the conference.

This group has campaigned against legislative changes that threatened our position and lobbied MPs and Lords in order to secure amendments to the Housing Bill. It has put pressure on local councils to introduce housing policies which are not discriminatory against Irish homeless applicants. It has also set up meetings with the councillors of individual authorities and provided them with case examples demonstrating the effects of discriminatory policies and practices on Irish women.

The Irish Women's Housing Action Group continues to meet regularly and is presently drawing up a leaflet giving advice to women who are forced to emigrate and who may be entitled to housing under Part 3 of the Housing Act 85.

sources on housing and employment conditions of Irish women in the capital. The report is an invaluable resource for researchers and campaigners outlining as it does the material disadvantages experienced by Irish women.

We have continued to maintain and develop links with other Irish and non-Irish agencies in London. The Centre continues to provide a co-ordinating and information exchange function for Irish women and Irish women's groups in the Greater London area. This function is vitally important, especially where areas of work may overlap. The Centre co-ordinated the Fourth London Irish Women's Conference in April 1988. The latter part of this Report includes a comprehensive report of speeches, workshops and resolutions from the Conference.

During 1988/89 the Centre expanded the range of classes on offer. We feel it is vital that women have a safe, non-intimidating environment with adequate childcare facilities, in order to gain skills and confidence that enable women to return to work. These classes included: video, radio, photography, healing, bodhran, sound recording, women in Irish literature, creative writing, computer skills.

Media Project Report

There have been many changes in the arts media project at the Centre since our last annual report. As with the Centre in general, funding had become the decisive factor in determining the scope and limits of developments in the media section.

The classes are a good example of how this fundamental shift has affected the Centre's media project. When we were being funded at the level we requested, we were in turn, able to fund our own classes. The fact that our funding level has stagnated and dropped has had three serious effects on the media courses we can now provide. Firstly they are necessarily fewer in number as

funding must be secured for each one individually. Secondly, they are subject to the current priorities of funding bodies. Thirdly and perhaps most importantly, developmental work has given way to budgeting. The media section of the Centre still has great potential for development. We have still got our video, radio, p.a. and photography equipment. Unfortunately development of these areas has suffered because of the pressure on workers' time to chase and secure funding for individual classes.

Before turning to the good news (and there is some), there is the future funding of the media project to consider. The

implications are that this is going to be shortlived. This year LBGU refused to continue funding for a media worker at the Centre. In March they gave us six months to 'reorganise' and deal with the implications of their decision. What does this mean? Other workers at the Centre may be able to incorporate some media work such as funding for training into their timetables, but inevitably something else will, in turn, have to suffer; the project cannot possibly be picked up by the other workers.

Here at the Centre we've got video, photography and radio equipment. We bought it all when the Centre was being set up for two reasons: firstly, we wanted Irish women to be able to project our own image of ourselves. For too long we had been forced to rely on other groups, inside and outside the Irish community here, to represent us, and they consistently failed us. The media project at the London Irish Women's Centre followed directly from the organisation of Irish women in the early 1980s. The more we organised, the more we realised our potential. When the time came to apply for grants we were bold in our demands. We foresaw confident Irish women behind video cameras, Irish women making radio programmes, Irish women mounting photographic exhibitions. We wanted it all and we got it, and we've still got it.

The second reason why we incorporated a media project into the work of the Centre was because of the importance of recording our history. The enormous contribution that Irish women have made to London over centuries has not been widely recognised, to put it mildly. In fact the lives of our grandmothers and their grandmothers who lived and worked and died in this city have been totally ignored. We want to work towards redressing the balance. We have already begun this process. For instance, we've recorded our conferences audibly and visually. We've recorded *Carraig agus an Fharraige*, the three-week-long Irish women's festival we ran in 1986. We've recorded events from history discussion groups to the Poll Tax information day, to the children's St Patrick's day party at the Centre. In short, we're recording ourselves into our history as it happens.

Alternative funding for a media worker looks very uncertain in the present climate. It looks as if the only thing that can save the media section at the Centre is the involvement of Irish women who can recognise the precious resource that is being seriously threatened and are prepared to give some time to ensure that this resource is not lost to Irish women.

And now to some of the things which have been happening in the media project over the last year or so. *Video Na mBan*, the Irish Women's Video Production Group, continues to organise at the Centre. Funding was secured from Greater London Arts to run a production course with special emphasis on editing, so providing

some vital extra training for members of the group and other women who joined them.

Siobhan Cleary was the tutor on this course as she has been for many of our video courses at the centre. We have pleasure in taking this opportunity to acknowledge her input into the video project at the Irish Women's Centre, this has been consistently helpful and appreciated.

Through the summer of 1988 we ran a series of screenings at the Centre covering documentary, comedy and drama. We have had video screenings at our last two conferences and have screened *Mother Ireland* at the Centre as part of our big hit open day just after Christmas. On that day we also ran short introductory workshops in video and radio. Thanks to the women of *Video na mBan* we have video records of our last two conferences, and of events at the Centre from the children's Christmas party to the Poll Tax information day for older Irish women.

We were successful in getting funding from Hackney Workers Education Authority to run a six-week basic video course. *Video na mBan* got their first tape together and this was screened at the Galway Women's Festival. Look out for future productions from that group.

It was Hackney Adult Education Authority which provided funding for our Introduction to Community Radio course which ran from November 1988 until April 1989. The tutor for this course was Cathi Hardigan who was able to secure some studio time in Radio Thamesmead for her class to put their programme together. The demand for use of the portable radio equipment continues. Irish women involved in community radio avail of the portable recording equipment at the Centre and the lending out of these machines is a service which the Centre is keen to continue.

Hackney AEI also provided the wherewithall for us to run a photography course from January to June of this year. Lyn Connolly tutored this class and many of the women from it are now going on to complete our Advanced Photography course. The GLA has agreed to fund this course and several other short, introductory courses in photography. Our darkroom is a great facility and one which we are keen to open up further. Interested women please come forward.

The public address system at the Centre is available for hire at very good rates. Irish groups and women's groups are given special consideration.

As mentioned earlier the future of the media project at the Centre now depends on women like you. If vital resources, services and facilities are not to be lost, women like you will have to become involved. You don't need technical skills, you just need enthusiasm.



London Irish Women's Centre Revenue Fund



Year end 31 March 1988

	£	£	1987 £
INCOME		110,532	110,811
Grants received – London Boroughs Grants Unit		—	2,640
– London Borough of Hackney		—	1,500
– Inner London Education Authority		—	1,523
– Greater London Arts		1,500	316
Donations: ILEA		808	—
Other income		112,840	116,790
EXPENDITURE	66,868		49,413
Salaries and related costs	12,106		—
Technicians' fees	762		—
Staff training/consultants	3,288		3,779
Rent, rates and services	1,603		1,824
Repairs and maintenance	3,913		3,967
Stationery and office supplies	5,935		14,164
Publicity	—		1,207
Hire of halls	2,805		3,903
Telephone and postage	1,262		1,973
Library and creche	3,563		2,420
Travel and motor expenses	1,035		840
Audit and accountancy	4,709		5,093
Insurances	413		1,375
Miscellaneous	4,226		24,059
Tutors' fees and training course consumables	1,254		1,066
Equipment hire	224		3,299
Events	277		114
Bank charges	951		4
Depreciation	421		—
Conference/reports	—		—
	118,812	115,615	118,496
DEFICIT FOR YEAR		(2,775)	(1,706)
Transfer to Capital Fund		—	(1,126)
		(2,775)	(2,832)
Balance brought forward		2,274	5,106
(DEFICIT)/SURPLUS CARRIED FORWARD		(501)	2,274

Year end 31 March 1989

	£	£	1988 £
INCOME			
Grants received – London Boroughs Grants Unit		84,971	110,532
– Inner London Education Authority		1,600	—
Donations		2,870	1,500
Other Income		8,454	808
		97,895	112,840
EXPENDITURE	67,934		66,868
Salaries and related costs	—		12,106
Technicians' fees	318		762
Staff training/consultants	3,566		3,288
Rent, rates and services	1,349		1,603
Repairs and maintenance	898		3,913
Stationery and office supplies	4,074		5,935
Publicity	2,645		2,805
Telephone and postage	2,327		1,262
Library and creche	548		3,563
Travel and motor expenses	725		1,035
Audit and accountancy	4,258		4,709
Insurances	187		413
Miscellaneous	1,502		4,226
Tutors' fees and training course consumables	1,023		1,254
Equipment hire	841		224
Events/reports	538		277
Bank charges	982		951
Depreciation	2,276		421
Conferences	—		—
		95,991	115,615
SURPLUS/(DEFICIT) FOR YEAR		1,904	(2,755)
Balance brought forward		(501)	2,274
SURPLUS/(DEFICIT) CARRIED FORWARD		1,403	(501)



Information

Drop-in access times Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, 11 am-1pm and 2pm-5pm.

Welfare advice sessions Tuesday 10.30am-12.30pm. Please ring for an appointment if possible.

Telephone information and advice Ring on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, 11 am-1pm and 2-5pm for information on housing, welfare and other issues.

Young women's counselling sessions Wednesdays, 2-4pm. Ring for an appointment if possible.

CLASSES

Children's Irish language class Held on Saturdays, 11 am-1pm. Tutor is Phil O'Malley.

Video class Subject to funding. Phone for details.

Photography class Beginners and advanced classes start October. Phone LIWC for details.

Radio production class Beginners class to start in October 1989. Phone LIWC for details.

Writing class Class to be held on Tuesdays, 10.30am-12.30pm, with Moy McCrory, Liverpool Irish writer. Classes to start in September 1989.

Restoring 'women's part' — images of women in Irish literature Class to be held on Mondays, 7-9pm, with Moy McCrory. Classes to start in October 1989. Phone LIWC for details.

Women in Irish mythology Class will begin in January 1990. Phone LIWC for details.

GROUPS

Irish Lesbian Network Centre provides postal address for this group.

Irish Women With Children Group Meets at the Centre on Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11 am-1pm.

Irish Women's Housing Action Group Meets monthly in Central London. Co-ordinated at LIWC. ring for details.

Video na mBan — Irish Women's Video Production Group Meets at Centre; ongoing courses; welcomes new members.

Postal, media, meeting room facilities available at LIWC. Ring for details. Volunteers welcomed.



SUBS FORM

If your yearly subscription is due, can you please renew it (using this form if you wish). If you have already renewed, please ignore this. Thanks.

Thank you for your support over the last 12 months. The year has been a crucial one for the Centre and much of our time has been dedicated to fundraising. Due to the cuts imposed on us last year we were forced to go on a four-day week. We hope to resume a five-day week later this year, but we are under constant pressure to review our priorities from the London Boroughs Grants Scheme.

Over the next year we have planned classes in video, radio, photography, 'Women in Irish Literature', 'Women and Irish Mythology', and Irish language. We will also provide counselling for young Irish women, regular housing, welfare information sessions, telephone information service, drop-in access, publications and exhibition, facilities for groups, as well as media resources. The fifth Irish Women's conference is planned for November '89.

We will continue to maintain the high level of creche provision for all our activities, events and classes.

The London Irish Women's Centre will continue to represent and campaign on behalf of the Irish women's community in London.

Membership entitles you to:

- 1 vote in the election of the Management Committee and stand for Management Committee membership
- 2 use the facilities and attend classes at the Centre
- 3 receive individual, up-to-date mailing on our activities.

Your continued support is vital, please renew your subscription.

Cost	Individuals	£4 (waged)
		£1 (unwaged)
	Groups	£5

PLEASE PHOTOCOPY THIS SLIP AND RETURN IT WITH YOUR SUBSCRIPTION

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

BOROUGH..... DATE.....

'Irish Women Today' Conference – April 1988



Introduction

The Fourth London Irish Women's Conference was held on Saturday 16th April 1988 in the London Women's Centre, Wesley House. The theme 'Irish Women Today' was chosen because we felt it important that our community should have the opportunity to assess the social, economic and political situation for Irish women both here and in Ireland at the present time. Since the last conference — in February 1987 — emigration has increased, the war in the North continues and in England we are facing the third term of the Thatcher government. What does emigration mean for the politically fragmented and demoralised community left behind and what is the response here to the latest wave of Irish immigrants? What is the mood now in the Six Counties in a year which has already seen the suppression of the Stalker Report and the assassinations in Gibraltar? How will harsh new legislation — the poll tax, Housing Bill, Social Security Act, Clause 28, extension of the PTA — affect the Irish women's community in London? These were some of the

questions we tried to address by providing a forum for the exchange of information and ideas. Although we were well aware of the limitations of a one-day conference covering such a wide range of complex issues, we hoped that the meeting might provide a starting-point for the debate. In the event the conference facilitated the beginnings of a number of new groups, information on which is included at the end of this report.

The conference is also a time for us to celebrate our culture and very existence and this year was no exception. The range of women's groups represented on the day spoke volumes about the variety and vitality of the Irish women's community in London. The ceili in the evening with performances by The Sheelas, the Hairys Marys and Patricia Coffey and friend, gave us an opportunity to appreciate the continuing involvement of Irish women in traditional music and provided an entertaining and enjoyable end to the day. □

Main Speakers



To provide a basis for discussion and to provoke debate in the workshops we asked our three main speakers to give an overview of the political and social situation for Irish women in the areas that they live and work in.

Jean Cross has been active in the women's movement in Ireland and in England and has been living in London for the past three years.

Una Marron lives in Belfast and works in the Falls Road Women's Centre.

Ursula Barry lectures in economics in Dublin and is the author of *Lifting the Lid*; she is active in the women's movement there.

Jean Cross

Our first conference in 1984 centred on the theme of emigration. It was a theme relevant to all of us whether we were born here or in Ireland. At that conference we explored the historical context of Irish women's emigration. We heard personal experience of emigration. We spoke about the war in the North and how it affects Irish women here. We talked about what it means to be an Irish woman born in this country. We discussed mental health, adoption, abortion and reproductive rights, education or Irish children in English schools, the problems faced by travelling women; we discussed alcoholism, the media, Irish music, Irish lesbians, housing, growing old in Britain and Irish women and writing.

It was our first conference in centuries, we had a lot to talk about.

In 1985 at our second conference, Living in England, we not only further discussed these topics, but added other issues to our agenda. We talked about raising children, contact between Ireland and England, ex-catholic women, anti-imperialist women from Protestant backgrounds, the P.T.A., sexism in the Irish community, social services, sexuality, racism, women with disabilities and class.

Having spent two conferences exploring the issues we saw as relevant to Irish women in London and having taken confidence from ourselves as a forging and vibrant community, we channeled our energies into organising as Irish women to tackle the problems we talked about at the conference.

Some groups were long established, others new, but all were and are committed to improving the situation of Irish women.

Our third conference was a brave and necessary step in which we looked inward to explore our diverse identities in recognition of each other's experiences as Irish women. It was a conference of consolidation. We heard from no less than 20 Irish women's groups in London. Some old, many new. We heard honestly of the problems some groups faced, and of the success of others.

