

IRISH WOMEN – YESTERDAY AND TODAY

The typical image of the Irish woman is that she is strong, shrewd, practical and affirmative. This may be because they have been saddled with so many hopeless men. For all his occasional bluster and bragging, the Irish man has often been seen as emotionally challenged and much given to sentimentality, perhaps because late marriage made him dependent too long on his mother. Irish women, by contrast, tend to be deeply unsentimental and unromantic, as women needed to be in a rural culture where they shouldered a lot of the responsibility.

Women in Celtic society had an unusual degree of freedom. They could divorce their husbands and wield political power. But under the common law imposed on Irish society by the English, a married woman was, in effect, the property of her husband, who could do with her what he pleased short of killing, selling or seriously injuring her. Even so, visitors to Ireland in the 18th century were struck by the air of independence these women had. In modern times, Ireland has been a highly patriarchal society, and the Catholic Church has done its best to keep women in their place. In 1948, the Irish state seriously considered banning young women from emigrating. Women's role was to stay at home, bear as many children as possible, and be shining examples of Irish modesty and self-sacrifice.

The index entry for "Women" in an edition of the Irish constitution reads: 'See Family, Sex'. A law of 1925 prohibited divorce, and another law two years later virtually banned women from jury service. In 1935, the sale, advertising and importation of contraceptives was forbidden, and the Catholic bishops condemned modern dancing and immodest fashions in female dress. Some clerics considered Irish dancing barely acceptable. Married women were banned from recruitment to the public service and abortion was not even discussible. For almost 30 years, women in Ireland were deprived of legal aid and unemployment benefits; there was no financial help for single mothers or deserted wives and no protection for battered ones. Until 1965, a wife could be totally disinherited by her husband. Apart from nursing and domestic service, teaching and secretarial work, there were very few careers open to women.

Much of this is now changing, in one of the most deep-seated social revolutions the country has ever witnessed. Joining the European Union meant that Ireland was forced to introduce laws on equal pay, a measure which the Irish government tried to block. Even so, Irish women are twice as likely as men to be in low paying jobs. The number of women in work has increased fourfold since the 1960's. By some measurements, however, the country still has the lowest rates of female labor in the western world.

Contraception is now available, though only after a fierce struggle during which feminists took the train to Belfast, bought contraceptives there and returned to Dublin to brandish them defiantly in the faces of an embarrassed bunch of police officers. Contraception only became legal in 1980 and then only for married couples. Family size fell between 1960 and 1990 from five to two children. Divorce has just come on the statute books. A large majority of Irish people are firmly opposed to abortion. To have an abortion, Irish woman must travel to Britain. This is unlikely to change for some time, given the strength of the Catholic church and because of popular opinion.

Women have by no means swept all before them. Ireland today is a deeply divided society on these questions, as traditional values fight it out with progressive ones. Rural woman in particular have a hard time, marooned from social services and doing much of the farm work, with scant recognition. Some features of the old Ireland may be dead and buried, but morally and psychologically speaking, the place is still much in evidence.

On being elected as Ireland's first woman President, Mary Robinson remarked that "the hand that rocks the cradle has rocked the system." As a liberal-minded lawyer who had battled for women's rights, Mary Robinson's presidency came to symbolize for many of her compatriots the new, enlightened Ireland, with its emphasis on cultural diversity and cosmopolitan vision. Even so, many Irish women remain stoutly conservative in their views: The battle between traditionalists and modernizers is by no means the same in Ireland as the strife between the men and women. But the current President is also a woman, Mary MacAleese, and she is the first President to hail from the North, which may be a good omen for the future of this divided island.

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Happy Easter

