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tion to the Labour Market**

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**Eileen Drew**

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## **Introduction**

Ireland has been characterised as a small, open, post-colonial economy situated on the physical and economic periphery of Europe. This paper presents an outline sketch of the situation of women in Ireland in the 1990s which contrasts sharply with the 1970s, which was a decade of transition, as exemplified by Ireland's admission to the European Economic Community. Apart from the obvious opening up of new economic opportunities in an extended market, this step was instrumental in introducing key reforms in the areas of equal pay and anti-discrimination in employment for women. The first Commission for the Status of Women reported to the Minister of Finance in 1972 providing another milestone as well as an agenda for action to subsequent governments.

If the 1970s were characterised by reform and optimism, the picture altered by the onset of the 1980s when Ireland entered a recessionary phase in which the problems of economic stagnation and rising unemployment and emigration took precedence over concerns about equality of opportunity for women in Ireland. The later half of the 1970s and early 1980s did see the growth of women's organisations and the formation of self-help groups: Cherish (support service for single parents), Rape Crisis Centres, Women's Aid (refuges for women and children who are being physically, emotionally or sexually abused in their own home), Childline (to counter child abuse) and Well-Woman Clinics. By the end of the decade there was a consolidation and articulation of women's interests through the emergence of Women's Studies in the third level curriculum of all Irish universities.

Though lagging behind the average in EU States, labour force participation has been rising among Irish women at a time when the rate is falling for men. This trend is due mainly to the increased attachment to the labour market by married women who are of prime child-bearing age,

and has occurred despite the limited access to part-time jobs in the Irish economy.

The 1990s mark a positive turning point with the election of a woman to the presidency and the increased success of women candidates in elections. A major programme of reforms has emerged in the report of the Second Commission for the Status of Women', in January 1993. This document emphasised the lack of progress in some areas and provided a new agenda to take us into the next century.

## **1. General Information**

### **Demographic Profile**

#### *Fertility*

Along with mortality rates, fertility rates, measured as live births per 1000 women, have been declining rapidly in Ireland, since 1970. Fertility decline in Ireland has been attributed to social and economic pressures common to all of Europe which include new attitudes and behavioural norms in relation to family planning as well as increasing labour force participation by women (Eurostat, 1993a). The total number of births has declined also and this decline is likely to continue. Compared with 1965 when average family size was over 4 children, family size has steadily fallen to 3.23 in 1980 to 2.10 in 1991. The major change which has contributed to smaller family size is in the falling proportion of births which are third, fourth or more to the same mother. In 1960 only 21% of live births were first born children compared with 33% in 1989. More significantly, 45% of births in 1960 were of fourth or subsequent births whereas the figure in 1989 was only 22% (Eurostat, 1991).

### *Marriage Rate*

Ireland now has a marriage rate of 4.8 per 1000 of population, the lowest recorded since the early 1940s and the lowest amongst the countries of the European Union apart from Sweden (Eurostat, 1993b). Average age at marriage has also altered, initially falling to 24.8 years in 1975 from 27.2 years in 1960 and then levelling to 26.3 by 1991 (Eurostat, 1993). In 1975 the average age of first time mothers was 24.2 years and this rose to 26.3 in 1989, higher than the EUR 12 average of 25.1.

In contrast to the fall in births within marriage, the proportion of total births accounted for by births outside marriage rose from 3% in 1970 to 17% in 1991. In 1991 6.2% of Irish women aged 20-39 years were heads of single-parent households (i.e. living alone with child(ren)), compared with an EU 12 average of 6.5%. The Second Commission on the Status of Women (1993) noted that, as in other countries, single mothers in Ireland tend to be from disadvantaged backgrounds and are more likely to be unemployed and younger than their married peers.

Despite the continuing fall in mortality rates, the mortality differential between men and women remains. Female life expectancy is currently 77.0 years for women in Ireland, compared with 71.0 years for men (Eurostat, 1993a).

Whilst Ireland's birth rate is now falling there is a high dependency level of children and elderly people, relative to the population of working age. It is estimated that 53% of women aged 35-39 have three or more children (Eurostat, 1993b). In rural areas of Ireland there are even higher ratios of children and elderly dependants. There is also an imbalance of the sexes in rural areas due to higher levels of out migration by women and lower marriage rates. Women constitute a larger proportion than men of those living alone after 65 years of age.

## **Educational Levels**

Since 1966 free secondary school education has been available to all children in Ireland. This has had a considerable impact on the pattern and level of female participation in second level and higher education since the 1960s. Since 1967 the number of girls attending secondary schools increased by just over 100% and they have represented at least 52% of all second level pupils since 1981. At third level the increase was greater still so that by 1982-3 women represented 45% of those receiving higher education (Working Party on Women's Affairs and Family Law Reform, 1985).

