Catherine Rose

THE FEMALE EXPERIENCE



The Story of the Woman Movement in Ireland



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Born and educated in Cork Catherine Rose worked in book publishing for several years before joining RTÉ Radio as a Features and Current Affairs Producer. She lived in Birmingham for some time after she married and subsequently returned to Ireland to work as a freelance writer and broadcaster.

She now lives in Galway with the three men in her life: husband Michael Roberts and sons Ronan and Peter.

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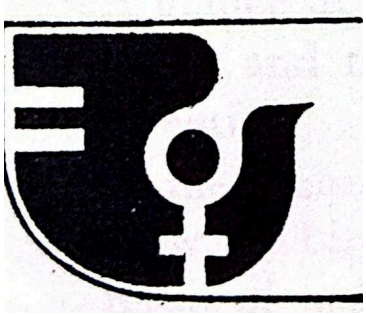
ARLEN HOUSE

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Cover design by John Skelton

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Printed by the Leinster Leader Ltd., Main Street, Naas. Co. Kildare.

To my mother

for her courage, resilience and good humour



Contents

PREFACE 8

INTRODUCTION 9

THE FEMALE DIMENSION IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY 11

TO BE A WOMAN 25

WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN IRISH HISTORY 46

REFORM OR REVOLUTION 62

TIP OF THE ICEBERG 85

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? 95

BIBLIOGRAPHY 106

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 108

APPENDIX 109

PREFACE

I am indebted to the many people who gave me information and advice in the course of this work. I would like to offer my thanks to the authors of feminist, historical, sociological and anthropological works which I have drawn on-I apologise if I have misrepresented them in any way. I am similarly indebted to the women's pages of the national newspapers (Independent Woman is the only survivor at the time of writing); they were first a source of inspiration and subsequently provided a painless means of keeping abreast of the woman movement.

Space precludes my naming family and friends who helped in so many ways but I would like to say that the greatest encouragement came from three men; Captain Seán Feehan who guided my efforts, Kieran Rose whose interest and advice sustained me and Dr Jack Cantillon whose critical scrutiny of the MS saved me from several pitfalls. For the faults of this work I must, of course, take full responsibility.

A final but very special word of mention to my husband Michael and son Ronan who had to live not only with me but with The Female Experience for the past twelve months!

CATHERINE ROSE

8.11.1974

INTRODUCTION

That there is a real problem of identity for women today is recognised by psychiatrists, social workers, members of the medical profession and by ministers of religion. The Irishwoman today may be better employed, have more money, a more comfortable home, better educational opportunities, more holidays and fewer children to care for but she is not more content than her mother or grandmother. On the contrary she is often tense, anxious and depressed.

The Irishwoman in common with her sisters all over the world is in the throes of seeking her true identity. Much of the sham, superficiality and sheer silliness of her sex causes her to be untrue to her real self and leaves her inwardly frustrated and unfulfilled.

Mary Hynes, Psychiatrist, reported in *The Irish Times*

Improved living conditions are no recompense for the state of confusion that exists for women and men as to what a woman is or should be. Does she retain the traditional female role or does she discard it in order to take her place beside men in the larger community? Can she combine several roles in her life time? How much is expected of her and what can she herself demand as her right?

There are social pressures on her to remain at home in the homemaker/housekeeper occupation. At the same time there are economic pressures on her to earn money to keep the home intact. There are subtle psychological pressures on her to be kind and gentle and sensitive and yet the modern woman is expected to be as able and competent as a man.

Above all she is conditioned to believe that marriage is the ultimate goal, her destiny.

Probably the whole problem is aggravated by this tendency to oversell marriage as an unending affair in which the partners are expected to remain at a high point of infatuation for the rest of their lives and in this romantic picture there is no clear definition of what the role and functions of the partners will be.

Hannah Gavron, *The Captive Wife*

Women are disillusioned, anxious, tense and depressed, women take drugs and alcohol in order to make life worth living, women resort to suicide or opt for the relative comfort of the mental hospital. Women suffer more from neurotic illness, mental stress and emotional strain than men. Can these facts result from anything but unendurable social and psychological pressures? Why do women seem unable to confront the problems, analyse them and find a solution? Why is the Irishwoman inclined to be lethargic, complacent and uncommitted?

My intention in writing this book is not to create the impression that all women are anxiety-ridden, maladjusted and despair-prone but a combination of personal observation and factual research leaves me in no doubt that sufficient numbers of women do suffer unnecessarily. It is my impression that many of the problems that women encounter in Ireland

are rooted in attitudes and behaviour that result not alone from existing discrimination and unfair conditioning of the female sex but also from our past history of female suppression.

THE FEMALE DIMENSION IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Women and Catholicism

It is significant that since the beginning of this century a considerable influence in the formation of the female character has been the Catholic Church. Catholicism has always downgraded women and in a country where Catholicism is all pervasive it is hardly surprising that women have been brainwashed into a reluctance to assert themselves. The Catholic Church had a powerful influence which extended not only from the pulpit but through the schools, social life and legislation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This influence has often been harmful to women; in the shaping of their attitudes and in the general lack of communication between the sexes.

In the twenties and thirties an almost maniacal hatred of women was expressed by many Catholic bishops and priests who saw in the female sex a cause for the decline in sexual morality which they feared so much. In 1925 Bishop O'Doherty of Galway said

> **If your girls do not obey you, if they are not in at the hours appointed lay the lash on their backs. That was the good old system, that should be the system today.**
>
> See J.H. Whyte, The Church and State in Modern Ireland

The clergy taught that company keeping and dancing were immoral and a danger to 'purity'. Some went further and even pronounced these evils as the work of the devil. Notices in dance halls said that 'respectable girls do not sit on gentlemen's knees'. Priests went to ridiculous lengths to keep boys and girls apart, patrolling the roads late at night and taking the names of any couples they found lingering in the darkness. According to the Joint Pastoral 1922

> **... traps for the innocent are chiefly the dance hall, the bad book, the indecent paper, the motion picture, the immodest fashion in female dress-all of which tend to destroy the virtues characteristic of our race.**
>
> See J. H. Whyte, *op. cit*.

Parishioners in Galway were forbidden to attend dances under threat of excommunication and in 1935 dancing was regulated by a Bill passed in the Dáil and said to have been influenced by the bishops. Even the traditional crossroads dancing which was one of very few pastimes available to those in isolated country areas did not escape the wrath of the clergy.

Where the more lively of the flock insisted on enjoying themselves by listening to music and dancing in the open self-righteous priests took it on themselves to set fire to the dancing platform, or else drove their cars backwards and forwards over the wooden structure to ensure that it could not be used again.

In some areas priests insisted that men sit at one side of the cinema aisle and women sit at the other; men and women entered churches through separate doors and sat in different pews; even when married they were ashamed to be seen talking to one another in public and stood and stared at one another from opposite ends of the crossroads meeting place.

A rural woman who braved the climate of opinion and managed to look joyful or happy left herself open to being labelled 'fast'. The Irishwoman was to be chaste, modest and virginal. She was taught to forego bodily pleasure and feel shame at anything so base as sexual pleasure. If she wanted

to retain her good reputation in the eyes of the clergy and the local people she did well to appear docile and never high spirited in public. Men and boys were often warned of the dangers of associating with sinful women and for many men a woman was primarily an occasion of sin.

Priests spoke out so strongly against the dangers of boy meeting girl that young Irish people grew into adults without ever realising that companionship with, and respect for, the opposite sex were possible. Total polarity of the sexes resulted from the fear and hatred of female sexuality.

Despite the attempts of the clergy to keep boys and girls apart many young people managed to get together for long enough to ensure that the girl became pregnant. The single girl who did become pregnant was despised by parents and priests alike and even by her male partner. He was pitied for being lured into sin by a ‘fast’ woman and she found neither charity, nor comfort, nor solace in her time of greatest need. She often suffered physical and mental torture at the hands of a cruel father who considered that his family's name was forever ruined. She had no option but to take the boat to England and there to be delivered of her unfortunate child. There was very little future for the young girl in this predicament. If she had the audacity to return to her hometown she knew: she would be automatically cold-shouldered even by her family and would be labelled as a sinful woman for the rest of her life. Like many other Irish girls without education, training or financial assistance her future in another country was bleak and she often resorted to prostitution as the only way to earn a living.

The puritanical influence of Irish Catholicism has been greater because it was disseminated not alone from the pulpit but through the classroom too. The Irish Catholic Church is in the unique position of having had almost complete control over the whole of a child's education. It has also put up strong opposition to any changes in the structure of Irish education that would lessen the power of the Church.

Primary schools are mostly staffed by lay people but the ultimate control of these schools is in the hands of a single manager who is usually the parish priest, while secondary schools have been owned, managed and staffed by religious orders of nuns, brothers or priests. The vocational schools managed by local authority-elected committees are the only area of education where the Catholic Church has never had complete control. And even here it is alleged that the bishops asked for an assurance in 1930 that this system would not infringe on their own secondary system. At third level the Hierarchy is also well represented on the governing boards of the colleges of the National University of Ireland.

The Hierarchy has also exerted influence over State legislation and has often been accused of attempting to make Irish laws fit Catholic moral and social teaching. The 1937Constitution forbids divorce for citizens of any religion and some years ago the Hierarchy reacted strongly against any change in the Constitution which would involve a change in the position regarding divorce. The Censorship of Publications Act of 1929 made it illegal to advocate the use of contraceptives and the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1935 prohibited the sale and importation of contraceptives.

But the most notable interference of the Church in State affairs was when the Hierarchy came out strongly against Dr Noel Browne's Mother and Child Scheme. As Minister for Health in 1950 Dr Browne proposed specialised health ser-vices for pregnant women and screening for children up to the age of sixteen. These safeguards for the health of the mother and her children were to be free of charge to all income groups. The scheme was publicly condemned by the Hierarchy because it was contrary to Catholic social teaching on the rights and duties of the family. The Bill was dropped, Dr Browne resigned as Minister, the Government fell and his party disintegrated but the women for whom the services were intended took no part in the whole controversy.

Priests constantly preached that a woman's place was in the home and Catholic literature advised that women who worked outside the home were guilty of neglecting husbands and families and were probably sowing the seeds of marital disharmony as well as juvenile delinquency.

The Irish Constitution enforced the view that a woman's place was in the home and that

> In particular the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall there-fore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic· necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.
>
> Article 41/2/1 and 2

but until the seventies the State did not see fit to allow women the privilege of personally receiving the Children's Allowance. This payment could only lawfully be made to a woman with her husband's written permission.

Women whose husbands died were not thought to be in neglect of family duties when they went out to work for pitifully low wages, without any tax concessions and without adequate means of caring for young children. There was no articulation and very little concern for the plight of the widow, the deserted wife or the physically assaulted wife in the first half of this century. Women who had to bring up young families single-handed and who could not earn money found themselves and their children poverty-stricken, starving and dependent on charity.

Women and Work

But women were also subject to strong economic pressure not to work outside the home once they married. Industrialisation passed us by in the nineteenth century and consequently at the beginning of this century Ireland had largely a rural-based economy.

Jobs were scarce, wages were low and the tradition of emigration to Britain and the United States continued. In an effort to cut down on emigration married women were encouraged, indeed often forced by legislation, to leave their jobs open to men. When they chose not to they were accused of being unpatriotic and of forcing yet another man and his family onto the emigrant ship.

In Ireland the soul of womanhood has been trained for centuries to surrender its rights and as a consequence the race has lost its chief capacity to withstand assaults from without and demoralisation from within.

James Connolly, *The Reconquest of Ireland*

Although Irishwomen supported and actively worked for a free nation once Ireland became a Republic, women, despite the promises of a Proclamation were forced back into the kitchen. The demoralised Irish woman was easily persuaded to run for the safety of the home and leave the men to get on with the formulation of important political, economic and social policies.

In the last fifty years women took virtually no interest in politics, they have had no voice in framing the legislation which ensured their enslavement and not surprisingly in view of their training in meekness and humility were unable to assess the effect of the discriminatory legislation or afraid to voice privately-held reservations. After the Republic became a reality there was a great deal of advice about women's obligations not to take men's jobs and to stay at home and look after their families but very little concern for their rights.

Nevertheless, women worked tirelessly, alone and through innumerable charitable organisations to raise money or to give personal support to those in grave need-the sick, the elderly, the poor, the incapacitated. But although women were motivated by a concern for human suffering this concern never resulted in a radical approach to community problems or to an analysis of the role of women in society.

Women's organisations founded about this time were largely educational and social in intent, conservative in outlook, pledged to silence on political issues and they failed to over-come the general apathy towards the cause of women. The Irish Countrywomen's Association was founded in 1910 by Sir Horace Plunkett who deplored the lack of social organisation in rural areas and advocated that self-help was as important as political action. The United Irishwomen, as the organisation was originally called, was one of the first associations of rural women in the world and their original name was changed because of confusion with a political party.

The ICA was represented at the first conference of Associated

Countrywomen of the World at Stockholm in 1933 and a member of the ICA was one of those responsible for founding the world movement. Study courses are held throughout the year by the ICA at their headquarters, An Grianan, in county Louth. Summer schools started in 1929led to the founding of this educational and recreational centre, financed by a grant from the Kellogg Foundation, and recognised as an Adult Education Centre by the Government in 1969.

The ICA has often been accused of being conservative. In the early days the ICA saw a woman as a back-up service to a man, the better educated she was the more able to support, encourage, assist and co-operate with him. There would appear to be a greater spirit of independence among ICA women now but wide-ranging resolutions passed in the last ten years have had little to do with radical feminism. They were concerned more with the health of children, education, home safety, career guidance, public services, the environment and care of the aged.

The ICA has consultative status at the United Nations through its affiliation to the Associated Countrywomen of the World, similarly the Catholic Women's Federation, formed almost thirty years later, through its membership of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations.

The CWF which grew out of the past pupils unions of secondary schools was founded in 1937 but never gained in membership as the ICA did. While the CWF was founded to promote Catholic social action, especially in the interests of the family, the ICA was founded as a broadly-based, non-sectarian, non-political organisation with the aim of developing and improving the conditions of rural life in Ireland by making women better educated.

Primarily concerned with service to the Catholic Church the Catholic Women’s Federation organised working girls clubs in Dublin where cooking, sewing, singing and dancing were taught. They pressed for control of juvenile emigration, they were concerned with issues like children's officers but they were most successful with a mass demonstration in O'Connell Street, Dublin, in May 1949, against the imprisonment of Cardinals Mindszenty and Stepinac.

The CWF had least success when it worked directly on behalf of women. Their application for registration as a nominating body for the Senate on the basis that they could best represent women in the home was turned down in 1938and again in 1954. They saw the need for 'this large body of unorganised citizens who are mainly women' and who could best be described as 'Homemakers’ to be publicly represented. The Federation gave evidence on the rights of Homemakers to the Commission on Vocational Organisation, ‘that local groups of Homemakers could be formed to work in

co-operation with and to be represented as a vocational group on local bodies' but the recommendations of the Commission published in 1944 were rejected by the Government.

The female dimension in Ireland in the thirties and forties had nothing to do with the political issues of the time. The rights of 'Homemakers' were considered irrelevant to the more important issues of industrial projects, Ireland's position in the second world war 'situation' and the relationship with Britain. Controversies surrounded not women's rights but the ban on Catholics at Trinity College and the restoration of the Irish language. Whether or not she made up that quarter of the population which the CWF described as 'Homemakers' the Irish woman's opinion was not considered in matters of public concern and she herself was content to leave the post-civil war politics and the administration of the country's affairs to the men.

And from all above to all below filtered the beliefs, customs, ideas, establishing a slave morality which enforces the subjection of women as the standard morality of the country.

James Connolly, *op. cit.*

Women and the Writers

Neither the Catholic Church nor the women's organisations nor the politicians could claim to have been an impetus for improvement in the status of women in the first half of this century. Similarly writers and historians chose to ignore the female dimension in Irish society. In The Irish, a social his-tory spanning two thousand years and first published in the 1940s, the only women that Sean O'Faolain mentioned are the legendary women of the sagas. Have Irish writers, usually male, been so hypnotised by the literary custom of fusing Ireland with the Dream Woman or the Dark Rosaleen that they find it impossible to come to terms with the reality, the humanity, the sexuality of women who make up just over half the total population?

