

## Ireland – Not the Plato Ideal for Women

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Though the Irish republic has been established for over half a century, the republican ideals of democracy, liberty, equality, and fraternity apply to men – full citizenship for women within this republic remains merely an aspiration.

'How many generations may be necessary to give vigour to the virtue and talents of the freed posterity of abject slaves?' asked Mary Wollstonecraft (1792).

Mary Ritter Beard in 1931 said: 'centuries before Mary Wollstonecraft called for a vindication of the rights of women, Plato was sufficiently familiar with women ... to provide that they should have equal guardianship in his ideal republic.'

While speaking of 'abject slaves' in the eighteenth century, early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft might see some progress for women in Ireland at this, the start of the twenty-first century. However, she would be deeply disappointed, as are many men and modern feminists, that in today's Irish republic the misogyny which pervaded in her century ensures Irish women still do not equally benefit from, nor enjoy, the same rights and privileges as Irish men.

Indeed James Connolly and other republicans of his time would shake their heads at the fact that the socialist and feminist revolution that they envisaged in the early twentieth century has yet to materialise. As the core ideals of the republican ideology – self-determination, liberty, equality, and fraternity – apply to women, the fact is that in 2000, women still do not enjoy the right to self-determination, full citizenship, or democracy in Ireland.

Today women make up 50.8 per cent of the Irish population. There is no doubt that a democratic deficit exists when we examine public life and the position of women in the institutions of the state. Women make up less than 12 per cent of the membership of the Oireachtas. The serious dearth of women in public policy decision-making posts (only one per cent of women in the two highest grades of the civil service), and their poor representation in the judiciary, add up to a disgraceful gender balance in this state. The failure of successive governments to tackle this gap is unfair and actually further supports the exclusion of women. Positive

action measures to increase the presence of women in all of these areas are necessary if the democratic deficit is to be addressed. For women in Ireland in the year 2000, real democracy does not exist.

In terms of equality, there is no doubt that there has been an increase in equal opportunities for women, in the area of employment in particular. However, many women's rights established in this state result from European directives or legal challenges at a European level (equal pay and contraception, to mention just two). Women do have the formal right to enter non-traditional, male-dominated areas of work (though women still make up less than five per cent of apprentices in Ireland, and less than three per cent of top managers in business). Women are now just over 40 per cent of the paid workforce – their participation rates have increased in the last ten years while their move into non-traditional areas is notable. Women now make up a huge number of solicitors for example, yet the vertical segregation of the labour market continues to show women as most likely to be in the low paid, part-time, and low status end of the majority of sectors.

Women are, ostensibly, entitled to economic independence. The recent moves towards individualisation (Budget of December 1999 and the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness) of the welfare and taxation systems will benefit women. Individualisation is a move towards ending the concept of woman as 'adult dependent'. Still today, married couples on welfare receive only 70 per cent of the male 'full' rate for the woman. There is no doubt that these discriminatory aspects of both the tax and welfare systems are based on the ethos and view of woman as contained in the *Constitution of Ireland, Bunreacht na hÉireann* – Article 41.2.1: 'by her life within the home, woman ...' De Valera may yet turn in his grave, if women's full and rightful place in and outside of the home, as citizens with full rights, is established.

The fact is that since the 1980s women are more likely to be 'at risk' of poverty than men (Combat Poverty Agency, 1998). Lone parent women headed households are those deemed most 'at risk' of being in poverty. The reasons for such exposure to poverty for women are complex. The absence of recognition that women are, and should be treated as, full individuals and citizens of this Republic, lies at the root of many of these injustices. Woman's poverty arises from the fact that many of her entitlements are 'derived' from her status, not in her own right, but in relation to a man. Women have little entitlement in their own individual right, especially if married.

Women's unpaid, undervalued, and invisible work at home and in the community, continues to mean that for most women entry into the paid labour market or access to training and employment is a problem. There are real existing barriers for women. The key barriers remain lack of

childcare and eldercare supports. In addition, for rural women poor public transport facilities create insurmountable barriers. Financial supports are needed for parents, recognising children as citizens of the state and the responsibility of the whole nation. Childcare and eldercare supports – both supply and demand sides – are a necessary and expensive aspect of the development of the Republic's infrastructure. If women really are to be full and equal citizens the state must stop treating women like a second class or an underclass that carries out the invisible yet vital caring duties in society.

