

THE  
5<sup>TH</sup>

LONDON IRISH WOMEN'S  
CONFERENCE REPORT





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This report comes from the 5th London Irish Women's Conference held on Sunday 26th November 1989 at The Albany Centre, South East London.

Although 'conference' is the term employed to describe these annual meetings of Irish women in London, and the format of the day resembles that of the standard conference, the 'conferences' of Irish women in London have always had a quality that is unique. That quality makes it a safe and welcoming event in which Irish women from all backgrounds can participate. That safety enables women who attend to voice contradictions as well as certainties, to debate and exchange information and experiences in ways that deepen awareness and break down barriers of isolation. It is that quality that has facilitated each successive 'conference' to build on the progress of the previous one, and in reading this report from the 5th Irish Women's Conference, it is clear that this one, too, marked a new stage or step in our collective journey, taking us forward yet again.

It is also clear that the essentials are the same – we face the problems as we did at the first conference in June 1984 – perhaps even more, with many rights having been eroded during the 1980s and a marked increase in emigration from Ireland. But we have many things now that we did not have then: we have a broader sense of 'community' than we had then: we have had a lot of experience in campaigning and working together in the meantime: we have an established profile inside and outside the Irish community; there is some research and information available now that was not available then; and we have a wide network of individuals and groups that were not in existence then to the same extent.

One of these groups is The London Irish Women's Centre. It is important to mention this as it is the main co-ordinating body behind the Irish Women's Conference. The centre works very closely with other Irish advice and welfare agencies to alleviate the growing poverty and welfare needs within the Irish community. It provides a vital service to the Irish women's community – one which cannot be provided by mainstream agencies. For the past four years it has been funded by The London Boroughs Grants Scheme. At this moment the centre is threatened with withdrawal of funding by the Grants Committee. Its threatened closure is an issue not just for the Irish community but for London's community as a whole.

If funds of the centre are cut or withdrawn the future of the annual conference of Irish women looks doubtful. We hope the campaign to 'Save The Centre' will be successful – in fact we believe it will be successful – and look forward to the future with confidence and solidarity. (March, 1990)

## Group Reports

Cathleen Dermody

### CAMDEN IRISH PENSIONERS GROUP

My name is Cathleen Dermody and I organise the Irish pensioners' group in Camden Town. At the last census there were two and a half thousand elderly people in Camden and so two Irish social workers in Social Services Area 2 thought it would be a good idea to start a pensioners' group. We started with a prime pump money of about £200 and eight members and it developed from there onwards. As a result of this there were three other Irish pensioners' groups started in Camden so it has been very successful. The group is organised by pensioners for pensioners.

So far we have taken two trips to Ireland, we have taken a trip to the Channel Islands and this year we went to Boston for a week's holiday for which we got £90.00 per person

from Camden Council. We also receive a grant of £1200 for running the club which is for all our stationery, telephone and other things. We do a lot of fundraising ourselves as we have to make up a deficit of about £500 a year, quite a lot for elderly people. As well as the trips, we have done various other activities and so I feel it has been very successful and because of this I would urge elderly people to form themselves into groups and be recognised. Now people say that we haven't accomplished anything, but we have. We've now got a small voice in Camden Council which means that they consult us on various things they're about to do. For instance, they consulted us on the restructuring of the Home Help service, a service which is very important to us because we are the future consumers. Lastly I would also like to say that the elderly must also listen to the young and be advised from time to time.



Heather Smith

#### IRISH LESBIAN NETWORK

The Irish Lesbian Network was set up after the last Irish Women's Conference in April 1988. We decided we needed a forum for support, socials and campaigning. People, especially heterosexuals, often think of sexuality as a private matter but we felt that we needed, because we are discriminated against and harassed in so many ways, to get together to support one another, but also to campaign for change. Society is very much built around the heterosexual nuclear family and therefore there are a whole range of institutions which ignore our needs as Irish lesbians and as women. For example, housing provision is always geared towards families and the definition of family is always the heterosexual nuclear family. Also we are discriminated against in immigration laws, in employment, health services, custody laws and in education. We are abused and ridiculed or ignored by the media and there are many very negative images and few positive images of lesbians and gay men and also of Irish people. We also experience a lot of intimidation, harassment by the police, getting beaten up on the street and so on. We also have to deal with a hatred and homophobia within the Irish community and also within the lesbian and gay community in England and in society in general. There are pressures at work, pressures within our families and from peers and it's really hard to stay out once you are out, and hard to come out in the first place. This is partly the reason for this group, to raise our profile and to say Irish lesbianism does exist and we're here and we are proud of who we are and we want to be respected and so on.

Another point I wanted to make was that everyone assumes you're heterosexual unless you say otherwise so there is a lot of pressure to constantly have to say do not assume we are heterosexual. Also there is a lot of isolation because we are a minority group. We are a sexual minority as well as being part of an ethnic minority group and so it's really hard to find one another, but it's very affirming in strength once we do get together. We are a very small active group from a range of backgrounds and we try to work in a non oppressive way and we would really welcome new members.

I want to say a little bit about what we have achieved in the last year and a half. We've organized a lot of ceilis and discos for Irish lesbians that have been open to all women. We organized a big event that was to be part of Lesbian and Gay Pride Week, which included live musicians as well as a ceili and disco. We are also setting up an embryonic Irish Lesbian Line and again we badly need volunteers. We have organized an Irish lesbian cultural even-

ing and we ran a counselling day with various workshops. We have gone on demonstrations, for example against Section 28, and also for Lesbian and Gay Pride Week. We've also socialised a lot together, formed friendships, gone to concerts, to lesbian and gay events as a group of Irish women. One of our group also helped organize Irish women's traditional music sessions at the Duke of Wellington pub on Sundays.

Let me say a few words about what we do. We are going to continue to organize ceilis because we think that is an important space for Irish lesbians. We are also going to organise a big event for St Patrick's day. We want to strengthen the phone line so again we need volunteers. Like I say, we want to raise our profile, we are going to write more articles and possibly make a video about Irish lesbians. We'd like to campaign on a wide range of issues that affect us and improve our links with lesbians in Ireland, both in the 6 counties and the 26 counties and in other parts of England, Wales and Scotland. We'd also like to establish support groups and possibly specific interest groups. We are existing in a very hostile climate, with the erosion of so many of our rights as people in general. Our education system is being destroyed, our welfare state being eroded, there is increased homelessness as a result of the Housing Act. The immigration laws have become more repressive, there is increased censorship in the media so that we're silenced both as Irish women and as lesbians and there are just so many issues we'd like to campaign on and have an input specifically as Irish lesbians. We refuse to be pushed back into the closet by repressive legislation or by anti-gay and lesbian hatred.

Jean Rathbone

#### COMMUNITY WORKER IN ADULT EDUCATION

My name is Jean Rathbone and I'm from a group called Irish Women in Wandsworth which is based in the south of London which is very bereft of any Irish activities, so we're fighting quite a battle down there. I've been a school governor for 18 years so it's been difficult for me to keep out of education but, fortunately, I never went in as a teacher and I'm very glad. Twenty years of being a school governor proved to me how difficult it can be in teaching but I am a community worker in adult education and that's very interesting because nobody knows what it is and I'm defining it as I go along, which is a very nice position to find oneself in.

I'm going to talk about ILEA. When ILEA, which has been regarded as one of the most innovative education authorities, initiated a multicultural, anti-racist initiative, it largely ignored the Irish. These initiatives were seen to be necessary when the assimilationists, which was very much an easy way out approach, were seen to have failed (particularly black youngsters) and when people saw

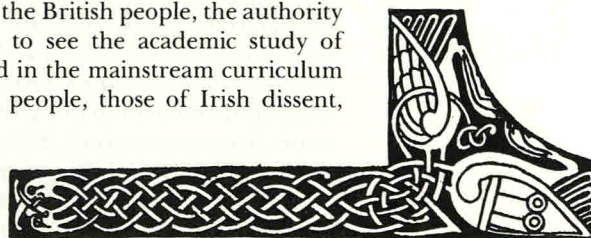
the insidious racism, which became very overt in the sixties and seventies.