> That Ireland more than any other country is spoken of as a woman is probably due to the appearance in our national affairs of qualities which men call womanly suggested Horace Plunkett in 1911. Irish literature written by men has always been more about the hopes for the emergence of a nation than about any desire for the emergence of women. Early twentieth-century writers also felt safer with mythological women. The Irish literary revivalists who used legendary themes for inspiration were praised for the new freedom which Anglo-Irish literature achieved but there is no reason to believe that Irish women have been inspired towards liberation by the romantically daring deeds of Deirdre, Grainne or Maeve.

According to the old Irish sagas women would appear to have played a major role in ancient Irish society but Helena Concannon in her book The Daughters of Banba shows that legendary men were urged to great deeds not so much by love of women but by love of country. The myths abound with stories of male struggles to win women but a constantly recurring theme is whether women are worth the struggle or not. Helena Concannon points out that the men who wrote the sagas practised discrimination, even contempt, for women in their desire to demonstrate women's evil-mindedness.

W B Yeats, one of those responsible for the twentieth-century revival of interest in the sagas, inspired women as well as men to fight for a free nation, but hardly inspired women to seek their own freedom. In his work Yeats left us the by now almost legendary figures of the women he loved and admired but neither the revival of interest in the mythological women nor his personification of the looks, the lives and the deeds of women like Maud Gonne, Constance Markievicz and Eva Gore

Booth led to the creation of a sense of identity for Irishwomen. Rather has the personification of these extraordinary women helped to enforce the national female inferiority complex.

However, life for the majority of women in the first half of this century was starkly unromantic. We are indebted to Peig Sayers whose life story was first published in 1936 for giving us some idea of the extent of the demoralisation and the depression experienced by women in rural Ireland at this time. She is the only woman who has left a written account of her deepest feelings of discontent and disillusionment with life during this period. Most of her life was spent on the Blasket Islands off the coast of Kerry and although she was aware of her personal enslavement she was in no way aware of the rights of women.

She had only a short few years of cheerful, optimistic childhood behind her when her father decided that she should be taken from school and put into domestic service. Peig's mother, a physical and spiritual wreck was heart-broken but could summon no energy to resist the decision to banish her youngest daughter.

It was three years before Peig saw her mother or the rest of her family again and already she was becoming dispirited and developing a fatalistic attitude towards life.

From then on she was aware only of the burden of suffering that was common to many women of the time and the futility of battling with the forces that kept a woman tied down. Although she always retained a brave spirit and a sense of humour she was a sad and lonely woman when she finally agreed to tell the story of her life.

> **I have dragged my way through life suffering torment and sorrow and it's little comfort I knew during the whole of my days.**
>
> *Peig*, trans. Bryan MacMahon

Present-day playwright John B. Keane's portrayal of the rural woman shows her to be still this curious mixture of docility and strength. Maggie in his play Big Maggie is remembered as a pretty young girl who gradually grew hard and tough during her marriage to a man who habitually consumed too much alcohol and whom she knew to have had sexual relations with other women. After her husband's death she vows that she will spend the rest of her life ‘getting the taste of marriage out of my mouth'. She wastes no time in mourning the loss of her spouse but sets about ruling her family in a hard-hearted manner as if to ensure that having suffered silently herself she can force others to suffer too.

In his Letters of a Successful T.D. the somewhat larger-than-life wife is depicted as a resentful and pitiful creature, resigned to the fate of an unfeeling husband and a demanding family. They for their part see her only as a hindrance, an annoyance; someone to be constantly humoured. The wife is jealous of the life her husband leads in the world outside their home, jealous of his concern for their daughter. With feeling and emotions long suppressed she is a martyr to the cause of Irish marriage and family life.

Female subservience is reflected not only in biography and fiction but in sociological studies too. In *Inniskillane* Hugh Brody demonstrates how lonely and despondent the Irishwoman has been in her acceptance of the female role of subjectivity. Although the rural woman may have had some measure of dominance over her husband and family in the home she had no influence in the life of the community outside.

The new wife owned not so much as a teacup. And she owned no more when she was eighty: everything passed to her son, whose wife would in her turn use but never own the household possessions.

Hugh Brody, *Inniskillane*

Hers was a life of hardship and drudgery. She worked continuously all during the year while her husband worked the land seasonally. It was accepted that winter was a time of rest for a man while it was unheard of for a woman to expect a break in the work routine. Some women never ventured further than their own villages and for many the only regular outing was weekly attendance at Mass in the local church. It was unheard of for a woman to think of accompanying her husband on his regular visits to the local bar. Traditionally hard work and little reward were accepted as a woman's lot in Ireland. Her life was dedicated to making her menfolk as comfortable as frugal conditions would allow and her husband often looked on her as his unpaid domestic servant.

TO BE A WOMAN

Sex, Marriage and Childbirth

Undoubtedly economic and social conditions have considerably improved with the increased industrialisation and better living conditions in the second part of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, illiterate travelling women still endure lives of deprivation and misery in caravans and shacks by the roadside. Camped outside the comfortable homes of their middle-class sisters they are unwelcome residents, shunted from one more inadequate site to another, threatened with violence by the well-to-do for daring to come too close, they are burned out of houses provided. Demoralised and de-humanised they exist in desperation.

Still more women endure overcrowding, unsanitary conditions and fire hazards in city flats which demand crippling rents. Poverty-stricken mothers have neither money to buy food, nor fuel to heat nor electricity to light the place they call home. Children borne by Irishwomen often go hungry, they have no place to play, they become ill in sites that are unserviced, totally lacking in sanitation and usually close to rat-infested dumps full of the cast-offs of the well-to-do Irish.

But the well-educated, well-informed Irishwoman of today can ironically be a sad, depressed, unhappy person. The puritanical, unchristian attitudes of the early part of this century have altered dramatically but the disastrous results live on in the narrow, ugly view of sex and in the weak, submissive Irishwoman who was born with the blessing of the Catholic Church.

Many women in Ireland today are uneasy, unsure, and unfulfilled. The female experience is to yearn unconsciously for a sense of identity, and yet to grow old bitterly, conditioned to the belief that anonymity is the female destiny.

It is in turn to be manipulated by men and to be conditioned by the educational system, to be engulfed by the brainwashing of the Church authorities and the advertisers.

The female experience is to be encouraged, and in turn to encourage younger women, to a life of subjection and docility, and to propagation of the myths of marriage. The female experience is one of dashed hopes and buried dreams which never culminate in self-knowledge or social commitment.

The experience for a married women is to cease to exist, to merge a never fully-developed identity with that of a man, to relinquish her rights as an individual and even her name. It is to use the male partner as an umbrella under which to hide her own character. It is always to use him as an excuse for not doing something that seems fearful or difficult. It is to live in dread of other women's bitchiness and malicious gossip. The female experience is to be afraid—of men and of women. It is never to have the courage to stand up on her own and be counted but always to work deviously through a man. It is never to have the courage of her convictions. It is to profess boredom with female company and yet spend all night in the pub talking solely to members of her own sex, while the males have their own conversation at the bar.

It is to see women as the real threat and to find a man’s drunkenness and insensitivity more acceptable than the mere idea of him talking to other women. Frequently it is a boast that her mate was the first to be carried out in a drunken stupour at the party.

The single girl who is able to devote her life to a fulfilling career is fortunate indeed but the more usual experience for a single woman is to feel cheated because she didn't get a husband and a house in suburbia.

Wishing on a diamond ring

Waiting for a kingdom on a shoestring is how Irishman, Anthony Blinco, sees the office girl as she alternates gossip and reading magazines with

Tracing thoughts of someone's dismal work

In neat figured patterns of un-understanding.

Not to marry is to be viewed by family and friends with a mixture of horror and despair. To be single is often to be better off financially than single women have ever been but to spend the bulk of that money in the expensive search for a man. It is to go on an annual pilgrimage ostensibly in search of the sun but the real journey is in search of the romance which she has been conditioned to expect but which the unimaginative and insensitive Irishman can never give her.

It is to return after two romantically perfect weeks in Majorca vowing to have nothing more to do with the Irishman who expects one thing only from a single woman and demands that so indelicately. But it is to drop that vow as soon as the suntan wears off and spend the rest of the year acting a role of coyness and femininity in her attempts to lure one more reluctant Irish male from his favourite pub and football club.

To be single and sought after means walking the thin line between being labelled sexy but not fast. And above all it is the need to be grateful and succumb easily to his sexual advances in a dark car when the pubs close. After all, for most women the main task in life is still to get a man at all costs and once she has landed him to hold on to him for life. If she does not succeed her fate may be similar to the eighteenth-century girl of The Midnight Court

> **With age and need in lessening span,**
>
> **And death beyond and no hopes of a man ...**
>
> **Every idiot in the country**
>
> **With a man of her own has the right to insult me.**
>
> trans. Frank O'Connor

The twentieth-century girl knows that the sudden display of ardent affection and undying love have been brought on by the beer but she knows also that if she does not nurture these tender feelings in the dark she is hardly likely to see her companion again when it is light. Furtive, alcohol-induced sexual encounters in parked cars easily become the pattern of life for male and female when both have been reared in a manner which equates sex with filth.

It is difficult to gauge the enormity of the problem which sex poses for Irishwomen because frank discussions on the subject are rare but from what has been written it would appear that ignorance of the body is widespread and that the sexual inhibitions of Irishwomen are tremendous.

In *Marriage Irish Style* Dorine Rohan says that an Irish-woman—a woman who was married for fifteen years—asked

> **Would you ever tell me what is an orgasm? Do you see stars and that sort of thing? I've never had one as far as I know.**

and an Irish mother of nine children

> **Whoever said you were supposed to enjoy sex, sure aren't we all here to suffer and the more we suffer in this life the better it will be for us in the next.**

But apart from the women who are unaware that love-making and sexual intercourse can be pleasurable and for whom sexual experience is a chore to be avoided whenever possible, 'I'm lucky, I

don't mind it', and ‘He's very good, he doesn't want it very often', Dorine Rohan spoke to women for whom sex was fearful and revolting.

> **I was always taught that sex was dirty and sinful. I dread it every time my husband wants to make love to me.**

For women like this nudity is taboo, shame is felt at the thought of undressing and sexual intercourse never occurs except under the bedclothes in the dark.

However puritanical her upbringing and however great a man's insensitivity and sexual incompetence the Irish-woman’s fear of sex may have been the result of her fear of pregnancy. This has been a lifelong dread for the woman who gives birth to ten or maybe fifteen children and knows that she still has a decade of childbearing years ahead of her.

Irishwomen are often accused of coping badly with childbirth but because of the lack of knowledge of contraceptive methods and the difficulties in obtaining supplies or even information on various devices due to legal restrictions many Irishwomen lived perhaps twenty years in fear and trembling of another pregnancy. Little wonder then that the experience of childbirth, the normal outcome of a pregnancy, has been at best a negative experience, at worst a nightmare for so many women.

Nevertheless, women themselves, although always ready to relate bad experiences of labour to their friends and neighbours have rarely complained publicly of cramped conditions in maternity hospitals, of bathroom and toilet facilities at a minimum, of brusque and sometimes insensitive treatment by the nursing staff. Nor has there been any agitation on the part of women who are better informed and prepared for the event for more information and better training for all pregnant women. An appalling lack of knowledge of the body in labour is still apparently widespread and this in turn leads to a lack of understanding and fear of the birth process. Frequently women profess a preference for this ignorance and a keen desire to be heavily drugged as soon as labour begins, unaware that drugs which relieve pain felt during the contractions can be injurious to the health of the unborn. Latterly there have been warnings that drugs are being used as a substitute for close personal attention during labour. The *Journal of the Irish Medical Association* records a case of a mother being so heavily drugged that the new-born child's vitality was critically impaired, the infant had to be given oxygen and blood transfusions at birth and needed intensive nursing care for over a month later.

This is not to say that analgesics do not have their place in childbirth. Happily, it is several hundreds of years since women who advocated the lessening of pain in childbirth were burned as witches. It was then the opinion of the medical profession as well as the Catholic Church that any interference with the pain felt in labour was against the natural law.

It is sad that in these days of greater medical expertise as well as easier means of communication that so many young girls approaching labour for the first time may be equipped only with horrific tales of marathon stitchings, torn vaginas and unbearably long labours plus the attendance of an unsympathetic doctor who does nothing to quell her fears. When the time comes for her to go into hospital she is likely to be tense and anxious and if left alone for long periods will undoubtedly panic. Psychiatrists point out that a badly managed or traumatic experience in labour can lead to severe depression or mental disturbance later. This possibility must be aggravated by the lack of knowledge of and limited access to means of contraception afterwards.

And yet scant attention is paid by the medical and nursing professions to the need for the psychological and emotional preparation of women for childbirth. Where ante-natal classes, dealing not only with the physical aspects but with emotional too, have been organised by physiotherapists

there have been reports that some obstetricians are neither co-operative nor encouraging in what they consider to be interference in their domain. It is ironic that physiotherapy is an almost wholly female profession while obstetrics is dominated by men.

...Not so Happily Ever After

Despite the fear of the body and of sex and no matter how difficult the experience of childbirth has been the new mother is usually in buoyant mood when she brings her baby home for the first time. But very soon she is jolted into the harsh reality that caring for the baby is a difficult business. She didn't think there was anything to learn, shouldn't it all come naturally to a woman? Endless days are spent washing napkins, sterilising bottles, and preparing feeds. Her husband may be away all week, she may be far from her own family and friends and daily she begins to feel more lonely, more tired and more cut off from reality.

She is conditioned to believe that caring for babies comes naturally to women so she battles on silently, ashamed to tell anyone about how inadequate she feels. Untold stresses and strains build up in women all over the country who are carrying out the nation's most responsible job in the lonely work of ensuring the physical growth and spiritual well-being of the future generation. A woman who was already beginning to rely on her husband now experiences total dependence on that man for her emotional, physical and economic needs. For many men the added responsibilities prove too great and very often pave the way to a break-down in the marriage.

For the young girl there is a nagging realisation that the sense of fulfilment and identity which she was led to believe she would find in marriage is growing daily more remote. She was conditioned from an early age to the belief that marriage is an end in itself, and that she should remain at a high point of infatuation for the rest of her life.

She has a vague remembrance of the 'happiest day in every woman's life', she waited for it for perhaps two decades and looks back on it, with the aid of a fat photograph album and yellowing wedding dress, for four or maybe five decades. There is an ever-cloudier remembrance of that golden engagement period, symbolised by a ring on the third finger. Sadly the diamonds now seem out of place on hands which are continually washing, cleaning, scrubbing and dusting. Bitterly she looks back on the engagement period as one massive build-up to marriage-a boom industry for dress-makers, photographers, confectioners, wine merchants, hoteliers, printers and newspapers. Young couples are so conditioned to the ongoing myth that they are prepared to spend hundreds of pounds on receptions and honeymoons and at the same time approach a housing aid society with a plea that they have not got any money to spare for a house deposit.

She looks back longingly at the heady days when her only worry was how to show-off to the best advantage those diamonds on her left hand. She sees no future for herself, so she urges her husband to a better career, and her children to high scholastic achievements.

She seeks her own identity in the present through the status which her husband's salary and social contacts can give her, and she dedicates herself to a life of housewifery and consumerism.

Because she never really knew who she was except in relation to men and because she is now too muddled to begin to learn she accepts the image of 'the ideal woman' that is created for her by advertisers who are usually men.

Whether the house is a council flat, a secluded mansion or a suburban semi it must be equipped with the furniture and fittings, the gadgets and equipment that are currently in vogue.

Obediently she discards perfectly good appliances in favour of more fashionable models introduced annually with an extra button here, a knob there and in a new colour range.

The house which symbolised security and achievement begins to feel like a tomb, there is a feeling of utter fatigue and ill health can easily set in.

She is surrounded by other women, all suffering from the same stresses and strains and all feeling anxious, lonely and unsure but very soon she learns that she can find no solace in friendship with her neighbours. She finds no sense of community life, sharing or involvement. She becomes aware that life on a new housing estate is a life of gossip. Unfortunately, idle gossip indulged in primarily out of boredom and loneliness can become malicious gossip as a result of which some women may suffer intolerable strain.