However, there still remain important differences between male and female educational opportunities and curricular choice. Research has shown that "sex differentiation in our educational system is very deeply institutionalised: in the ideological and cultural presumptions underlying the provision of subjects and the design of curricula by the different school-owning authorities, in the expectation of parents and teachers, and in the self-definitions and educational attitudes and expectations of the students themselves" (Hannon and Breen, 1983).

Studies have shown that among some socio-economic groups, such as small farmers in the western region of Ireland, the "formal educational achievements of the wives is already a good deal higher than that of their husbands" (Working Party on Women's Affairs and Family Law Reform, 1985). However it is also recognised that adult education is particularly important for women, many of whom have left their employment to rear their families and want eventually to return to employment. Aontas (1993), the voluntary umbrella body concerned with the promotion, development and support of all aspects of adult learning in Ireland,

estimated that women continue to comprise 75% of participants on adult education course throughout Ireland.

Educational attainment by women is of particular importance in determining their long-term commitment to the labour force, although this relates to the type of courses taken and the degree to which they have a "career" or "domestic" orientation (Paukert, 1984). While more girls than boys completed the secondary school cycle in Ireland, by third level they represent a minority amongst entrants to University or Regional Technical Colleges. Within the third level system, girls are concentrated disproportionately in the Arts, and in Teacher Training, Nursing and Secretarial courses. Boys are more likely to enter Engineering, Technology or Applied Science courses. "Girls are not only less likely to go on for third level education, but, when they do, they choose options that are traditionally associated with female achievement models - teaching, medical and paramedical, social work, administrative options" (Hannon and Breen, 1983).

Callan and Farrell (1991) have shown that the greater the investment in education by women in Ireland the stronger their attachment to the labour force will be. While less than 20% of women holding Group Certificate or less were active in the labour force this level increased to over one-third of those who had completed their Leaving Certificate and to nearly three-quarters of graduates. In other words "the better educated women are, the more they are economically active" in Ireland and throughout the European Community (Maruani, 1992).

## **2. Socio-Economic Status of Women**

### *Labour Force Participation*

The relative level of integration by women into the Irish labour market is low by international standards. According to Labour Force Survey statistics, in 1993 there were c. 469,900 women in the Irish labour force, comprising 34.2% of the total. Whilst this remains low, it does represent a substantial increase over the level that prevailed in 1971, before Ireland's entry to the European Community, when women workers comprised 25.7% of the total. The 1971 figures reflect the particularly low level of participation of married women in the labour force of 39,200 women in 1971 compared with 212,600 in 1993. Over two decades, married women's participation rate increased from 7.5% in 1971 to 30.9% in 1993 (Central Statistics Office, 1973 to 1995). Activity rates for married women point to an increasing shift towards remaining in the labour force after marriage/child-bearing by younger women.

### *Part-time Working by Women*

The Commission for the Status of Women recognised in 1972 that the availability of part-time work, was an important consideration influencing the decision, by women, whether or not to resume work. In most developed economies the availability of part-time working facilitates the re-entry of married women to the labour force much of which occurs in service employment (e.g. distribution, financial, business and professional services, personal and miscellaneous services, public administration). In 1993 there were a total of 126,600 part-time workers, representing 11% of all job-holders and 21% of all jobs held by women (Central Statistics office, 1995).

Despite evidence of a desire by married women, who had retired from employment for family reasons, to work part-time on entry or re-entry to the labour force (Fine-Davis, 1983), overall levels of part-time working

remain low in Ireland compared to other European and OECD countries. Any increase in demand for part-time labour by employers, particularly in the service sector, would have a disproportionately positive impact on female participation. There are indications that part-time employment will increase in Ireland and that it will provide more opportunities for many women who wish to combine family and employment commitments (Drew, 1990).

### *Segregation*

In common with many other countries, Irish women are occupationally segregated: horizontally by 'crowding' into a limited range of occupations most notably in the 'caring' professions (nursing, teaching, social work), retailing and 'personal services' (cleaning, catering hairdressing etc.) and insurance, finance and business services; and vertically through the under-representation of women in skilled occupations and management. The limited sources of analysis on gender segregation cover the 1970s to 1980s and suggest a decline in horizontal segregation. However data for vertical segregation showed that women were severely under-represented at executive/managerial level and other "high occupational status categories" (Blackwell, 1986). This segregation has also contributed to the earnings differential between men and women.