Now at our fourth conference, Irish Women Today, it is time to assess our community. To acknowledge our achievements, but also to be honest with ourselves and to examine the issues we need to take on board if we are to continue to grow as a strong and united community of Irish women. For we are going to need unity and strength in the coming years if we are to outlive Thatcherism.

The last twelve months have seen many setbacks. Not least the re-election in June of the present government. In the last few months alone the attitude of this government to Irish people here and in Ireland has been graphically and tragically illustrated.

The continued and increased strip searching of Irish women, the continued imprisonment of the Birmingham Six and the Guildford Four and the extension of the P.T.A. testify to the fact

that Irish people do not receive fair treatment from the British judicial system. Since the earliest days of British involvement in Ireland, Irish people have been systematically brutalised by the British judicial system, and we continue to be brutalised by the British judicial system.

In the light of how Irish people have fared under British justice in recent years, indeed in recent weeks, I challenge the right of the Irish government to sign any agreement on the extradition of Irish people to this country, or to the British authorities in Northern Ireland.

The murders of Mairead Farrell, Danny McCann and Sean Savage in Gibraltar is perhaps the most horrific example of the British government's policy of shooting dead unarmed Irish people. That the Stalker Report was suppressed and those of the RUC involved in the shoot-to-kill policy were not prosecuted shows the growing confidence this government has in its policies of control by intimidation and brutality.

To Irish people living here the response of the British media to recent events in Northern Ireland was predictably sickening. We were denounced as depraved killers, again. We were shown to be stupid, again. We were portrayed as unable to govern ourselves, again. We were said to be in need of British guidance, again. In short, we were subjected to yet another barrage of anti-Irish racism by the British media.

Notice how easily the racist words flow from the articulate television journalists and political commentators, notice how easily the racist words in British newspapers are read by the British public and how easily they settle on their minds. Notice how easily racist Irish jokes evoke laughter.

It's what they expect to hear about Ireland. It's what their mothers expected to hear about Ireland. And unless we do something about it, it will be what their daughters expect to hear about Ireland.

It's up to all of us to confront this racism. It's up to all of us to phone the BBC or Channel Four when we are presented with anti-Irish racism as entertainment or as political analysis. It's up to us to write to offensive newspapers. It's up to us to challenge shopkeepers who stock Irish joke books, or upsidown Irish birthday cards or other such pathetic items designed to amuse the minds of the inadequate. It's up to us to challenge anti-Irish racism whenever and wherever we come into contact with it.

If we are successful in undermining anti-Irish racism we will have disarmed the British establishment of one of the most effective weapons it ever used against the Irish people.

Ireland continues to suffer the effects of a colonial history. As Action for Irish Youth can confirm, tens of thousands of young Irish people are arriving annually in Britain. If we are serious about meeting the needs of all Irish women we must ask ourselves what we as a community are doing to cater for the thousands of young Irish women arriving in London with little money and no networks for accommodation and jobs as are traditional for Irish men on arrival. Many of them come through a combination of social and economic factors. That we are here today organising as Irish women is a testament to the fact that the Irish community in London does not meet the needs of Irish women. But are we making efforts to seek out these young women and show them that social support at least is here for them, or are we more complacent? Are we letting them walk into the worst housing and the worst jobs that have traditionally been reserved for Irish women in London without at least offering the benefits of our experiences as emigrants?

Any of us that left Ireland knows of the isolation, the loneliness, the fear and uncertainty that can be the constant companion of the newly arrived immigrant. We all know it's hard. We all know what makes it hard. But surely we should be prepared to make it that bit easier for young Irish women arriving in London.

I think that we are willing to offer support to newly arrived women and hopefully this conference can be the starting point of organising a group or network to do so.

Newly arrived lesbian women are in need of particular support and should take heart that other Irish lesbians do exist in London, as in Ireland. They should take heart that we have successfully established a centre for Irish women in London, organised four conferences, major festivals for women and children, set up numerous groups, and generally raised the profile of Irish women in London. We were of course assisted and supported in our efforts by many of our straight sisters, as lesbians have been generally in the women's movement.

A most heartening development has begun in the Irish community. Women have begun to appear, not as apparitions as has been the case in the past, but as real people with lives. In the photographic exhibition *Anim agus Intim* we see women as musicians, footballers, technicians and generally as a visible part of the Irish experience in England. The involvement of Irish women in putting the exhibition together is a very welcome development and clearly benefits all Irish women in London in terms of recognition. The same is true of the *Síol Phadraig* festival last year when Irish women writers and film makers were given recognition. The work of the Irish Women's Centre in the last few years is certainly paying off now as the profile of Irish women in London is being raised. Significantly, Irish women are now being mentioned in some reports issuing from the Irish community whereas before they would have expected the Irish Women's Centre to take on everything that was to do with Irish women. It's a process that is only beginning, but it's a very welcome beginning. At the recent Irish Book Fair the rise of Irish women in print was evident. The experiences of Irish women here and in Ireland are being written about and read by Irish women on both sides of the Irish sea.

The links between Irish women here and in Ireland are strong and so they should be. We cannot easily forget our past. We cannot easily leave the experiences of our mothers and our grandmothers on the shores of Ireland and start a new identity when we get here. Nor can the daughters and granddaughters of Irish women who are born here be denied the identity of their foremothers. Have we the right to tell an Irish woman that she cannot possibly pass on her love of Ireland and Irish culture to her granddaughter, and that if she does and if this granddaughter claims her Irish heritage she will not be welcomed by the Irish women's community because we do not recognise third generation Irish women? Can we deny a third generation Irish woman her Irish identity when there are first and second generation Irish women who do themselves deny that identity? Surely the courage of a woman who claims her Irish identity after two generations and in the face of hostility and ridicule should be applauded and she should be accepted into the Irish women's community with a hundred thousand welcomes.

Clearly such categorisation is not the solution to the question of Irishwomen's identity. There may have been reasons in the past for such strategy. That our community would be swamped and diluted by the trendy and fairweather Irish. But surely we are solidly established and in a position to welcome the Irish woman whose strength of identity has been tested by time and adverse conditions. Surely we should recognise this woman's achievement in upholding a heritage which so often flounders on the rocks of convenience. Older Irish women here face enough hardships without having to think that their heritage will not be recognised in their granddaughter.

Up to one quarter of the Irishwomen's population in London is over 55. Because many of these women had to work in badly paid jobs they have only the state pension to rely on. Many of the women in our community are approaching retirement age as the government

is restricting social security. In addition many Irish women of retirement age have lived in tied accommodation and now face the prospect of being thrown onto a shrinking housing market with little or no chance of finding a decent place to live which they can afford. The problems of our elderly are ones which we should tackle now, it is after all in our own interests to do so, literally. We would be very wrong to view older Irish women as mere problems, they have much to offer us. They are our links with our grandmothers, indeed they are our grandmothers and we have much to learn from their experiences and their knowledge of the world.

The single most important development of the last year for Irish women in London was perhaps the publication of the London Strategic Policy Unit Report, *Irish Women in London*. Though it makes depressing reading it is a handbook for progress. The position of Irish women in housing and employment is examined and a study is made of our population background. Irish women suffer the worst and lowest paid jobs, and live in the worst housing conditions. Though these findings are not surprising they are very welcome. For the longer our needs remain unrecognised, the longer we will be unable to successfully demand reforms. I urge all of you to get a copy, to read it and to use it. Use it in applying to funding bodies. Use it in arguing for equal opportunities for Irish women. Use it to get further research funded. Write articles about it in your local papers. Encourage feminist publications to highlight it. We've been waiting long enough for it, let's use it. In the light of government plans for the not too distant future we will need to use every resource at our disposal to fight against unjust laws.

The strength and determination of the Irish women's community has been tested in the past and it will certainly be tested in the future. The threatened funding cut of the LIWC would have serious implications for our community. This could be our last conference. The recent Housing and Social Security Acts will greatly affect Irish women, particularly the most vulnerable, the newly arrived and the elderly. The Alton Bill will have serious implications for women coming over from Ireland to have abortions here. Clause 28 of the Local Government Bill seeks to drive the gay community underground and with it Irish lesbians who have been politically active in this country for years. Resisting such legislation is nothing new for us. Irish women have been fighting unjust and oppressive British legislation for centuries.



Una Marron

Before I came over, we had a long discussion on why this conference was important and the issues we wanted to raise here, but first I want to explain exactly who I am and what our centre is. The Falls Women's Centre has been in existence for about 5 years. It was born out of a debate among a group of local women who had been actively involved in women's campaigns over a number of years. It was agreed that a women-only centre was essential to provide the help and support that many women needed to cope with the constant grind of poverty, deprivation and repression that dominates life in West Belfast. Over the last few years we've increased our range of services, and also our direct involvement with numerous campaigns, both nationally and locally — campaigns such as Defend the Clinics, Low Pay, Health & Welfare Cuts, Political Vetting, Strip Searching and the Belfast Urban Plan, to name a few.

While we feel that it is crucial that our centre is used as a base from which important issues affecting working class women are raised, we also feel that it is important that women and women's issues do not become isolated from wider community issues, especially in an area like West Belfast, and therefore we consistently

work to make links with all genuine independent community groupings.

One of the reasons we felt it was important for us to be here is to come and give some voice to the community of West Belfast — a community which finds itself increasingly silenced, distorted and misrepresented; a community whose voice is being systematically stifled. This is not happening because we are incapable of speaking or representing ourselves. It is because the truth of what is happening in the Six Counties is dangerous and any legitimate alternative view is to be decried, isolated and rendered ineffective. Why?

Why this is so is because it is in the interests of British imperialism that this happens. This view may not be popular. Women may feel that we should come together to discuss or celebrate those issues of common oppression that unite us. I've been told at women's conference after women's conference — "Don't raise the issue of imperialism — it divides us", and I agree that it does divide us. It divides us one from another. It divides us by selling us the lie that it is not a women's issue, that women are a neutral force, fighting their own corner on their own issues.

Imperialism will allow us to agree that Irish women experience discrimination and oppression. It will allow us to agree that throughout Ireland women are discriminated against in relation to family and property law, fertility control, education and employment, and that women are subject to sexual harassment and violence. It will allow us to agree that Ireland is a country steeped in patriarchy and religion, but it will not allow us to discuss the underlying reasons why this is so.

And the truth of why this is so is that British interference in Ireland has brought about the existence of two conservative states; that it continues to bolster these states and the continued existence of these states demands the oppression of certain sections of society and of women in particular. Britain controls both these states through its direct role in the Six Counties and through its position as a major trading partner and world power. It distorts and suppresses democratic political control and prevents us from organising our economic and cultural lives as best suit us. It prevents us from formulating and agitating around our own democratic agenda and it robs us of a united and strong voice with which to defend ourselves, our children and to defend our sisters.

As Irish women we experience imperialism through discrimination, through unemployment and emigration, through impoverished rural and urban areas, bad housing and through health and welfare and education systems that have little to do with our needs. As Irish women we live in a system which is geared towards the destruction of our history, our aspirations, our language and our cultural identity — a common national identity which unites all the people of Ireland. Our experience of imperialism will vary depending on our politics, our class and where we live. Our experiences will vary depending on whether we are engaged in resisting British rule or in upholding it. But here I want to concentrate on the experiences of the community of which I am a part and of which you have a responsibility to respond.

I experience oppression both as a woman and as a member of a colonized people. My daily life is lived through a welter of oppressive legislation and the presence of armed troops. I live in a community where sectarian neglect has become community punishment, where the right to democratic protest has been attacked either by plastic bullets or by the Public Order order. A community where democratic structures have been suppressed and where any attempt to fill this vacuum is undermined; where community groups are subject to political vetting, where funding can be withdrawn without reason, where undemocratic spokespersons such as the church are bolstered, and where elected representatives go unheard.

I come from a community that is not consulted; if we ask, we are not listened to, and if we demand, we are silenced. We are silenced by many means: we are silenced by the rejection of the Birmingham Six Appeal; we are silenced by a Shoot To Kill policy and by giving

indefinite jail sentences to our youth; we are silenced by no-jury courts and by physical attacks on funerals. We are silenced by the release of Private Ian Thain — the only British soldier ever to be convicted of murdering an Irish person. We are silenced by Gibraltar and by Milltown; we are silenced by plastic bullets and by strip searching; we are silenced by the Prevention of Terrorism Act and by the open censorship of Section 31. We are silenced by the censoring of Roisin McDonough, Jenny McKeever and Nell McCafferty; we are silenced by the racism of the media which can portray us as savage, uncivilised and subhuman, and can portray Britain's role in Ireland as that of a well-meaning social worker.

We are silenced and we are isolated, and it hurts us no less than it would hurt you. We work and we bleed and die just as other people and our grief is no less real. Mairead Farrell's blood on the streets of Gibraltar was real. She was an Irish woman surrounded by twelve armed men and shot to death, shot to death at the same moment that Irish women stood outside Maghaberry Prison celebrating International Women's Day. Her murder illustrates the reality of what the British presence in Ireland means for Irish women, and the lies and distortion which have surrounded her death illustrate the tactics they have used so successfully for centuries to isolate Irish women, one from each other.

Mairead Farrell was a woman from my community and my community is angry and we have a right to be angry. And we have a right to your support for our anger and we have a right to demand that the Irish Women's Movement takes on board the issue of British imperialism. And once taken on board, we must make it known that we will no longer allow the debate on Ireland to be censored or distorted. It is us who must define the terms of the debate, and we must make it known that our voices will neither be censored by repressive legislation, the established media nor indeed by so-called radical alternatives such as "Spare Rib" who refused to accept a commissioned article on Ireland because they don't like the political conclusions of it.

We must confront the British Women's Movement with its own racism. As women they should realise that the trick of blaming the oppressed for their own oppression is an old one, and that Irish women do not have to earn their support. As Irish women we will make choices — these choices will be made in the context of the community from which we come. As Irish women we will prioritise issues which affect us and on which we will fight, but these issues will be dictated by the circumstances of our lives. I cannot separate Irish women from the communities in which they live, just as in my community I cannot separate women's issues from the wider issue of community survival.

I am an Irish woman and I have a culture, a language and a history and I will not allow my life to be held cheap. And I will not allow my voice to go unheard. I may not be the type of feminist that sits easily, but I am a woman and a feminist nonetheless, and I demand respect for that, for my identity and for the choices I have made, and I demand respect from the community from which I come — a community that has been under a sustained and vicious attack, and a community that has not only survived this, but maintained both its dignity and its pride. Go raibh maith agat.



Ursula Barry

The question which I want to look at is to what extent and in which ways has the situation of women in the 26 Counties changed over the last two decades. Now perhaps the most obvious way of answering such a question is to look to the changes which have affected the legal position of women in the Republic, in the sense that legal reform

often reflects concessions which have been made to political movements. But there is little to show for two decades of organisation and protest by women in the 26 Counties in terms of law reform.