She begins to see other women as a threat and she lives in fear of what they think of her and what they may say about her. In extreme cases a woman who was befriended may feel totally exploited when she finds that her personal life has become public knowledge. She may become so disillusioned that she shuns all social contact and retreats once again into the home in which she was feeling so trapped.

She is easy prey for manufacturers who use researchers to probe the hidden depths of a woman's mind to establish how to make her buy. They know how to sell to women who are menstruating, women who are neurotic and women who are lonely. They know how to make use of her guilt and her distresses. They know and use the approach that will give her a sense of purpose and creativity just by buying things to fill houses which are no longer homes but monuments to consumerism. She buys things to fill the house, things to clean the things that fill the house, things in which to store the things she buys to clean the things ... and so on and she wonders why her purchases never make her happy.

She tries to find a medium of expression for her personality in constantly redecorating and rearranging. She knows she must work hard and efficiently at budgeting, marketing, cooking, cleaning and still not be submerged by domesticity. She knows that she must appear glamorous and sexy even though she spent the day dusting and tidying.

Her hopes in marriage have been dashed, the promises left unfulfilled but the basic desires are still there. Manufacturers make millions out of women's hidden dreams. She put her trust in the state of marriage and her money into the industries which sustain it. Now she switches the trust and money to the advertisers who sell her promises; promises of love if she uses stock cubes, promises of beauty if she creams her face, they promise her the envy of other women if she buys their scented floor polish, they promise her relief from loneliness if she uses their cake mix.

Constant bombardment by the advertisers helps to mask the emptiness of the role of a housewife by assuring her of the need to buy a vast profusion of cleaning sprays, creams, liquids, conditioners and detergents. It also perpetuates that role by compelling her to keep on buying the myriad of kitchen gadgets which are put on the market each year. She concentrates on housewifery and with the help of the manufacturers, the advertisers, the gadgets and equipment she creates a beautiful interior. She feels under constant pressure to keep the house looking like a show home no matter how she wears herself out in the tedious and repetitive process.

When God made women they straight away got into mischief. You see he forgot to give them any brains and it was too late to do anything about it then. So he had an idea. He invented dust so that they should be all day sweeping it from one end of the house to the other.

Eric Cross, *The Tailor and Ansty*

But it has no heart, her husband feels out of place, her children resent the fact that she is so taken up with cleaning and tidying that she has no time for them. Housewifery becomes an end in itself and rarely does the occupation demand or help realise a woman's real capabilities, rather does it further alienate a woman from her family.

Even though a woman may not find her housework particularly rewarding she still feels compelled to keep her home looking as clean and as neat as her neighbours' homes. At the same time she wants her children to grow up with as much freedom and space as possible. But her two roles in the home are in total conflict.

As soon as she has cleaned the floor the children mess it up again with muddy shoes, as soon as she has tidied a room they dump their toys about and so it goes on throughout the day.

There is something so negative about this role that society heaps entirely on the shoulders of women, that of making sure that things do not get dirty.

Suzanne Gail. *Work*

She prides herself on taking care of her children in her home instead of sending them to the latest playgroup but in reality she spends more time admonishing and tidying them from one room to another. The child senses from the many warnings about not soiling, not scratching, not touching, not even moving that he can hardly be as important as the pieces of furniture and he vents his pent-up feelings on his mother. The continual frustration during the day adds to her tension and anxiety and to the bad relations which are building up in the family.

A Dream that does not Come True

As the years go by she becomes more and more disenchanted with the way her life has evolved. She is disillusioned with marriage, disappointed with her husband, and bored and restless with herself. She is too conditioned to a role of passivity and lethargy to attempt to grapple with the problems which beset her, rather is she inclined to blind herself to her frustrations by becoming obsessed with her children or by making a production of housework. Even the acquisition of the most luxurious modern home complete with the latest fittings and furnishings does nothing to compensate for a woman's nagging realisation of the futility of her pursuits. The busy and successful husband whom she urged to a better career has a stressful time at the top of his business or profession and consequently has less and less time for his wife, his family and his home.

Regular visits on her part to the hairdresser, beautician or masseuse do nothing to alter the fact that he works late hours at the office and is frequently called away for prolonged business trips. When

he is at home he wants only to relax and sleep, he has less and less desire for lovemaking and finds he cannot even satisfy the demands she makes on him

> **She has what she wanted, wants what she cannot have, is not satisfied with what she's got.**
>
> Sean O Faolain, *A Dead Cert*

There are no statistics to show the number of married women who resort to extra-marital sex as an answer to the disillusionment and even desperation which is so often the female experience today but the figures do show that more and more women are resorting to self-prescribed alcohol or medically-prescribed sedatives or anti-depressants.

Tired of the wax treatments, the sauna baths and all attempts at keeping her body expensively in shape wealthy

> **Little wonder that she seeks solace in the tea and Anadin routine, the magic green and black Librium or the primrose-coloured Roche 5. If things get really bad she'll become a supermarket alcoholic - as the statistics so shockingly attest.**
>
> Mary Hynes, Psychiatrist

women in common with their less well-off but more tired and care-worn sisters reach the same stage of uncertainty about the future, inability to cope with the present and total disillusionment with the promises and expectations of past youth.

Female drinking is steadily increasing, more and more women are presenting themselves for treatment for alco-holism and the statistics show that there has recently been a dramatic increase in the number of alcoholic women admitted to psychiatric hospitals. The *Irish National Council on Alcoholism* in its report to the Minister for Health in 1973pointed out the intolerable strain that the alcoholic wife can put on the mental and emotional well-being of the entire family.

> ...much of the money allotted to her for home necessities is spent on drink, until such time as the husband is forced to take over the household management. Even then, household articles are sold or pawned, or money is borrowed to purchase alcohol.

Social workers find that the problems associated with alcoholism are physical violence, marital disharmony leading to total breakdown in the relationship and, as evidenced by the work of the *Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children*, to uncared for, abandoned and emotionally-disturbed children.

Sadly, a woman's dependence on alcohol can grow slowly but surely without any conscious decision on her part to jeopardise the marital relationship or the mental health of her family. At first she takes a quick drink to calm her frayed nerves before her husband arrives home at the end of what has been for her an exhausting day. Soon she finds that if he is away she can more easily relax in the evening if she has a drink or two, then she finds that the day's problems melt away and sleep comes as a solace if she is intoxicated before she goes to bed. Gradually the need for alcohol becomes more acute and occurs earlier and earlier in the day. She must have a drink first thing in the morning and finds her-self taking sips direct from the bottle all during the day. It will not be long before she is in the grips of a deadly disease.

Not alone are women using alcohol as a means of escape but a great deal of concern has been voiced recently because of the alarming quantity of tranquillisers and anti-depressants that are being

prescribed each year for women who tell their doctors that they cannot manage their lives without a pill to calm nerves that are constantly on edge or to enliven spirits that are suicidally low.

Much of the space in medical journals is taken up with full-page drug manufacturers' advertisements extolling for general practitioners the merits of the 'newest' and 'best' of these drugs. The ads, in which a female is always depicted as the agitated or depressive patient, promise miraculous relief from those predominantly female' complaints - insomnia, anxiety, depression, premenstrual tension, agitation, panic attacks, tension headaches, low back syndrome, menopausal syndrome and phobias of all kinds. Of all phobias women would appear to be particularly prone to agoraphobia, a nervous disorder which manifests itself at the thought of leaving the house or travelling by public transport. Of approximately thirty thousand sufferers in Ireland according to the *Out and About Association* two-thirds are women. Many women become willing prisoners in their own homes after the first attack, deviously working out a lifestyle which enables them to avoid mixing with crowds, which prevents them going to the supermarket or on shopping trips to the town.

Some agoraphobics remained housebound for years in the past without even realising that their suffering had a name, too ashamed to confide their anxieties to even the closest friend or relative. Not for them the comfort of quelling the panic with a prescription marked 'renew' because they may be unable to sit long enough in the doctor's waiting room to seek medical help. Similarly a visit to the dentist or the hair-dresser may be an agonising if not a totally impossible experience.

Considering the conscious decision of women suffering from agoraphobia to opt out of normal life, considering the slow growth but steady reliance which other women place on the warm, steadying gulp of alcohol and considering the countless women who every day consult their doctors and go away with a prescription that is renewable every thirty days and which is guaranteed to steady those nerves, calm the anxiety or lift the spirits it is hardly surprising to learn that there is an increase in admissions to Irish psychiatric hospitals of women suffering from alcoholism, drug addiction, personality disorders and neurosis.

Neurosis, which the dictionary defines as a functional disease of the nerves, accounts for one-third of all women admitted to hospital for psychiatric treatment for the first time. According to the Medico Social Research Board's *Activities of Irish Psychiatric Hospitals and Units* almost twice as many women as men were admitted suffering from neurosis in 1970.

Significantly more middle-aged women would appear to suffer from neurosis than any other age group, to judge by the statistics. But even the woman who was quite happy and content during twenty years of devoted childrearing may have great difficulty in adjusting to a different style of life once her children are grown up. She refuses to accept that the children she cared for day and night are now capable of managing their lives without her help. She cannot believe that they have grown away from her, that they are people with their own rights and she is jealous even of the achievements to which she nurtured them. She may be hostile towards the man she married and with whom she now realises that she has very little in common.

He appears to have progressed while her life remained static, for a lifetime her horizons were confined to the home, the children and the supermarket while his human contacts have been constantly changing. After all the effort that she put into a life of caring, of budgeting, of nursing, of cooking, of cleaning, of washing, of giving support it now appears that she never really existed as a person in her own right. If she did once have ambitions and aspirations beyond the family they are now long forgotten. Her life has been lived for and through her family but now that they are grown up the sense of purpose is gone. Home today is more likely to be a stopping off point for a man who is making his way in the world rather than the place of work and social gathering which it used to be.

Keeping house is meaningless when the house is always empty. Bored and lonely, totally untrained to take up a career outside the home the middle-aged woman can experience terrifying feelings of uselessness and depression.

The Irish Male

Rarely does a woman get understanding and support from the Irish male. He freely admits that he cannot understand women. He is always uneasy and seldom relaxes in female company. It is as if by engaging in conversation with a woman he may lose himself or in some way commit himself. Small talk he finds embarrassing but what else can he discuss with her, he feels that she would not appreciate the dirty stories he just heard in the pub and she probably would not know the first thing about his favourite sport. The problem is that the Irish man feels totally inadequate in the company of women. Most probably his education has been devoid of female influence and boys who have been educated through their teens by celibate religious brothers acquire and frequently carry with them for the rest of their lives some peculiar notions about the female sex.

Whether his conception of the female sex is of human beings so angelic that they must be kept on a pedestal or of creatures so base that they exist only to satisfy a man's bodily desires he keeps his distance. Until darkness falls that is and he has had a few pints, then the coyness and femininity of women from whom he shrank during the day become a bonus to the drinking hours. Inhibitions gone he now enjoys having his ego boosted by cuddly females—as long as he is not out-numbered by them and his mates are nearby. His tongue loosens with the effect of a few pints and the conviviality of the pub, his hands are adept at feeling for soft female flesh. He takes whatever physical delights she is willing to bestow on him before they return to their respective abodes and next day matter-of-factedly tells the story of the 'great bit of stuff' or alternatively is contemptuous of the 'lousy bitch' that (when he did not get what he wanted) he encountered last night.

If he decides to get to know her better he will accompany her to the pub with the unwritten agreement that she will sit with the women and talk women-talk while he with any luck will be unable to find a seat near her and so will have retire to the bar with the lads for a decent chat. It will not occur to him that she might be spirited away in his absence by another of his sex-he knows that any decent Irishman will be too busy putting away pints to spare a thought for the women. Of course he may not completely forget about her. Depending on the extent to which his decency can be stretched he will glance encouragingly in her direction from time to time although he may find it more difficult to focus on her as the night proceeds. If he is not too drunk he will look for signs of discontent on her face, which unless he keeps replenishing that glass of vodka, will mean another of those stupid rows about him leaving her stranded with a bunch of boring women all night.

Man's vision of woman is not objective but an uneasy combination of what he wishes her to be and what he fears her to be, and it is to this mirror image that woman has had to comply.

Eva Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes*

If she is still around after the lapse of a suitable number of years he may decide to do the decent thing and marry her. He then reckons that he has accorded her such an enormous favour that she should be deliriously happy for the rest of her days. He may be remarkably happy for as long as his life-style can remain at the bachelor level because he can indulge in a bit of football or a flutter whenever the fancy takes him, meet the lads and have a jar whenever it pleases him and all with the added bonus that he can go home to the missus afterwards for mothering, feeding and copulating.

All may be well until the children are born and financial commitments become more serious. He is then content to leave his wife who rarely has adequate rest or relaxation to shoulder the lonely burden of caring for their children and to balance the meagre household budget. It does not occur to him to cut down on his own spending or on his own leisure pursuits and he cannot understand why she is not the same girl he used to know, why she looks so bedraggled and unhappy, why she gets upset so easily, why she is always nagging, why his drinking habits disgust her, why she gets so worked up if he doesn't attend to his personal hygiene. He begins to see marriage and his family only as curtailment of his freedom. Household chores like washing clothes (but more particularly hanging them to dry in the public gaze), brushing floors and cooking meals are all seen as a threat to the Irishman's masculinity. Women too are generally conditioned to the belief that it is absolutely against a man's nature to press shirts or clean the toilet.

At this stage he may begin to demonstrate a more callous, cruel and cowardly side to his nature and his total lack of sensitivity may break her spiritually and mentally. The Samaritans reported in 1974 that 15 per cent of the people who sought help from them had marital difficulties. Out of a total of three hundred and sixty-one over half were women; with more women than men seeking help with problems of depression and anxiety also.

> **It is remarkable to see the emotional bashing a wife suffers when her marriage goes wrong, her world zooms to the smallest dimension of the kitchen or the bedroom while her obsession with self guilt, anxiety for the children, concern for the future looms large and uncontrollable.**
>
> Nuala Fennell, *Irish Marriage—How Are You!*

But the Irish husband's aggression towards his wife may take on a more physical form as more than one Irishman has voiced the belief that 'if you want to keep a woman in her place keep her pregnant and barefoot'.

Women who are brutally beaten by their husbands often endure being slashed with knives, pulled by the hair and kicked in the stomach, even when pregnant. Most marital cases in court are due to drink and violence but those cases which are heard publicly before a court of law are only a fraction of the total marriage breakdown in the country.

The Irishwoman to whom respectability is all important will go to great lengths to avoid the disgrace of a court case and make it appear that all is well even though the marriage may have broken down years before. Archaic discriminatory laws are still on the statute books which operate to give a wife the status of mere chattel of her husband and ensure her dependence on him. Divorce is unconstitutional in the Republic of Ireland but married couples do not find them-selves more compatible as a result. Many women are deserted each year by husbands who may turn up within weeks or months but who very often never show up again. Children are subjected to untold suffering in marriages that have been non-existent for years. Women suffer silent lives of misery with husbands who are mentally unbalanced, they suffer aggression, physical brutality and acute depression in their marriages to men who are often drunk and they suffer terrible deprivations, economic hardship and starvation with men who are gamblers.

> **... until Irishwomen are prepared to critically examine their reasons for getting married, the rights they forfeit in marriage and the reality and consequence of marital breakdown they will continue to be the unequal and disadvantaged partners in their marriages.**
>
> Nuala Fennell, *Irish Marriage-How Are You!*

WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN IRISH HISTORY

Feminism versus Nationalism

The contemporary Irishwoman may suffer but consider the fate of women in the distant past.

> **Like cattle they became a measure of value and an acceptable means of payment. A conventional rate of exchange was established between female slaves and cattle. Six heifers or three milch cows were the equivalent of a female slave.**
>
> Cullen, *Life in Ireland*

Although individual Irishwomen often fought hard for equality for women and organisations to promote the cause of women were organised at various times in the past there has never been a really vigorous woman movement in Ireland. The three main reasons I would put forward for the absence of a woman movement on a national scale are the lack of opportunity for higher education for women until very recent times, the lack of opportunity for women to work outside the home and last but not least because feminism has always been secondary to nationalism in Ireland.