### *Undercounting of Women's Economic Contribution*

Consideration of women's economic contribution is hampered by the limitations associated with data collection. Blackwell (1987) has commented on the lack of information on home working in Ireland and the "significant number of part-time workers in agriculture, many of them women (who are sometimes called relatives assisting)...There is likely to be an under-enumeration of the role which this work contributes to agricultural production". It is not only women's contribution within agriculture which is undercounted. Blackwell mentions that an unknown number of women, especially married women, are likely not to be enumerated in censuses and labour force surveys unless there is a positive answer under 'unemployed, having lost or given up previous job' or 'actively looking for work again after voluntary interruption of working life for personal or domestic reasons'.

Sexism underlies concepts such as 'dependants' (for social welfare entitlements), 'Head of Household' (in Census data collection) and the cursory manner in which 'home duties' are dealt with in official statistics. Since work is defined as 'paid employment', "unpaid domestic labour, virtually all produced by women, does not appear in statistics on work.....if the value of women's work on home duties were valued at the average industrial earnings of women, this output would be valued at 20% of (a higher) national output in 1985" (Blackwell, 1987). Another form of sexism in the census of population ascribes women who are not in the measured labour force to the socio-economic class of the person on whom they are deemed to be dependent (usually the male Head of Household).

### *Sectoral Employment of Women*

Nationally employment has undergone a sectoral shift away from agricultural employment into manufacturing and, since the 1980s into services. While 31% of the male labour force were employed in manufacturing, extraction and construction industries in 1993, the comparable figure for women was only 17%. Female employment has been associated with the service sector which has experienced an average annual increase of 2.4% (Humphreys, 1983). "Many women who entered the labour market have found employment in services, which offered greater employment opportunities for women. Between 1975 and 1979, total employment of women increased by 25,000, of which 18,000 was in the service sector" (Blackwell, 1986).

However, the development of the public sector has been a very important factor in the sustained demand for female labour. Paukert (1984) attributes this to easier entry in terms of degree of fairness and less discrimination, specific occupational requirements (administrative, clerical, nursing, teaching, social work), and the frequent incidence of part-time work. Of the 102,700 increase in service employment between 1971-1979, the private sector expanded by only 38,700 (or 12.7%) compared to 64,000 (or 42.6%) in public sector services (Sexton, 1982).

### *Earnings*

Economic arguments, citing high levels of unemployment and emigration which have prevailed since Independence in 1922, continue to be used to make the case that married women are taking 'men's jobs'. Hence the nuclear family model of the male breadwinner and dependent housewife/mother continue to be a predominant, if declining, pattern in Ireland. Reinforcing the 'male breadwinner' role, over the past decade women's hourly earnings, as a proportion of men's has remained static at 68% despite the enactment of 'Equal Pay' legislation (Second Commission of the Status of Women, 1993). Further research has shown that women constituted 62% of those earning below the minimum threshold in 1987 (£130 per week). It has been noted that "equality legislation does not address the problem of low pay for many women workers. Because they work in all-female employment there is no male comparator on the basis of which to make a claim" (Second Commission on the Status of Women, 1993).

### **3. Socio-Cultural Attitudes towards Women's Role**

Social attitudes to working wives and mothers have ranged between cool to hostile, with reinforcement of 'traditional role' of wife and mother. This view was enshrined in Article 41.2 of the Irish Constitution which says:

- "1. 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.*
- 2. The state shall therefore 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".*

The Catholic church continues to emphasise the critical role of mothers, but not fathers, in the rearing of children. Ireland is a predominantly Catholic country in which the Church exerts a particularly strong influence on the state. Hence the adherence to orthodox views and legislation on social issues such as abortion, divorce (now likely to be legalised following the passing of a referendum) and, until relatively recently, contraception.

The political and social climate, in relation to married women's employment, has been reinforced by economic conditions and these in turn have shaped fiscal and industrial investment policies and militated against the provision of adequate child care facilities. This has led to a labour market which discourages employers from utilising married women's labour, particularly in facilitating flexible working arrangements.

Attitudes about women's' role in Irish society have tended to reflect "traditional" expectations of wife and mother. Surveys have indicated "that attitudes of society as a whole were found to be ..... negative and at best ambivalent towards changing sex-role behaviour and particularly to employment of married women". However, there was also evidence of change, illustrated by the opinions of women working in the home, a majority of whom wanted their own daughters to combine marriage and motherhood with a career" (Fine-Davis, 1983).

Evidence of a shift in attitudes can be found in women's responses to the statement (posed in 1975 and again in 1986) "Being a wife and mother are the most fulfilling roles any woman could want" (Fine-Davis, 1986). In 1975, 70% of women sampled agreed, whereas in 1986 only 39% did so. In common with women in other countries, Irish women work not only for financial gain, but also for the enjoyment they obtain from it.