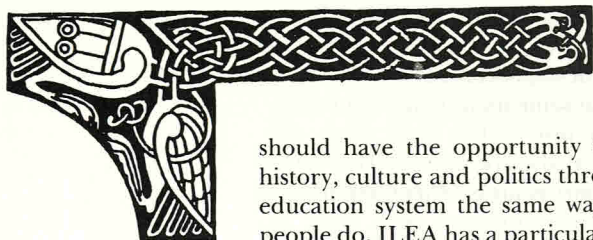
I believe that racism is different from anti-Irish prejudice and discrimination. I know many activists in the Irish community who do not agree with me. Racism is a universal phenomenon and it applies to people with darker skins no matter how long they have lived in a country, and no matter how many generations back they go. Anti-Irish prejudice and discrimination are not universal but exist in Britain, and like racism are a result of colonisation. Anti-Irish prejudice can only be explained in terms of colonial justification and a continuing colonial relationship. Racism too is rooted in the notion of the colonialists asserting their superiority over the inferior natives they have come to civilise and racist ideology is based on the superiority of white people over black people. The reason why I'm dwelling on this point is to show why an anti-racist policy could exclude the Irish. However, a multi ethnic curriculum should not have excluded the Irish, but it did. Now I feel I should explain the difference, in educational terms, between a multicultural curriculum policy and an anti-racist policy. You can very easily indulge in a bit of multiculturalism without ever addressing or tackling racism or prejudice. Nevertheless many people see anti-racism and multiculturalism as being the same and so this can partly explain why the Irish were literally left out and ignored and of course the issue of Section 11 funding which applies to the New Commonwealth. The CRE and many black groups do not believe in Section 11 and want to abolish it. They want racism addressed, not this issue of New Commonwealth which in the end is to do with multilingualism and nothing else. However, it has been difficult to get ILEA to recognise that the Irish are the largest immigrant group and that the Irish do suffer from discrimination, prejudice and disadvantage, and the very reason that there is anti-Irish prejudice is precisely because of the continuing colonial relationship and war. Even when we can show the extent of discrimination and prejudice against the Irish in Britain and in England in particular; even after we have shown our experiences as immigrants are very similar to black and Asian people; even when we have demonstrated that we have our own culture and history, there is still great resistance from bodies like ILEA to do anything about it. Why? Because of the continual colonial relationship and war. In other words, the Irish in Britain, in educational terms and other terms, are seen as controversial, dangerous and taboo. Everyone hates Sun type headlines, and Francis Morrell, the ex leader of ILEA, was no exception. She made it quite clear there was going to be no Irish dimension because it might invite 'IRA in the classroom' headlines from the Sun. It has been a long, long fight for us and that's why there has been so much caution. Two years ago an ILEA working party was set up. I served on that and

at the time it was chaired by councillor Hilda MacCafferty who represents Hammersmith and Fulham. The report and the recommendations came out some months ago but unfortunately it was just at the time when the announcement of the abolition of ILEA was made. This report is an excellent report for those working in education who want to agitate for an Irish dimension.

It now means that it's left to the boroughs to pick up on this. This means that we will all have to lobby our boroughs to try and get an Irish dimension into our education service at all levels. We want our children to achieve at schools and this can best happen if they're valued as people. Education is an extremely important position to begin to counter the general ignorance of Irish affairs and negative images of Irish people we find in the media, the classrooms, the playgrounds and so on. We want Irish Studies in Higher Education on a par with American Studies, Caribbean and African Studies, Oriental and Asian Studies. More importantly we want teachers from nursery classes upward to help our children be proud of their Irishness rather than being ashamed of it or hiding it. We've all had experience of this, for instance our children wanting to change their names. This is because anti-Irish racism is rife in the playground. It's the only acceptable form of racism. Irish jokes are in abundance and our children are subjected to this sort of racism daily. We want to improve the multicultural curriculum for everybody by including an Irish dimension at all levels and in all subjects. There is a shocking amount of ignorance in schools in England about British colonial exploitation generally, and of the history, language and cultures of the people and the pupils in their schools.

I'll turn now to the adult education service because I have been working in that for a year and I can see the tremendous potential that this service holds, for Irish women in particular. The service is there and you must start to make demands of it. You only need fourteen people as a group and you can demand a course tailor-made to your needs. This could include Irish history, literature, dance, Irish language, music and anything else that you wanted. A quote from an ILEA document reads: 'The adult education service has a uniquely important role to play in meeting the needs of the Irish community in London. All adult education institutes have resources and facilities to assist the fostering of cultural activities related to this group in their area. Given the importance of Irish history, literature and politics, to both the present and past experience of the British people, the authority would expect to see the academic study of these reflected in the mainstream curriculum of AEI. Irish people, those of Irish dissent,





should have the opportunity to study their history, culture and politics through the adult education system the same way that English people do. ILEA has a particular commitment to providing educational opportunities to working class people and women who have been denied access to opportunities in the past. Many Irish people are already to be found on many basic education programmes and on Access and Return to Learning courses in ILEA so it is very important that you use this to its full potential. It's a service for you, so please do use it.

The Youth Service – again that's a part of the education service that is not meeting the needs of Irish people. I was at one time an ILEA youth worker and I just found it so appalling in terms of racism and sexism generally, but also in the denial of the existence of Irish youngsters. When I became the focus for these Irish youngsters it was the first time in their lives that they had anybody Irish to identify with who was in an official position. Their teachers had never realised that these children were Irish, that they had Irish parents, and so their whole identity was being completely denied. The Youth Service has been very bad in recognizing the new immigrant community, as well as recognizing the issue of first and second generation Irish people. What is more important – it's ignoring the first generation, the newcomers coming over. There is The Action Group for Irish Youth and they have set up a Youth Service Working Party and have produced information packs on Irish youth. They have done a lot of work but they have had to do this on their own. Again I would urge you all to go back to your own boroughs and start writing letters. Ring up the Education Department and the Youth Services, Centres and Clubs and find out what they are doing for Irish youngsters, both first and second generation. You have to ask them how many Irish members they have, how many Irish workers they have. It's important to remember that they are supposed to be catering for the needs of all young people, so if they're not doing this for Irish youngsters you must hassle them and your councillors. I'm afraid if you don't do it, it's just unlikely to happen. There are council elections in May 1990, so now is the time to start asking the various parties and their councillors what they are proposing to do about the ILEA reports and recommendations. Ask your Divisional Officer and your teacher centres how they are implementing their equal opportunities policy for the Irish. Find out how many Irish governors there are in your division or borough and, as a last resort, ask to go into your children's schools to introduce an Irish dimension yourself by conducting assemblies on the theme of Irishness. Sometimes, I'm afraid, it's the only thing

you have to do and I actually believe that sometimes one should take control and actually do it oneself. I found it very effective and at least in my own children's school they can hold their heads up in a way that they were never able to do before.

One reason education is very important to women is that we have to take responsibility for our children's education and culture. For those of you who have read the *Irish Women in London* report, you may have noticed that 54% of married Irish women in the London area are not married to Irish men. Now this is a very interesting phenomenon and I mentioned it as it shows that women are carrying this burden, often on their own, against an alien culture and I think it's very important that the Irish community itself understands women's position in the whole issue of education and the transference of the culture. It is women who take that responsibility and people must start taking us seriously.

Jo Tully

#### TROOPS OUT MOVEMENT

We think it vital that Irish women in this country are aware of the existence of a movement which organizes around the political issues of imperialism, focusing on Ireland and the war.

As emigrants we are particularly helpless, not only before the grotesque facts of the war, but also because of the effects we feel as part of the Irish community in Britain. We also have to contend with the terror of the PTA, the fates of the Birmingham Six, the Guildford Four, the Winchester Three and all the others convicted and now serving the longest sentences ever meted out simply because they're Irish. It could have been you or it could have been me simply by virtue of our Irishness. This is the meaning of the Irish experience in Britain. There is a change in the political climate in Britain with regard to Ireland. Fifteen years ago the Troops Out Movement, of which I am a member, emerged because of a void in any discussion of the war within the main political parties in Britain. TOM set itself up as a pressure group to force the war in Ireland on to a political agenda. Recent events demonstrate that Ireland is now firmly on that agenda. The emergence of Time To Go 18 months ago reflects this change within the political establishment. When Time To Go came into being, Clare Short, the chairperson of that organization, was on the back bench of the Labour Party. She's now back on the front bench. It's not just for the Labour Party that Ireland is on the political agenda. Recently Peter Brooke, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, clearly stated that withdrawal of the troops is now also on the political agenda for the Tory Party. The propaganda machine, the media – *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, and other newspapers – are clearly preparing a political climate for the withdrawal of troops out of

Ireland. This is an example of the redefinition by the media of the role of the British troops in Ireland. Up to now the British Army has been glorified as the peacekeepers keeping warring Irish tribes apart. *The New Statesman* now feels confident enough to announce that the men of violence are the British Army.