Of these the most important have been the removal of the ban on married women working and the legalisation of contraception. Up until 1973 women were forced to retire from work on marriage, in the public sector and some private companies, such as the banks. I believe that the removal of the ban had a more profound effect on women workers than the more obvious legal changes such as equal pay. In fact, it was membership of the EEC which brought in equal pay, rather than any particular campaign by women's groups. But, even more importantly, women workers are so highly segregated into particular areas of the economy and into the lowest job grades that such a legislation affected only a tiny minority of women workers. The removal of the ban, by opening up longer term employment for many women across the economy had a more dramatic effect on the position of women workers.

During the '70s there was a three-fold increase in the numbers of married women in paid employment a development which has lately come to grief in the midst of a deepening unemployment crisis.

By highlighting these two changes, I don't mean to imply that access to paid work or to contraception is no longer problematic — far from it. In looking back over our recent history, it seems to me that the 26 county state has adopted the most rigid and uncompromising stance in the face of powerful and well-organised campaigns by the Women's Movement. In reality legal reform has only eventually been conceded when the social and sexual practices of women have reduced the law to ridicule. Hundreds and thousands of women were practising birth control, clinics were importing and selling contraceptives for years before a law was finally and painfully passed in 1980. And despite the law, the majority of chemists in the country refused to stock contraceptives and the public health service refuses to provide a birth control service.

From this point of view the dismal record of legal reform in the Republic is not a very useful measure of change.

The question which must be asked is — why is it so difficult for women to squeeze concessions from the state? I believe the answer to that lies in the heart of the political question which has dominated all political movement in Ireland over these two decades — the National Question. Partition has imposed on us two fragile and crisis-ridden states, fearful for their survival and unable to concede political and social reform. Right wing forces flourish on both sides of the border. In the 26 Counties the ruling classes stonewall all demands for change, for fear of undermining the shaky alliances which hold its power structure in place. The integration of the catholic church in the state, which characterises the Republic, acts to reinforce an otherwise unstable state.

The overlapping of the institutions of church and state means that education, health and voluntary welfare services are to a large extent still under direct catholic church control. Health services are selectively provided, not just on economic grounds, but dictated by ethical committees based on traditional catholic teaching, refusing for example to provide sterilisation facilities for women. There exist only four schools in the state which provide either multi-denominational or non-denominational education. These are all located in Dublin, and only came into being after literally decades of campaigning by community groups. Pulpits across the country serve as powerful political platforms, and are used to promote a narrow and rigid ideology concerning women — compulsory motherhood, guilt-ridden sexuality, opposition to birth control, self-sacrifice and economic dependence.

I believe that the occupation of part of our country by the British and consequently partition, affects every aspect of life in the 26 Counties. We live officially in a State of Emergency with special laws and special courts. In the North, British rule has meant the daily repression of the Nationalist community and a state that is both anti-democratic and irreformable. Partition has left us with the most

entrenched anti-woman forces in both parts of our island. It has permitted the catholic church to present itself as the sole moral authority in the 26 county state. It has produced a state which cannot speak of its history and is nervous for its future. Partition is the culmination of years of systematic under-development of the Irish economy, leaving us with a dependent and debt-entangled economy.

I raise the question of the economy because I believe that the depressed and defeated state of the economy has overwhelmed all social movements for change in the 26 Counties, and particularly the Women's Movement. Women have been forced to the very margins of an economy in crisis. It's not just that I look around this hall and see too many familiar faces. It's not just that the energy of hundreds and thousands of women is consumed by the desperate need to manage an unmanageable family economy: feeding, clothing, educating and entertaining children becomes more and more a full-time activity. The combination of severely depressed economic conditions and anti-women legislation serve to intensify the burden for women in poverty; large families; inadequate health services; dependence on welfare; violence in the home and on the streets; care of the ill and the elderly; constant wrangling with unresponsive state agencies; stretching hopeless pay packets in too many directions, and all the time responsible for keeping the show on the road. This is a text book case of the feminisation of poverty. And the soul-destroying aspect of this situation for so many women — the final irony — is to end up packing the bags for the boats and planes that take the almost reared children to yet another country.

It would be easy enough to conclude from this depressing picture that the Republic is an impoverished economy without sufficient wealth to support its people. This is far from the truth. In reality it is the debt treadmill which is systematically draining wealth from the economy. Almost £2 billion is syphoned from the Irish economy every year, simply to pay the interest on the foreign debt. A further £600 million is taken out of the economy by mainly American multi-national companies, who make their highest profits in the world in the Irish Republic. Together this represents nearly 20% of all the wealth generated within the economy in one year. Internally the society becomes increasingly polarised between those sectors which accumulate untaxed wealth and those who are ever more marginalised from mainstream economic life. Whole regions of the country have gone into deep decline, as resources are monopolised by the eastern region, while in Dublin class lines are carved by the literal physical segregation of increasingly hostile communities.

For women in the 26 Counties, the prospects in the job market are contracting, which means that the emigration figures can only continue to rise. The only two areas of the economy to show any significant growth in employment opportunities for women since the early '70s have been the public and private services sectors. And it is precisely these two areas, which for different reasons are experiencing a dramatic decline in employment levels at the present time. Current government policy has targeted public services, particularly health and education which have traditionally been major employers of women, for its severest public expenditure cuts, including a 10% reduction in employment. Private services, such as banking and insurance and all forms of office work are in the process of intense rationalisation, based on the diffusion of micro-electronic based technology. The banks have already stopped recruiting and are no longer replacing staff who leave.

The consequence of these developments is that women are finding it harder and harder to find paid work, a situation which can only intensify our already high level of economic dependence, as well as feeding the emigration trail.

When Brian Lenihan, Minister of Foreign Affairs, stated that there isn't enough room for all of us in such a small island, he's reflecting current Government policy. Their economic strategy assumes rising levels of emigration; it is built into their forecasts and integrated into their plans. But women emigrate from the 26 Counties not only for economic reasons, but also for social reasons. The 1980's can hardly be viewed as an optimistic time for women in

the Republic. Catholic right wing forces launched a counter-offensive against the Movement as the decade opened. Within weeks of the legalisation of contraception, the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign was formed, bringing together organisations of the New Right — the Responsible Society, SPUC, Family Solidarity and so on, with more traditional groups such as Opus Dei and the Knights of Columbanus. This alliance has been responsible for the anti-abortion amendment to the constitution, the anti-divorce campaign, the court cases against the non-directive pregnancy counselling services, the campaign against sex education in schools and the attempts to undermine the AIDS information programme. The right wing offensive directed most of its energy against women, bombarding us with sanitised images of childbirth, motherhood and the family, whilst simultaneously eroding choice and control from our lives; our fertility; our personal relationships; our health and our sexuality.

The anti-abortion amendment has the most serious implications for Irish women. The Irish Republic has become the first country in the world to confer a constitutional right to life on the "unborn child". The very wording of the amendment puts the right to life of a pregnant woman on equal terms with that of the foetus she is carrying. This is a radical redefinition of woman under the law. Irish women have been re-categorised as equal to that which is not yet born. I think it is vital to understand that the ideology which shaped the amendment to the Irish constitution does not have its roots in traditional Irish catholicism. The rhetoric of rights is not one which is rooted in the prescriptive-style catholicism which has been imposed on Irish people. On the contrary, Irish social history is littered with examples of bitter conflicts over questions of rights and the role of the State. As late as 1951 the catholic church opposed a welfare scheme for pregnant women and new-born infants on the basis that the State should not interfere in family welfare. Yet in this amendment we have right-wing catholicism formulating an amendment asserting foetal rights and looking to the state to vindicate those rights.

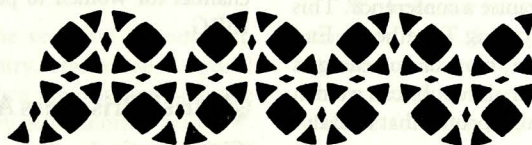
So where does the amendment come from? The new right internationally,, and particularly in America have adopted a new and increasingly powerful ideology of foetal rights. It is here that we find the origins of the Irish amendment. They are pushing for a whole new set of restrictions to be legally enforced on pregnant women, determining our behaviour during pregnancy. This would mean not

only prohibiting abortion, although that is clearly the most important restriction, but also the whole life-style of pregnant women — our diet, whether we travel, whether we consume alcohol etc. The key to all this is the establishment of foetal rights under the law. This is the essential element of the anti-abortion strategy. Internationally the new right is using this amendment as a show case and a model to be followed elsewhere. The Irish Constitution in this sense, is a pawn in a much wider game, and it is Irish women who have to live with the consequences of this. Only three weeks ago, the Supreme Court confirmed a ruling based on this constitutional amendment, which prevents pregnancy counselling services from providing women with proper information and advice concerning the availability of abortion services in Britain or anywhere outside the State.

The feminist movement played a large part in the campaign against the amendment, although the public face of that campaign was made up primarily of doctors' and lawyers' groups against the amendment. In the divorce referendum which followed a couple of years later, women's organisations were very much in the background. As the decade has progressed, the campaigning edge of the women's movement has faded. This has ended up more a time of discussion and assessment than street demonstrations and pickets. Women's services, such as the rape crisis centres and health clinics continue to function, and women's groups have been formed in many regional towns and in working class areas of Dublin. Women's groups have formed discussion and education groups. Conferences on women's issues draw larger numbers than ever before.

And looking back over these years, despite the depressing picture I've painted, there are certain developments which even our divided society cannot deny.

Against all the odds, women have managed to force through real changes in our lives. Hundreds of thousands of women are using contraceptives. Tens of thousands are separated and seeking their legal rights. Thousands of women continue to come to England for abortions. Many more married women are in paid employment. Increasing numbers of women are rearing children outside of marriage. Lesbians are becoming more visible, more vocal and more confident. Women are talking, writing, performing, producing and simply expecting more. And increasing numbers of women have put their militant energy into the war against British forces in Ireland. The assassination of Mairead Farrell has affected all our lives.



Group Reports



☼ Stop the Strip Searches Campaign

Last November was the fifth anniversary since strip searching was introduced in Armagh jail. The London Stop the Strip Searches Campaign Group grew out of the London Armagh Women's Group and became autonomous about two years ago.

In April last year there was a BBC Open Space programme about strip searching. This programme was asked for by women in Belfast and we tried to influence the BBC as to the input of the programme but we didn't have any success really. In the programme they looked at strip searching in Holloway Prison and Irish republican women were only included in quite a small way, and the impression given was that the issue of strip searching was only used for propaganda purposes. That TV programme sparked off a huge debate that went on for months and months.

The first part of last year was also taken up with building up towards a national demonstration, which took place in Durham in June. To build for the demonstration we sent letters to near on a thousand organisations, asking for donations, telling them about the demonstration and we also did quite a lot of public speaking to advertise the demonstration, and leafletting. In the course of building up to the demonstration we made closer links with the Women in Ireland network, which is a network of women throughout the country working around the British colonisation of Ireland; also with women in the Troops Out Movement and the Irish Prisoners Appeal and various other groups.

The demonstration was a big success — there were 2,000 people in Durham, which is an out of the way place, and it was only 2 days after the elections. Also about this time last year we made the first moves to get a scientific psychological investigation into the psychological effects of strip searching. We asked Dr Maire O'Shea to help with that. That's been going on for the whole of this year, and it's been very difficult to get psychiatrists to take on a commitment for that. At this stage that responsibility has been passed on to the newly formed United Campaign Against Strip Searches.

After the demonstration, the question was where to go from there and how to build on the momentum. The Irish team in the London Strategic Policy Unit offered to organise a conference. This took place in December and was called "Working Together to End Strip Searches", and after the demonstration, most of our energies went into that conference and ensuring that Irish republican women were central to it, and if not central, had a high profile that couldn't be ignored.

Since the conference the United Campaign Against Strip Searching has been set up and that is not only about Irish republican women, but includes black and Asian women and anyone who is concerned about strip searching. We are affiliated to that campaign, but we also retain our autonomy because over the past few months what has become very clear to us is that what we are really interested in as a group is the role of Irish women in the struggle against the colonisation of Ireland by Britain and we are interested in strip searching because it is being used to demoralise them. This is not to say that we condone strip searching under any circumstances, and we join with any group who organises to oppose strip searching.

Also throughout the year we have had the usual fund raising efforts, organising benefits, sponsored swims and asking around for donations. Plans for the future — apart from campaigning against strip searches we want to investigate ways in which we can help in a concrete way. So we hope to build closer links with women in the Six

Counties. One of our members went on the International Women's Day Delegation to Belfast this year and visited one of the convicted women prisoners in Maghaberry and she told her that in the last three months there have been 100 strip searches on 16 women, so strip searching is still going on.

We have started a newsletter which we plan to make bi-monthly, or monthly if possible. We have also become involved with regular street leafletting with women in the Troops Out Movement — this usually happens on a Saturday outside tube stations or supermarkets. They also involve singing Irish protest songs and women's protest songs, of which there are quite a few now. We also have an information pack which we try to keep up to date.

☼ Women and the IBRG Group

We are organised on a regional basis and are open to all women members of IBRG. We support a woman's right to choose and try to keep all members in IBRG informed about the work of the Irish Women's Abortion Support Group. We recognise that travelling women face hostility from the British and Irish communities and through our work we try and support these women in their campaigns for better health care and education for their children. We see strip searching as a form of sexual harassment and campaign against the practice. We campaign for the existence and experience of Irish lesbians, both within the Irish community and in the wider community. We recognise that Irish women have played a prominent part in passing on their culture, language and tradition to our children and encourage Irish women in this. We will undertake work to re-examine the traditional role of Irish women throughout history and to help Irish women here to discover their true historical identity.

We recognise the special problems of second, third, fourth generation Irish women and support them in their right to be Irish. We hope to give support to black and other ethnic minority women in their struggle. There are more Irish women in England than Irish men, but less of those women involved in politics. We hope to be a channel for women to participate and to take a strong role in the IBRG.

☼ Irish Prisoners Appeal

(Claire Keating)

The Irish Prisoners Appeal group is a local group which is based in Brixton in south London and it tries to meet the needs of those Irish prisoners held on republican charges in Brixton Prison and also to meet the welfare needs of their families. Brixton Prison is the prison most widely used in this country for the holding of Irish political prisoners while they are on remand, so there's been a constant stream of prisoners held on remand — both male and female — for periods of upwards of a year.

They are held with very few privileges, in fact the few remaining privileges which were — to have the right to have meals brought in from outside and food parcels, were taken away so the distinction between a remand prisoner who is technically innocent of any crime and a convicted prisoner who is technically guilty of the crime, is being increasingly done away with. There is much less of a distinction and effectively the prisoners are becoming criminalised by the system as soon as they are arrested.

