

WOMEN OF INFLUENCE

Introduction

Last year, as we celebrated the centenary of the granting of votes for women in Ireland and Britain, we had the opportunity to reflect on how far women's lives in Ireland had changed over the course of the twentieth century. Similarly, the 2016 commemorations of the Easter Rising highlighted the role of women in the Irish revolutionary decade, a contribution that was often ignored or misunderstood for many years following the foundation of the Irish state.

This exhibition seeks to examine the lives, careers and contributions of a diverse mix of women who lived and worked in Ireland and overseas in all ten decades of the twentieth century.

SOCIAL CHANGE

For much of the last century, social change in Ireland happened slowly, meaning that women's rights, particularly those related to their participation in the workplace and the world of politics, lagged considerably behind other European countries. Indeed, some of the constraints imposed on women in Ireland relating to reproductive rights and pay equality continue to undergo change and reform. Nevertheless, all decades of the twentieth century were transformative in the lives of women in Ireland. Some of these transformations were formal. They involved political change, legal reform and more recently, public referenda. At the same time much of this change was informal in nature, brought about by broader societal change such as the outbreak of war and technological developments in the home and workplace.

PRIVILEGED BACKGROUNDS

The women selected to represent the early years of the century were of high social and economic status. While they too often faced discrimination in the working world, their privileged background allowed them access to education, the opportunity to travel and the social contacts to live lives beyond the reach of poorer women, whose stories we often know little of, even today. As the century progressed, we see a more socially diverse group of women, contributing to and influencing Irish society in a wide variety of endeavours.

This exhibition presents a group of nine women, each one representing a period in Irish twentieth century history.

Among their numbers are writers, poets, artists, engineers, sportswomen, teachers, university lecturers, political and environmental campaigners, librarians, counsellors, medical practitioners and religious sisters. Many were high achievers in multiple fields and contributed to Irish life in several ways over the course of their lives. All used or use their talents, not just to further their own careers, but in the service of other people, and other Irishwomen in particular.

As such they offer a fascinating glimpse into aspects of our national story that we are often slow to appreciate.

WOMEN AND

Health

LOCK HOSPITALS

From the notorious 'lock hospitals' of the nineteenth century, opposition to *Noel Browne's Mother and Child Scheme* in the 1950s and more recent campaigns to liberalise the law regarding contraception and abortion, healthcare has always been at the centre of women's rights in Ireland. At the beginning of the twentieth century, social inequality and poverty lead to ill-health, rampant infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and high infant death rates.

Women's lack of access to education meant that they often had little understanding of health and hygiene, resulting in continual pregnancies and sickness. 1907 saw the establishment of the *Women's National Health Association*, which aimed to eliminate tuberculosis and reduce high infant and maternal mortality rates by educating ordinary women about health and medical issues.

While the early years of the new state did see a general improvement in the health of the nation, the specific healthcare needs of women, particularly in the field of reproductive medicine, was slow to develop. There was an aging stock of Victorian-era lying-in hospitals and a medical community that was inherently socially conservative. Much of healthcare was in the hands of the Catholic Church and the system of general practitioners was entirely privatised.

IRISH WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

Inspired by 1960s social reform elsewhere, the *Irish Women's Liberation Movement*, headed by women such as Mary Kenny and Nell McCafferty was established in 1970, and access to healthcare was one of its core demands. This included a train journey to Belfast where contraceptives were purchased and brought back to Dublin, which was then illegal in Ireland. A gradual

liberalisation of Irish law, including the *1979 Family Planning Act*, which allowed women access to contraception with a prescription. By 1985 the need for a prescription was abolished and women's health campaigners turned their attention to the repeal of the *Eight Amendment*, which outlawed abortion in Ireland.

DR. NOEL BROWNE

In 1948 Dr. Noel Browne became Minister for Health. Influenced by the gains made in public health in Britain after the establishment of the *National Health Service*, he proposed a similar scheme in Ireland, which would provide free medical care to pregnant women and young children. The scheme faced hostility from the Catholic Church and the Irish medical establishment, who opposed the apparent socialisation of medicine and the possibility that it would allow for the availability of contraception. By 1951 the scheme was shelved, thus depriving Irish women of universal access to maternity health care for a generation.

CONTRIBUTION OF IRISH NURSES

An overlooked aspect of healthcare in Ireland had been the contribution of Irish nurses, both at home and abroad. In the early to mid-twentieth century, nursing was one of a handful of 'respectable' occupations available to talented young women, and many thousands relished the opportunities it brought them. In addition to playing a vital role in the Irish health system, Irish nurses were a key part of the *N.H.S.* in Britain, especially as it developed in the 1960s and 1970s. In more recent years, Irish nurses have travelled to places such as the United Arab Emirates and Australia, continuing the proud tradition of Irish nursing.

WOMEN AND

Housing

HOUSING CRISIS

Although we might view the housing crisis as a contemporary one, scarcity of housing, or housing that is poor in quality was a continual problem for men and women in Ireland throughout the twentieth century. Due to their reduced earning power and lower legal status, women were particularly vulnerable to housing insecurity, especially if they were poor, single or engaged in behaviour that earned them criticism from the local community.

WRENS OF THE CURRAGH

An early example of these so-called outsider women were the *Wrens of the Curragh* in Co. Kildare. These were groups of derelict women, some of whom worked as prostitutes in the nearby army camp, and who lived in 'wren's nests' of sod and gorse which offered some protection from the driving rain and wind of the Curragh Plains. Many lived in these abysmal circumstances for years because it was preferable to the conditions in the nearest workhouse in Naas. Furthermore, their status as outsider women meant that they were unlikely to receive any charity or support from the local community.