In the face of these new changes there are urgent questions for everyone involved in the withdrawal movement, but particularly for Irish women. Different groups will respond to these questions in different ways. For example, *Time To Go* says it's time to talk about the withdrawal of troops. *TOM* goes a step further. We say that there was never a time for British troops to be in Ireland in the first place and the real issue is the removal not only of the troops, not only of the war machinery that has been in place in Ireland over the last 20 years, but all the other repressive structures. These include the emergency legislation, the Emergency Provisions Act, armed police forces, gerrymandering and so on. These have been in existence since the creation of the Northern Irish state to maintain partition and therefore to keep the people to Ireland divided. The questions now facing us here and in Ireland are: Are we being faced with yet another British solution, meaning an imperialist solution? If so, no British solution is possible without Irish compliance. What compromising will they demand now from the progressive forces in Ireland and will Irish women once again have to bear the brunt of these compromises? As an Irish woman I am personally concerned that a lot of Irish women will be forced to pay an even heavier price if this British solution succeeds. In this instance we must be prepared to look at the uncomfortable facts, face the difficult issues, be involved and demand a say in our future.

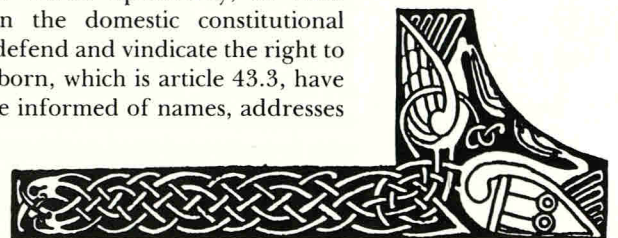
Ruth Riddick

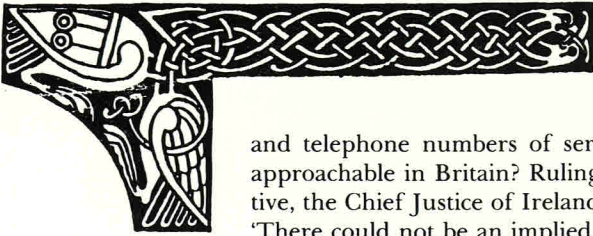
#### DIRECTOR OF OPEN LINE COUNSELLING

The Republic of Ireland voted by referendum in May 1972 to join the European Economic Community as it was then known. Voting was overwhelmingly in favour of joining, although there was an important debate on the question. As a member of the Labour Party then, as I am now, I campaigned against the EEC, although I was too young to vote in the referendum, a position that was somewhat ironic in view of later developments. Broadly the arguments were that the EEC would offer enormous economic benefits to the industrial and agricultural sectors without which productivity and prosperity would be impossible. Opponents argued that the changes in society, which would be wrought by EEC membership, would completely undermine the fabric of Irish life. With the wisdom of hindsight, we can see that both points of view contained elements of truth, but looking back on the campaign I can't remember questions of social justice, especially for women, being a high priority on either side, but it could be argued

that the influence of the then emerging Women's Movement was not yet sufficient to set the agenda. As it happened, membership of the EEC has brought improvements in women's status in Irish society. Equally, legislation was introduced in the mid seventies on foot of European initiatives and while many of these provisions are inadequate, there is no suggestion that a domestic government would have introduced them. Indeed, a recent report suggests that the influence on domestic policy of the government established Council for the Status of Women has been minimal. Questions of social justice from marriage breakdowns to male homosexuality are increasingly referred to Europe as citizens fail to achieve relief from the domestic legislature through the courts. In a recent development one of our senior politicians, an indefatigable opponent of women's rights, the former senator Mary Robinson, has announced her retirement from parliamentary politics, to devote herself to the European Law Centre. Under Margaret Thatcher, and as we have seen especially in the last two weeks, Britain takes a different view of the relationship with Europe. Triumphs and past glories briefly revived during the skirmish with the Argentinians in early 1982. Britain remains reluctant to abandon the memory of colonial leadership and commit to a more equal relationship with its European partners. Because of this isolationism much of the impact of the developments in Europe receive scant attention or understanding here, and yet legislation being drafted in Brussels, and rulings being handed down in Luxembourg and Strasbourg, will determine the contents and context of future campaigns for social justice throughout Europe. Of course progress towards federalisation is slow and it would be naive to suggest that the motivation of Eurocrats is entirely altruistic. Nevertheless a federal Europe is likely to function in a manner not unlike the USA where broad policy is centrally determined, but member states retain certain legislative rights and responsibilities. Some difficult questions about this structure are already being raised in Europe, most dramatically around the abortion issue.

As the Republic of Ireland prepares to assume presidency of the EEC in January 1990, there are, to the embarrassment of the government, no less than two abortion cases before the European Courts. At the instigation of Open Line Counselling the European Court of Human Rights is being asked, in effect, do Irish women have the right to know about lawful services available to them in other member states? Specifically, do Irish women, given the domestic constitutional obligation to defend and vindicate the right to life of the unborn, which is article 43.3, have the right to be informed of names, addresses





and telephone numbers of services lawfully approachable in Britain? Ruling in the negative, the Chief Justice of Ireland commented, 'There could not be an implied and enumerated constitutional right to information about the availability of a service of abortion outside the state, which, if availed of, would have the direct consequence of destroying the expressly guaranteed right to life of the unborn. I'm satisfied that no right could constitutionally arise to obtain information, the purpose of which was to defeat the constitutional right to life of the unborn child.'

Abortion use by Irish women is a European issue because of one basic factor. Abortion being illegal and largely unobtainable in Ireland, North and South, is sought by Irish women in England where lawful services are available to them. Evidence suggests that Irish women also made this journey before 1968 when official data was first published by the office of population census and surveys here. Such abortion tourism as we know is hardly unique to Ireland. For instance Dr Colin Frankholm wrote in 1984: 'We have seen that women often have to travel to different countries to get abortions. British women went to France in the early part of the 20th century and French women came to England in great numbers in the mid seventies. Swedish women went to Poland, New Zealand women went to Australia and up until 1972 American women came to Britain. German and Belgian women go to Holland and increasingly Spanish and Irish women come to England.' So many women have had to travel extensively to circumvent restrictions their own society has placed on their personal choice.

Dr Frankholm was writing in 1984. Subsequent law reform, most notably in Spain, has modified this picture and only Ireland and Belgium continue to apply a blanket ban on abortion within their jurisdiction, although there are already signs of liberalisation in Belgium. In Ireland however a constitutional rider was added to the existing legal prohibition, guaranteeing the right to life of the unborn. Professor Kevin Boyle, legal consultant to the International Human Rights Organization article 19, takes the view that article 43.3 of the Irish constitution is in open incompatibility with the European convention on human rights and points to article 8 of the convention which stipulates rights of privacy and article 10 which guarantees freedom of expression. Furthermore article 59 of the Treaty of Rome, of which all EEC members are signatories, confers a right of freedom of movement of citizens of member states who wish to receive services. Article 60 of the same treaty defines services as including activities of the profession which are normally provided for remuneration and the European Court of

Justice has held that services in this context include medical treatment. It is also worth noting that article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the Council of Europe and of which Ireland became a member in December of 1948, reads: 'Everyone has the right of freedom of opinion and expression. This right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference, and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through the media regardless of frontiers.' To non lawyers these issues must appear bizarre and to women facing crisis pregnancy they may be a cruel irrelevance denying access to non directive counselling and to information already in the public domain. For professional pregnancy counsellors such legalisms are a source of frustration. We have, in a colleague's memorable phrase, been made 'constitutionally redundant' and prevented from being what was described by the President of the High Court, to the astonishment of the anti-choice movement, as 'a reputable organization providing many needy services to women'. He continued to say that their employees are skilled and concerned people and well motivated with regard to the counselling and other services which they provide and consider necessary. The crux of the matter lies in the constitutionally charged parliament, the courts and society at large, to recognize, defend and vindicate the right to life of the unborn and given this obligation it seems to me the Chief Justice had little alternative for the following reasons: The courts could not ban outright the practice of non-directive counselling without undermining the entire therapeutic services, a situation that would clearly not be in the public's interest, hence the divorce of information from counselling, and therefore by debarring certain organizations and individuals from disseminating information about abortion services legally obtainable abroad. The courts could be seen to uphold the right guaranteed to the unborn while being mindful that such an order would be almost impossible to enforce and that women needing abortion would get the information anyhow. As the Chief Justice acknowledged and I quote 'Nor does the order prevent a pregnant woman from becoming aware of the existence of abortion outside the jurisdiction'. However, in a separate but related development the international women's journal, *Cosmopolitan*, has announced that effective from March 1990, its Irish edition will omit advertisements of lawful pregnancy related services in the UK and it's interesting to note in that context as well that the *Guide to London*, the Irish edition, also omits this information.