The *Gaelic League* founded at the end of the nineteenth century to promote Irish language and culture was the first organisation to allow women to join with the same privileges as men. But it was still considered that women were unsuited to public life and particularly to active participation in campaigns against injustices. A woman was not expected to have an opinion on a controversial matter and if she had it was more fitting that she should not voice that opinion but remain demurely acquiescent to the decisions of men. One woman who was fully aware of injustices to women and impatient with the exclusion of women from public affairs was Maud Gonne. But like many other Irish women who first became politically active in the cause of women she allowed her feminist ideals to become submerged in her stronger resolution to make Ireland a free nation. The first action of the separatist women's organisation *Inghidnhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Ireland)* which she founded in 1900 when Ireland was still under British rule was a demonstration against the reigning monarch Queen Victoria's visit to Ireland.

Eight years after *The Daughters* was founded it was decided to publish a woman's magazine and in 1909 *Bean na hÉireann* first appeared under the editorship of Helena Moloney, who was a militant republican. Although the organisation and the magazine were committed to women's rights *Bean na hÉireann* did not see that the question of votes for women was as important as the role of women in the struggle for Irish independence. Its theme was 'be pre-pared to give your life for Ireland'.

Articles on cooking and gardening were interspersed with those on labour problems and methods of street fighting but even the innocent-seeming gardening notes often camouflaged nationalist propaganda with slugs, weeds and pests representing the British and flowers, birds and trees the enslaved Ireland.

A regular contributor to the magazine was Constance Markievicz. With her sister, Eva Gore Booth, Constance organised and spoke at women's suffrage meetings when she lived with her family in the west of Ireland. Eva remained passionately concerned about the rights of women for the rest of her life but she was prominent only in the woman movement in England. Constance, on the other hand, having married the Polish Count Markievicz and given birth to a daughter, who was called Maeve in recognition of the legendary Irish queen, was to dedicate her life to militant republicanism. So totally immersed did she become in republican ideals that Constance alienated herself in turn from

her family, her former friends, her husband and her daughter. She secretly trained a rebel boy scout organisation called *Na Fianna* to prepare them for armed insurrection and she herself fought in the 1916 Rising.

She was imprisoned along with the leaders for her part in the Rising but whereas they were executed her life was spared because she was a woman. She contested a general election from her prison cell in England and was the first woman to win a seat in the British House of Commons. She did not, however, take her seat in Parliament in London; instead when she was released she returned to Ireland and became a member of the illegal Dáil set up by Sinn Féin in Dublin and became its first Minister for Labour. Constance Markievicz was also President of *Cumann na mBan* until she resigned to join the Fianna Fáil political party.

Cumann na mBan, started in 1913 as an auxiliary to the Volunteer Army, incorporated *Inghidne na hÉireann* founded by Maud Gonne some years before. To *Cumann na mBan* Irish women's rights were unattainable without first freeing Ireland from British rule. Its members pledged them-selves to regain for the women of Ireland the rights that belonged to them ‘under the old Gaelic civilisation’ by actively participating in militant republicanism. The movement, which became well organised throughout the country, was split in 1922 after the Treaty in which Britain recognised the freedom of twenty-six counties of Ireland; the Cork district supported the Treaty and disbanded voluntarily two years later; the majority of the executive, however, were against the Treaty, they urged non-cooperation with the new Irish government and pledged themselves to continue the fight until the whole thirty-two counties had been freed.

It is worth noting that very often the women who were most dedicated to the cause of Irish freedom became most disillusioned in later life. Despite a lifetime of fighting for, speaking on behalf of, writing about and being imprisoned and tortured for the cause which was so dear to her, Constance Markievicz would appear to have ended her days saddened and disillusioned; a fate not unlike that which befell Ann Devlin, an Irishwoman who was associated with an earlier Rising. After the failed nineteenth-century insurrection she was steadfast in her refusal to betray Robert Emmet by whom she was employed as housekeeper. Although imprisoned and tortured in efforts to make her speak she never relented and when she was finally released from jail she was a physical wreck. Despite her actions in the cause of Irish freedom she emerged friendless and forgotten. Although she was penniless charitable appeals on her behalf went unheeded in her old age and she eventually died of starvation in a Dublin tenement. The inscription on her grave, the only acknowledgment of her patriotism, reads:

> To the memory of Anne Devlin the faithful servant of Robert Emmet who possessed some rare and many noble qualities, who lived in obscurity and poverty and so died on 18September 1851 aged 70 years.

Already in 1851, far away from the misery of Ann Devlin's existence in Ireland an American woman Ernestine Rose was calling for the removal of the 'legal shackles' from women at a meeting in Worcester, Massachusetts. The first Women’s Rights Convention had been held three years before at Seneca Falls, New York, when resolutions to end discrimination against women were adopted. The nineteenth-century woman movement in the United States evolved out of the crusade for the abolition of slavery and the women who pioneered the movement travelled long, uncomfortable journeys to speak about the rights of women at meetings and gatherings all over the country.

They were not always well received by the crowds but in the cause of women they were prepared to endure the heckling and suffer the objects which were hurled at them on the platforms. At first their proposals were radical and far-reaching, American women attacked the State, the system of

legislation, the Church and the institution of marriage. They called for self-reliance, the politicisation of women, equal educational and job opportunities and an end to the enslavement of women. But towards the end of the nineteenth century the more radical aims of American women were being watered down or forgotten. The movement increasingly began to focus on the struggle for woman suffrage, which was eventually gained throughout the United States in 1920.

English women were not successful in gaining the vote until 1928 and became increasingly militant in the struggle for female suffrage. The suffragettes, a term used at first derogatorily and later adopted by militants such as the Pank-hursts, caused an enormous amount of violence and public disorder. Political parties in England feared woman suffrage and Prime Ministers such as Gladstone and Asquith resisted the granting of votes for women. In 1903 Emmeline Pank-hurst, disgruntled because of the lack of progress, decided to form her own suffrage association. By 1905 the suffragettes were gaining widespread publicity, they were being assaulted by police and ordinary people alike, they were jailed where they went on hunger strike and were force-fed as a consequence. From then until full suffrage was granted the suffragettes grew more and more violent in their tactics; politicians were attacked and their homes bombed.

Women's Rights and Education

Apart from the fact that the energy of politically-aware Irishwomen was usually channelled into the cause of nationalism and republicanism in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries one of the main reasons why English and American women were more strident in their demands for equality than their Irish counterparts must surely have been their greater access to higher education, with the Americans in a more fortunate position than the English. By 1880 more than a third of the students enrolled in higher education establishments in the United States were women; there were only a few hundred women in the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge and although they sat for the same examinations as men they were not allowed to receive degrees until well into the twentieth century.

A handful of schools pioneered the cause of higher education for women in Ireland. Alexandra College, a Protestant school which opened with six pupils in 1866 fought hard for entrance to Trinity College, Dublin; students sat for and passed the entrance examinations but were not accepted as students of the university until 1904. Methodist College and Victoria College, both Belfast establishments, also championed the cause. Although the Universities of Cork Galway and Belfast founded in the middle of the nineteenth century were nondenominational, attendance by Catholics was actively condemned by the hierarchy; even when the three colleges of the National University of Ireland were established at the beginning of this century with hierarchical representation on the boards women were still discouraged from attendance.

In fact until the middle of the twentieth century Catholics whether male or female who attended Trinity College without the permission of the Hierarchy were said to be guilty of grievous sin. Similarly in the nineteenth century Catholic girls were forbidden to attend non-Catholic schools and had it not been for the zeal of the religious orders of nuns who were already founding schools towards the end of the eighteenth century the education of the majority of Irish women would have made even less progress.

The Ursulines were the first community of nuns to open a school for girls since the Reformation and they too were responsible for the foundation of the Presentation Order which dedicated itself to the education of the poor. The Presentation Sisters later extended their work to caring for the aged, founding orphanages, industrial schools and colleges of domestic science.

The Dominican Sisters too were responsible for the founding of secondary schools and colleges of domestic science. The Irish Sisters of Charity, founded in 1815 to aid the sick and poor also branched into orphanages and industrial schools. The Sisters of Mercy opened a house in Dublin for destitute women in the nineteenth century and later founded orphanages, industrial schools, primary and secondary schools and teachers' training colleges.

But while the secondary schools of other religious denominations were agitating for admission to universities the nuns apparently ignored the third-level education of Catholic women and were prepared to accept the male hierarchical viewpoint that might be summarised in the words of the Irish poet who many hundreds of years ago wrote;

Nor do I ask for intellect

A little scholarship will pass

All that of women I expect

Is to know water-cress from grass

Women, trans. Frank O'Connor

And although the nuns own history is one of pioneering strength and unselfish dedication, of great hardship and personal deprivation they educated generation after generation of Irish girls who acquired an unadventurous, unquestioning acceptance of life, the epitomisation of which is the long-suffering martyred wife and mother. It is ironic that the same nuns who managed their lives, their communities and their convents with the minimum of male aid should have educated Irish girls in meekness and humility towards men as well as in the myth of female inferiority.

Nevertheless, the history of the religious orders is even less happy in the institutions they set up for orphaned and deserted infants and children. A girl who was reared in a convent orphanage, whether as a result of the death of her parents or because her parents were unwilling or unable to take care of her themselves, had rarely any future other than in domestic service. Still in her teens she was a cheap and easy means for the middle-class wife to acquire an 'untrained' and often illiterate girl to do her housework. Rarely were the girls who lived in orphanages given the benefit of even the most basic scholastic education. It was a foregone conclusion that such a luckless individual could not possibly possess intellectual ability and if she had any training it was because she had no option from an early age but to acquire the skills which befitted a domestic servant.

Social Feminism in the Nineteenth Century

The woman movement in the United States and Britain coincided not alone with the advent of higher education for women but also evolved with industrialisation, the consequent shift of population from rural to city areas and the possibility for women to work outside the home. In both countries the distress of the poor became more apparent as industrialisation increased and acted as a further inspiration to educated English and American women to work for social reform. As William L. O'Neill points out in *The Woman Movement* the development of social feminism in the late nineteenth century was more important for the insight and experience which women gained for themselves rather than for any good which the women achieved in the community.

The same jolt to social feminism did not exist in Ireland because industrialisation passed us by in the nineteenth century. Although steam power was available there were too few mineral resources so the majority of the population remained on the land and the work base was still the home—when there was work and when there was home. Although the distress which conglomerated

in fast-growing cities in other parts of the world was absent in Ireland the poverty of rural people was often acute.

At this time half the families of Ireland were living in one-room, earth-floored cabins without a window to let the light in or a chimney to let the smoke out. The *Poor Law* had been in operation since 1830 and many families had nothing to call home but the Workhouse, which usually consisted of three separate dormitories in order to keep men, women and children apart. As a result whole families were split up in the same Workhouse, neither sharing sleep, nor recreation nor work but they were prepared to endure separation and were glad to avail of food and shelter at any price rather than starve in a hole in a bog with a makeshift roof over their heads.

Apart from women's association with the cause of nationalism the land war was the most notable period of Irish history in which women were actively involved. So although the same spur to social feminism did not exist in nineteenth-century Ireland small groups of women acquitted themselves admirably not alone in charitable acts but in political action on behalf of the poverty-stricken tenant. The *Ladies Land League*, the first radical association of women organised for political action, was founded by Anna Parnell, a sister of Charles Stuart Parnell. Clergymen spoke publicly of the great danger to feminine virtue and morality which would result from women's participation in such political affairs, the movement was greeted with contempt and derision by most of those in authority and even Parnell himself was not in favour of the *Ladies Land League.*

Undaunted, the Parnell sisters and the other *Ladies* endeavoured to care for the families of tenants imprisoned during the land war. They organised the building of huts for evicted families and they urged the tenant women to co-operate with one another in the fight against eviction. They travelled long distances agitating for land reform and when the male leaders of the *League* were imprisoned the women took on their work too until eventually the *Ladies*

Land League was declared an illegal organisation and ordered to disband in 1881.

Margaret Anna Cusack was said to have been a one-time president of the *Ladies Land League*. A sister of the enclosed Order of Poor Clares, she was unable to take an active part in a political movement but it is known that her concern for the plight of the peasant predated even the Land League. Born in 1829, *The Nun of Kenmare* as she came to be known was in favour of a complete social revolution for the underprivileged and especially for women. Her vows would have forbidden her to travel around the country speaking in public so her efforts to pressurise for a more just society were concentrated in the books she published. She wrote about the enslavement of women, about their lack of social, legal and political status, about broken marriages and the urgent need for divorce in the nineteenth century, about the causes of prostitution and the deplorable conditions in which so many women were forced to seek employment. In Kenmare she proved to be an embarrassment to her community and to the Catholic Hierarchy when she blamed the Government and the wealthy landowners alike for their lack of assistance in establishing industrial training schools for girls. To *The Nun of Kenmare* it was pointless teaching Irish girls the ladylike practice of lacemaking if their only future was in the kitchens or factories of the United States.

However, her radical ideas were the cause of her hasty departure from Kenmare for Knock where she hoped to found a new community of nuns. She managed to start a nursery school for the poorest children in the area but she was very soon to be denounced by a priest for supposedly luring children away from the local national school. She had in fact accepted two children who were old enough to attend the local school but who had been turned away because their clothes were in such a ragged condition. She had hoped to set up a training school for older girls to teach them the elements of horticulture and poultry-keeping which would be of practical benefit to them as women but these

plans were not realised; she was forced to close the nursery school and leave yet another diocese at short notice. Realising that her hopes of liberating poverty-stricken Irish women were to have little success *The Nun of Kenmare* then devoted her life to the welfare of young Irish emigrants to America. In 1884 at the age of fifty-five she left Ireland for the United States but soon found that she was as unwelcome in the big cities there as she had been in the small towns of Ireland. In Ireland she had met with disapproval and even ridicule in her attempts to get the authorities to accept responsibility for even a minimum of training and education to equip girls who were destined for the emigrant ship. In the United States she travelled extensively seeking help to make life less lonely and miserable for these girls but everywhere she met with blank walls of hierarchical disapproval for her work. In New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Washington and in many other cities she was refused ecclesiastical permission to found homes for working girls who so often lived and starved in dark cellars.

In New York she campaigned for a better deal for the poor Irish serving girls whose hard-earned money was almost forcibly extracted from them to build Catholic churches and support Catholic schools. As Irene ffrench Eagar documents in her book, *The Nun of Kenmare*, the latter often heard Irish working girls whose money had helped to build a magnificent cathedral say, 'If we want a seat we have to pay dear and even then we are put near the door.' She found that the priests and bishops had little or no interest in the plight of these girls; her pleas that they would never benefit from the schools that their money was helping to build fell on deaf ears. While the clergy were totally involved in their enormous building projects the uneducated, untrained, poor and lonely Irish girls often had no choice but to resort to prostitution.

> **The daughters of the Irish peasantry have been the cheapest slaves in existence, slaves to their own family who were, in turn, slaves to all social parasites of a landlord and gombeen-ridden community.**
>
> James Connolly, op. cit.

The ideas and aspirations of The Nun of Kenmare were so far ahead of their time that many of them have not been adopted even in the latter half of the twentieth century. Thwarted in her attempts to introduce social justice and having met everywhere with antagonism from men and from women it is hardly surprising that she gave up the struggle and ended her days in England.

Women's Rights, the Ascendancy and the New Ireland

Few of the educated Irishwomen of the nineteenth century saw the need for women's rights. It was not that the daughters of the landed gentry were lacking in common sense, intellectual ability or in imagination. They were usually given the same education as their brothers and in the case of Maria Edgeworth in the early nineteenth century and Edith Somerville in a later generation, proved themselves as capable of managing the estates as any of the male members of the family. Very often too the *Big House* women showed more kindness and concern than the men for the plight of the poor tenants, permitting families to remain on estates rent-free if they were unable to pay and helping to feed, clothe and nurse the children. In some cases as at the Edgeworth estate in County Longford this concern manifested itself as more than mere charity; in the building of relatively comfortable homes and in the provision of schools for the children. Nevertheless, a paternalistic attitude towards the native Irish persisted and even an eminent author like Maria Edgeworth saw no reason why democracy should extend to the lower orders. She was also apparently of the opinion that the female sex was less intellectually capable than the male despite her own success as a writer. The first woman to be admitted to the Royal Irish Academy in 1842 she was easily dissuaded from requesting that women be allowed to attend meetings of the *Academy* when it was pointed out to her that they would undoubtedly lower the tone of discussions with senseless babble.