We provide accommodation, transport and other assistance to family and friends of prisoners as they come over. It's largely women who come over. They may not have been to Britain before; they don't understand the prison system or know anything about it in this country. They don't know the geography of London and they come on very, very limited budgets, often with children to a country which threatens them repeatedly with use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act and we have experience in our work of women being held repeatedly under that Act, of people being excluded from Britain when they have come to see prisoners in this country, of women being stripped and internally body-searched and threatened with having their children taken away, and never as a prisoner's relative travelling to this country, being charged with any offence. It is a method of harassment to double the punishment which is applied to prisoners, whether they are on remand or convicted.

The experience we have of welfare work arising from that level of harassment of prisoners who are both ghosted and moved from prison to prison and put in solitary confinement and beaten is added to by the experience of their families and their friends who come over to visit them. Arising from that experience we have been heavily involved in the campaign against strip searching — in trying to widen the campaign as much as possible to include work by trade unions, in the Labour Movement, MPs, MEPs and to get it taken up as a campaign that affects everybody who is strip searched, as a form of deliberate sexual harassment which is designed specifically to degrade and humiliate the person who is affected by it, whoever they are and wherever it happens. We also acknowledge that the systematic use of strip searching is used quite deliberately and reserved almost quite exclusively at this stage for Irish women held on republican charges. But we also accept that it is used very widely and increasingly, at customs, immigration, police stations and even in the street.

We are also becoming increasingly involved with the Irish Prisoners Support Group in a campaign to demand and win the right of all Irish prisoners to transfer to prisons near their own homes in Ireland. This is a campaign that is required because almost any other prisoner in British prisons is given the right to transfer to a prison near where they come from. This is given to British soldiers who are convicted in Ireland (the very few who are convicted), whether they are convicted of murder, rape, manslaughter, or accidental death. When they are sentenced, they are immediately transferred to a prison near their own home and after a couple of years on a murder charge they are released and brought back into the army as a decent member of society. The exact reverse of that treatment is dished out to Irish political prisoners' families. The prisoner remains in a prison in England on a quite monumentally long sentence reserved almost exclusively for Irish prisoners.

The sentence is served in one of the very few prisons with maximum security blocks across the country. Heavy use of special isolation units, transfer of prisoners so when the prisoner's relative arrives at a prison they are not there. They go to another prison — they are not there. Frankly they have run out of money and the kids are bursting into tears all over the place; they go home, they don't see the prisoner. Over and over again there are cases of prisoners' families who are too elderly to travel, too poor to travel, in too poor health to travel, with too many kids to travel, too frightened by the PTA to travel, too harassed previously to travel and also who have maybe one visit a year and find the visit too traumatic. That deliberately contradicts all those women who travel over repeatedly on poor budgets to a hostile country via the PTA, are supported by organisations as diverse as the Association of Probation Officers and funnily enough the Home Office who say that prisoners should serve their sentences near their families and their homes, in order to facilitate what they describe as "normal family relationships". The Association of Probation Officers have said quite publicly they consider it unfair, discriminatory, heavy handed and quite deliberately punitive to punish both the prisoner's relative and the prisoner, and we would be involved in the campaign which is now just starting

off to demand and win that right to transfer for Irish prisoners, whether political or non-political prisoners who are serving long sentences.

The case is slightly different and more problematic in one sense, with the 26 County government because although technically they accept that prisoners should be able to transfer within Common Market agreements to the 26 Counties, of course they haven't quite got round to ratifying the agreement and don't know when they will and of course they claim that a massive number of prisoners will want to come home and a massive number of people are just bursting to serve time in Portlaoise. The evidence that we have collected contradicts that again — that the net effect of allowing transfers freely within the Common Market would indicate that there would be a small number — 12 or 13 — who would wish to transfer to the 26 Counties and a higher number who would transfer from the 26 counties to other EEC countries including Greece. It's a question of politics. They are quite happy for the British government to have "the problem".

London Armagh Group

(Siuin McNally)

Dia dhuibh a chairde. We set up in 1980 and are a group of both Irish and non-Irish women. Within our group we have tried to look at the relationship between the colonisation of Ireland by Britain, the present phase of the war in the Six counties and how that has affected the position of Irish women. We campaign for British withdrawal from Ireland and we have actively campaigned against the strip searching of women in Maghabery and Armagh. We set up the Strip Searches Campaign in 1983, which is now separate from our group, and we have also been involved in organising the delegations to Ireland for International Women's Day.

Since the last conference we have been keeping a pretty low profile as regards campaigning, as we've been working on a book which we hope will be published soon. Our book looks at the colonisation of Ireland, how it has affected Irish women in the Six Counties, the 26 Counties and in Britain, eg. one chapter looks at how the war has come into the lives of working class nationalist women in the 6 Counties; how they have had no other choice than to get up a fight the British state. The book also looks at the solidarity work and campaign work that has been done in this country around Ireland and it also looks at why some sections of the British women's movement don't support Irish women in their struggles against British imperialism.

We hope our book will appeal to different groups of people — people at home, Irish people in Britain, feminists and also people who don't know very much about the situation and want to find out. This will take up all our time in the near future and we don't have any plans yet for going back to active campaigning, although we continue to support and attend pickets, vigils etc. organised by the Stop the Strip Searches Campaign and other groups.

Because of our work with the women in Armagh and Maghabery we built up personal contacts with them and we were deeply shocked and stunned by the killing of Mairead Farrell in Gibraltar a few weeks ago. Mairead is an example of an Irish woman who took on British imperialism and fought for the freedom of Irish people until the end of her life. I think the words of Martha McClelland from Derry will say more than I can, "She was a wonderful person — one of the finest people I have ever known; brave, strong, courageous and fun-loving, highly intelligent and very politicised, just a really special person who always made you feel better just by her being around. She will be sorely missed by everyone who ever knew her. The news of her death hit heavy here, but really tempers people like steel — you get more determined that the effort and sacrifice of such a beautiful person achieves the goal." Go rabh maigh agaibh, a chairde.

☼ London Irish Women's Centre

(Madeleine Griffin)

The London Irish Women's Centre, which is a London-wide organisation for Irish women, has now been open for the last two years. We continue to campaign for the needs of Irish women to be taken on board and run classes, offer advice and information sessions to Irish women and run children's sessions, and we also have lots of other activities going on.

In the last year, in conjunction with the London Strategic Policy Unit we have been involved in the production of a report on Irish women in London, which is the first of its kind and for the first time looks at the position of Irish women in London in terms of careers and housing.

In the last six months we have also seen new legislation which we know will have drastic effects on Irish women and the London Irish Women's Centre has been actively campaigning against them. The first of those is the Alton Bill which is aiming to cut the time limits for abortion. This will make it incredibly difficult for Irish women coming here.

Then there is Clause 28, which is attempting to outlaw lesbians and gay men and is opening the door to increased harassment, and the Housing Bill which aims to increase rents, bring back private landlords and end council housing. We have seen the effects of this on Irish women and their children who are already being offered travel warrants back, rather than what they need, which is housing. The Social Security Act, which has just been passed, has particularly drastic effects for young Irish people because it means that social security will be paid two weeks in arrears and there's thousands of young people coming here. They are going to get reduced benefits and they will also have to wait a lot longer for their moeny.

Now the Irish Women's Centre is faced with a further crisis and that is, we are being threatened with a cut in our grant. That in effect will mean for us a couple of redundancies in the Centre, which means that certain activities will have to stop. That has a knock-on effect on other activities and we will not be able to continue to provide the service that we want. So we are asking today for people to support us either by writing letters of support, addressing them to the Centre, about our work, and also by becoming members of the Centre. It's a minimum of £1.00 but if you can afford to pay more, please do so.

☼ Irish Women's Video Group

(Liz Macebo)

The Video Production Group meets at the London Irish Women's Centre every second Wednesday. It is open to Irish women with basic video experience or who have been on a video course at the Centre. So if any of you here today have some skills in this area, you are very welcome to join us.

We discuss the issues which have a direct bearing on Irish women in London around which we'd like to work. We are very much aware of the power video has over our everyday lives. We want to demystify the image created around this high-tech medium. Because of the immediacy of its production, information gathered on video can become out of date very quickly. This is one of the reasons why it is so important for us to familiarise ourselves with the operating techniques, in order for our voice to be heard at the crucial time when issues have public attention.

At the meetings we discuss forthcoming events, and arrange teams to go out and record these events. We look at any recent tapes we have made and consider what use, other than for the archives, these might be put to. For instance, the group recently compiled a magazine video to send to the Galway Women's Film and Video Festival.

As has been said at previous conferences, it is vitally important that a record should be kept of Irish women's achievements. It is equally important that these achievements should be seen from our perspective. This is especially so, given the sparse attention and narrow view on issues relating to Irish people churned out by the

established media. Consequently the ongoing continuance of the Video Production Group is vital, so that ordinary Irish women can develop the skills necessary to produce a technically credible alternative representation of the facts.

☼ Irish Women Artists Group

(Anne Tallantyre)

The Irish Women Artists Group continues to encourage women to take control over their own representations and to challenge the elitist function of the definition of the artist. The Irish Women Artists Group held its second major event last August, which was an exhibition called "Off the Map" of installation based work and was held in the Chisenhale Gallery in the East End of London. The show was an investigation into the contradictory experience of being not only Irish but female in this country at this time. There was a great attendance at the exhibition and we have heard that it was one of the most successful shows the gallery has had. There was a great deal of surprise about this, for some reason. The exhibition included the screening of films made by Irish women and the last day closed with a reading by the Irish Women Writers Network.

We have, with the Irish Women in Islington, continued to run and consolidate our art workshops and are in the process of expanding our educational programme. The workshops we run are open to all Irish women, irrespective of how much experience you have in any form of expressing yourself.

Despite the ongoing problems of funding, we are in the process of organising two major events for next year, which will be advertised soon. It is a particularly crucial time for us in the light of Clause 28 and this is one of the issues we intend to take head-on in the next year because it's got major implications for representations generally.

☼ The Sheelas

(Brid Boland)

We are an Irish women's band playing traditional Irish ceili music and we've been in existence for two years now; we spoke at last year's conference and gave a background to the political implications of women playing Irish music.

This year has been a very difficult year for The Sheelas. We seem to have been affected by the general demoralisation that seems to have affected the voluntary sector generally. We had a couple of women leaving the band or going away for a period and that affected us very badly, so we were almost at the point of breaking up several times during the year. In fact tonight's performance after the ceili, was originally supposed to have been our last performance. But we have decided to go on, because we see that there's a real need for it. And a lot of credit for that is due to women who support and encourage us to keep going, which is something that I want to thank both Irish and non-Irish women for, who felt it was important to have a band and we feel there is a need for an Irish women's band playing music.

Apart from The Sheelas there's been another band formed recently. They're playing at the ceili tonight as well. They're not a ceili band, they're just a smaller band. During the past year as well, there's been an exhibition of Women and Irish music in Derry and that looked really interesting. It was organised by a woman who's doing research on women and Irish songs, and producing a book of Irish women's songs from a feminist perspective, and it should be interesting to see that when it comes out.

Apart from that, in Dublin, Macalla have produced another LP and there's also a very big women's ceili band in existence in New York for the last couple of years. And that's generally the round-up of women in Irish music in London and across the world at the minute, I think. So we just want to thank everybody for supporting us last year.

Irish Women in Greenwich Group

(Sarah Kelleher)

I'm a full time worker with the Irish in Greenwich Project, but I'm also a full time Irish woman living in south-east London and sometimes it's hard to know which hat I'm wearing, but I think today I'll wear my woman's hat.

Our women's group, which first got together two years ago, has gone from strength to strength and during the past year a whole range of activities took place — from just talking to each other to having the odd party or two.

Initially we had in mind that a forum would be available for all Irish women in the borough of Greenwich to get together, so therefore the group was open to all women of all ages with all interests. Work was done to reach as many women as possible by means of a publicity campaign to advertise the group, and this on the whole was very successful. But the first problem arose quite quickly — why do we come together and what do we want to achieve? Unfortunately, slowly the obvious became crystal clear — that not all Irish women are the same; also we don't all have the same common interests either.

Apart from the fact that we are all Irish and we are all women, these statements meant very different things to different women. We've had women from 17 to 90 years of age, all with their own ideas and their own views covering a wide spectrum, on issues such as the catholic church, contraception, abortion, the North of Ireland, men, sexuality to name but a few, and some of these differences were virtually impossible to reconcile.

At our first meeting, some women wanted to invite men along. There's no half-way house on this issue, I'm afraid, and the result was obvious as well, but this also meant that we lost those women who wanted to meet with men as well. The point I'm trying to make is that without criticising any one person's view, we feel that the term "Irish women" is far too general to mean anything other than a woman who considers herself to be Irish, and while this is important in itself there is the bond that we all here today share, and we have learned over the past year that it is practically not possible to have one umbrella group which can serve all our diverse needs. So while in name we have a general interest Irish women's group for the past year in Greenwich, in practice it has evolved that our group is made up of young, progressive women.

It is obvious also, that we have to examine exactly how we wish to advertise ourselves in the future. The group has become stronger and cohesive over the past few months. We felt it was necessary to explain the politics and dynamics of how our group has evolved and how we see ourselves today. I don't want you to get the impression that our group is insular and we are an exclusive club — far from it, and just to give one example, at Christmas we decided to hold a party which would attract Irish women from all sections. This was a roaring success and the nicest comment came afterwards from a woman who hadn't been to that type of event before — "I never thought I could have such a time with only women."

Because the group is clear about why it has come together, it is now possible for us all to pull in the same direction, and so events are organised with a clear objective in mind and are therefore far more enjoyable. You're probably wondering what we get up to amidst all this soul searching. We meet every second and fourth Tuesday at 7.30pm at 141 Greenwich High Road, SE10. Evenings vary from having invited speakers to discussing issues of the day, organising trips out of Greenwich to other Irish events around London, and mainly providing support for each other, and having a good crack as well.

Our group has also been instrumental in making sure that Irish women's needs are met in Greenwich, and by having a high profile within the Irish in Greenwich Project, it is at all times ensuring that agencies such as other community organisations, accounts departments, libraries etc. do not forget that there is a large Irish community around and also a large number of Irish women.

One of the problems which the group faces is the lack of child care facilities, which I'm sure is not exclusive to Greenwich. But we are in the middle of trying to organise an afternoon or morning event which will have full creche facilities available. All in all, in the group we feel we have come a long way in the past twelve months and it is days like today which really give us support and new ideas for what we might do next year. If any of you are interested in joining, contact me on 317-1435.

IBRG Lewisham Branch Pensioners Association

(Teresa Byrne)

We were very fortunate towards the end of 1986 that Age Concern got a Development Officer who also happened to be an Irish person,



Jackie Jolly. She also belongs to the IBRG Lewisham Branch, so in the course of discussions at the meetings, we decided that we ought to do something for the Irish pensioners, with the result that Age Concern gave us the premises and IBRG funded the party. We were confined to about 60 members because of the size of the hall but it was a very successful party, and from that a nucleus of pensioners interested in forming an association, became possible.