However, the ESRI report on Schooling and Sex Roles (Hannon, and Breen 1983) showed that "the orthodox view of married women's responsibilities still prevails and it constitutes the expectations of the majority", only 10% of the school-going sample of girls held "liberated" views of the relationship of marriage and work, while 40% were interested in combining part-time working with minding children, while their spouses worked full-time. The importance of social values and sex-role expectations cannot be underestimated in terms of their impact on Irish women's' decisions concerning re-entry to the male world of paid work.

A recent European Community-wide study showed that, particularly in Ireland, "women still shoulder household tasks to a disproportionate extent" and that the domestic activity of men tends to be 'helping' rather than 'sharing' tasks (Eurobarometer, 1992).

#### **4. The Legal Framework for Employment Equality**

Over the last 22 years in Ireland legislation has been introduced which has had a direct effect on women's opportunities in the labour market. The first significant initiative was in the removal of the 'marriage bar' in the public service in July 1973. The effect of this move operated beyond the public service, since the practice of resignation upon marriage for women applied not only in government departments, local authorities and semi-state bodies, but generally in clerical jobs in service and some manufacturing industries and banks (Commission on the Status of Women, 1972).

This initiative was followed by equal pay legislation in December 1975, anti-discrimination legislation in July 1977 and the maternity protection in 1981. These had the effect of guaranteeing, in law, the right to equal

pay for equal work and equal access to job opportunities and promotion. The third act provides for the right to paid maternity leave of 14 weeks to pregnant women and to reinstatement following leave.

These enactments, coupled with the legalisation and ready access to contraception, have established a legal framework for the rights of women workers and would have had a direct impact on matters of pay, promotion, wider range of job opportunities and the right for women to remain in the labour force after marriage and to take paid leave to have children with a right to return.

#### *Child-Care Provision*

A Working Party was set up by the Minister of Labour to draw up recommendations on child-care facilities for working parents which reported in 1983. The report set out demands for improved facilities including community provision of child-care centres, funded by the state, and a recommendation that fees and other expenses incurred by working parents to have their children cared for at home, or otherwise, should be reckonable for income tax relief purposes. There has still been no official policy/action by government in response to this report.

Circumstances have improved somewhat during the 1980s through the emergence of private and, as yet, unregistered day-care for children, catering mainly for pre-school children (under five's). A Working Party on Women's Affairs (1985) sought the provision of tax credits to parents to meet childcare expenses. McKenna's (1988) report to the Employment Equality Agency has reiterated the demand for better provision and the need for state support via grants and tax allowances.

## **5. Representation of Women in Political Life**

A major focus of research has traced the voting power of women in elections (including the election of a woman president) and the motivation of women who have succeeded in the political arena. The Women's Political Association was formed in 1971 to interest women in public life and to encourage higher participation of women.

A recent report showed that while women were more likely than men to be members of social welfare, religious, educational or cultural organisations, they were also equally likely to be members of local community organisations or professional organisations. However men were twice as likely as women to be members of a political party. The consequences of this under-representation extend into candidature for elections and political representatives at local and national level.

The 1990s may prove a turning point in political and public life for women. In November 1990, Mary Robinson, Senior Counsel and Professor of Law at Trinity College Dublin, was elected the first woman president of Ireland. A self-professed feminist, President Robinson defeated the candidates put forward by the two major political parties. Smyth (1992) states that Mary Robinson is "the literal embodiment of change, challenge and the kinds of values which the women's movement has fought to have inscribed within the public power structures". Since taking office the president has aligned herself with women, and other "out-groups" and women have gained " a precious sense of energy and inspiration" Smyth (1992).

Part of that energy brought about a record 20 women being elected to the Dail (Parliament) in November 1992. This means that women now hold 12 % of the seats in national government, thereby overtaking UK, Belgium, France, Italy and Portugal (Eurostat, 1993b).

However, since women represent half the electorate there is still a long way to go in public life.

## 6. Some Key Indicators of Change:

	1971		1991	
Number of Women			1,765,000	
Percentage of Total Population			50.1%	
Life Expectancy			77 years	
Number of Marriages	20,778		16,859	
Number of Births	64,382		52,690	
Birth Rate per 1000	21.90		15.00	
Number of Extra-marital Births	1,709		8,766	
Total Fertility	3.50		2.10	
% of Women in Labour Force	18.00		32.90	
% of Married Women in Labour Force	8.00		26.90	
Number of Women Unemployed	13,658	(1973)	102,457	(1992)
% of Women Candidates in Local Elections			15%	
% of Women Elected in Local Elections			11%	(88 women)
% of Women Candidates in National Elections		(1969)	18%	(1992)
% of Women Elected in National Elections	2%	(1969)	12%	(20 women)

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