Maria Edgeworth's work was to have considerable influence on writers of a future generation, notably Edith Somerville and Violet Martin who collaborated as Somerville and Ross to produce many important works. Like Maria both women were born into wealthy landowning families, they too were broadly educated, capable of estate management and concerned about the poor and they also achieved literary fame. But unlike Maria, Somerville and Ross lived in a more violent and fast changing world, Edith Somerville experiencing both the land war and the 1916 Rising. Although a strong supporter of woman suffrage she did not incline towards radical action or press for reforms in the condition of women. At this stage in the early twentieth century the landlord system had all but disintegrated and there was a steady movement of people from rural areas to the cities and what the unskilled female factory workers urgently needed was concern in the form of protection from exploitation by unscrupulous employers. This need was filled in

1911 by Helena Moloney and Delia Larkin who founded the *Irish Women Workers Union*. Delia Larkin put all her energy into the labour movement and worked particularly hard on behalf of women. She organised choirs and dramatic companies for women in the Union and she helped to provide clothes and food for the families of men affected by the big *Lock Out* of 1913. Along with James Connolly and other well-known people she spoke in the Albert Hall in London in protest against the imprisonment of her brother Jim, the labour leader. But by 1915 Delia Larkin, voted the most popular woman in the labour movement, had resigned as a result of disagreements within the union but indirectly it is thought as a result of many clashes of personality with Countess Markievicz, and she was lost to the cause of the Irish working woman.

The worker is the slave of capitalist society, the female worker is the slave of that slave. In Ireland the female worker has hitherto exhibited in her martyrdom an almost damnable patience.

James Connolly, *op. cit.*

Connolly was one of the greatest champions in the cause of the working woman but despite his efforts and those of people like Delia Larkin over half a century later Irish women workers still show a marked resistance to being unionised. In *The Reconquest of Ireland*, written in 1915 he struck out at the terrible conditions in which women worked in Dublin and pledged the support of the labour movement to the cause of women's rights.

Throughout Irish history it would appear that men have been better able to see the injustices to women and have been

Just as the present system in Ireland has made cheap slaves or untrained emigrants of the flower of our peasant women, so it has darkened the lives and starved the intellect of the female operatives in mills, shops and factories.

James Connolly, op. cit.

greater champions in the cause of women than women them-selves. In 1825 a Corkman, William Thompson, wrote *An appeal of one half of the human race, women, against the pretensions of the other half, men, to retain them in political and thence in civil and domestic slavery*. Less than a century later the better-remembered James Connolly, an ardent socialist and a stronger supporter of women's rights than most socialist thinkers of his time was urging women in every strata of Irish society to assert themselves and condemning as injurious to women ‘the whole spirit and practice of modern Ireland as it expresses itself through its pas-tors and masters’. Not alone did Connolly make

his views on the position of women known through his writings in which he dealt with the drudgery that the working woman endured, the misery of the woman in rural Ireland and the hardship which the uneducated and untrained emigrant Irish girl suffered in England and America but he was always ready to speak in public on behalf of women or take action when necessary as he did in leading the Belfast millgirls strike.

Connolly's work on behalf of women ended with the 1916Rising as did the work of his great friend and fellow socialist, writer and supporter of women's rights Francis Sheehy Skeffington. It was Skeffington who noted that despite the dedication of women to the cause of nationalism that the men in the movement were inherently and decidedly anti-women.

REFORM OR REVOLUTION

The Sixties

After the heady days of the early part of this century marked by the militant republicanism of women like Con-stance Markievicz, the trade union idealism of women like Delia Larkin and the struggle for justice and equality for women on the part of men like James Connolly, Francis Sheehy Skeffington and Horace Plunkett the period for almost half a century after the establishment of the Republic was marked by a lack of thought, words or action to promote the cause of women. The Catholic Church was one of the main influences on attitudes and actions during this period and their influence acted to the detriment of women in most instances.

But by the sixties a more liberal approach became apparent in the lessening of the puritanical teaching of the Church authorities and ironically in view of our past history of clerical attitudes Catholic priests were often the most concerned and vociferous on women's behalf. The nationalist ideal had not been fully realised because the whole island of Ireland had not been united but the dream had greatly subsided by the sixties and the country had been a Republic long enough for a generation to have lived without experiencing the republican struggle.

Almost half a century later with the State-building process well under way the Irish mind increasingly turned towards the many areas where social reform was so badly needed. This desire for social justice was not peculiar to Ireland and was in fact a phenomenon of the sixties that Ireland shared with other countries of the western world. As yet the articulation of women's rights in Ireland was done, not usually by women, but by a handful of the concerned male population.

Even though the State was beginning to invest more money in education the benefit was not reaped by the female population at this period. Many Irishwomen firmly believed that ‘too much’ education would spoil a girl's chances of marriage and would ultimately be ruinous to her relationship with her husband and totally unnecessary to a life of housewifery and motherhood. The 1966 Census showed that only .02 per cent of the female population recorded had received university education and for half a million Irishwomen full-time education had ceased at the age of fourteen, at primary level.

When a woman was fortunate enough to have the same education or the same technical training as a man she was at a disadvantage in her application for a job simply because she was a woman and if she did manage to get a job she was likely to be graded and paid less than a man and forced to resign on marriage. But the vast majority of women at work were uneducated, untrained and unskilled and showed no great desire to be unionised even though their average weekly wage was only half that which men were paid. Ironically, the areas of employment where women workers were in the majority were the areas where they got least promotion. Most of the 60,000 women employed in manufacturing industries never knew status of any kind. They were badly trained, badly treated and badly paid by the very industries which were prepared to spend millions of pounds in attempts to persuade women to buy and use their products.

Increasing numbers of married women were going out to work but they were opting for the ‘part-timing’ which was in danger of becoming the new slave labour. By virtue of their domestic duties and lack of acceptable skills and qualifications married women found part-time, unskilled work eminently suitable.

There was still a tendency for a married women who worked outside the home to be accused of neglecting her husband and family. Whether a woman worked outside the home because of

economic necessity or to fill in the time once her family was grown up she tended to play down the occupation and accepted meagre wages in grateful silence.

She was reluctant to admit either to necessity for or enjoyment in her paid employment. Equal pay with men was a long way off and most women, conditioned to female sub-serviency would have been against the idea for fear that a man would be made to 'feel small'.

The widow suffered most discrimination because she usually had no choice but to go out to work when her husband died. Nothing was done to alleviate her burden of attempting to care for a young family as well as earning enough money for food and clothes and to keep a roof over their heads. Very often a widow found that having paid heavy death duties she was unable to pay the annual rates on the house she owned and had no option but to sell the family home.

Nevertheless, widows were the first group of socially deprived women who were prepared to communicate with one another and bring pressure to bear on all levels of Irish society in order to bring about a more just situation.

Eileen Proctor, herself widowed in 1959, has the distinction of being founder and life president of the National Association of Widows in Ireland. The main aim of the Widows' Association when it was founded in 1967, then the only organisation of its kind in the world, was to help the widow reintegrate into society because, according to Eileen Proctor,' for a time immediately following her husband’s death she usually feels nothing other than complete and utter demoralisation, her only desires at this time being relief from mental agony and a reason for living'.

This work of rehabilitation is made possible in the meeting places and social clubs which the Widows' Association has since established all over the country.

An equally important aim of the Association is the upgrading of the widow's status. To this end they made submissions to the Commission on the Status of Women and have since 1967 continued to lobby T.D.s for increased pensions, more just income tax allowances for working widows, rates relief, free medical attention for widows and their families, State-run nursery centres and retraining centres for widows who must work but who have not been employed for perhaps twenty years.

But in the sixties most women still showed a marked reluctance to join in controversial public debates or to seek to redress the discrimination suffered by so many women in Irish society. Maire Mullarney, wife, mother of a large family, journalist and member of the Irish Theological Association, was an exception to the rule. Because of her special concern for the care and education of children she became a member of Reform, an association opposing corporal punishment of children, in the early sixties. Those involved in Reform saw that there was also an urgent need for advice on contraception and family-planning methods and as a consequence a limited company called *Fertility*

Guidance was set up. Maire Mullarney was one of two women on the original committee of six which set up the first family-planning clinic in Dublin in 1969. Neither the original Fertility Guidance Company nor the present family-planning clinics can lawfully sell contraceptives but patients have since the beginning been able to have the pill pre-scribed and diaphragms fitted although not supplied.

Although many Catholic women had already made contact with the Fertility Guidance Company they received a bitter blow in 1968 with the publication of the encyclical Humanae Vitae. Until its publication there had been considerable hope that the new encyclical would relax Church teaching regarding the use of contraceptives. Dr James Good, chaplain to an orphanage and industrial school for fifteen years, secretary of an adoption society and member of a matrimonial tribunal of the

Catholic Church was the first Irish priest who publicly rejected the encyclical's pronouncement on contraception. His published statement and his conviction that contraception can be lawful in the eyes of the Church gave enormous moral support to the thousands of Catholic Irish women who were shattered by the contents of Humanae Vitae.

Unfortunately, Dr Good's liberal interpretation conflicted with the more conservative attitude of his bishop and this conflict of views cost him the right to hear confession and to preach in the diocese of Cork. Two years later Dr Good was to resign from the Chair of Theology at University College, Cork, when he took up a post as Director of the Education Centre in Limerick. Dr Good explains that he is not a radical and that he made no conscious decision to pressurise for social and religious justice for women but that his parish work gave him first-hand experience of the areas of human need and the necessity for reform in matters vitally concerning women. Since the controversy surrounding Humanae

Vitae Dr Good has frequently condemned both our social and legal system for the way in which deserted wives, the partner of a broken marriage and the adopted child are made to suffer. Ironically, Irishwomen, although benefitting from his outspokenness, particularly from his support in alleviating the anxiety caused by the encyclical, never publicly supported Dr Good in his own predicament.

A Catholic priest who has never made any secret of his desire to champion the cause of all women is Fergal O'Connor, OP, whose efforts on behalf of the unmarried mother have done so much to alleviate the stigma which had attached to her in Irish society. Fr O'Connor was the first to articulate the cause of the single girl who becomes pregnant when in the middle sixties he began a Family Placement Service for these girls. In the prevailing puritanical and uncharitable climate of opinion which for many years had been forcing unmarried pregnant women to seek refuge or abortion in Britain this service provided them with an opportunity of remaining in Ireland for the duration of the pregnancy and of living with a family at a considerable distance from the accusing fingers which would point in their own hometowns. Although the status of the unmarried mother has risen through the efforts of those who campaign on her behalf the need for such a service continues.

The Seventies

Bridging the gap between the sixties and the seventies was a far more vicious struggle than that involving the acceptance by Irish society of unmarried mothers or the improvement of the status of the widow, or the provision of family-planning advice. Civil strife erupted in Northern Ireland and at the heart of the civil rights movement at this time was a young girl who was to become famous for the way in which she emerged to play a major role for a time in Northern Irish affairs. Bernadette Devlin became known as a fearless young orator who advocated radical change in Ireland. When she was still only twenty-one, she was elected a Member of Parliament at Westminster and her maiden speech attacking the system in Northern Ireland had an electrifying effect on Parliament and on the Press.

Civil disorder evolved into full-scale war and Northern Ireland entered the seventies to the tune of bombs and tear-gas, the re-emergence of the IRA and the arrival on the streets of the British Army.

Not surprisingly, the sectarian shootings, the hundreds who were killed or maimed for life and the community chaos, left women in all parts of Ireland numbed and fearful but would appear to have made others determined to work actively for peace and justice.

More and more women showed themselves willing and capable of coming out into society and working on behalf of themselves and of others. The reforms of the sixties were followed by more

revolutionary social changes in the seven-ties which heralded the new era of the politicisation of Irish women.

Margaret Waugh, in her fifties, wife and mother of a grown-up family who founded the Women's Political Association in Dublin in 1970 explains that it was southern involvement in Northern Ireland affairs which shook her and set her thinking. 'Up till then I was pretty dormant and never wanted to be involved in politics in any way but I really exploded mentally and emotionally. Would things be different if women were more involved?'

Margaret Waugh thought a great deal, became more interested in current affairs and began to realise the slender influence women have on political life and on legislative decisions.

It occurred to her that women could have a far greater influence on government and legislation but they would have to be helped and encouraged to participate in politics. To this end she approached Senator Mary Robinson and the outcome was the formation of the *Women's Progressive Association*. The idea of the association (which was later renamed the *Women's Political Association*) was not to form a separatist women's political party but to encourage more women to join the established political parties, to go forward for election and to win seats—in short to break the male hold on Irish politics.

The aim of *WPA* is to educate its members to be socially and politically aware and to give them confidence in their ability to take part in political affairs. Their efforts were rewarded at the local elections held in June 1974 when five members of *WPA* were elected on behalf of the various parties.

This was some slight advance on the position when the *Commission on the Status of Women* made up of women and men drawn from all walks of life, published its report in 1972. It found that although they make up 51 per cent of the electorate the involvement of women in politics was slight and

The general failure of women to participate more fully in political activity can only operate to their disadvantage.

Nevertheless, the Commission blamed traditional attitudes for preventing women from achieving complete self-fulfilment and equal participation in all aspects of life in the community. The report suggested that it is only by the removal of the cultural mould which dictates that a woman's life must be home-centred while a man's life is centred on employment that women can play an equal role in community life with men.

Apathy among women, the Commission felt, could be accounted for by the inadequacies of the educational system. It stressed the need for civic and political education and training to ensure that women realise their rights, their obligations and their abilities.

The Commission reported fully and made recommendations on the position of women and the law, women at work, equal pay and social welfare.

That same year the cause of women's equality received a bitter blow with a court ruling that a wife is still merely her husband's 'chattel'.

The following year the myth of female inferiority would appear to have been enhanced when the highly-skilled female confectioners had their request for equal pay with their male counterparts turned down by the equal pay commissioner. 'The hardest work in management these days,' noted Mary Maher in The Irish Times, 'is reshuffling job titles and grades in an effort to be certain that women are seen not to be equal to men.'

Women themselves must be educated to understand and accept that they have a further and important role to play outside the home and that the basis for this must be laid at school and in the early years of employment.

Report of C.S.W.

Suggestions of the *Commission on the Status of Women* regarding general education as well as education for house-hold management, the provision of day-care centres for young children and the necessity for safety and health precautions at the mushrooming private playgroups all over the country and the provision of information and advice on family planning have been largely ignored by government authorities.

Meantime the Family Planning Clinics in Dublin had been carrying out voluntarily the work of informing and advising more and more patients on methods of family planning. In 1972 the work of the clinics was augmented by the establishment of Family Planning Services, a company set up to provide non-medical and non-pharmaceutical contraceptive devices.

The company operates within the law by not charging for supplies of contraceptives which can be ordered by post and sent to addresses all over the country. Income is received in the form of voluntary subscriptions and donations. In 1973the law regarding the unlawful importation of contraceptives was found to be unconstitutional. A twenty-seven-year-old married woman who had already had four children was advised by her doctor that another pregnancy could be fatal. The contraceptives which she sought to import were seized by customs authorities acting on the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1935. The Supreme Court eventually judged this law to be contrary to the Irish Constitution. Arising out of this ruling the position now is that contraceptives can be freely imported in any quantity for private use. A government attempt to have this situation regulated with a Bill introduced in the Dáil was defeated in 1974. Meantime, Senator Mary Robinson's repeated attempts to have a Bill passed in the Senate which would allow for the dissemination of information and advice on family planning as well as a measure of control over the sale of contraceptives have also been unsuccessful.

It would appear that even in the seventies there is still a sizeable body of opinion which intends to ensure that State legislation should follow Catholic moral teaching. If there was proper information on contraceptive methods and access to these methods there might well be fewer traumatic abortions for Irish girls in England.

Perhaps the quietest but most profound revolution of this decade has been in the lives of the nuns who have emerged from the cloisters. Unafraid to speak out against injustices they are putting particular emphasis on the need for the involvement of the individual in the community. Sister Margaret MacCurtain, OP, best known as Sister Benvenuta, is one of the foremost articulators of women's rights in Ireland. Lecturer in the Department of Modern History at University College, Dublin, she has spoken about the cause of women, past, present and future, at meetings all over the country-stressing and re-stressing the need for women to be politicised. Championing the cause of the underprivileged, male and female, is Sister Stanislaus, member of the Irish Sisters of Charity, professional social worker, member of the Southeastern Health Board; of the Catholic Council of Social Welfare and Chairwoman of the government-appointed Commission on Poverty.