The constitutional amendment was adopted as recently as 1983 and was to prevent any undermining of the anti-abortion provisions of the 1861 Offences Against the Persons Act reforms in England over 20 years ago. International politics has very little experience of such human life amendments.

Many countries like the UK quite simply do not have written constitutions which form the basis of all law and which may be amended by plebiscite or, like the USA, they resist such amendments. As far as I know, the Philippines, under President Marcos, did adopt such a provision. I have no information as to its effects on women's lives although some clues are surely given by the experience of post referendum Ireland or by the subsequent formulation or reform of reproductive laws. To this extent it may be said that the Republic of Ireland is making the running not only in Europe but internationally.

By virtue of our EEC membership, matters of ordinary Irish law, even matters of constitutional law, may no longer be confined to the domestic legislature or courts because member states also have obligations under the Treaty of Rome and under the European Convention on Human Rights. Any citizen protesting a grievance or violation of her perceived or assumed rights may, having exhausted domestic remedy, appeal to the European Court of Human Rights under article 25 of the European Convention as we have done. Similarly, the domestic courts retain the discretion, under article 177 of the Treaty of Rome, to refer to the European Court of Justice issues of possible conflict that arise between domestic and European law. Member states are equal in this respect and while individual rulings are usually specific to a member state, precedents thus set are relevant throughout the community. In the Irish abortion cases, the European courts are being asked to consider the question of freedom of information, not matters of reproduction rights. Equally there is no question that the British Abortion Act of 1967 is under external threat. What is significant about these cases is that they refer to constitutional guarantees which take precedence over ordinary law. This may make the courts reluctant in their pronouncements. As one legal commentator remarked: 'What would have to be established would be that article 43.3 of the Irish Constitution was a breach of fundamental rights and I'm not convinced that a European court would go that far'.

Preliminary submissions have already been received by the court in the Open Line Counselling application and a preliminary hearing is likely in the New Year. Depending on the backlog of cases it could be as early as next February so by this time next year we may be looking at a whole new situation. The government of Ireland is likely to argue that the domestic courts have asked, with the legitimate aim of upholding national policy, that in consequence of article 43.3 abortion is contrary to national policy and public morality and that information must be provided in accordance with Irish law. Responding to this line of argument, David Cole, a lawyer with the United States Centre for Constitutional Rights, contends that to regulate the information necessary to an informed decision about

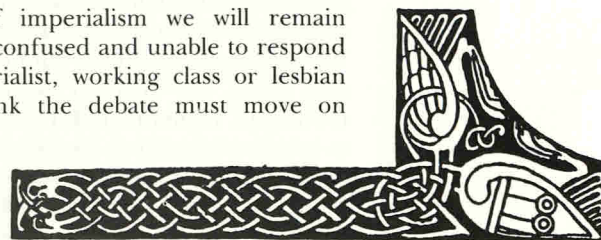
abortion is to regulate abortion. It is an especially pernicious form of regulation, for it seeks to affect women's decisions by enforced ignorance. It seems to me that Europe will ultimately be obliged to acknowledge the inappropriateness in international law of the Irish human life amendment. Notwithstanding that, as with similar previous cases, most notably the Norris case arguing for decriminalisation of homosexuality, the government is likely to suggest that the machinery of protection established by the European Convention is subsidiary to national systems safeguarding human rights and that a wider margin of appreciation must be allowed where international law appears to be in a transitional stage. Such an acknowledgement, as I propose, would of course be an appalling defeat for one of the favourite international strategies of the anti-choice movements. At the present time Europe is the only forum for such a development.

Finally I'd like to say that internationalism is an issue for the pro choice movement, not only because we are now citizens of an increasingly internationalized Europe, but because the anti-choice movement itself is international. We are in practice fighting for the right to choose in an international forum and context. It's time we recognized this process in theory while we wait with shared interests for further developments and trends in European law. Indeed what choice do we have given a conservative judiciary and a rigid application of emerging foetal rights, as for example constitutionally guaranteed in Ireland but equally under considerable debate here in terms of embryo research. It will be clear that without a mitigating appeal to a higher court, such as exists within the European community, the immediate affect of a human life provision is not simply a diminution of abortion rights, a process clearly significant in the US, but the limiting of other personal rights to privacy, access to information and freedom of speech, elsewhere considered central to the maintenance of democracy.

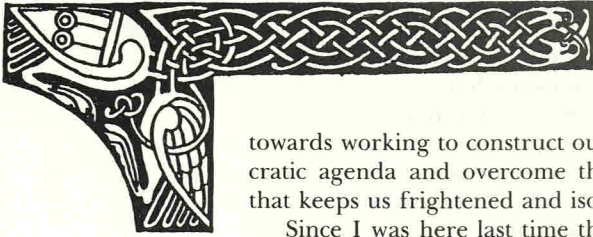
Una Marron

#### FALLS ROAD WOMEN'S CENTRE

Last year when I spoke at this conference I tried to outline the effects of imperialism and partition on the Irish women's movement. I argued that imperialism distorts our political landscape, feeds us half truths, divides and ultimately silences us, and that unless the Irish women's movement as a whole takes on board the issue of imperialism we will remain divided and confused and unable to respond to anti-imperialist, working class or lesbian issues. I think the debate must move on







towards working to construct our own democratic agenda and overcome the censorship that keeps us frightened and isolated.

Since I was here last time there has been one major victory for the Irish community – the release of the Guildford Four. It has renewed our hope and determination, it is a victory that we can all take heart from, but it is not a victory that we can afford to congratulate ourselves on. The Guildford Four were released not because, after 15 years of pressure from the Irish community, it had become a united and irresistible force, but quite simply because the British establishment could no longer sustain a lie. What of the Birmingham Six?; the Winchester Three?; What of Judith Ward? For my community very little has changed. We still strive to assert our dignity in the face of a vicious onslaught. We have lost another child shot dead by a plastic bullet. Genuine community self organization and control such as Conway Mill and the Falls Road Women's Centre, are still victims of political attack, starved of funding and kept running on determination and a refusal to be silent. Daily homes are being torn asunder, women and frightened children huddle in rooms while their homes are systematically destroyed. Names of political activists are leaked to loyalist death squads and children are still left without parents. The prisons are filled with our youths who know of no alternative but resistance. The fear, the destruction, the distortion and the censorship are all still intact. All of this is known; it was also known when I spoke here last year. How has the Irish women's movement in Britain moved to put these issues on its agenda? It can be said that the history of British imperialism in Ireland can be told in terms of internment and censorship. Censorship is one of the continuous facts of life regarding Ireland. The censorship of debate, the censorship of information, the censorship of democratically expressed views. This censorship pervades every aspect of our lives from our history, culture and language, to control over our own bodies and sexuality. Censorship robs us of a voice, leaves us open to racist attacks, makes us easy targets, but there is more than one kind of censorship. We must begin to accept that the Irish women's movement, both in Ireland and Britain, has censored itself for years. Growing dependency on state funding is increasingly used as an escape from the politics of our communities, dictating that we abstain from political work and campaigning. We can service the needs but not address the root issues. For many in the Irish women's movement, feminism itself has been used, not to bring us together to discuss and debate our differences, not to make space and understand our priorities, not to build an analysis that will encompass all our differences, but to

deny the truth of some women's lives and the struggles, hopes and realities of working class lesbians and nationalist women. My community is struggling for survival. We are struggling against a tremendous weight of oppression. To survive we need all our strengths, all our perceptions and realities recognized and united. The task is not an easy one, it is one that has to be taken on afresh every morning, but it is one that the Irish women's movement is increasingly prepared to meet. Likewise, the Irish women's movement in Britain must not allow itself to become separated from the Irish community as a whole. Conservative elements within that community must be challenged from within and the struggle to change attitudes part of an agenda set by ourselves, not directly or indirectly by the British women's movement, nor by the distortions supplied by the British establishment. Building links and setting the agenda within our own communities are not an insular activity; it also means extending to make vital contacts with Black women and other ethnic minorities in this country. Irish women at home and in Britain need to be working, talking and listening to such women in order that together we can start to construct and define an articulated theory and challenge to racism and imperialism. It is only through contacts and coalitions, that have been worked at constantly, that real exchange can be achieved. These links are invaluable in strengthening the chain of resistance to imperialism and defeating censorship. Solidarity work means more than a postcard to a prisoner at Christmas, or single speaker at an annual conference. It has to be built upon, developed consistently.