To foster the development of fraternity – real sisterhood and brotherhood in equality – there remains a list of items which must be dealt with, for men to show that they regard women as sisters in the Republic. The fact is that violence against women is still increasing in Ireland, both rape and domestic violence, while one in four Irish women has experienced violence at the hands of a known male intimate (Women's Aid, 1996). In their private roles women carry the greatest care burden – little equal sharing of household and domestic tasks takes place in the private sphere. This public/private split is most worrying, especially as the Celtic Tiger and rising house prices draw more women into the public workplace. The real burden is that most women carry out their public/paid employment tasks while also retaining almost full responsibility for the caring and home life of the family. This is not sustainable, and women are increasingly calling a halt to the double burden they carry. Women are talking about quality of life issues – it's a discussion from which men may also benefit, especially if it is carried out in a real power-sharing approach!

Few political parties in Ireland support positive action measures to encourage women to overcome the barriers they face when attempting to access political power. Notable exceptions are Sinn Féin and the Green Party, both of whom managed to get a respectable gender balance in their last outings at general/European elections. If parties really support women's participation and power sharing, then they must recognise the real barriers that exist for women. They must support the move towards a balance of power, and get more women into their ranks at all levels. The colleens may still be dancing at the crossroads for some antiquated republicans, but *Mná na hÉireann* are far more likely to be occupied by the double demands of managing home/care duties and working a 40 hour week!

If fraternity is an ideal worth pursuing, then we must recognise that the ability to live together in society as true equals, requires a shift in the power balance. Feminism, as a philosophy, addresses this shift from a rights perspective. Of course, the shift will require relinquishment of power and position by men. There are some men willing to engage in this

dialogue. Most men do so in intellectual terms only. Many men, including the proponents of a republic, fail to make the connection between equality in legal terms and the necessary private shift in responsibility and power. Only the latter will make a real difference, and lead to genuine shifts towards gender equality in an integrated private/public manner.

What would democracy with gender equality and freedom look like for women?

Women would be free from fear of violence from men. Women's contribution to society would be measured and valued. Existing barriers to women's full participation in all areas of social, political and cultural life would be eliminated. Gender mainstreaming of women and women's concerns would be in place. All public policy would be gender-proofed to ensure that structural inequalities are removed, and that women and men derive equal benefit from public policy decisions and public funds.

Such equality would mean supporting decisions inherent in women's and men's life choices. Equality is not about creating a homogenous people. Equality is about recognising differences, and ensuring that the differences do not give rise to discrimination. 'All different – All equal' was a slogan used in an anti-racism campaign some years ago. The true test of freedom in a democracy is the extent to which we can support and encourage difference. Recognising the rights of minorities, whether political, religious, sexual, able-bodied, or ethnic origin is vital. While women are not a minority grouping, this move to support a wider equality agenda is the context in which the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCi) is currently working.

Interesting developments in Ireland in recent years include the recognition of NWCi as a social partner, along with other members of the Social and Community Pillar. NWCi represents 150 plus women's organisations, amounting to some 300,000 women. As a social partner, NWCi took part in national agreement negotiations for a second time, on the negotiation of the successor to the Partnership 2000 national agreement. The new Programme for Prosperity and Fairness contains significant gains for women – gains for those women in paid employment; gains for those women with caring responsibilities (though not a childcare payment for parents, yet); gains for women entering education and those in welfare dependency.

Allied to participation as a social partner in national negotiations is the participation of NWCi in the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) and the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF). In each of these fora gender equality is now centre stage. Advice to government on economic and social matters includes significant consideration of the gender dimension of proposals and recommendations. This consideration of possible impacts and outcomes for women is a significant step forward

in the development of public policy in a republic. Gender equality – including consideration of gender equality outcomes along with equality of opportunity – is a vital cornerstone of the whole social inclusion and equality agenda.

The NWCi welcomes the new equality institutions, the Equality Authority and the Director of Equality Investigations. The Equality Act of 1998 and the forthcoming Equal Status legislation firmly set out the grounds of anti-discrimination work and the role of these new institutions. It is hoped that these institutions, building on the groundbreaking work of the Employment Equality Agency, will support the establishment of an equality culture, at least in the public sphere. However, it is notable that the Employment Equality Act of 1977, which introduced the equal pay legislation, has yet to deliver. Forthcoming Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) wage differential figures show some 20 per cent plus difference in women's and men's earnings.

In 1869 J.S. Mill (*The Subjection of Women*) spoke of the subtle and pervasive social conditioning of women and men, which explains how women 'learn' to accede to their societal roles. He concludes: 'So long as the rights of the strong to power over the weak rule in the heart of society, the attempt to make the equal right of the weak the principle of its outward actions will always be an uphill struggle.'

For NWCi and feminists on the island of Ireland, the uphill struggle continues for the realisation of a republican ideal many centuries old - and getting older.

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