

LWC Speech:

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

The London Irish Womens Centre has been providing essential services for Irish women in London since it opened in 1986. Over the years increasing emmigration 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.

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The centre also facilitates and supports a number of Irish Womens groups, including the two successful groups that emerged from last years conference, the Irish lesbian network and the Irish Womens Housing Action Group. We have Video na Bahn 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 groups since the centre opened, and we continue ⁱⁿ our committment to providing high quality childcare services.

Aswell as providing classes in radio, video, ^{and} photography we offer classes in Irish lanaguage 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, childrens cultural days, a class on Irish Women and literature, Irish women and Mythology, a radio production weekend, on 24/25th 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 Womens 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 seperation, Irish + alcohol/drug abuse the possibilities are infinite. But they depend on the strength of our community, the LBGS withdrawal of grant to the London Irish Womes Centre is a threat to ~~our~~ ^{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 at amongst the worst in the European Community. We feel that women in the Irish community have a responsibility to raise consciousness on these issues.

If the same amount of initiative, energy and resolve not to be beaten comes from this conference as came from last years 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 can not emphasise enough the need for all women here to join in the campaign to save the centre. The London Irish Womens centre plays such an important role in maintaining and promoting the multifaceted identity women in the Irish community. Sign the petition at the LIWG 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.

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