Imperialism has distorted the Irish landscape for years. As Irish women it has affected us no matter where we are from – it has robbed us of much. My community has carried the full weight of its presence for the last 20 years. Women have taken to the streets to defend themselves, their children, their nationalists and cultural aspirations. They have resisted plastic bullets, shoot to kill policies, strip searching and loyalist death squads. They have been told that these things are not feminist issues. They have fought to build links only to watch them fade when the issue is no longer newsworthy or when the going gets too hard. We have carried this weight for 20 years and we need more than sympathy and kind words. We need unified action. Irish women at home and Irish women in Britain must strengthen their links. We need access to your contacts and you need access to our information. We have struggled alone and separately for too long. We must form a unity which is the solution to all our futures.

*Go raibh maith agat.*

Bernadette Hyland  
**CHAIR OF IRISH IN BRITAIN  
REPRESENTATION GROUP**

I thought I'd look at what was happening in

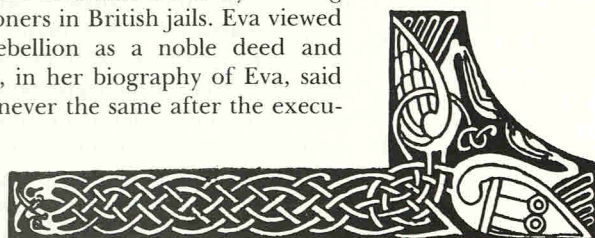
the North West of England and also at some general views about what it is to be Irish women, how we organize and who we organize with. As previous speakers have shown, to be an Irish woman in Britain means xyz number of different things. Personally I see myself as an Irish woman but an Irish woman who is also lots of other things. I'm from the north west, I'm a very proud Manchunian. I'm also somebody who is active in IBRG. I'm also a trade unionist, a socialist and lots of other things like working class and so on. I'm second generation Irish and I come from a long tradition of Irish people, the majority of whom were Irish women who came to Manchester to the towns and cities of the north west of England to work in some of the worst aspects of the mills and factory system for more than 200 years. Obviously I think the whole thing about our identity is something that we need to redefine and reassess every generation and certainly how I see myself as an Irish woman is very different from how my mother sees herself. My mother came from the west of Ireland. She came from a rural background so I'm very different from her. I think one of the saddest things about history is that when you look at the history of Irish women and what exactly has been written down about them, we have been largely ignored. I've noticed that in one of the latest books to come out about the Irish in Britain, called *The Irish in Britain 1815–1937* by Roger Swift and Sheridan Gilly, there's no actual reference to Irish women in the book apart from a token picture of an Irish woman on the cover. This I find amazing but it's usually the norm. I think, as with a lot of other things, that it's down to Irish women themselves to put themselves on the agenda, to demand their space within history. In the past years we've been lucky – we've seen books such as *Across The Water* by Mary Lennon, Marie McAdam, and Joanne O'Brien. It's been a very important book in detailing the experiences of Irish women in this country. We've also got some very good Irish women authors such as Maude Casey, Moy McCrory and Maeve Kelly. Again these give fictional accounts of Irish women in this country but also show the role Irish women have played and play today in the lives of the Irish community in Britain and also in British society as a whole.

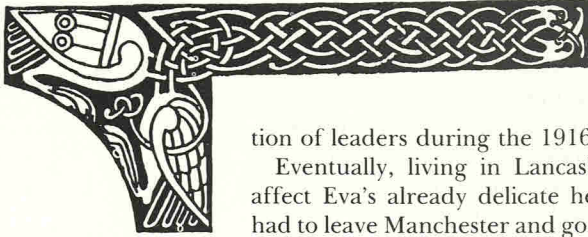
As I said before I'm from the North West and I'm particularly interested in the role of history because I think history tells us a lot. It tells us about who we are, where we come from and gives us encouragement and confidence in going forward. I'm particularly interested in the history of Irish women and Irish people in the North West because lots of them came to that part of the country and again, there is very little research about how those Irish women lived or survived in some of the worst industry. Obviously there are very few records left to actually show what it was like for Irish working class women of that

period. Often we find that we have to look to the history of perhaps more famous women to find a glimpse of what it was like for ordinary Irish women of that time. I've done some research on Eva Gore Boothe who was the sister of Constance Markievicz, quite an interesting character and quite a contrast to her famous sister. I think that Eva was famous in her own way and I think that when you look at the research and the kind of things she was involved in, the kind of struggles she went through and the contradictions she lived through in her life, these were many of the struggles we are going through today.

Eva was from a very upper class background. She came to Manchester in the 1890's because she had met up with Esther Roper who was a suffragette, Eva decided to come and live with Esther and she chose to work and become involved in the campaign to get women the vote, trade union rights and other rights they should have been afforded. At that time in the 1890s a lot of the campaign for the vote for women was taking place in the Lancashire area. Also at that time a lot of women were working in the mills and the factories and in many cases they were the major wage earners in the family. They worked in the cotton industry for meagre wages and Eva was involved in organizing women into trade unions and she saw the economic aspect as being very important in raising the lives of these women and improving the meagre wages they were living on. She also saw education for women as being important. She worked in a predominantly Irish area in Manchester, teaching women to read and write and introducing them to her great love of poetry. There are still some references left about her effect on, and relationship she had with, these women. She was obviously a very interesting character who treated women on an equal basis and who worked with women rather than for them.

She dedicated most of her life to campaigning for the vote for women, many of whom were Irish, and it wasn't very easy doing this at that time. She was subjected to many forms of verbal and physical abuse. She travelled up and down the country speaking at meetings, lobbying MPs, writing letters and producing a newsletter. In contrast to her sister, Eva was a pacifist and she must have viewed with trepidation some of the things Constance was getting up to around this time. Even though she was a pacifist she did support Constance when she was in prison and she also did a lot of work for Irish prisoners in this country around 1916. It was no more popular then than it is today working for Irish prisoners in British jails. Eva viewed the Easter rebellion as a noble deed and Esther Roper, in her biography of Eva, said that Eva was never the same after the execu-





tion of leaders during the 1916 rebellion.

Eventually, living in Lancashire began to affect Eva's already delicate health, and she had to leave Manchester and go and live in the south. Eventually her health broke and it is obvious that the work she had done played a big part in her early death. I think the life of Eva Gore Boothe is important to us because of the things she fought for and also it reminds us of the links we have with Irish women of the past and because today we are still involved in many similar campaigns. The position of Irish women in this country is a very similar one, obviously not as bad as that period, but still today the Irish are used as a reserve pool for labour in this country with many Irish women working in low paid part-time jobs. Eva saw it as very important for women to organize separately whilst still participating in the mass movement. Again this has always been a controversial issue in the women's movement in Britain. I think very often we are asked to subsume our Irish identity for the overriding aim, whether it's the revolution or getting a Labour government into power. I think the position for Irish women in the Irish community is again often fraught with difficulties. I know that our experience in Manchester has not been a happy one. In a couple of years, Irish women organizing in Manchester for events such as women's pay, have met with a lot of abuse from our fellow Irish men in the community and, unfortunately, from some Irish women in our community. I think this reflects a great deal on how the Irish community works in this country and the kind of political infighting that goes on. Anyone who seeks to disturb the balance or disturb some of the cosy relationships that some of the leaders of our Irish community have, is seen as a threat. The traditional Irish organizations have always sought to police our activities and unfortunately some Irish women viewed us as a threat in terms of our political differences as well as our class. The plus side was that lots of Irish women in the community rallied round to give us support and in the end we did have our women's activities and we did start an Irish women's group. Unfortunately this wasn't that successful in the main as we found it difficult to get some of the women to take over some of the activities and the major decision-making. I'm not sure of the reasons for that but I think it is very difficult organizing as Irish women anyway. Also for many people, particularly for many women, the 1980s has been spent in fighting Thatcher as well as the repressive legislation of the PTA and so on. This has left many of us exhausted. As a feminist, I think it's really important to participate in women's groups but also I think that it's crucial, as the issue around being Irish in Britain goes, that it's important to be a

member of an organization such as the IBRG. The IBRG started in 1981 because of the various events happening in the community at that time, events such as the Hunger Strike, the effects of the GLC recognizing the Irish as being an ethnic minority and the recognition of the kind of discrimination and deprivation we are facing. I think the IBRG is an important organization because it recognizes the day to day realities for Irish women and men in this country while recognizing the political situation in Ireland. It recognizes our community as a complex one and I hope as National Chair, it encourages Irish women to get actively involved in the organization. We do have an equal opportunities policy and we do have many Irish women participating in our group. We think it is important that more women get involved because we think that there are major issues that are crucial to our lives such as anti-Irish racism, strip searching, abortion, education, housing, civil rights and so on. These need to be taken up and we need to get more people involved. Like every other organization we need more members to do the work. IBRG is a democratic organization with members coming from a variety of backgrounds, ages and occupations. I think it's also very important to note that a lot of the issues that at one time were seen as unsafe, such as the Guildford 4, ethnic status, anti-Irish racism; at one time those issues were taken up by IBRG and now those issues have become safe issues and have been taken up into the mainstream. I think that says a lot about the way in which IBRG has developed and the value and amount of work that people have put into those issues at the start.