We launched early in March and from then we have achieved quite a lot. We had an Irish Pensioners' Festival which happened with the help of another Irish girl who was a student helper with Pensioners' Link. The Festival was very good, and considering we only got £300 funding from the Arts Council, I think we did quite well.

We also have campaigned against injustice for the Birmingham Six, the Guildford Four and strip searching. We have taken part in Health Day marches, and one of the nicest things we have had was a Hallowe'en Party. We felt that the older people and younger people should get together, so the IBRG and the other pensioners organised a Hallowe'en Party for probably the second generation of Irish children. We showed them what we used to do in the old days — bobbing for apples, blind man's buff, the candle in the turnip, the barmbrack and the red lemonade.

We of course had Irish dancing, and the nice thing about children is you can always tell if they are enjoying themselves, because they didn't want to go home, so I think that in itself told us that it was all right.

We have had speakers at our meetings: on Irish literature, history, the meaning of Irish place names, social security benefit changes, the Nationality Act and we are also campaigning for free travel for Irish born citizens. We have had Cass Breen from Morley College re. the Irish Curriculum development in ILEA schools, and as I am a governor of three schools, I've brought it up time and time again. So we are hoping that Morley College will get it started now that the government has decided to abolish ILEA.

One of our very nice times was St Patrick's Day. It started with Mass. We had Fr. Martin, thanks to Jackie again. He came down from Southwark, and is an Irish speaker and then from Mass, we went down to the Albany. It was an Open Day and the idea was that we would let ourselves be known, and people could come in and see what we were all about. We had a meal of bacon and cabbage, we had stalls, home-made food, books, the IBRG stall and in the afternoon we had a ceili for the pensioners which was very much enjoyed, and Guinness at 55p a pint. That was in conjunction with the Albany, the IBRG, the Greenwich pensioners and Lewisham pensioners, so when we get all the money together, we're going to divide it three ways.

We also had two schools which took part in learning Irish dancing and I think that if we get the younger generation interested in Irish dancing and music that probably that's the best way for us to go forward. Also Greenwich and Lewisham have combined in having a week in one of the local schools in Deptford. They went in and there was story telling, musical instruments, music and dancing, and towards the end of the week they had Irish pensioners in to explain to them what it was like as emigrants in the 30s and 40s. I came over in the late 30s and have been here 50 years, but I'm still Irish by the way! That had an off-spin because at different meetings I've been to, teachers in that school have said to me how very much the children enjoyed it and when were those people coming back again. I think that maybe is a good way of breaking the anti-Irish racism. There were junior pupils of mixed race, and the questions they asked were quite surprising. We learned quite a lot ourselves.

We are having our first AGM on 20th, so we are hoping to achieve as much if not more. We also had a rally, it was organised by Richard Balfe and sponsored by the Co-op. We went to Brighton to the Labour Party Conference, to try and improve the lot of all pensioners. We are not isolated; we take part in all the things that affect pensioners and because we are governors, things that affect mothers and children as well. So we are doing our best.

☼ London Irish Women's Abortion Support Group

(Bernadette Manning)

We set up in 1981 with the aim of providing accommodation and support to women who were coming over to London for abortions who needed us and in fact, unlike the Liverpool Group, were very much linked with Open Line and the Well Woman's Centre in Dublin. Most of our contacts came through those agencies.

Then along came the Referendum and things got harder. Information was more difficult to get at home about us and about abortion generally here, even though Ruth kept her service going. In response to that, we thought we'd like to do something more. So we set up a direct telephone line for women in Ireland, so they could ring us. We run that on a Tuesday night between 6 and 9. That's our referral point as well and women will generally contact us during that time. We run the line on a rota basis, so different women run it each week. Fifteen to twenty women a week contact us at the moment, and we always have someone staying with us, particularly at weekends, because most women come over on Friday and go back on Sunday.

The other aim we had at the beginning was to support campaigns at home to improve choices for women who wanted to either continue a pregnancy or have abortions, and we've always tried to support those campaigns financially, morally and in every way we could.

Recently we've had the Alton Bill here, which has been mentioned. We've had a fair amount of pressure on us in London, as an Irish Women's Group, to speak on behalf of Irish women separately in relation to the campaign fighting the Alton Bill. We've been able to use that opportunity to say a fair amount about the situation at home. But what we've seen generally is that there is certainly a move to make Ireland the Western model for the pro-family, anti-abortion movement, internationally. We generally try to point that out when we speak, because it's quite dangerous and actually has a direct relevance to English women and women in other countries who think they're safe and are never going to be like women in Ireland.

So while in general we are asked to speak about the plight of the poor weak Irish women, in fact we try to speak about the strength of Irish women, who have the courage to come here, often with no resources at all — while also pointing out that it's not because Irish women are weak that they have to come here for abortions, but because the Irish State is the one state in Europe prepared to launch into this notion that the family is all wonderful and in particular, women should have no choices or control over their bodies.

The other effect of the Alton Bill recently for us here has been that the abortion agencies here, including the charities like PAS, have used the opportunity to put their prices up quite dramatically since it started to be discussed. For example, the price of an abortion for under 12 weeks now is £180. It was £140 a few months ago.

Our two major problems at the moment — probably shared by every group here — one is money. We have a principle in our group that no woman should not have an abortion just because she can't afford it. On the other hand, we're about the least attractive kind of organisation for any kind of funding — either from the British government or the Irish government. We've even tried the European pregnancy organisations, and we're really unpopular. We haven't got a penny, so you'll have seen our fund-raising events. Anyone who's interested in getting involved in the fund-raising side of what we do because we often help women to pay for abortions where we can, you're welcome to join in with that and we'll be touching you tonight at the social for some money, because we take every opportunity to get a bit.

And the other thing we need is women to get involved in the group. There are about 20 of us at the moment who are fairly active, but if anyone's interested in getting involved, you don't have to provide accommodation, or you don't have to run the telephone line,

you can do anything related to the group. We're all Irish women or women of Irish descent, so we thought we'd use this conference as an opportunity to try and recruit some new members. We're running an introductory day on May 8th, and if you want to get in touch with us and come to that day, you're very welcome.

Finally, I'll just say that recently on the telly, along with Ruth, the BBC made a programme mainly based in Ireland, but it featured us as well, called "Heart of the Matter" — trying to examine the situation to do with abortion at home. We've brought a video of the programme along, so it'll be shown later on today. We had one criticism of it, and that was, it entirely ignored the situation of women from the North of Ireland, and in fact we get a fair number of them coming over, and while it's not quite the same in the North — it's illegal for women in the North also to have abortions there. I know the Liverpool group probably has more to do with women from the North, but we get a lot coming over and we'd like to say it's difficult for women from the North, as well as women from the South.



One of the many speakers who addressed the 1988 Irish Women's Conference, Stasia Crickley (TIDE: Youth Emigration Action Group, Dublin). Other speakers included representatives from the Republic of Ireland, the Six Counties and from England

TIDE

(Stasia Crickley)

I'd like to start by thanking you for inviting me, a representative of TIDE, to come over. TIDE doesn't actually mean anything — it just means we couldn't think of a proper name for the group and TIDE sounded good. Basically, we started off as a Youth Emigration Action Group, but we've broadened our remit to be concerned with emigration in all its aspects, whether by younger people or older people.

But as you all know, most emigration from Ireland tends to be from the age range of people who are under 25, and therefore officially designated in European Community terms as being "youth". We started at the same time as the Action for Irish Youth in London and we started in response to two things — first of all, the people in London were saying there was a huge increase in young Irish people coming to London, at that point in time. there was considerable concern about the lack of attention being given to the issue in Ireland, and then secondly, people who were working with young people in Dublin especially, and also in Cork were very conscious of the numbers of very very young Irish people who were

leaving four years ago. I mean in particular, people in the 16–18 age range.

A lot of them had just come out of care and found themselves in great difficulties in Dublin and in Cork, and at that stage they could have claimed some sort of Social Security benefits if they came to England. Obviously the situation has now altered, but in Ireland then, as now, they had absolutely no right to claim anything. So we started at that stage, and we had two broad concerns.

One was to get the Government to acknowledge that emigration from Ireland was taking place, and that might sound like a facetious concern, but in late '84, early 1985 it was by no means facetious, because the last thing they wanted to acknowledge was an increase in emigration, so they told us that we didn't know what we were talking about and that we had no figures and we had no facts, and that all of the social indicators like Irish accents in pubs in London and Gaelic football teams with more members than they had had for 30 years — that all these things were just because there was a sudden resurgence of interest in things Irish among the Irish community overseas, which we didn't believe.

But eventually after the '86 Census figures appeared we were actually proven to be correct, not that any of the people who insulted us ever apologised — but anyway! We have two major concerns — one is acknowledging the reality of emigration. I personally think it's very important to speak about the difference between the reality of emigration and whether or not it's a good thing. I mean, acknowledging the reality doesn't mean putting up with it for ever.

One of our concerns has been to ensure the people who feel they have no other choice, for whatever reason, but to emigrate have adequate information available to them to assist them to do so. The second concern is to try to start addressing the factors that lead to emigration from Ireland and to try and start addressing the causes of emigration from Ireland. So we applied to the Government for money to do research on the causes of emigration. Needless to remark, they ended up giving us a few pounds, ie. a state scheme — a Teamwork scheme to collect information which might be of assistance to departing emigrants, so whatever about providing us with some money to do something about the departing emigrants, there was no way they were going to help us to do some research on the causes at that point in time.

So to date, we have compiled a Directory of Information for departing emigrants. We have worked fairly closely with the Action Group for Irish Youth here in London. One of the things which strikes me from our enquiry report was the comment by young people from a youth club in Co Cork, on the conversation in their Youth Club (and that's a year ago now), all about "Who's gone? Who's going? and Who's home on holidays?" So the reality of emigration as part of the social structure in Ireland is quite a horrendous one for some people and quite a soul-destroying one for a lot of others.

At this stage we have returned again to our research proposals. We are hoping to follow through on that area of looking at the consequences of emigration for local communities in Ireland. That's our current proposal, but we haven't got any money, but might end up trying to do it ourselves anyway. Other special concerns have been groups of emigrants who mightn't get the same attention as other groups, say for example, travelling people. I was reading your excellent reports and while for example Irish women are often quite invisible, Irish travelling people not only tend to be invisible, but as you know, tend to suffer discrimination from for example, other Irish people overseas. So we have had a particular concern about looking into the rights of Irish travellers overseas.

We've also, jointly with the Action Group for Irish Youth, proposed that a task force be set up, and we're currently trying to put a lot of pressure on the Irish government to set up that task force to examine the factors affecting emigration. And following through from that, we are trying to develop a Charter of Emigrant Rights — the United Nations are attempting to develop a Charter of Migrant Rights — and we're trying to make some proposals about that.



Lastly, I suppose you are wondering what is the significance of the TIDE group, and I think there are two things significant about it. Number one is that it is an independent voluntary group — it is neither statutory nor controlled by the catholic church, and that's quite significant in terms of emigration concerns in Ireland. And number two, I think the fact that it is in Ireland. One of the biggest difficulties initially was getting people in Ireland to focus on emigration as an issue. It's an on-going problem and we believe very strongly that only when people in Ireland are prepared to put their backs into addressing emigration as an issue, that something can happen. Because in a lot of ways, they are always very glad when all the Irish associations come from England and America. They invite them into Leinster House and shake their hands, tell them they're lovely and get their photographs in the paper, put them on television and that's grand and they all go home. But they don't vote in Ireland, so the mechanism for putting pressure on the Irish government, we feel, has to be supported by groups in Ireland and those are the two reasons we continue with our voluntary group. It's a totally voluntary group at the minute; we don't have any state funding for anything, which also leaves us in a position to complain about the level of support the state gives to emigrant services here.

The Hairy Marys

(Angela Clerkin)

We're a group of London Irish women and also two English women who mix traditional Irish dancing with crazy costumes, rock & roll dancing, anything else you can think of — we chuck it all in — and the idea is to show a lot more people that we can enjoy Irish dancing.

We do traditional stuff, which we enjoy and are very happy about doing, but we also like to mix it with other sorts of things. We also do workshops in schools which I think is very important. For me as a London Irish child, I didn't like to admit being Irish. Even though I went to a catholic school and most of the kids there were Irish, we were encouraged to keep our Irishness down and it was something embarrassing, something that was joked about and not discussed.

What we aim to do by going into schools to do workshops is to show that Irish culture is something to be proud of, something people should know about and we do this by talking about Irish dancing, the history of it and also by getting everyone to join in. It's to help Irish kids and also to tell people and kids of all nationalities of our culture.

London Irish Set Dancing Group

(Nora Hughes)

It's a small group of women who just meet once a fortnight to enjoy ourselves. Set dancing, in case you don't realise it, isn't the same as ceili dancing. It's the older form of dancing; it was done in kitchens; it's very rural and very working class and very informal. There's been a big revival at home recently and also quite a revival in London. Some of us got interested a couple of years ago when two well-known set dancers from Cork, the O'Donovans, came over and did some workshops in London and then we went over to a summer school in Co Clare and learned a bit more, so that the way of learning was very informal — there aren't any experts, it's non-professional, it's meant for everybody and we all just find different ways of

learning it and spreading it round.

So, it's a women-only group. We have learned a lot from mixed classes we've been to in London at the Irish Centre, but we actually found we want to have our own space; we find that sometimes some of the role-playing that goes on in traditional Irish dancing can be a bit tedious, to say the least. We like to turn it on its head and have a bit of a laugh. It's very therapeutic if you live in London and face all the usual strains of the 73 bus and the tube and all the rest of it. So we meet once a fortnight, sometimes in the South London Women's Centre and sometimes in the London Irish Women's Centre, although we're open to considering other venues as well, so you'd be very welcome to join us.

Irish Women's Writing Group

(Moy McCrory)

We've been meeting in the London Irish Women's Centre in Stoke Newington once a week for the last couple of months. The activities there have been set around developing skills such as editing, creating dialogue, characterisation. It's been a very structured course, but what's been coming up all the time are the thematic experiences which are based on Irish women living in England, looking at their lives and feelings about class, race and culture.

And although it does seem odd to have a workshop calling itself creative writing tucked away between all these life and death issues such as abortion and the war in Ireland, creative writing has the wrong sound. It's an airy fairy something and you might ask yourself what on earth has it to do with all these real issues. I think it does look strange, it does look out of place, but it's not there to deflect from anything at all. It really should take its place right in the heart of those real issues that affect us every day, every minute of our lives.

It's an odd term, because it does form this apolitical internalised image and if you close your eyes you can ignore what's going on outside, but I don't think any of us actually have that choice. The various layers of oppressions in a racist, sexist and class-ridden society would have beleaguered us before any of us could get pen to paper and we have to open our eyes very wide indeed if we're going to produce work that reflects our experience without distortions.