I think the prophetic role of religious is all important. We must find and declare the needs of our time to society otherwise we're failing in our duty. The religious should always be radical as were the early Irish nuns in the orders founded at the beginning of the last century. The things their founders did were way ahead of their time-visiting jails and helping the destitute and dying.

Sister Stanislaus interviewed in *The Irish Times*

Another unconventional nun who is doing trojan work in the community is Sister Consilio of the Sisters of Mercy in Athy, ‘she works miracles, the most hopeless cases, alcoholics who've been hospitalised scores of times and kept right on drinking go to her to get sober'. In 1972 Sister Consilio bid for and bought land at an auction and borrowed the money to build a treatment centre for alcoholics. The unit was designed and built by patients themselves to house fifty alcoholics in various stages of recovery, a doctor, two nurses and the pioneering, cheerful and energetic Sister Consilio.

Despite the liberalism and revolutionary spirit of some sisters in religion it would appear that there is unrest and dissatisfaction behind many convent gates. Psychiatrist, Mary Hynes describes the modern nun aged eighteen to thirty-five as an entirely new social phenomenon in Irish society ...

...working feverishly in schools, hospitals, social centres and charitable institutions, living an almost secular life. She was trendy in outlook, liberated in life-style, yet could be confused at the innermost core of her spiritual and emotional being.

Mary Hynes, Psychiatrist

According to the Reverend Fergal O'Connor, OP, the education of most nuns is impoverished because ‘they are

Diocesan control of religious women by bishops and priests has led to supervision of rising and retiring times, use of telephones, permission for egress from convents, supervision of wearing apparel, and even the length of a habit! It would be absurd if. it were not so tragic in the wreckage of infantilism that it has left.

MacCurtain, OP, *Women Irish Style*

formed by a cold, masculine spirituality and this results in a fear of emotion and feelings'. But whatever the crisis of identity is for the modern nun there has been little public debate on the rights of sisters of religion in Ireland.

Undoubtedly the most effective social reforms and up-grading in the status of women have been brought about in this decade by individual women and women’s organisations who have focused on injustices which had remained hidden for too long-the plight of widows, deserted wives, unmarried mothers, single parents and wives who suffer physical torture at the hands of their husbands.

This is in line with the *Report of the Commission on the Status of Women* which pointed out that women’s organisations have an important role to play in educating, encouraging and supporting

women to take a more active part in public life. Women's organisations were urged not to dissipate themselves on a myriad of causes but to concentrate on specific aims and see these through to fruition.

Most of the credit for improving the status of the deserted wife who in the absence of divorce in Ireland was an emotionally and materially crushed category of Irishwoman can go to AIM. AIM (Action, Information, Motivation), a pressure group concerned mainly with family maintenance, justice and legislation, was founded by Nuala Fennell, when she resigned from Women's Liberation in 1971. AIM, a small Dublin-centred group which is composed of men and women, has highlighted the inadequacies of and called for a revision of the laws regarding marriage and the family. Until her cause was articulated by AIM the deserted wife often felt nothing but shame and fear in her plight and experienced great hardship.

A sister organisation called ADAPT was founded in Dublin and has since spread to provincial locations and this gives deserted and single parents the opportunity to meet one another and provides a means of mutual support.

Subsequently Nuala Fennell turned her attention to the plight of the many brutally-beaten wives and children in Ireland many of whom endure assaults daily over a long period and in 1974 Irishwomen's Aid was founded to assist these women and children. Property was acquired in Dublin which enables *Irishwomen's Aid* to provide temporary accommodation for women and children who are forced to flee the brutality of Irish husbands and fathers.

Cherish was founded in 1972 by Maura O'Dea and four other unmarried mothers who recognised the need for an organisation which would give support and advice to single parents. Cherish went on to pressurise successfully for a social welfare allowance for the unmarried mother and her child, raised money for the appointment of a social worker and intend to continue the struggle for the full acceptance of the single parent and child as a family unit in Irish society with equal rights and adequate support.

The work which Fergal O'Connor, OP, started on behalf of the unmarried mother in the sixties culminated in seminars held in Kilkenny in 1970 and Athlone in 1971 and in the founding of *Ally* which continues to find a sympathetic home for a single girl who becomes pregnant and is forced to leave her home. Accommodation at a comfortable distance from reproving eyes is provided for the duration of the pregnancy.

Of the older women's organisations the *National Association of Widows in Ireland*, the first pressure group founded by a woman on behalf of women, is still very much a force to be reckoned with politically. Along with providing a means of support and social interaction for thousands of members in over thirty branches throughout the country it devotes a great deal of time to lobbying for a more just situation for widows. The *Irish Housewives Association* which was responsible for the founding of the *Consumers Association of Ireland* concentrates on attempts to improve consumer education and standards of hygiene and in 1974organised a huge march to protest to the government against the spiralling cost of food prices. There are also signs that within the oldest of the women's separatist organisations, the *Irish Countrywomen's Association*, which concentrates on providing home-based educational, social and cultural opportunities for rural women, that a less-conservative attitude will become apparent. A recent allegation from a member of the ICA was that Irish farmers are more concerned with the comfort of their animals than with the well-being of their families to judge by the fine houses they provide for farm stock as against the meagre family dwelling. The *Cork Federation of Women's Organisations*, representing seventeen local associations, was responsible for opening the first Citizens Advice Bureau in Ireland in 1972; staffed by members who are briefed on a

wide variety of social and legal problems the Bureau finds a preponderance of queries and requests from women with marital problems.

These and other women's organisations are affiliated to the *Council for the Status of Women* which was set up to provide a means of liaison between women's organisations and State departments and to press for the implementation of the recommendations of the *Report of the Commission on the Status of Women*. The Council, representing twenty-three major women's organisations and two hundred and fifty thousand members, intends to press for the removal of dis-crimination against women and to this end plans an intensive educational programme to foster the acceptance of women as full human beings who have equal status with men.

It must be clear that heartening though the success of these organisations has been in highlighting social and legal injustices and raising the status of many groups of women to date the work was helped by the increasing interest of the media in the position of women in society. An indication of the revolution in attitudes has been the way in which women's magazines which first came on the market in the mid-sixties began to evolve in the seventies.

Woman's Choice offers an exceeding frank advice column which deals with readers' physical, emotional and psycho-logical problems in a manner which would probably have been unacceptable to the readership a few years ago. The magazine offers articles on fashion and cookery alongside 'Part-time Wives' and 'New men in the Dáil' while in the same week *Woman's Way* had an article on 'How to make good Marmalade' sandwiched in between 'An Explosion of Sex Myths' and 'Unwanted Pregnancy'.

The extension of broadcasting hours on RTE radio in 1969 made possible the production of programmes which brought current affairs into the kitchen at eleven a.m. every morning and also enabled discussion on the position of women in Ireland and highlighted the discrimination and suffering which many of the female population endure. The *Gay Byrne Hour* which was first broadcast early in 1973 has had per-haps the greatest and most consistent feedback from women. In what is ostensibly a light-hearted musical show Gay Byrne, backed by an efficient production team, has managed to unearth a phenomenal amount of psychological and emotional problems common to women all over the country.

With the charismatic Gay Byrne many a woman has shared her grief and passed on her experience of life with a husband who is alcoholic, a husband who refuses to communicate with her, of trying to live with the knowledge that she has an intense dislike for one of her children, of how she has an intense fear of leaving the house. Arising out of programme discussions on agoraphobia (a fear of open spaces, of leaving the house or possibly of being alone) from which it appears that women are particularly prone to suffer, an association was formed in order to give sufferers a chance of communicating with one another and benefitting from mutual support.

Lost Leaders?

The real revolutionaries in this decade and those who sparked the initial enthusiasm for an end to discrimination against women are journalists; notably Mary Anderson, Mary Kenny, June Levine, Mary Maher, Janet Martin, Nell McCafferty and the late Mary McCutchan who whether re-porting on or editorially commissioning work for the women's pages of the national newspapers consistently focused on the injustices and discrimination suffered by women in Irish society. Since the late sixties they have done their utmost to awaken the consciousness of Irish women to the necessity for upgrading the status of women and towards the realisation that for too long the female mind had been conditioned to mediocrity.

It is in no small measure due to their efforts both in print and in public debate that so many Irish women were given the impetus necessary to come out of hiding and take the first steps towards becoming more concerned and more confident human beings. Not surprisingly the place of the women journalists at the head of the woman movement in Ireland (which not one of them chose to lead from the front) has shifted. Similarly the importance of the women's pages of the national newspapers as a source of inspiration in the struggle to end discrimination has lost ground to the mush- rooming pressure groups and politically-inclined women throughout the country who are becoming more and more vociferous in their demands. Recognising this fact the pioneering Women First of *The Irish Times* appeared for the last time in October 1974 with the explanation that 'there no longer appears to be any justification to confine women's affairs to a purely women's section of the newspaper and that in future coverage of women's affairs would be given in the general body of the newspaper.'

Mary Maher, first editor of the new-style women's page of *The Irish Times* can be credited with shaping not alone the controversial content of Women First but must also have influenced the policy of the women's pages of the other national newspapers who soon followed the lead of *The Irish Times* by appointing young, liberal-minded journalists as women's editors. Each in turn provided thought and action provoking articles relating to the position of women in Ireland as well as a platform for discussions on discrimination and inequality. In *The Irish Times* Mary Maher and subsequently Maeve. Binchy and Christina Murphy were to give women credit for being intelligent, thoughtful, concerned human beings and not just moronic sections of the built-in equipment of the 'home' who until the days of liberated women's journalism were fed a steady diet of hints on cooking and cleaning, bottling and tidying.

Similarly, the women's page of the *Irish Independent* first under the editorship of Mary McCutchan and later Janet Martin focused on a wide range of social, legal and economic injustices suffered by women. But it was the women's page of the *Irish Press* and its editor Mary Kenny which for most people revolutionised the concept of women's journalism in Ireland. After five years with the *Evening Standard* in London Mary Kenny returned to Ireland in 1969 to be women's editor of the *Irish Press*. Two action-packed years of fearlessness in writing and speaking about what she considered to be the ills of Irish society made her a legend in her own time. Her name became synonymous with women's liberation in Ireland, the cause of women always being upper-most in her mind. She alienated herself from people in all sections of Irish society; she even has the distinction of being discussed in the Dáil when a TD accused her of using women's liberation as her 'front organisation'. But there can be little doubt that what she wrote and what she said in public provoked reaction and whether it was to praise or condemn her attitude to Irish society women were forced to take a long cool look at their own attitudes. For many women her outspokenness concerning sexual discrimination and inequality were the start of their own soul searching and consciousness raising.

In 1970 editors Mary Maher and Mary Kenny along with journalists Mary Anderson, June Levine, Nell McCafferty and Nuala Fennell, Mairin de Burca of Sinn Féin, Gardiner Place, and several others made an additional commitment to the cause of women when they formed the most controversial of all women's associations-the *Irish Women's Liberation Movement.*

The founder members themselves were influenced by the emergence of the *Women's Liberation Movement* in the United States. The US movement was characteristically American in its refusal to accept that because roles, attitudes and theories are traditional they are intrinsically good and should never be challenged in any way. In challenging the age-old concepts of male supremacy and female inferiority and of conditioning from infancy for sex roles, women's liberation

encompassed more than the straightforward surface reforms of existing women's organisations. Few women found themselves in agreement with all the aims expressed by the new feminists but there is general agreement that this movement more than any previous wave of feminism enabled more women to analyse their role in life, in the family and in the wider society and made countless women of all ages aspire to bring an end to sexual discrimination.

Long before the movement emerged American women were showing signs of dissatisfaction with their lives as Betty Friedian documented in her book *The Feminine Mystique*. Research which she carried out in the fifties showed that a great deal of heart searching about the role of woman was going on amongst women who lived in well-to-do neighbourhoods, who had husbands and children and every material comfort and yet felt discontented and unfulfilled. In the sixties a latent consciousness of the plight of women at all levels of American society began to emerge. Women who were involved in students' rights and civil rights began to see that regardless of the number of concessions granted to minority groupings the female majority in the population would always be discriminated against. Women began to demand their own rights and as they did male chauvinistic attitudes became more blatant. Women liberationists were urinated on, accused of being lesbians, told that all that was wrong with them was that they 'just couldn't get a man'. Nothing daunted, American women continued to meet, to demonstrate, to write and to speak about inequalities and discrimination which to date they have been successful in alleviating to some extent as they have been in pointing out the way in which women are conditioned and manipulated from infancy to play a stereotyped role in life.

The *Irish Women's Liberation Movement* was launched on the public during a Late Late Show on RTE in 1971. For some time previously the founder members had been meeting privately to discuss the implications of women's liberation for Ireland where the grievances of the female sex were enormous. There was an enormous response both in the studio during the discussion and afterwards in letters from viewers to the statements of the women who took part in the programme. As a result a public meeting was arranged for the Mansion House; again the response was unprecedented and the enthusiastic attendance resulted in the formation of twenty-eight branches of the movement.

Meetings went on and demonstrations were held, the most famous being the 'Contraceptives Train Event' of May 1971.This demonstration was a protest against the law which at the time made the importation and still makes the sale and advertising of contraceptives illegal in Ireland. Forty women, single and married, went by train from Dublin to Belfast (where contraceptives are legally sold) on a contraceptive-buying spree. They returned later that day, flaunting their purchases (which were not impounded) at the Irish customs officials and declaring to their three hundred supporters and to press and television reporters from all over the world that 'the law is obsolete'.

But somehow it all backfired for women's liberation, with this demonstration the enthusiasm waned, branches disintegrated, the founder members drifted away or were forced out, and hardly any one of them is happy with the way in which the movement has developed. Some blame the 'Contraceptives Train Event' but a view more generally held is that the Late Late Show was responsible not alone for launching the movement but unwittingly for its downfall too. Mary Maher says that they were unable to cope with the widespread publicity the movement got from television coverage. 'It got too big too fast.'

Mary Anderson says 'maybe the mistake we made was in not leading from the front'. Mairin de Burca feels that they went public before they had agreed on what kind of movement they wanted.

I wanted then and I want now a women's movement which would embrace the kind of women who need it most—working-class women in the cities and women in rural Ireland. The fault that it did not develop that way as I see it, was with myself and some others who were too dogmatically left-wing political and the trendies, who were impatient with the pace the movement would have to take if it were to appeal to the mass of Irishwomen.

Mairin de Burca

Nuala Fennell says that ‘the alignment of women’s liberation with all the left-wing issues did more harm than good for the cause of women in Ireland and at any rate the movement had no basic structure and women with good addresses were only barely tolerated’.

By September 1971 splits were occurring in the *Irish Women’s Liberation Movement* and it became characterised not by any success to raise the consciousness of Irish women nor by pressures to end discrimination but by resignations and bitter accusations hurled backwards and forwards by members and ex-members. In the minds of many people women's liberation in Ireland died with Mary Kenny’s resignation as women's editor of the *Irish Press* and her return to the *Evening Standard* in London as features editor. Nuala Fennell resigned because she disagreed with the way in which the movement was evolving. In a public statement which she made shortly after the' Contraceptives Train Event' she accused the small policy-making central group of

Women's Liberation of being 'anti-American, anti-clergy, anti-Government, anti-ICA, anti-police, anti-men'. Nuala Fennell, who after her defection went on to found AIM pressure group, out of which ADAPT and *Irish Women's Aid* have evolved, explains that she grew disillusioned with the pointless demonstrations and constant intellectualising of women's liberation and wanted to do something practical for women who were most in need of help.

In June 1972 Mary Anderson, staff writer with the Irish Independent, frustrated at the stagnation of the movement, resigned and decided to join Sinn Féin, Gardiner Place, and work for the cause of women through that organisation. In November that same year Mary Maher was taken to task by the *Irish Women’s Liberation Movement* for reporting in *The Irish Times* on a Women's Liberation Conference which she had attended in London. This kind of bitterness culminated in 1973 in accusations about the political involvement of Mairin de Burca. Although denying that she alone was responsible for introducing women’s liberation to Ireland Mairin de Burca accepts that she 'may have acted as a kind of spark which ignited the smouldering fire'. She also resigned considering, 'that if my political beliefs were such a weight holding back the movement that it would bound forward if I were cut adrift. It didn't.’