I think one of the major issues for Irish people in Britain is the presence of British troops in Ireland and the effect this has had, not only in the North and South, but also on justice for Irish people in Britain. The effect of the PTA in 1974 was to silence our community and to imprison members of it such as the Guildford Four, the Birmingham Six and the Maguires. This drove underground any discussion or debate about what was happening then. The IBRG has a policy on Northern Ireland and we are still one of the few Irish community groups that demand our right to discuss and have opinions on what is happening in our own country. Certainly this has made us unpopular with our own community because we don't dodge the issue and certainly has put people off joining us, because they are frightened about getting involved in issues such as Irish political prisoners and anti-Irish racism. I think also it has gained us a lot of respect and influence in our own community and it's also meant that we have sought alliances with other Irish groups in order to promote the debate about Ireland. We also worked with groups from the British Left although, as I said earlier, this was not an easy relationship particularly because of the chauvinism of some groups. They fail to understand, not only the history and the

relationship of the Irish community to Britain, but they seem to concentrate wholly on the withdrawal of the British presence in the North and fail to give weight to the equal injustices suffered by Irish people in this country. As first woman Chair of IBRG I would like to actively encourage Irish women to join the organization and I think that within the IBRG as a national Irish community organization, we need to reflect the experiences and the realities of both Irish women and Irish men living in Britain and therefore make the organization much more representative of the Irish community in Britain.

Bernadette Clegg

#### LONDON IRISH WOMEN'S CENTRE

My name is Bernadette, I am a member of the management committee of the London Irish Women's Centre; the centre largely responsible for the organisation of this conference. As you may know the London Irish Women's Centre is under serious threat of closure. In September of this year we narrowly escaped complete withdrawal of funding by the London Boroughs Grants Scheme. We are now fighting a desperate campaign to ensure future funding when the committee meets in March to consider our funding again.

The London Irish Women's Centre has been providing essential services for Irish women in London since 1983, in particular since 1986 when the centre opened. Over the years increasing emigration has led to a parallel increased demand for our services. Today we are the only organisation in London that caters specifically for the needs of Irish women. We provide an information service, welfare advice, counselling sessions, creche and childcare facilities, work with Irish travellers and perform a co-ordinating function for Irish groups throughout London.

The centre also facilitates and supports a number of Irish Women's Groups, including the two successful groups that emerged from last year's conference, the Irish Lesbian Network and the Irish Women's Housing Action Group. We have Video na mBan operating from the centre (who are currently working on a video film on the Gibraltar killings and Mairead Farrell), there have been several women and children's groups since the centre opened, and we continue in our commitment to provide high quality childcare services.

As well as providing classes in radio, video and photography, we offer classes in Irish language and creative writing. In the last year we have hosted a number of events, including information sessions on the Poll Tax and Social Security changes, socials for older women and events for children.

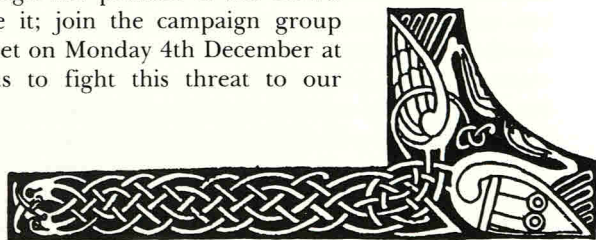
In the coming year we intend to have an adult Irish language class, children's cultural days, a class on Irish Women and Literature, Irish Women and Mythology class, a radio production weekend, on 24th/25th February, and an Irish Lesbian Workshop on 28th

January organised by PACE.

At present we are undertaking research into the kind of support groups that women would like to see become established. One such group has begun already; from today's workshop on Women's Experiences and Feelings about the six counties we intend to hold an ongoing group which first meets on Wednesday 13th December, at 7.30 at the centre. After that date the group will be closed. There are many such groups which need to be established such as women and imprisonment, incest survivors, women and rape, divorce and separation, Irish Women and Alcohol/Drug Abuse – the possibilities are infinite. But they depend on the strength of our community. The LBGS's withdrawal of grant to the London Irish Women's Centre is a threat to that survival.

In view of the present climate of cuts in public spending and restricted funding for voluntary organisations, we as Irish women must go on challenging the Poll Tax, Clause 28, the Prevention of Terrorism Act and any attack by this government on our community. Like other Irish groups we want to celebrate the release of the Guildford Four, but we are also mindful of the fact that the British State holds other political hostages and we cannot be complacent until the Birmingham Six and so many others are released. Women continue to be strip searched in Maghaberry and Durham jails, thousands of Irish people are still being detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Last year we saw the extension of that Act to become a permanent feature of British Justice. We saw the withdrawal of the right to silence which places British justice amongst the worst in the European Community. We feel that women in the Irish community have a responsibility to raise consciousness on Irish issues.

If the same amount of initiative, energy, and resolve to succeed comes from this conference as came from last year's, we **will** win. We are women together, lesbian women, heterosexual women, bisexual women, we derive inspiration and strength from each other. Indeed the lesbian women in our community have played an enormously important part in initiating so many of the valued projects at the centre. We need to celebrate and be proud of what we as Irish women have achieved. We cannot emphasise enough the need for all women here to join in the campaign to save the centre. The London Irish Women's Centre plays such an important role in maintaining and promoting the multifaceted identity of women in the Irish community. Sign the petition at the LIWC stall; circulate it; join the campaign group which will meet on Monday 4th December at 6pm; help us to fight this threat to our community.





*Una Marron  
and Ruth Riddick*

## Workshop Reportbacks & Resolutions

### IRISH WOMEN'S ABORTION SUPPORT GROUP

As you probably know by now, we are a group of Irish women who support women coming from either the North or the South of Ireland to have abortions here. Our role has now changed because it's become possible again to receive information about abortions in Ireland. As a result what we are not doing so much of now is arranging abortions, which we had to do for a while, but supporting those women who are most desperate, both emotionally and financially. We get desperate appeals from women on the phone saying I want to have an abortion but I really don't have the money and as they can only have abortions in private clinics (they cannot use the NHS) it works out quite expensive and is getting more expensive. For an Irish woman coming to England for an abortion, not only does she need the boat fare and money to put herself up and money for food, she needs the cost of the abortion itself, so we are talking about at least £350, which is not easy, particularly if you are a working class woman and need to get hold of the money

at very short notice. We are asking you to support us by putting yourself on the accommodation rota, because those women who desperately need counselling and support, we try and put them up in our houses so we can speak to them the night before and help them by taking them to the clinics, so again we really do need your support.

### IRISH IN GREENWICH PROJECT

#### Resolution 1

*We propose that the conference recommend that the European Parliament, when setting budgets, takes into account the position of Irish women in London. They make up over 51% of the Irish population in London, form 8% of the total female labour force in London, occupy at least 9.2% of furnished private rented accommodation in London. (Source of information is the Irish in London report by B. Walters.)*

**Resolution carried**

### **Resolution 2**

(proposed by Jean Rathbone, seconded by Bernadette Clegg)

*That the London Irish Women's Centre should enable Irish women attending this conference, and any other Irish women, to be put on a list for their own area so that they can create a group or a network. We also call on the LIWC to enable us to create another list or register to record information such as jobs, courses etc, and this be made available as a resource for Irish women.*

### **Resolution carried**

## **HOUSING WORKSHOP**

### **Resolution 1**

*Irish women's homelessness and housing needs will not be tackled effectively until the ethnic minority status of Irish people is officially recognized. We call on all central and local government agencies to acknowledge Irish ethnicity.*

### **Resolution carried**

*Speaker from the Housing Workshop:*

The reason for this particular motion was basically because of the housing problems Irish women experience. We felt that if we got local government to actually define us as an ethnic minority group, we would have more status in Housing Associations and Housing Co-ops and therefore more access.