We have the sole right to say how we will be represented; we're the ones who will give a definitive account of our lives. At the workshop, let's hope that all writing women will meet up, make contact and see what help and support we can give each other in what is traditionally an isolated activity — that we can look at our common themes, discuss our differences and that we can inspire each other. For while we are communicating about our lives in writing, we are actually there at the same time, celebrating our survival and our strengths.

Irish Women in Islington

(Claire Keating)

The Irish Women in Islington is funded by Islington Council and is one of the networks of Irish women's groups that operate around London. While we do a lot of the same things that the other Irish women's groups do, we also do things slightly differently in our own way. We try to operate a policy where we can offer housing advice, benefits advice, welfare advice etc., to Irish women who come into the project, but obviously the amount of advice and information you can give is severely limited by the amount of housing and welfare benefits available. It's becoming increasingly difficult to provide any meaningful housing advice because there is not really any housing option available these days, as more and more boroughs send homeless Irish people back to Ireland and have less overall housing for anybody. But we do keep up that kind of service.

We also got involved with the Irish Studies Unit in North London Polytechnic and with other Irish community groups in the borough to provide awareness training for council officers working

in the neighbourhood offices to make them, within the budgets they've got, more aware of the needs of Irish women in the area, and more sensitive to how those needs can be met.

We also run a range of classes, including crafts, art classes, swimming — a variety of classes that are geared, in the main, to more elderly Irish women. We try and work with other Irish groups across to board — not just women's groups and not just groups in Islington, to identify strands of interest that go across all the different aspects of the Irish community, whether that's things like strip searching, or prisoners' rights or harassment under the PTA, or whether it's more general things to do with racist attitudes in society or oppression of Irish women in any of the ranges of ways it comes — with housing, child care or anything else.

Irish Women in Wandsworth

(Maire Curran)

Dia dhuibh a cairde. The council in Wandsworth doesn't recognise the Irish as an ethnic group and therefore doesn't fund any Irish project. Individual officers from the leisure and recreation centre and social services have co-operated with us in a small way. The Irish in Wandsworth have held two ceilis, and a series of dialogues in the library last summer. Jean Rathbone served on the ILEA Irish Working Party for the last year, which was looking into the Irish dimension in anti-racist and multi-ethnic education.

We have a representative on the Wandsworth Community Forum for setting up a women's centre in Wandsworth and also on the Battersea Power Station employment panel. I run a pensioners' group for Irish people, one morning a week. I have been running it now for three years on my own. There are 15 who come regularly to the group, and I visit six women weekly who are housebound. Through raffles and jumble sales we have managed to have a Christmas party at the Battersea Arts Centre, an annual outing to the seaside and a series of activities for the whole of St Patrick's Day.

An Irish Pensioners' Group is special because they come to meet other Irish people where they can talk about Ireland and the past. While listening to Irish music, there is a special feeling of belonging and so they can feel comfortable talking about their daily problems. We hope to plan a programme where we will invite speakers to give advice and also entertainers. We would like to make contact with other Irish groups and exchange visits, so if there are any women from Irish pensioners' groups here, I would love to meet them. We are doing our best to meet the needs of some of the Irish in Wandsworth.

Ni feider inionai machair na h-Eirann a chur síos, in other words you cannot put good Irish women down. Slan agus go rabh maith agaibh.

Islington Pensioners Group

I run a luncheon club in Manor Gardens on a Wednesday and at the George Robey and quite a lot of people come. We started with about 20 and have about 35 now. We have outings and go to the seaside each year and bring our invalids to Southend. We run raffles, jumble sales and various other things. The only other thing is that we want a lot more people to join. If you know of old people who could go to these luncheon clubs, where someone collected them, it would be very nice. Some people don't like to start going, but they miss a lot because once you start, you don't want to stop. So I hope that those people who are here will help others to come.

London Irish Women with Children Group

(Biddy Mitchell)

The London Irish Women With Children Group was formed by a group of Irish women who met regularly at the Baby and Toddler Sessions run at the London Irish Women's Centre. The group is open to all Irish women, first or second generation, who look after

children whether on their own, or as paid child minders. The aims of the group are to provide support and friendship for Irish women with children and to highlight the difficulties that many Irish women and children in Britain have — inadequate housing, loneliness, anti-Irish racism, trouble coping with a social security system very different from that in Ireland, and being away from friends and family and therefore having less help and support.

That is not to say that we only talk about our problems. The children meet and make friends with other Irish families, and the women make lasting friendships, while at the same time sharing their experiences and information on what is available. It can be very bewildering for someone coming over from Ireland to know what is available.

At the moment there are not that many of us in the group so again, we want the word spread around. There are lots of women who perhaps couldn't come here this morning because of family pressures, and if you know such women, there is a leaflet available which you can take and pass on.

The value of pre-school experience is now well appreciated, though it's hard to believe this when one sees that the already patchy provision for under-5s in London, nursery education and general facilities are threatened by further cuts.

At the moment the on-going sessions are Thursday and Tuesday mornings at Stoke Newington. We hope to start up swimming sessions again and there's a first class creche provided by the Irish Women in Islington Group. We realise that a lot of women with children who don't live near the centre won't be able to come to these sessions on a regular basis, but we also hold activities for both women and children — outings, parties etc. throughout the year and the minibus at the centre now has baby car seats and we'd like more women and children to come along to these events. So please, spread the word and encourage women you know to come along and join our group.

Grainne Mhaol

(Joanne O'Brien)

We are a group of three women who have been working for the last five years on a book which is called *Across the Water*. The book consists of interviews, stories in women's own words about their lives in this country from the 1920s onwards. In the space available, we have tried to cover as large a cross-section as possible — women from rural and urban backgrounds; women from the North, from the South, and we have also tried to delve a little into the experiences of second generation women, and women who come from a mixed race background.

We've worked collectively, that is we have shared the decision making about everything. Two of us are writers and one a photographer and I have to say it has been a very happy and lucky experience in the way it's gone, because there's been a great deal of agreement and understanding and indeed, as a photographer I've learned an awful lot about how you put the words together and how you pin things down.

We've had two years of Women's Committee GLC funding, without which we could never have completed the work because it has just taken so long and involved so many processes. We hope that other women will have the opportunity to work the way we have done, and I'm really glad to hear of all the different groups that are putting together accounts of Irish people's experience, and Irish women's experience in particular, in different boroughs in London.

We handed in the manuscript last August and since then we have had to work quite closely with the publishers. After the book comes out (on 26th May), we'll be available to give talks and slide shows. We hope that people enjoy the book. We feel that it is an interesting and riveting read and we hope as well that it contributes to our collective understanding of our experience in this country.

London Irish Women's Football

(Lena Ryan)

We are strictly a Gaelic football organisation. We started in London around 1976 but only really got ourselves organised by about 1984 when we set up a County Board, which is the organising body of ladies' football.

At that time we had four clubs — our whole organisation is based on the club system. To be a member of our association, you have to be a member of the club. In 1988 we have ten clubs, with approximately 260 members. Quite a lot of our clubs are based in north-west London but we have three setting up in south London — in Brixton, Croydon and Bromley-by-Bow. These clubs are all affiliated to either pubs or social clubs and all have their own pitches etc.

Since 1984 we run a championship and a league. We are basically a sports and social club. Our league is run on the basis that each team plays each other and the teams with the most points at the end are the winners. Our championship is run on a knock-out system, similar to the FA Cup system in soccer. In March '88 we affiliated to our sister organisation in Ireland, based in Wexford at the moment. In doing that, we are allowed to play in the all-Ireland ladies' junior championship with our first game to be played, hopefully in August, in Ruislip against the Leinster champions. To do this we have to form a London team, not just a club team. This is obviously going to take a lot of work.

In affiliating to Ireland, we had to change our rules a little and at the end of this month we have a group of people from the organisation coming over from Ireland to do a coaching and refereeing course with us. Our members are mainly made up of Irish girls and girls of Irish descent. In the past it has mainly been Irish descent, but due to the large number of emigrants in the last couple of years, quite a few of our members are girls who have played the sport in Ireland and wish to continue over here. We are not restricted to Irish people. In the past number of years we have had a large number of ethnic minorities, mainly Jamaican and West Indian girls who wish to play the sport, and all people are welcome to join us.

Our season is usually from the 1st March to the end of October. We try to run it during those times as the weather is much better and we have less chance of people being injured, therefore being out of work and causing them more hardship.

Throughout the whole year, as well as organising our league and championship, each club runs a festival day. It's a festival of football, where all the clubs and anybody who wishes to take part, come along. This serves two purposes — first of all it helps the individual clubs to raise funds, as we are not funded by any of the boroughs, solely by our own efforts; on those nights we also have a social evening, usually some form of Irish music or dancing. Because of our similarities with the camogie girls, we run in conjunction with them, so a lot of our functions are joint.

We are not restricted to people who know anything about ladies' Gaelic football or camogie. We welcome anyone who is interested in the game and also people interested in the administration side of it. We are a very young organisation at the moment and it is very difficult to be involved both in the playing of the sport and the administration side as well. It does take up a lot of time. It is completely voluntary and in order to do that, we may need people who are that bit older and maybe that bit experienced in administration.

Twice or three times a year we do a learning session whereby we teach people the basic rules and regulations of the sport and how it should be played and the various positions on the field. I am aware that each club does that at the beginning of their training year, which is right now. Anybody who is interested in joining us or help out in any way can contact me.

☼ Liverpool Abortion Support Service (LASS)

(Kathleen McKeating)

We were formed in 1981 by a group of Irish women in Liverpool and local feminists who had been involved in campaigning for abortion rights. We became increasingly aware of the trauma, the financial difficulties and the awful pressures put on women coming from Ireland to Liverpool for abortions, and also the fact that they were open to pressure, it being a port of entry, by Special Branch etc. because of the reason they had come to Liverpool and we wanted to see if there was any way we could give some help.

We had a series of meetings and training sessions where we went into all aspects of abortion and the political and cultural set-up of Ireland, both the Six Counties and the 26 Counties. This was quite successful because with the English feminists, they perhaps were jumping in with certain political or feminist ideas of why they thought women should have abortions, what they thought of as the position in Ireland and in fact we didn't want any pressure put on the women who came to Liverpool.

We made contact with groups in Belfast and Dublin, told them of our existence but in fact we found that we mainly worked through BPAS, which was the clinic in Liverpool. If we knew beforehand that someone was coming over, we could make arrangements, but what tended to happen was that counsellors, meeting Irish women at the office, we hopefully educated and trained them to be aware if the woman needed either emotional support, she wanted to be with others, she didn't want to be in a bed and breakfast for two nights, which sometimes would happen. Or if in fact the financial burden of those extra costs was just too much, so what happens is each day a woman rings the clinic and asks if they have anyone for us. Then we meet the woman, take her home, put her up for the night, take her to the clinic the next morning, go and visit her in the evening and if possible take her to the boat the following day.

We found the clinic's decision didn't in fact have that much influence on the number of referrals we had because a lot of the women who came to us were loners, if you like, they didn't come for their abortions in Liverpool because they had gone through the Well Woman or Open Line. They were the women who were looking at the small ads in newspapers, who were ringing up throwing coin after coin in a phone box from Dublin or from a rural situation and were just pleading for help to BPAS in Liverpool, came over on the boat and there was no back-up for them at all. So they tend to be the sort of women we continue to support.

We have contact with the London Abortion Support Group. We continue to be in contact with what has been happening in Belfast and Dublin. We did get some information back-up to the International Abortion Tribunal, which was held in Belfast, and we also had a couple of fund raising functions, eg. when the Referendum debate was going on and for the Defend the Clinics Campaign.

We are very concerned, obviously, about recent decisions, about the increasing difficulty and pressure Irish women are coming under and basically we welcome the time when there will no longer be any need for an organisation like LASS to exist.

☼ Open Line Counselling (Dublin)

(Ruth Riddick)

A previous speaker has referred to the fact that in September 1983 the Constitution of Ireland was amended. Article 43/3 of the Irish Constitution now reads: "The State acknowledges the right to life of

the unborn and with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect and as far as practical by its laws, to defend and vindicate that right."

As far as I understand, Argentina under the military and the present day Philippines are the only other countries in the world to have such a constitutional provision. I'm open to information on that.

In 1983 it was stated that the purpose of amending our constitution in this way was to copperfasten the absolute ban on abortion contained in the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act. However it became clear very shortly after the passing of this Amendment that its real and immediate political purpose was to close the pregnancy counselling services, the services which are very similar to the Pregnancy Advice Bureau in this country.

The legal campaign to have the pregnancy counselling services closed was successful, culminating as recently as 16th March this year, the eve of St Patrick's Day, in a decision by the Supreme Court which reads in essence: "The activities of the defendants, (essentially Open Line Counselling, my organisation and our sister organisation the Dublin Well Woman Centre), their servants or agents in assisting pregnant women within the jurisdiction to travel abroad to obtain abortions by referral to a clinic, by the making of their travel arrangements or by informing them of the identity and locale of, and method of communication with a specified clinic or clinics or otherwise, are unlawful, having regard to the provision of Article 43/3 of the Constitution."

So that's the present legal situation in the Republic of Ireland, absolute and total ban on the giving of names, addresses, telephone numbers of abortion services lawfully obtainable outside of the Republic of Ireland.

So what are we doing in the present situation? Well, basically our response has been two-fold. Since the suspension by Open Line Counselling of the formal provision of non-directive pregnancy counselling services in January 1987, pending this appeal to the Supreme Court, we established as an emergency response a counselling help-line service.

This service is available five nights a week, staffed by professional counsellors on an informal rota basis; it's contactable through and co-ordinated through my private telephone number. We advertise it as widely as possible. To date, in the last 15 months, this service has been contacted by over one thousand callers, which perhaps represents a slight increase on the demand which we would have experienced when we were providing a formal, walk-in, face to face counselling service.

So clearly the provisions of the Constitution and the judgement of the Supreme Court bear little relation to the daily experience and practical needs of Irish women, which we are continuing to try and meet in this perhaps less than entirely satisfactory way. Otherwise we are preparing our appeal to the European Court of Human Rights, where access to information is considered to be a fundamental right to be enjoyed by all citizens of member states. That's what we are doing. You can help by contributing to our Fighting Fund, details of which are on our leaflet, available to the Conference.

Meanwhile I'll just leave you with the words of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted and proclaimed by the General Assembly of the Council of Europe in December 1948: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers."



Workshop Reportbacks



There were nine workshops in the afternoon session and each had a keynote speaker to introduce the subject and to suggest areas that might be covered in the following two hours.

✻ Abortion

(Ann Lyons)

The discussion was about three areas — the current situation in Ireland as a result of the Hamilton Ruling; the situation in Britain as a result of the Alton Bill and another Private Members' Bill — the Lee Bill, which is to be introduced shortly, and the work the support group does.

The outcome of the Hamilton Ruling is that women can do counselling, but they can't give any information, which means that it's not possible to give information legally in Ireland. But in the meantime, the phone lines will continue and information will continue to be passed on in that way.