What has survived is a largely ingrown, ineffective organisation that has done little to promote social reform or instil a consciousness of the rights of women in Irish society. It is a disaster that the *Irish Women's Liberation Movement* should be so-called when it has done little to speed the process of liberating Irish women.

TIP OF THE ICEBERG

Silent Revolt

Because the debasement of women has been fostered at all levels of society for many centuries it is not easy for a woman to throw off the veil of conditioning-or even to realise what is 'natural' and what is 'conditioning'. Male supremacy and female inferiority have long been considered part of the natural law.

It has been a foregone conclusion that a woman is born with particular facility for keeping things clean and tidy. No matter how slight her maternal instinct a woman is considered a 'natural' child-rearer. Until now for a woman to step out of the conditioning line or to attempt to reverse the roles was to be accused at the very least of being unnatural, irresponsible and sometimes even the major cause of the ills of society.

The signs are that since the early sixties women through-out the world have been engaged in a healthy silent revolt against the age-old accepted beliefs in the female ideal of submission and docility. In 1969 an English sociologist's study of attitudes within marriage found that the idea of a woman submissive to her dominant male partner was fast losing ground. It should be made clear that these attitudes can hardly have been influenced by the articulation of women's liberation (since the movement had only recently emerged across the Atlantic) but were part of the awakening consciousness of women everywhere.

Sex and Marriage in *England Today* shows that Geoffrey Gorer's findings for the sixties were in sharp contrast with a previous study of attitudes which he made in 1950. Then the traditional idea of a complementary union, where the husband was the provider and the wife the homemaker was considered the norm. What emerged from the analysis of the sixties was that young couples were quietly challenging the theory that a woman who was not submissive was 'wearing the breeches' and that a man who was not more aggressive than his wife was 'henpecked'.

'Symmetrical' is how Geoffrey Gorer describes the marriage of greater flexibility where more emphasis is placed on give and take and less on playing at the old 'complementary' feminine and masculine roles.

In a different field Robin Wight in *The Day the Pigs Refused to be driven to Market* draws the same conclusions about the changing attitudes of women and their silent revolt. He documents the growth of a sophisticated consumer consciousness in the sixties, particularly when women showed signs of baulking at the pressures put on them by advertisers. The idea that women as consumers and amateur buyers are at the mercy of the professional sellers backed by their 'hidden persuaders' would appear to be losing ground. Consumer protection and advisory bodies are increasing. More and more people are becoming aware of their rights as citizens and individuals, as consumers and buyers.

Robin Wight points out that the age of individualism, where people get more satisfaction out of being different, sets new trends in consuming, moving away from the habit of acquiring a car or a cooker just for the sake of owning it and towards the notion that an object is only worth buying if it can be used or enjoyed. Wight holds that it was the outrageous promises made by so many advertising agencies on their clients behalf that raised consumer expectations above the limits of possibility and indirectly led to the consumer rebellion.

The treatment of the female as an unintelligent, moronic, sub-human member of a species who was expected to believe that a laundry bleach would make her family go into raptures about her, that a choice of soap powder would make her a perfect mother, that a stock cube would give her sex

appeal and would send her husband panting home from the pub, triggered the silent revolt of many women.

However, the way in which women are used in advertising campaigns was only one of the reasons why the female sex began to look more deeply into what had for so long been accepted as the traditional role for women. Changing social conditions in the second half of this century meant a diminishing of a role which was so long 'traditional' that it had become ‘natural’. With the availability of contraception internationally women were spending less time bearing children. Smaller families meant that for many women child-rearing was over before middle age. The increasing commitment of States to health, education and social welfare meant that women were relieved of some of the burden of providing for their children. Women’s former commitments were further relaxed by the labour-saving gadgetry of the modern home. Increased affluence gave women more opportunity for education, leisure and mobility and public pressure resulted in various legal and social reforms in the condition of women.

However, private revolt against traditional standards and subtle public reforms of discrimination against women were to prove insufficient against mounting social change. Despite the advances women were still obliged to appear unintelligent, inferior and submissive. It was the impatience of a minority of women who refused to go along with this sex-role conditioning which gave birth to the *Women's Liberation Movement*. The cause of women was as much in need of radical thought and action as it was of private revolt and subtle public reforms and the *Women's Liberation Movement* was only the tip of the iceberg—the articulation of a pent-up desire of women to be accepted on full human terms.

Pros and Cons of the New Feminism

Best known of the articulators of the new feminist movement is Germaine Greer who demonstrates the extent to which a woman must direct her energy to please others and to ‘conform, aprons off, scent on, feigning leisure and relaxation when they feel only fatigue'. She says ‘Maybe I'm sick of the masquerade. I'm sick of pretending eternal youth. I'm sick of belying my own intelligence, my own will, my own sex' and wants—

> **To be freed from guilt and shame and the tireless self-discipline of women. To stop pretending and cajoling and manipulating and begin to control and sympathise. To claim the masculine virtues of magnanimity and generosity and courage...**

Author Kate Millett describes femininity as a delight in docility and a large appetite for masculine dominance. In *Sexual Politics* she points out that a woman is so conditioned towards passivity that she eventually accepts her inferiority as fact. Millett's desire is-

> **...that a second wave of the sexual revolution might at last accomplish its aim of freeing half the race from its immemorial subordination and in the process bring us all a great deal closer to humanity.**

Author Shulamith Firestone is of the opinion that marriage is becoming defunct and she predicts the slow death of the family, which in her estimation has always been responsible for the exploitation of women. In the *Dialectic of Sex* she recommends the abolition of pregnancy in favour of artificial reproduction.

One of the counterrevolutionaries who blames the ‘libbers’ for upsetting the apple-cart of female apathy is Arianna Stassinopolos. She castigates women who want freedom from discrimination and manipulation as man-haters, other-woman haters and child-haters in her attempt to

‘dynamite the foundations' of a movement which is clearly the result of social and technological change.

She accuses the leaders of projecting their hangups onto all women and of forcing radical change in the condition of women who are perfectly happy as they are. But she makes no mention in the *Female Woman* of the harsh realities of the physical violence, the mental torture and the desertion which women experience at the hands of men on whom they are totally dependent. Stassinopolos’ female woman must rely on her husband's good nature to keep her in constant elation.

But whether counter-revolutionaries like Stassinopolos realise it or not women were showing signs of wanting to be free long before women’s liberation was born. Betty Friedian's *Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, predated the women’s liberation movement in the United States. Her book was the result of research and analysis into the lives of well-to-do American housewives in the 1950s. Although they lived in comfortable, gadget-filled homes with 'good' husbands and ‘nice’ children, these women often felt depressed and fatigued at the futility of their lives or else they were so full of pent-up energy that they consumed vast quantities of sedatives. Friedian's advice to American women was not to look on housework as a career but as something which has to be done as quickly and efficiently as possible and not to regard marriage and children as the ultimate fulfilment.

In far-off 1949 a book that is still the most important study of womankind, Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*, was published in France. In a studly which ranges over biological, historical, sociological, literary and mythological viewpoints de Beauvoir blames women’s enslavement on the conditioning which they are subjected to from infancy. Her over-twenty-year-old prediction that **sooner or later they [women] will arrive at complete economic and social equality which will bring about an inner meta-morphosis.**

has yet to be realised.

Counter-revolutionary Midge Decter chides the liberators for attempting to make society fit their needs instead of changing themselves to fit society. Surely a ridiculous argument when for centuries men have shaped and moulded society (and most of all women) to fit their needs. It is only when women become politicised that they too can operate this right.

Doubtless there is truth in Decter's assertion in *The New Chastity* that

> **...for the middle-class woman her opportunities to participate in the world beyond the household, to educate herself, limit her family, go to work and to an unprecedented extent make her life-have left her in a sometimes nearly overwhelming state of uncertainty.**

She accuses women of being afraid, afraid of new-found freedom, afraid of being inadequate mothers, afraid of sexual freedom because of the possibilities that open up when they are freed from excessive child-bearing. Is a certain amount of apprehensiveness not understandable in the face of ever-increasing social change? And will there be an even greater loss of identity and sense of fear for women if medical technology accelerates at the rate which Robert T. Francoeur predicts in *Eve’s New Rib?* Francoeur, a Professor of Experimental Embryology, predicts that

> **...our children will face the possibility that a man, a normal male, will be able to reproduce, or procreate his own identical twin (minus a few years of course) simply by culturing one of his skin cells in an artificial medium and womb, completely bypassing both egg and sperm, sexual intercourse, fertilisation and the previously universal dependence of humans on the womb of the female of the species.**

Francoeur also tells us that future banks of semen from anonymous donors will mean that a single girl can become a mother without ever having intercourse; that a woman whose husband is sterile can be artificially inseminated with her father-in-law's semen and bear a child with her husband's hereditary traits; that a woman prone to miscarriage could have an embryo child transplanted to grow in and be born from her sister's womb.

The social implications of these possibilities for human reproduction are immense and are further indications of the need for a radical re-evaluation of the role of women in society. They pose questions as to whether the artificially-inseminated single mother is still a virgin; if ‘the artificial insemination of the wife is a violation of marital fidelity and more, incest, since her husband's father donated the semen'; of who can be said to be the true parent, the husband or the father, the woman who conceived or her sister who bore?

Francoeur points to reproductive technology, the separation of sexual intercourse from procreation and the emergence of woman as the three areas of greatest upheaval in modern society. For the future he predicts that traditional monogamy can no longer function as it once did so effectively and that marriage, for those who opt for that lifestyle, will be in a modified form to allow for extra-marital experiences by both partners.

Undoubtedly, many women feel personally threatened by the idea that the age-old institutions of marriage and the family are doomed. But can the biological family survive if the connection between sexual intercourse and procreation is severed to such an extent? Not only the experimental embryologists but radical feminists and prominent psychiatrists are united in the belief that there will be radical change in future lifestyles. What part can the woman movement play in the shaping of these lifestyles?

It is not easy to predict the future with accuracy but study of the past can give a better sense of perspective and lessen the apprehension. At the crossroads of immense social change we have the unique opportunity of being able to look back into the origins of the female sex to a time before civilisation. Anthropologist Elaine Morgan's *Descent of Woman* tells how our ancestors, having evolved as land-dwelling mammals took to the water and lived there for millions of years, then did an about-turn and came back to live on the land permanently. As a result of our aquatic beginnings she is able to dispute the fondly-held male theory that everything about the female was designed primarily for the benefit, pleasure and convenience of man. Women developed rounded breasts not to make themselves more sexually attractive to mighty male hunters but to make it easier for their young to suckle. When our ancestors had lost most of their fur, there was, according to Morgan, nothing for the babies to grip onto while feeding so they got ‘two lovely, pendulous, dollopy breasts as easy to hold onto as a bottle'.

Margaret Mead enables us to see that what we recognise as the traditional role for women has no significance in primitive societies. In *Coming of Age in Samoa*, anthropologist Mead tells how

> **All the irritating, detailed routine of housekeeping which in our civilisation is accused of warping the souls and souring the tempers of grown women is here performed by children under fourteen years of age.**

The sewing of thatch rather than childminding was regarded as women's work in Samoa; once they were weaned infants were handed over to the care of an older sister. She found that children of six or seven cared for babies by carrying them around strapped to their backs, each child being disciplined and socialised through responsibility for a still younger child. When the older sister was capable of working on the plantations she handed over her baby-minding duties to a younger sister.

While his sisters were looking after the babies or at work on the plantations young Samoan boys were to be found in charge of the cooking.

However, consciousness alone, of the way in which the female evolved as the demoralised, inferiority-ridden, male- dependent sex, will not solve the dilemma for women. Consciousness-raising is meaningful only for as long as it takes a woman to become aware of the female experience past and present. Over-preoccupation with past grievances prevents creativity. And women must become creative; each woman achieving her full human potential and thereby creating a better future for the next generation. The woman movement can articulate the discrimination, the manipulation and the conditioning; it can provide a platform for the communication of the frustration, fears and the anxieties that women have suffered through the ages; but it too must work in the present and towards the future.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Undoubtedly there has been a long history of discrimination against women, discrimination on the part of the Churches, discrimination by legislators, by educational institutions, by employers, by writers, discrimination by men. For generations women suffered the injustices silently, afraid to voice their opinions publicly for fear of being labelled 'unfeminine' or 'political'. These attitudes are changing and more and more women are shedding the characteristic female apathy and are prepared to talk out about injustices and fight for their removal. Women are demonstrating that they are capable not alone of carrying out maternal duties in the home but of committing themselves to the well-being of society as a whole. Men too are beginning to accept and even applaud the end of an era which decreed one stereo-typed role for women. Men are beginning to see women not just as sex objects, inferior beings, or as pillars of support for males but as human beings who have rights as well as duties.

The emergence of women and recognition of their importance to the political life of the country is evidenced by the willingness of politicians who are mostly male to legislate for the removal of the more blatant forms of discrimination against women and to promote research into the position of women in our society. Side by side with the advancement of women educationally, culturally and politically, govern-mental commissions are set up to study the rights and the grievances of women and legislation is enacted to see that the discrimination is ended. So progress is made along the path of the revolution of the ‘second sex’ but the revolution must be speeded up and must gain the support of all women. Laudable though the social reforms that have been achieved so far and praiseworthy the professional achievements of individual women we are still a long way from full equality of status and opportunity for Irishwomen. The progress being made should not be a signal for complacency or apathy but should act as a further impetus to each woman to examine her attitudes, her behaviour and evaluate the direction her life is taking. The real impetus for change will come not from official reports nor from legislative enactments but from the consciousness of individual women that they have basic human rights and from a realisation that they too have obligations in the shaping of society. If we are to ensure that future generations of Irish women do not suffer from the traumas and frustrations that past and present generations of women have endured in trying to fit the preordained mould then we cannot afford to lose any more time.

First we must put an end to the conditioning that makes girls-and boys—expect that all a woman needs in life is a man (on whom she can depend for the rest of her life to fulfil all her emotional and material needs) who will marry her and provide her with a home and babies in order to ensure the woman's lifelong contentment. Judging by the extent to which young and middle-aged housewives suffer from depression, anxiety, neuroses, frustrations and phobias the happiness and contentment that women are led to believe they will find in the role of housewife would appear to be an illusion. And judging by the amount of hardship and brutality inflicted on women by their husbands it would appear that the Irishman's devotion to the woman he professes to love and with whom he offers to share his life is short-lived. Due to the efforts of voluntary groups which have campaigned on behalf of women in recent years it has become clear that it is in the area of marriage and the family that the female sex is most vulnerable. The efforts of those pressurising for social, legal and financial aid for deserted wives, battered wives and children forced out of homes by male physical violence backed up by medical and psychiatric reports, by the findings of ministers of religion and by voluntary groups engaged in befriending the depressed and suicidal, by those concerned with the provision of information about family planning, or with the care and prevention of cruelty to children surely prompts the question of whether the institution of marriage, which

constitutes unhappiness, degradation and brutality for so many women, is any longer worth preserving?

Admirable though the work of the pressure groups is in attempting to push through social and legal reforms and worthy though the work of the caring organisations is in alleviating the burden of life for women whose husbands desert them and leave them homeless and destitute or for women who are forced out of their homes by the brutality of their husbands these groups are treating the effect that marriage and family life can have on individuals. Can we get to the cause of the disharmony, the brutality, the desertion? Can there be any real communication between Irishwomen and men?

The male lack of sensitivity set against the romantic idealism of the female is surely at the root of the problem of communication between the sexes. Many women have had a cloistered convent education where they were taught the desirability of being ladies with qualities of gentility and kindness. The man's schooling has been as devoid of female influence as hers has been of male and he has been taught to suppress any natural tendencies towards sensitivity as being qualities suitable only for women. Boys learn early in life that it is through aggression and domination that a man makes his way in society-whether it is in the home or at work. Men and women rarely bridge the divide by sharing common interest and pastimes because as boys and girls they never shared education or leisure time. Of what benefit are the supposed womanly virtues of compassion and affection if the man she lives with has no understanding of these deeper feelings? He has been trained to be harsh and objective so he answers her tenderness with cold brutality and leaves her emotionally shattered.