### **Resolution 2**

(from morning workshop)

*We call on all Irish community and advice services, hostels and Irish Centres to monitor the number of Irish women who approach them for help. We further call on these agencies to publicize the results and to address the under-representation of Irish women within their users.*

### **Resolution carried**

### **Resolution 3**

(from afternoon workshop)

*This conference condemns the Poll Tax as an inequitable, unfair and unjust tax. It bears no relation to people's income and consequently will most adversely affect the poor and the vulnerable. This conference calls for its repeal and, pending this, the establishment of an Irish Against the Poll Tax group.*

### **Resolution carried**

## **WORKSHOP ON IRISH EMIGRATION (morning) AND VOICE FOR IRISH EMIGRANTS IN BRITAIN**

### **Resolution**

*This conference petitions the Irish government to introduce a facility that will allow Irish emigrants to vote in Irish elections. We are asking the Irish government to acknowledge our position as emigrants. We ask as Irish citizens to be allowed to participate democratically in the affairs of our country.*

### **Resolution carried**

*Morning workshop:*

We have been campaigning for a provision to be introduced by the Irish government which will allow Irish emigrants to vote in Irish elections. At present, only Irish civil servants, their spouses and Irish army personnel living abroad, are allowed to vote in Irish elections. All other EEC countries, with the exception of Belgium and Ireland, have taken measures to ensure that all their citizens abroad can exercise their democratic right to vote. We are currently compiling a document analysing how all these countries implement voting systems for their immigrants. Many countries outside the EEC also allow their immigrants to vote; even the so-called 'Iron Curtain' countries allow their immigrants to vote. For instance, in June 1989 in Poland, thirty-five thousand Polish emigrants voted in the Polish General Election at their consulate in New York. When we first approached the Irish government about this issue, they claimed that they could not allow us to vote because we might abuse the electoral system. However, recently they have stated, in their joint programme of government, that they were looking into the feasibility of granting voting rights to recent emigrants and this we feel has been partly due to the pressure we've put on them.

*Afternoon workshop:*

The workshop was mainly about the problems of emigration. We felt that the conference should endorse the need to inform young people in Ireland about the harsh realities of emigrating to this country and indeed about emigrating anywhere. We felt that the conference should also pass a resolution to lobby agencies, the Irish government, parents' groups, community groups, youth groups and to forge links with other Irish women's groups. It was also felt that the London Irish newspapers don't always represent the Irish people here to the best of their ability and that the British media, with its racist stereotyping of Irish people, should be directly challenged about the views they put forward about us as Irish women and as Irish people.

### **Resolution**

*That this conference endorses the need to inform young people in Ireland about the realities of emigrating to London, and that this should be achieved by lobbying the Irish government and its agencies, and making links with parents' groups, community groups, youth groups and Irish women's groups.*

### **Resolution carried**

## **SECOND GENERATION WORKSHOP**

In our workshop we looked quite a lot at the definitions of first and second generation Irish. We know that other conferences have addressed this issue and that there have been changes and moves forward, but we would like to move it one stage further. Firstly, we believe that those terms create some kind of hierarchy of Irishness. We wanted to acknowledge and respect the differences amongst us as Irish women, but at the same time, to say that we are all Irish and to find those common bonds as well as looking at the differences. The sort of thing we looked at, in relation to being second generation Irish, was the feeling of ambivalence. Women also experienced feelings of not being accepted by other Irish women, feelings of being caught between two cultures, and what

it meant to live in the country of the oppressor. We also looked at anti-Irish racism, and the effects of growing up in a culture that's hostile to us, and the damage this has done to us in childhood as well as adolescence. We also acknowledge that first generation Irish women are more easily identifiable and therefore bear the brunt more so than we do of direct anti-Irish racism. We also looked at our role in preserving the culture and how important that is, given the massive emigration and the aim of imperialism to erase our culture. We also wanted to respect the different ways of doing this – for instance, by the church or schools or by more radical means such as women's groups and community groups. The last thing we looked at was identity, what it meant for us in terms of culture, language, immigration and imperialism. We all came to the conclusion that we were Irish, and that we wanted to celebrate our Irishness.

#### **Resolution**

*While we acknowledge and respect the differences between Irish women born in Ireland and Irish women born and brought up elsewhere, we reject the hierarchical implications of the terms first and second generation Irish and we propose that the umbrella term 'Irish women, irrespective of birth place' be used instead. By forging links with Irish women elsewhere, we would also like to have stronger links with Black and other oppressed groups, to acknowledge our differences and shared oppressions.*

#### **Resolution carried**

### **WORKSHOP ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN**

We were a diverse group of young and older women, some who were working with children and some who were in different situations, i.e. whether they were married or single. The main thing we talked about was the isolation felt by all mothers and carers because the children themselves need constant attention and the way in which society views children in general. We were concerned that at last year's conference the same issues were brought, so it seems that a year later nothing has changed. We discussed the lack of information and knowledge about facilities already available in relation to children's issues. We were concerned about lack of practical recognition within the school system of Irish culture and this often led to our children denying their Irishness. Two women in the group took the initiative of trying to promote Irish culture in their schools and got a positive response from both the schools and the children. We felt that if this sort of input was more widely used it could help to promote less anti-Irish racism and it could help to promote an awareness of Irish culture. There was a feeling in our group that women whose children had special needs were not recognized by the community at large and as a result we would like to see support, especially for single mothers in that position, in the form of a network that offers moral and practical help.

#### **Resolution**

*That the Irish women's community, through the Irish Women's Centre, make more commitment to Irish women with children, offer positive practical help, newsletters or information packs about education, and make these freely available to the local Irish community.*

#### **Resolution carried**

*Secondly, that the Irish women's community through the Irish Women's Centre, should make more liaisons with other women in Irish groups throughout London in order to form a network and make information more freely available.*

#### **Resolution carried**

### **DISABLED WOMEN'S WORKSHOP**

We looked at a variety of different areas to do with disabilities but mainly we were concentrating on two areas. One was about access, and how access actually meant barriers to us, and also how access meant different things. It didn't just mean getting in the front door or having a sign language interpreter present. For us it was really important to address this conference with some of the issues we are experiencing on a day to day level, and also we would like to share and get the commitment of the Irish women's community in looking at disability as a social discrimination against us. We actually experience a segregation from most other Irish women as a result of a variety of different things that are to do with our access to you. We don't want this conference to go away today and think that disability is what it has traditionally been seen as, a medical and charity issue. We reject that image, and we reject that definition, and we want the commitment of this group here and all Irish women to redefine disability as a social discrimination. Putting in your publicity that disabled women are welcome is not enough. It is really important for the Irish community to seek out disabled Irish women and to attract and encourage their presence through a variety of different ways. We also noticed that there was little formation of disabled Irish women and that that formation had begun today.

Lastly, we felt that particularly important to us as Irish women was the impact of religion and religious status in Ireland in relation to disabilities. We felt that it kept us in an acceptable situation around charity and again we reject this image and do not find it acceptable, especially not on the terms of religion in Ireland. We very much want the support of Irish women here, and Irish women everywhere to try and challenge this at every level.

#### **Resolution**

*That disabled women's existence in the Irish community gets real recognition by Irish groups, making active efforts to seek out disabled people because our absence is seen as normal. Access is not only about getting in the door or having a sign language interpreter. This should be a priority for all Irish events and should act to challenge other Irish venues on access.*

#### **Resolution carried**

### **IRELAND – PARTITION AND THE CHANGING POLITICAL CLIMATE IN BRITAIN**

I would just like to say that both the morning and afternoon workshops were very well attended, so the issue is an important issue for women here today. The workshop discussed in broad terms the political issues facing us as Irish women in this country, particularly given the present political condition surrounding Ireland and the war. Our workshop prepared the following statement:

### **Resolution 1**

*We respond to the call from the platform from the speaker of the Fall's Road Women's Centre, to the need expressed by the anti-imperialist women in Ireland, both North and South, and to the need expressed in our workshop for the setting up of an autonomous anti-imperialist Irish women's group in this country. This group should be set up to articulate the voice of anti-imperialist Irish women in Britain and to establish, in conjunction with Ireland, a network for information, support and discussion. It should also maintain links with anti-imperialist women in this country, Ireland, and other women involved in anti-imperialist causes throughout the world.*

### **Resolution carried**

### **Resolution 2**

*That this conference congratulates those women involved in supporting the Guildford Four throughout the 15 years of their imprisonment. We recognize the enormous cost made in personal lives and admire their courage and determination.*

### **Resolution carried**

## **TRAVELLERS' WORKSHOP**

We talked about how travellers are seen as a problem, how they are judged to be unhygienic and how travellers here are not identified with the often romanticised Romany tradition. Discrimination against Irish travellers exists within even the facilities that are provided for them, and there are less numbers of Irish travellers on official sites here as well as in Ireland. We talked about how travellers need shelter, especially in the winter, and how sometimes they will need temporary accommodation to get them through the winter months. We also talked about where prejudice came from and tried to identify its cause. What we came up with was that people do not like anything different, they see it as subversive. Even poorer sections of the settled community look down on travellers. People also dislike the independence of travellers. We also talked about the ideological differences of life on the road compared to a more settled lifestyle. We talked about the continual need to break through the prejudices that have been engrained in us. We thought that we should support travellers' calls for permanent sites because, as someone pointed out, this would actually work out cheaper for local authorities in the long run.