In relation to the situation in Britain, we have to contend with the Alton Bill and the Lee Bill which I mentioned, which would mean, if a woman came over from Ireland to have an abortion, her own doctor would be informed and also she would have to satisfy residential requirements here.

Also, as part of the future, as a result of the Supreme Court ruling, the Defend the Clinics and Open Line are appealing that decision to the European Court of Human Rights, but that in a way is academic, in so far as it can take up to five years for a decision. So again, what we've got to do is continue the phone lines, continue to publicise the work of the Support Group in London and the work of the abortion groups in Ireland as well.

There's a training day on May 8th, because we are very anxious for new women to join the group.

✻ Irish Lesbians

We had a large meeting with women from various sections eg. we had young lesbians, older lesbians — though nobody really that old, but I'm sure they exist even though they weren't here unfortunately. There were lesbian mothers, separated women, divorced women etc. There was a general discussion first and then we divided up into four groups — the Coming Out Group, the Network Group to establish a lesbian network in London and a group to discuss bereavement. Then there was the Clause 28 Group.

The Coming Out Group went through a lot of stories about people coming out. It was very funny in many respects, as all instances of Irish prejudices often are. They talked about all the difficulties, especially among families — everybody seemed to talk about the importance of coming out to your family, and many people want to avoid it at this stage. The difficulties of confronting your parents; mothers not wanting to confront their own homophobia, not wanting the neighbours to know if they had come out to the family. And also, even when you do come out, the sexual aspect of your relationship with your lover has invariably to be hidden and is not recognised by your families and friends and people who tend to think that they are oh so liberal.

The Network Group came up with some good proposals, one of which is that a core group will meet at this Centre (Wesley House), because it's very central, and that a series of local groups will be

established as time goes by. They will use the registration mailing list to send out the letters regarding the Network Group because they feel there were an awful lot of women here today that may want to consider their sexuality. And also lesbians who were here today and attended other workshops because they were all interrelated.

The Clause 28 Group passed a Resolution. They also decided to have a meeting on 28th April at LIWC. They stressed the necessity for all Irish women to support the Anti-Clause 28 Campaign, and they want to establish links with the Anti-Clause Campaign here in England, the Irish lesbian and gay community in relation to the Campaign and in that respect at the Anti-Clause March on April 30th, the Irish Lesbians Against Clause 28 will all march under the same banner.

The Bereavement Group stressed that they had found support among each other and the necessity for support and they also said that in reality they could not expect support from outside ie. normal Government support, but they found their meeting very helpful and emphasised that bereavement means not only grief but also considerations to be made regarding wills, decisions to be made in your life and changes.

We all met together afterwards and the main points were that Irish lesbians have got to repeatedly come out. There's not just one coming out and then everything's OK from then on; people have to repeatedly come out to themselves, their friends, to their family, to people they don't know, at work, to the Irish community, to Irish women here, to just about everybody and then each of those stages is equally hard and difficult.

The second point was about families and relatives, coping with anti-Irish racism as Irish lesbians, dealing with homophobia on a grand scale and establishing support and links. And in general they felt that it is important for all Irish women, because we are silenced as women, silenced as Irish women — that we should be strong and vocal on all these things, and as Irish lesbian women, that we should get the support from other Irish women on whatever we are fighting for.

✻ Stress

(Brid Greeley)

The first thing we did was deal with a very cold room, so we did some warm-up exercises. Then we went on to look at some definitions and try to find a definition that was appropriate to women. We saw stress as a break-down in our own self-healing capacity, which sets up a vicious cycle of stress. Then we looked at that cycle both in terms of feelings and the effect it has on our bodies.

In terms of feelings we looked at difficulties we have with feelings like anger and grief, as this ties in with the fact that women in this society are not given permission to have those feelings, and how we come to internalise all that. We looked at how the body goes into a fight or flight response, and when we are stressed, our body is in a permanent state of emergency, as if there is always impending danger.

Then we moved on to look at what is particularly stressful about being Irish women in this society. I think an awful lot of it was eloquently covered by the speaker on emigration. Then we posed the question — what do we do with the anger on a daily basis when we are confronted by racism? We found it was difficult to put that anger anywhere.

We then looked at exercises and techniques for relaxation, and found that even though we often know about these techniques and exercises that we don't do them, or we don't do them outside the class. We tried to focus on why that was and found that as women we had great difficulty in taking up time and space; that again we are only allowed an identity in terms of relating to other people and that if we try and take out some time for ourselves, it brings up a whole crisis of identity and in fact we feel more anxious and tense.

Also women talked about being alone and trying to do the exercises alone, but again feelings of guilt and selfishness, and also a feeling of abandonment and that we were alone. So that in fact, working through the anxieties around taking the time out, in terms of time and space for ourselves was the most problematic part for most of us.

We then did look at the physical exercises, the yoga, the visualisations and Tai Chi and deep breathing to see which ones were more appropriate for us.

The War in Ireland

GROUP 1

Marion, from the London Armagh Group, introduced this workshop and she talked about how Irish women's communities in London had much in common with women in the North. However, while we have been having lots of conferences around Irish women and around various issues connected with the war in the North, and passed resolutions against strip searching, what hasn't actually been taken on is the national question and how that fits in with feminism — British feminism — in that sometimes there is a dilemma in terms of what we support in terms of Irish republicanism and as feminists.

A lot of it comes from the '70s when the National Front was very strong and nationalism was often seen as being reactionary by British feminists, in the same way as now when a lot of people see the war between Iran and Iraq — if you support Iran, you are actually condoning the oppression of Iranian women. So in the same way, support is not given to Irish women fighting the war in Ireland, because they are seen as being involved with the republican movement. So the question to ask is where we as feminists want to place ourselves in regard to the national question.

Marion looked at the repression of women in the south and where that stems from — the partition of Ireland and the southern government wanting to contain the war in the sense of upholding capitalism in the south of Ireland. But a lot of southern women coming to London have actually got more involved with the issues because of being faced with Irish racism in Britain. One example Marion spoke about is a dilemma for feminists here. There's an article in *The Irish Post* where one of the Birmingham Six was calling for support for the Alton Bill and how no one had reacted to him. The significant thing was not that he had written the letter, but that nobody had written back and responded to that. We said that there wasn't a cohesive group where we could say "We'll react as feminists here to this". And if you do react, is that saying that you're not supporting the Irish republican movement and how this will be seen.

Then we raised various points — how it is a job for people in this country to stand up for Irish freedom and take sides in the Irish war. And for a lot of British feminists the problem is having to confront British imperialism, so they blame Irish republicanism rather than British imperialists in Ireland. However one speaker pointed out that there is a wide range of diverse groups working around the Irish war and people join groups for different reasons and in a way it is those personal reasons that keep people going and active around the war. However, we do recognise that in recent weeks Britain has stepped up its oppressive rule in Ireland, and in Britain more and more repressive measures are being carried out against Irish people. More and more people want to get involved, but maybe they don't have the groups to get involved with.

We talked about setting up some sort of umbrella movement, but we were saying that there were various fundamental differences among the groups working around Ireland and people chose to work with different groups for different reasons. So the only concrete thing we came out with was that the various people who work with different groups would send in a list of the resources they'd got — videos for hire, contact addresses, meetings coming up within the group and people who weren't in groups could, if they were isolated in a town where there wasn't anything going on around Ireland, borrow the video and show it at a women's group, or they could get in touch with that group.

(Kate Foley) GROUP 2

Our discussion concentrated mostly around how we felt about whether the Irish women's community needs to have its own collective voice to express how we feel about nationalism, republicanism, sexism and feminism. Sisters from the North particularly expressed their feelings about coming to terms with their experiences in the Six Counties only they are here in Britain. And about feelings of alienation being surrounded by women who appear to have a very well worked out political line which doesn't necessarily accord with the reality of their experiences.

It was felt that there is a lack of provision and resources for us as Irish women, and as a result of that we are forced to collude with the stereotypes we are presented with. We agreed that what we would like is a forum around the theme of women and the national question, but within that to discuss a number of particular questions like mental health or class, or experiences of being a second generation Irish woman. So we wanted the conference organisers (or somebody) to take that up and hopefully to get that sort of thing going, which would be widely advertised and held in a central and accessible venue.

Workshop Keynote Speaker: Marion Larraghy

Creative Writing

(Aine Collins)

One of the things coming from the workshop for women who are writing and women who would like to write, was for women who are writing — how do we make more time for writing, and for women who would like to write — how on earth do we get started? There will be a day conference on 14th May for women writers. Then there's a weekend for women writers coming up in the autumn. The other thing is there's a group called the Irish Women Writers Network which meets on the first Wednesday of every month here at Wesley House at 7.30. The Women Writers Network also organises days when we specifically concentrate on writing and there's a couple of those coming up.

It was a bit strange in a way, sitting down talking about writing because what a lot of us wanted to be doing was writing and so in some ways again in future we hope to get our act together to organise events that are about participation and involvement, rather than talking about the never-never. The never-never in this instance being our writing. We split into two groups — mine was a very large group, which indicated the interest in reading and writing. A huge number of women are writing and that raised the question of what is writing and do we have to call ourselves a writer before we're writing, and there's lots of women writing at all sorts of times. And the importance as well of being with women who see themselves as readers.

We are trying to get some of our writings published and I think what's really important, since for the most part we are dealing with English publishers and they read our work through their eyes with all their stereotyped views and values that they're bringing to it, and it's really important that we recognise women who see themselves as

readers, because if they read the stuff before we send it to the publishers, and think it's OK, then we know it's OK. So we were talking about the collective process — writing isn't just an individual activity. We write stuff and then read it to a group and then rewrite it and then give it to more women to read and it might have some woman's name at the bottom of it, but it's actually been written by more than one woman.

Four of us from the Irish Women's Writing Network are going to do a reading tonight — that really is an open reading, so if any of you have stuff that you'd like to read, or you've memorised something or you want to write something between now and then, bring it along.

We talked about being working class; being second generation or about being Irish and now living here; our views on Ireland and how we identify. We summed that up by saying there are so many ways of identifying ourselves and all of those ways affect our writing in one way or another. Sexuality, leaving Ireland and coping with a sense of loss and writing "as Gaelige" and the shortage of material written by Irish women for women who need written material for classes, whether they are teaching Irish or doing women's writing.

Getting published — women write for all sorts of different reasons, and maybe after a time some of us decided that we would like to get some stuff published and there's a multitude of questions that that raises. But at the same time, we think it's important that given that we have a lot to say and that what we have to say as Irish women is valuable, that it's important that it is published.

Feedback is important — you mightn't like to give feedback in public at the reading tonight, but give it afterwards because what we need to be very careful about is that there aren't at the moment publishers crying out to publish us, but there certainly is a tendency around for English publishers to think "Oh, here's an Irish book. We'll publish this" and to ignore the quality and not apply the same standards of editing and criticism to it. We wrote to Virago and what they basically said in their letter was that they couldn't publish anything by us because they were already publishing something else by Irish women. So it sounded to me as if they were saying "We've

got our one Irish book on women; that's it. We're dealing with Irish women that way". So if you want to write to Virago and let them know what you think of them, please do.

(Nora Connolly) GROUP 2

Moy McCrory was in this group and she described her experiences as a writer and as somebody who runs writers' workshops and how she began to emerge as a writer, from which anybody can draw experience and parallels from which they can use to write. In general, the topics covered went from: who would want to read my stuff, right through to how to get rid of creative blocks and how to create methods for yourself to work well in and how to recognise patterns in your work so you can avoid the sense of frustration or despair because you know that your writing voice will come back if you just wait quietly for it.

We then went into other areas — the Great Untold Story of the Irish in Britain through women's eyes in the last few years. I tend to write and recognise these headings, any of which could be taken away and written from. And "The Shame" came up and "The Loss" came up and we have heard that a thousand times, but there is still that story to be told, and why there's a story to be told is that we recognise fully and freely that although we didn't like the use of the word "oral tradition", that we are used to telling stories because we are Irish and sometimes the English haven't the patience to appreciate a refined way of speaking and an imaginative way of speaking, and I consider this is very important — it's about writers taking responsibility within the present political atmosphere of what they choose to reveal or expose through their work. That was another topic that could be taken up and taken away and debated endlessly.

That's about it, except to say that I think there is not one way or one reason or one manner in which you should write or could write, except to like what you have written and to continue to do so, to grow in confidence and sharing.

Workshop Keynote Speaker: Moy McCrory



✠ Emigration

(Sheila McCarthy)

We decided to concentrate on our own experiences of emigration and we didn't have time to make resolutions as such. From the women who had emigrated recently, different things came up. To begin with, we were talking about the lack of preparation before we came over and the actual shock of arriving here and the difficulty of getting accommodation, of getting work, getting into low-paid employment.

Another experience mentioned was that women got so caught up in getting employment and getting into a place and as soon as that started getting sorted out, culture shock then began to hit. And also, the other side of that was that women who felt that things were going better materially here than at home and because there was better work opportunity, it was quite surprising to find that they were going back into depression. It was then that they started to identify this as racism and the experience of emigration.

Women discussed the fact that their accents sometimes made them afraid to speak because of ridicule and also they were made to feel uncomfortable when told they had a "gorgeous" accent or it's "very lyrical" or "very quaint" and that after a while that didn't really feel very complimentary. Another mention was that women were asked "What do you think of the IRA?" and the association with terrorism automatically if you are Irish. A very strong thing with recent emigres too was a lot of women felt it wasn't a case of choice, and felt quite angry about this — that they didn't actually want to be here. And also finding it difficult to cope with racism and jokes and this kind of attitude — and sometimes as well because of Irish jokes at home which were acceptable and I personally was discussing the acceptability of Kerry jokes at home, being from Kerry myself — and often finding the Irish jokes over here were just a switch over, so that it took quite a while to handle that situation as well.

We had one woman who has been here for 35 years and still felt that she hadn't made any real friends and still felt very isolated outside her family. Also mothers who had been in the areas for years and years and still felt very isolated. People felt that they were becoming more withdrawn with time and that they were losing their openness and friendliness and were being made fools of if they were being more friendly and open than others would be. Also, looking at people who had emigrated recently, they were very much aware about how open they were and felt quite sad at the notion that they weren't going to be like that any more.

Some people felt this to the extent that they felt it brought about personality change and was very damaging, and would use terms like "soul-destroying" to say what it was about for them. Also, people were talking about having emigrated here twenty or thirty years ago and find it odd seeing new generations coming all the time, and the whole thing of having to support and helping out young people coming over now and start the whole process again.

A couple of women talked about their experience as having emigrated from Belfast and they felt over here an inverted form of racism, new to a lot of people, which was people actually showing interest in them because they came from Belfast where the troubles are and so saw them as somewhat different, and wanting to go back to Belfast with them so they could say they had been where the troubles were, and then being very disappointed because they hadn't seen enough soldiers or guns.