Despite the lack of communication between women and men, the unmarried mother, the deserted or physically assaulted wife, the woman whose husband is an alcoholic can suffer as much if not more from the stigma, the distrust and the malicious, uncharitable gossip of other women than from the actual desertion, the beating, the unwanted pregnancy or the drink problem. The dismal fear and dislike which women can express for other women must surely result from their lifelong preoccupation to win and keep the approval of men. Women can overcome their distrust of one another with the realisation that the female sex is not inferior and if instead of living their entire lives through husbands and sons that they learn to be people in their own right. Women must be accepted and can be liked, and loved, for their individuality as human beings and not for affectations of pose or behaviour.

Communication between the sexes therefore can only be achieved by a radical re-evaluation of our attitudes and behaviour. If marriage is to survive, and there are those who would dispute the possibility, then the institution itself must also undergo a re-evaluation. It can no longer mean a fusing of identities, one person ‘belonging’ to another. While it is important that there is privacy for each individual within marriage it is equally important that the partners should retain their separate identities outside the marriage. Very often they cut themselves off from any possibility of growth or maturity because of fears for the security of the relationship. Most often the woman is to blame because she has no sense of identity outside the marriage. She may not have progressed intellectually or emotionally beyond the day she decided to put all her cards on a certain man for status and economic security and much as she resents his possibilities for growth she fears the thought of greater freedom of expression for herself. Anthropologists Nena and George O’Neill in Open Marriage explain how the relationship can be based on the equal freedom and identity of both partners and on the commitment of both to the right of each to continue to grow as individuals.

Open marriage is a non-manipulative relationship between man and woman. Neither is the object of total validation for the other's inadequacies or frustrations. Open marriage is a relationship of peers in which there is no need for dominance and submission, for commandeered restrictions, or stifling possessiveness. The woman is not the caretaker, the man is not the dictator.

Nena and George O'Neill, *Open Marriage*

There is a strong case to be made for the retention or re-establishment of a women's financial independence within the marital situation. In practical terms this would reduce the amount of suffering at present endured by women who are utterly dependent on husbands who spend everything on alcohol or gambling, or that suffered by women whose only security is life with a man who inflicts physical or mental torture on his family. Financial independence would also be a tremendous boost to the morale of women in a society where everyone and everything is measured in financial terms.

As well as working towards greater economic independence for women in marriage there must be less rigidity about the traditional male and female roles.

One assumes characteristics to define a role. We make the role; so by education we can redefine the role. Why could a man not take on a woman's role and remain masculine and vice-versa with women in politics. A man shouldn't feel less a man if he does full-time housework.

Fergal O'Connor, OP, *The Church in Action*, RTE Radio

We must be more tolerant of marriage situations where the present recognised 'roles' are reversed. There is no reason why a man should feel his masculinity threatened by the very thought of putting clothes on the washing line or cleaning the bathroom but there is good reason to suspect that a man who takes over the role of housekeeper is as likely to suffer from the same intolerable strain and to suffer a similar loss of identity as his wife. A study of English couples who reversed the traditional roles found that housebound husbands also tended to complain of anxiety, nervous tension and depression.

Regardless of which partner takes on the role of housekeeper or of which partner takes on the major responsibility for childrearing there must be less isolation of pre-school-age children and those who care for them. Sociologist Hannah Gavron stresses the importance of reintegrating mothers with young children into society. Mothers are confined to sub-urban homes to an extent which no previous generation has experienced and alone for most of the day they are attempting to rear families which are often smaller and more widely spaced than in previous generations. Children are suffering extreme boredom in flats and houses which must always be neat and tidy or else they are in constant danger from traffic if they are put on the roadway to 'play'. Instead of rearing children in between bouts of housekeeping as is the present haphazard method more thought and effort should go into this important occupation.

Pointing out that childrearing, although essential to the economy, has never been evaluated in economic terms and has remained to all intents and purposes a cottage industry, anthropologist Elaine Morgan suggests that if a woman went out each morning to a child centre for ‘a hard day’s child-rearing’ she might then begin to feel that the job is an important one needing special equipment and regular contact with others engaged in the same task. At all events some effort must be made to separate childrearing from houseminding and this can be done by moving the childrearing from the home to a communal centre, at least for part of the day.

An analysis of marriage for women must include a re-appraisal of our attitudes towards our bodies, towards sexuality, towards pregnancy, labour and childbirth. In these areas the help and advice of experts in the fields of medicine, obstetrics and midwifery must be sought in order to provide women with the information and education that is so sadly lacking. 'Bodies are for feeling with and actively living through and enjoying', according to social anthropologist Sheila Kitzinger.

I should like to see women able to choose freely whether or not to use their fertility, to have control over their own bodies, and to decide how many children they wish to have, when and under what conditions; and, having decided, to enter on the process with understanding, free of the fears and ignorance of the past, and able to participate in and enjoy childbearing as much-even if in a different way-as they now feel they have the right to enjoy sex.

Sheila Kitzinger, *The Experience of Childbirth*

It is vitally important for the physical health and mental and emotional well-being of Irishwomen that we have adequate information on and access to contraceptive methods and to education for pregnancy and childbirth.

The way a woman feels about her pregnancy and birth, her whole manner of approaching it, and the way she behaves, are part of her idea of herself as a woman and part of her sexual nature.

Sheila Kitzinger, *The Experience of Childbirth*

In an attempt to find the path we should take from here I have been concentrating on women and the institution of marriage, without apology I might add, because marriage is and will continue to be a way of life for many women and consequently the manner in which the institution effects women is of great importance to the woman movement.

But we should not lose sight of the fact that marriage can have a disastrous effect on the mental health and emotional growth of some people and that no matter how it is updated the one-to-one relationship does not suit everyone. Obviously the advantages to society of a marriage partnership which draws on the idea of ‘synergy’ that one plus one equals more than two, that the sum of the parts working together is greater than the sum of the parts working separately

Open Marriage by Nena and George O'Neill

are immense but as a theologian pointed out in a protest to a Report on Partnership at the World Council of Churches Conference in Berlin

the basic premise that people come in couples was wrong. She [the theologian] felt that the Churches should consider the singularity of each individual first and then discuss only in this context the validity of many life styles now apparent, whether it be marriage, friendship, living together, communes or homosexual relations.

Bernadette Cahill, *The Irish Times*

The fact that married couples can already choose not to have children and the fact that society is beginning to accept and make provision for single women who want to rear their own children point towards an even greater necessity for the growth of woman as an individual.

The objectives then for the woman movement in Ireland are many and varied but the concentration must be on research, information and education.

The woman movement must begin with research into the ways in which women are effected by their upbringing, the educational system, the media, the Churches, the medical profession, childbirth, employers, unions, the environment and by the isolation of young mothers and their children.

The woman movement must promote the on-going education of women by making available studies of women in Irish history, comparisons with women in other countries, assessments of the role of women in Irish literature as well as sociological and psychological studies of the female sex.

The woman movement must encourage the involvement of women not alone in the provision of child-care centres and in pressurising for a more favourable suburban environment but in local and national affairs affecting the community as a whole.

The woman movement should urge women to support the work already being done to improve the situation for widows, deserted wives, unmarried mothers, battered wives, and the work of trade unions to provide a better situation for women in employment.

To achieve the aims of the woman movement there is an urgent need for inspired leadership, for the emergence of women who have the ability to lead others in a concentrated effort to achieve specific aims.

Women can go on living on doctors' prescriptions; women can go on hoping that the advertisers’ promises will come true; women can go on blaming people who attempt to manipulate them-the media, the planners and all the face-less collectives—for conditions of life which they abhor but which they imagine they are powerless to change. The female sex must stop tranquillising itself into acceptance of a life it does not want and learn to analyse, evaluate and take action.

It cannot be easy to change a way of life, to alter a pattern that has grown easier with the passage of time but which is hardly fulfilling. Nevertheless, with the realisation that growth is never achieved without a certain amount of pain the conflict and tensions which women experience today can and must be put to advantage in order that women can grow as people and be more fully human.

Too many women are drugged to keep them in line with their conditioning; dosed with anti-depressants to lift deadened spirits or with sedatives to subdue real feelings. A sense of humour and above all laughter might well help shed the burden of anxiety and depression and pave the way towards the release of latent female energies and the establishment of a sense of identity.

Would that the woman-power that is subdued by tankful’s of tranquillisers be channelled into the hard work that is needed to set Irish women free to live life more honestly and more openly, more fully.

The real revolution of the female sex will be accomplished when women are given the right to become fully human and when they in turn accept the duty to society as a whole that such a right entails.

Let's not talk about if or when but make it now. We can cope with the obligations and with the freedom. In this exciting age of great social upheaval we have the choice; we can conform to the outdated mould or we can create a whole new way of life for women. What will you do?

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To the publishers of copyright material for permission to use extracts: A. D. Peters & Co. for The Midnight Court and Women translations by Frank O'Connor; Faber and Faber Ltd. for Patriarchal Attitudes by Eva Figes; Gill and Macmillan Ltd. for The Church and State in Modern Ireland by J. H. Whyte; The Irish Times and Bernadette Cahill; The Irish Times and Kay Kent for extracts from reports cited in bibliography; Doctrine and Life and Margaret MacCurtain for Women Irish Style; Jonathan Cape Limited for extract from A Dead Cert from The Talking Trees by Sean O'Faolain and The Second Sex by Simone de Beauvoir translated by H. M.Parshley; Laurence Pollinger Limited for Coming of Age in Samoa by Margaret Mead; MacGibbon & Kee Ltd. for Eve's New Rib by Robert T. Francoeur and The Female Eunuch by Germaine Greer; The Mercier Press Limited for Five Irish Poets by Anthony Blinco, Marriage Irish Style by Dorine Rohan, The Tailor and Ansty by Eric Cross, The Prison Journal of Anne Devlin ed. by John Finnegan; Penguin Books Ltd. for James Connolly: Selected Writings edited by P. Berresford Ellis, Inniskillane by Hugh Brody, The Housewife by Suzanne Gail from Work ed. by Ronald Fraser; Routledge & Keegan Paul Ltd. for The Captive Wife by Hannah Gavron; Rupert Hart-Davis for Sexual Politics by Kate Millett; The Controller, Stationery Office, Dublin, for The Constitution of Ireland and Report of the Commission on the Status of Women; the Talbot Press Limited for Peig; Victor Gollancz for The Experience of Childbirth by Sheila Kitzinger; Wildwood House Limited for The New Chastity by Midge Decter; Aine McEvoy, Religious Affairs producer RTE, and Fergal O'Connor, OP, contributor to the Church in Action programme on Women; conversations and correspondence with Mary Anderson, Mairin de Burca, Nuala Fennell, Mary Maher, Maire Mullarney, Margaret Waugh; information from State, voluntary and women's organisations.

APPENDIX

INTERNATIONAL WOMAN YEAR 1975

As The Female Experience was completed before International Woman Year it does not take account of the people or the progress of women during 1975.

ADDRESSES

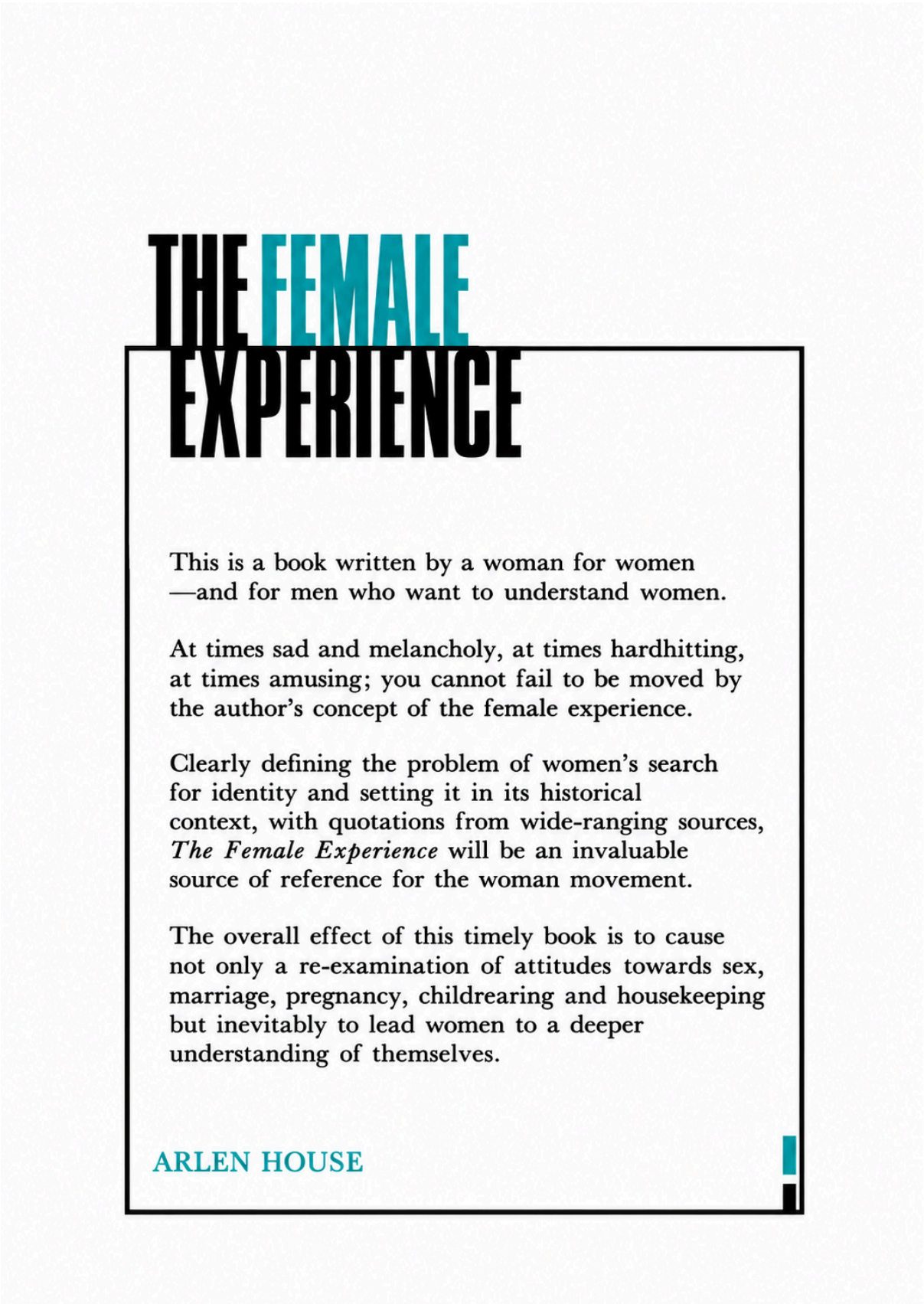
The Women's Representative Committee was set up by the government to study and coordinate activities for 1975. The Committee, chaired by Eileen Desmond, TD, has a complete list of women's organisations (voluntary, professional and vocational) and women's Trades Unions with relevant addresses.

SPEAKERS

Women's Forum is a group of speakers who are active in the Irish woman movement and who are prepared to travel to any part of the country at the invitation of a local group (not necessarily a women’s group). Club secretaries or anyone interested in holding a Women's Forum should get in touch with Nuala Fennell at 22 Foxrock Ave., Co. Dublin.

WOMEN'S STUDY COURSE

An extra-mural course in women’s studies will be held at University College, Dublin (Earlsfort Tce.). The classes, starting on October 6th, 1975, will be given by Bernadette Cahill.


THE FEMALE EXPERIENCE
This is a book written by a woman for women —and for men who want to understand women.
At times sad and melancholy, at times hardhitting, at times amusing; you cannot fail to be moved by the author's concept of the female experience.
Clearly defining the problem of women's search for identity and setting it in its historical context, with quotations from wide-ranging sources, The Female Experience will be an invaluable source of reference for the woman movement.
The overall effect of this timely book is to cause not only a re-examination of attitudes towards sex, marriage, pregnancy, childrearing and housekeeping but inevitably to lead women to a deeper understanding of themselves.
ARLEN HOUSE