### **Resolution**

*This conference recognizes that Irish travellers, travelling women in particular, are amongst the most disadvantaged and discriminated against groups in our society. We call upon Irish women to campaign to ensure that the ethnic minority status of the travelling community is recognized and acted upon by central and local government in Ireland and Britain. We call upon local authorities to provide safe temporary and permanent sites that are fully resourced, and that travelling people be consulted on the provisions of these sites. We fully demand that local authorities ensure that housing, education, and local services begin meeting the needs of Irish travellers. We condemn the discriminatory legislation and practices that exist against travellers.*

### **Resolution carried**

## **LESBIAN WORKSHOP ON SEXUALITY**

The main points that were raised were about Irish identity and the basic conflict between being a lesbian and being Irish, because in many sections of the Irish community this is almost a contradiction in terms. A lot of women talked about coming to Britain and that for many of us the sole reason for being here was because we were lesbians. This affected our feelings being here and for many of us created a feeling of transience while feeling that we will probably never go back unless of course things change radically. We discussed how it affects our relationship with Ireland when we do go back and how it affects our relationship with other women in Britain, whether they are Irish or English. Some of us had fantasies about boat loads of Irish lesbians going back. There was a feeling about how we express our identity and how in some parts of the community, like the English community, we have to deny or negate our Irishness. Also, in the straight Irish community, we have to negate our lesbianism and how both these issues create a feeling of schizophrenia about ourselves. We also talked about lesbian invisibility and Irish invisibility because of racism and heterosexism and how some people actually find safety in invisibility. We talked about both the positive and negative aspects of having a relationship with English lesbians and Irish lesbians. In some ways it was felt that being in a relationship with an Irish woman was nice because you had a common background and common experiences. The relationship can also be very claustrophobic as the lesbian community is often very intense and having a relationship with an Irish woman can make it even more so. Being in a relationship with an English woman can also be difficult because they don't always know where you are coming from. You constantly have to explain what it was like to grow up as a catholic or protestant in Ireland and how that pervades the whole culture, your politics and everything about you. In some ways it can be a challenge, quite freeing but it can also be quite draining. We talked about the power difference in some relationships and how some people are attracted to people who are more powerful than themselves, whether because of class, personality or politics. Another point that was raised was about Irish lesbians growing up in Britain whose parents were Irish and who had internalised a lot of anti-Irish racism and who were quite negative about their Irishness. We talked about ways of dealing with this and also how it might affect our relationship with other women. Lastly we looked at the problem of being a lesbian in an overwhelmingly heterosexual world. Some women spoke about their interest in a religious life as a way of life and the possibility of becoming a lesbian nun.

### **Resolution**

*We welcome the fact that the Irish Women's Conference is more welcoming to children than other areas of the women's movement. We congratulate it for the high standard of creche provision. We want the conference to recognize that Irish lesbians are mothers too, and to ask that creches are organized by any groups within the Irish women's movement to promote positive images of lesbians and gays. Our rights as lesbians to be mothers is threatened by the Jill Knight amendment to the Embryo Research Bill and we ask that the London Irish women's community campaigns against this repressive piece of legislation.*

### **Resolution carried**



*Afternoon workshop:*

In our workshop it was interesting to discover that when we began to discuss the differences amongst us as lesbians, we chose to focus on those differences between lesbians who are mothers and lesbians who are not. Often, as lesbian mothers, we sometimes find that we have more in common with heterosexual mothers and can often be quite isolated from the lesbian community. Being a lesbian mother has its own particular problems because, as you know, being an out lesbian mother can be very dangerous if you want to hold on to your children. We felt that it would be important to us as Irish lesbians to talk to all Irish women and say Irish lesbians are mothers too and that we appreciate very much the creches that are run here and at other Irish events. As well as promoting a positive image of Irishness, we would also ask that you promote a positive image of lesbians and gays.

As far as this amendment to the Embryo Research Bill goes, there is a particularly vicious little clause which has been introduced by one Jill Knight which argues that artificial insemination should be reserved for women inside the marriage relationship and to be forbidden for all single women. Now this is an attack, particularly on lesbians, on the reproductive rights of all women and so we think that this is one issue that lesbians and heterosexual women could unite on. We ask for your support in campaigning against this amendment because it could have far reaching repercussions on all your reproductive rights but particularly on the reproductive rights of lesbians.

**WOMEN AND OUR EXPERIENCE AND FEELINGS ABOUT THE SIX COUNTIES**

This workshop was open to all Irish women. The aim was to provide an open and safe place for all Irish women to explore our feelings and experiences about the Six Counties.

Thirty women attended the workshop. The structure and ground rules achieved their aim of providing a feeling of safety and ensured that all women's feelings were listened to and respected. We were aware that today could only be a beginning because women have so many feelings around this issue that it was not possible to

deal with or even to share all of them at one short 3 hour workshop. The structure of the workshop and the exercises in it were designed to get women in touch with some of their feelings as quickly as possible, so that we could spend as much of the time as possible sharing and discussing these feelings with each other. The workshop had a ground rule of confidentiality but below are some of the feelings women had about the workshop that they wanted to share with the whole of the conference.

- great opportunity and space to have the time out together
- sharing our feelings was very important
- vulnerable, sad
- very empowering experience
- common identity
- not having to identify ideal Irish women
- frightened but found the workshop safe, caring and peaceful
- very open
- able to identify needs between each other
- very supportive way to work
- structure was invaluable
- recognition of oppressions of both religions
- violence and contradictions around this
- fear
- alienation from Ireland
- explore reservations and contradictions
- awareness
- varying levels of bigotry and how that affected our perceptions
- alienation, feeling that we couldn't go home because we had developed different ways
- important to be able to share in a safe place
- realisation that things which were personal for us were personal for everyone
- realisation of the lack of information about each other
- allowed to acknowledge ourselves
- violence and the extent of it
- just a start, a long way to go

In order to provide a forum for women to continue to explore and share their feelings around this issue, we have offered a series of support group meetings. The group is open to new members and meets once a fortnight.

Contact the Irish Women's Centre for more details.

**Further Information**

Two groups have been set up from the Conference and have held regular meetings:

1. Women and our Experiences and Feelings About the Six Counties
2. Anti-Imperialist Irish Women's Group

Contact the London Irish Women's Centre for further information and contacts. Letters have been written to political parties in Ireland enclosing a copy of the resolution on the right of Irish emigrants abroad to vote in elections in Ireland, which was passed at the Conference.

**Conference Planning Group**

Workers at the London Irish Women's Centre - Shelagh O'Connor, Eilish Dowds, Angie Birtill and Brid Boland, Management Committee member Eibhlin NI Dhuibhnigh, Pat Dickinson, Majella Crehan (Harringay IBRG), Bernadette Clegg (Waltham Forest Irish Project), Joan O'Flynn (Action Group for Irish Youth)

**Acknowledgements**

Our grateful thanks to volunteers Lyser Thomas, Kay Woolner, Vivacious, Barbara, Rita and Mo. Funding Bodies. Pet Hextall, Co-ordinator at The Albany Centre.

**We would like to thank the following organisations who contributed towards the funding of the 5th London Irish Women's Conference:**

National Westminster Bank Fund, London Borough of Brent, London Borough of Ealing, London Borough of Waltham Forest, London Borough of Islington, London Borough of Greenwich, Greater London Arts, Clondalkin Group plc, Waterfoods Foods, AerRianta, An Bord Baine, Digital Equipment International BV, F11 Ltd, Irish Distillers plc, Allied Irish Bank

Design, typesetting & artwork by Lasso Women's Co-op (272 9141)  
Printed by Trojan Press (249 5771)