We also had the experience of second generation women and this was varied as well. Some felt ashamed of the fact that they were Irish and would be inclined to deny it, especially in school because they felt discrimination in this way, while others had difficulty in keeping their Irishness and found it difficult to find ways where they really wanted to identify themselves, but because they were second generation they were seen as English. And some felt quite angry at the fact that their parents had had to emigrate and they hadn't settled here and hadn't been able to make it at home.

We then had the readings from "Across the Water" and I think

the feeling from that was very much one of sadness at people's experience and running through the whole workshop was this feeling that came across of depression and loss and anger and we felt very much that the reality of emigration is one of isolation, discrimination and institutional racism and we need to come to terms with the reality of it and become more organised.

Once again we have the feeling that we are always going home and we don't settle properly and talking to people who had been here for many many years, and still felt that they were going home. We also felt it was very sad about the people who never came back home because of the thing that you have to go home with riches and as a successful person, so that they got completely lost here. Or people who came here and felt that they had integrated to the extent of completely denying their Irishness.

Again, we felt different things about the issue of an Irish community here. Some people felt they couldn't identify an Irish community, while others felt there was an identifiable Irish community, but that didn't mean we wanted to align with them. We talked about the fact that there is a community of women developing and that this conference reflects that very much and it is very important for us that we build on it.

We also wanted to say something about the brain drain being the picture of emigration from Ireland today and the attitude of the government putting it across of it being about the intellectual, well-educated people who are leaving Ireland, because this is not the reality of it. People from all classes are leaving Ireland. That was being put across because it was mainly middle class parents who were articulating and making their demands known, and who were being heard.

We finished up on the note of the Irish government's role in emigration and a lot of us felt very angry about the fact that they are not taking responsibility for what's happening. Some people were talking about how the Irish government view emigration as that we don't really have that many problems because at least it's legal to come here and it isn't to the States. And also this notion of emigration to England being second class in some way — you know, you can't actually make it to America, and we're not very well organised over here, and you can come home any time, so it's not as important. And it is really very necessary for us to push it with the Irish government to pay attention to what is going on here.

Finally, I think I might have given a very depressing picture of what went on. The picture is depressing, but at the same time I think I would say that there was a very warm feeling in the workshop and it was very good to share our experiences, and very supportive, and that it is very necessary that as Irish women, we give each other support.

*Workshop Keynote Speakers: Stacia Crickley
Eithne O'Flynn
Members of Grainne Mhaol*

✠ Mothers' and Children's Group

(Liz Marcebo)

The first thing was the isolation which society in general forces on all new mothers. This is felt more strongly by us being Irish women coming from the sort of background that we come from and it's doubly so for those of us who have black children. As one mother of adolescent children said, "Being a mother is not just about having babies". Another thing was the antagonism we find from the medical world. We have the babies despite those people. It was really stimulating because we had women who are pregnant in the group, women with small babies, people with young children and people with adolescent children, and we all felt that it was great to talk about all the different angles and we wanted to hear about each other's stories.



We're very conscious of the way people treat you differently from the minute you become pregnant and I'm afraid that we feel isolated by not just general society, but women who are feminists who don't have children — they actually do isolate us, so I'm talking to the rest of you without kids — please understand that we are still women, we're still people. We want to give something to the children but we also want to claim our own space as well. Please remember us when you are doing everything else, don't forget us.

We spoke about the British educational system and how it totally ignores the Irish culture. Women who had children going into school were suddenly confronted with the choices they had and we discovered that going to a catholic school, you are denying them the chance to get in touch with their Irish culture more than if you don't go to a catholic school, because it appears that it's dangerous now to be Irish. The catholic church doesn't want to identify with Irishness any more.

We've decided that we've got to start here and now; we can't just let what happened here today go by — we've got to keep the threads that we've got, so we've got to keep in touch with each other. We intend to have workshops where we help each other to gain strength and to explore the areas of our own personal growth and to build up strength to tackle all other issues. Because if we don't give ourselves something, if we don't claim our own space we can't really be productive in dealing with other outside issues in the community.

We decided that one of the things we could do is have videos of

women with children talking about their experiences and distributing a video like that to schools and people who work in playschools, and local government — just make our voice be heard. We said it would be really good if we could set up a conference like this for women who've just got children and want to talk about the issues around that. It would be very important that we should include black women who have got Irish partners because we'd like to give them support as Irish people; we'd like them to know the wealth of values that we as Irish people have and we want to extend the thousand Irish welcomes bit, which personally I don't feel is given out very much anyhow.

We decided to set up a network of support, even if most of the time it's only on the telephone because we're spread out all over London. We would like to set up a further workshop and will be consulting to see when this will be possible.

Keynote Speaker: Maureen Carroll

❖ Spirituality

(Flora Kerrigan)

We started giving our personal opinions and experiences and I felt there was an emphasis on disenchantment with the catholic church particularly, because most of us had come from that tradition,

together with a feeling of loss but a lack of knowledge as to what to do with this feeling of something lost. We all felt that there was great importance in ritual particularly at times of death when people feel a need to grieve and show their feelings and we have a lot of that in Ireland in our tradition. Though sometimes it doesn't come out very well and sometimes because people drink a lot we abuse it, although we use it to get to a spiritual way of feeling, it then becomes not very nice and it devalues us.

Some women had found their own spiritual path and were content with it and this was sometimes difficult to tie in with the feeling of dissatisfaction and disenchantment which was experienced by the other women in the group. We were beginning to discuss a definition of spirituality rather than religious allegiance and some of us thought it had something to do with being clear and at peace with ourselves, and to be some kind of force for peace and clarity and this would affect other people around us.

There was an important link, we felt, between politics and spirituality and this should come together and we don't necessarily very often find it in organised religion. We felt that spirituality was a personal thing and that those of us who felt that there was something good in either the catholic church or some of the other christian churches or many other traditions would like to take the best out of them, but not think we have to take the whole package. Because there was a large proportion of women who wanted to find out more and were just beginning to explore ideas, we felt we'd like to set up a meeting at the London Irish Women's Centre and we thought we might do this on 25th May.

Chair: Flora Kerrigan

❖ Housing

Our main speaker was Claire McElwee from the Irish in Islington Project and we had speakers from all over London as well as someone from Brighton, people who either work with Irish women in bad housing conditions or women who are interested in improving the lot of Irish women.

We concentrated on three main areas. One was the Housing Bill and the implications that has for Irish women, but also the Social Security legislation which has now gone through Parliament, and also the repatriation of Irish families and the conditions facing many Irish women today.

It was generally agreed that while the Housing Bill is going to have horrendous implications for Irish women, young and old, people couldn't help feeling how on earth could things get any worse than they are now? Because we went through so many different areas: we talked about young single women who either have been living in London for a long time or who have just come over from Ireland, who've got little money and who can't find any accommodation at all. There are few hostels for Irish women, and a lot of these people end up on the streets with terrible consequences.

We talked about elderly women — women who've lived in this country for years and years and who are living in some of the worst privately rented accommodation, who are putting up with harassment from landlords to this day. We talked about women who, under the Homeless Persons Act, should be classed as priority homeless by local authorities, and yet are being turned away by all authorities — Tory, Liberal and Labour authorities, and we felt very angry that women in this position are being turned away.

We cited a number of cases from different authorities — women who are pregnant, who are being sent back on the basis of a telephone call to an Irish authority, and we felt Irish women were being singled out, and having to bear the brunt of the cut-backs in local authorities. This disgusted us, particularly the Labour authorities who we feel have made commitments to ethnic minorities and we feel they have broken these commitments.

We also pointed out the position of Irish travellers and the fact that they face horrendous living conditions. They can't even get temporary sites, and get hostility not just from people in this country — Irish people as well as English people, and we felt that their concerns needed to be taken on board as well as Irish women who have got homes of one kind or other.

We talked a little bit about the Social Security changes and we pointed out that the abolition of the Urgent Needs payments was going to have a terrible effect on people. Up to now people have been able to get at least some kind of payment while they've been trying to get accommodation and this has allowed them to at least pay a deposit to some racketeer landlord. At least it's allowed them to establish themselves in a home for a short while. These, of course are being abolished now and the Social Fund which replaces them is going to be a discretionary fund, and we felt that that allowed for people in DHSS offices who are anti-Irish to take out their racism on people and send them away with nothing in their pockets.

Finally we came on to the dreaded Housing Bill and how in every single area Irish women are going to be absolutely hammered. It's going to make the homeless women who come over here have even less chance of finding anywhere to live because the Housing Bill forgets to mention the homeless. It doesn't put any obligations on Housing Action Trusts or landlords who are going to be taking over and privatising public accommodation. We pointed out how Irish women who are council tenants are going to be fooled like a lot of other people, into accepting private landlords taking over their properties.

The Government says that a minority of an estate can vote to have themselves taken over by a private landlord. A lot of people we felt, would be disillusioned and wouldn't bother voting or might be fooled into thinking that a private landlord might do something, because they'd become so disillusioned with the cutbacks in council house spending over the years, and that's something we felt we'd really need to urge people to think about carefully.

Private tenants again — we know that this Bill will be devastating because it will give landlords even greater powers than they've got now to evict people, to raise rents, to do whatever they like. And particularly elderly Irish women, large numbers of whom are living in privately rented slum accommodation — there's nothing whatsoever in this Bill which says landlords should have a duty to carry out repairs. It's a complete landlords' charter, and we felt that forbodes very badly for Irish women.

We ended on a very positive note in the sense that, although there is a lot of demoralisation among people that this Government is just infallible and they can just ride over us and steamroller through any legislation they want — we feel that people have got to stand up and fight what is ahead of us. We hope to set up an Irish Women's Campaign Group that will campaign around the Housing Bill and all other areas of legislation and we will expose those authorities who we feel are giving Irish women a bad deal and we will put demands on them to take our views seriously. They come after our votes when it's election time, so we expect something back from them in terms of housing.

Keynote Speaker: Claire McElwee

❖ Statement

(Liz Masebo)

I'd like to ask the women here today to examine themselves as to the extent to which they might be a party to white racism. I ask this as an Irish woman who is married to a black person, and is the mother of a Tanzanian-Irish daughter, growing up in Britain. In the light of this week's BBC production "Black & White", I wish to confirm that I experience, usually covert, white racism — not just from British people, but also and more painfully, from Irish people who aren't always aware of their collusion with white racism.



Resolutions



1. The Home Office continues to refuse Category "A" Irish political prisoners the right to transfer to prisons near their homes in the North of Ireland. This policy effectively sentences the mainly female visitors to the same sentence as has been dished out to the prisoner, travelling once a year, with children, on the limited budgets into a hostile country with the very real threat of the Prevention of Terrorism Act hanging over every visit. It is not in line even with stated Home Office policy of transferring prisoners, at their request, to prisons near their own homes and is deliberate punishment of visitors.

This conference calls on the Home Office to grant all prisoners transfers at their request, to facilitate visitors. And we further call on the Government in the 26 Counties to ratify the European Convention on the transfer of prisoners, to enable transfers to take place from England to the 26 Counties.

Proposed by IRISH PRISONERS APPEAL

Motion carried.

2. This conference calls for continued pressure to be put on the British Government to end the use of strip searching. The use of strip searching has escalated since last year's Conference and is now more widely used in police and prison custody, as well as at customs points. There continues to be systematic abuse of Irish women prisoners by strip-searching in Durham Prison and Maghabery Jail.

This conference calls for an immediate end to the use of strip-searching, which is degrading, humiliating and not of security value.

Proposed by IRISH PRISONERS APPEAL

Motion carried.

3. We ask that this conference recognise the need for Irish lesbians to be supported both locally and centrally in the Irish community, and to have equal access and priority to the resources available to other members of the Irish community, through for example the London Irish Women's Centre, the IBRG, Camden Irish Centre etc. We ask that the newly formed London Irish Network be supported.

Proposed by IRISH LESBIAN WORKSHOP

Motion carried.

4. That this conference recognises the central contribution of Irish lesbians to the development of the Irish women's community in London. We deplore the attacks on the lesbian and gay community, represented by Clause 29, and we pledge our full and active support to the campaign against it.

Proposed by IRISH LESBIAN WORKSHOP

Motion carried.

5. That this conference abhors the total absence of women from the Dublin Millennium promotion poster. At a time when Dublin is celebrating a thousand years of Irish history, we question how it can ignore the contribution women have made to the development of that city.

Proposed by SARAH KELLEHER

Motion carried.

6. This conference condemns the decision of the Appeal to the Supreme Court for its criminalising of women who seek to support, advise and assist women seeking abortions in Ireland. Irish women in England will continue to provide what advice, assistance and support they can to all Irish women seeking

abortions. We wholeheartedly support the continued struggle against this ruling and the application to the European Court of Human Rights. We believe that all women have the right to decide for themselves if they want an abortion, and call upon all Euro MPs to raise the issue in the European Parliament.

Proposed by the IRISH WOMEN'S ABORTION SUPPORT GROUP

Motion carried.

7. This conference recognises that the Housing Bill is simply one aspect of a sustained attack on working class communities, their living conditions and their basic human rights. This legislation represents a direct attack on those people who are in the greatest housing need. It will add to the growing numbers of homeless Irish women in London, and it will worsen the position of Irish women who are in Council or private rented accommodation. This conference resolves to establish a campaign group of Irish women who will organise against the Housing Bill and all other socio-economic measures introduced by this government which worsen our position.

This group will seek to monitor and expose the injustices that occur as a result of the Tory government's measures. This group will bring pressure to bear upon government and government agencies to reverse the ongoing legislation, and it will align itself with all other groups, organisations and communities who are also bearing the brunt of government attacks.

Additionally, this Conference totally condemns the way in which local authorities, and particularly Labour ones, have used Central government legislation in order to attack Irish women, most notably with the repatriation of Irish families, but also with the harassment of Irish travellers and the non-provision of permanent sites. This conference calls upon those authorities to reverse such policies, and we resolve to do everything in our power to defend the rights of Irish women against the blatantly discriminatory treatment they are currently receiving.

Proposed by the HOUSING WORKSHOP

Motion carried.

8. This conference endorses the report on Irish women in London, published recently by the London Strategic Policy Unit, which highlights the disadvantages facing Irish women in employment and housing in London. We call upon local authorities to adopt this report and to establish policies which will positively improve the position of Irish women.

Proposed by the LONDON IRISH WOMEN'S CENTRE

Motion carried.

9. This conference recognises that the British State's use of systematic strip searching on Irish Republican women is a method of torture aimed at breaking their political will. We call on this Conference to support Irish Republican women in their struggle against British imperialism and to join in the campaign to end strip searching.

Proposed by the STOP THE STRIPSEARCHES CAMPAIGN

Motion carried.

10. That all Irish organisations, including the Irish Women's Centre and the London Strategic Policy Unit, actively monitor incidents of racial harassment as it seriously affects the quality of life of women and Irish people in Britain.

Proposed by MARY BUTLER

Motion carried.



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