For middle and upper-class Irishwomen, the *Married Women's Property Act of 1882* gave them some protection as it allowed them to own and sell their own property even after marriage. However, they had no right to a share in their family home, which could be sold by their husband without their knowledge or consent. Similarly, upon a husband's death, the family home could be left to a son, leaving a woman effectively homeless or living under sufferance with one of their children. This meant that even well-off women often had little say in where they lived and faced huge insecurity, especially during widowhood.

KEEPING WOMEN OUT OF THE WORKPLACE

The foundation of the Irish state did little to offer women more security when it came to their housing needs. Victorian-era legislation stayed on the statute books and the new government's insistence on keeping women out of the workplace greatly weakened their economic independence. Single women were expected to live in their parents' home until marriage, often acting as unpaid housekeepers or farm labourers.

LEAVING RURAL IRELAND

However, by the middle of the century, better access to education and the lack of opportunities for educated young women in rural Ireland saw thousands leaving for Dublin and British cities such as London and Manchester. Many rented rooms in 'digs' or flat-shared with friends, giving them the opportunity for independent living for the first time in their lives. This is well-illustrated in Edna O'Brien's 1960 novel *The Country Girls*, which depicts the experiences of two young women from rural Ireland moving to Dublin.

1976 FAMILY HOME PROTECTION ACT

An important piece of legislation for women was the *1976 Family Home Protection Act*, which prevented a husband from selling or mortgaging a family home without his wife's permission. It also coincided with the increased participation of women in the workplace, which allowed more women to buy or rent secure housing for themselves. However, up to the present day, women's access to secure and safe housing is largely connected to economic and social status, with women unable to access well-paying jobs most likely to experience homelessness.

WOMEN AND Work

WOMEN HAVE ALWAYS WORKED

While the idea of women participating in the world of work may seem relatively modern, women have always worked out of economic necessity. At the turn of the century women worked on family farms and in family-run businesses, in domestic duties such as childcare, cooking, cleaning and looking after animals. Many worked as domestic servants, as temporary agricultural workers during harvest times and in industrialised areas such as Belfast. In general middle and upper class women did not work outside the home, but some secured poorly-paid but 'respectable' jobs such as teaching.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century women's working lives were transformed by technological developments. The introduction of the typewriter into offices from the turn of the century saw women working in clerical roles. An early manual for a typewriter explained that typewriting was especially suitable for women as it involves 'no hard labour and no more skill than playing a piano'. While typing work was often tedious, and women were usually paid around half of what their male counterparts earned, it nevertheless normalised the idea of women in the commercial world.

INDUSTRIAL LAUNDRIES

Similarly, the rise of industrial laundries provided new employment opportunities. From the 1920s onwards, hotels, hospitals and state organisations began to outsource their laundry to big commercial laundry companies, which employed hundreds of largely unskilled women. The pay was low and working conditions were difficult. Women stood over enormous vats of hot water for thirteen hours a day. The workers organised themselves into the *Irish Laundry Women's Union* and campaigned for better pay and conditions. This resulted in the *Laundry Strike* in the summer of 1945, which ended with all workers in Ireland being awarded two weeks' annual holidays. This achievement

was largely down to the efforts of Louie Bennett and Helen Chenevix, who organised the strike and pressurised both the government and the media.

GENDER DISCRIMINATION

The *Employment Equality Act of 1977* abolished the legal basis for gender discrimination and gradually women began to work in more diverse fields including previously male-dominated industries. The *Defence Forces* admitted women from 1981. While women currently make up 46% of the workforce, some continue to struggle to break into traditionally male sectors of the economy and with the gender pay gap.

LOWER RATES OF PAY

Despite this achievement, women in general were actively discouraged from work outside the home. A significant barrier to work for Irish women was the marriage bar, 1933 to 1973, which forced women to resign from state jobs upon marriage. Women were legally obliged to accept lower rates of pay than men for the same job. In the late 1970s, the demands of economic development and increased access to secondary and third-level education dramatically increased the number of women in Irish workplaces.

WOMEN IN THE

Public Sphere

THE PROCLAMATION OF IRISH INDEPENDENCE

In 1916, the proclamation of Irish independence proudly demanded *'the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman'* and guaranteed *'religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens'*. Similarly, Article 2 of the 1922 Irish Constitution declared that *'every very person, without distinction of sex . . . shall enjoy the privileges and be subject to the obligations of such citizenship'*. However, the reality for women was different. The new Irish state had confused and contradictory attitudes towards women particularly so on the right of women to participate in public life.

Irish independence was won through the unheralded efforts of thousands of women. Some of these, Constance Markievicz, Maude Gonne and Augusta Gregory, are well-known. These women, particularly members of Cumann na mBan, who had fought alongside men, assumed that they would take their place as leaders of the new state on both a local and national level. However, even before 1922 there were signs that society were not committed to women's rights. Much of this resistance was ideological, as feminism was viewed as an English import. Many of the prominent advocates for women's rights in Ireland were suburban, protestant and unionist, identities that did not fit neatly into the prevailing view of a rural and predominately Roman Catholic Ireland.

DOROTHY MacARDLE

Some women actively participated in the public life of the new republic. One of these was Dorothy Macardle, who had been a member of *Cumann na mBan* but had opposed the 1921 *Anglo-Irish Treaty*, leading to her imprisonment during the *Civil War*. Although she was a life-long friend and ally of Eamon de Valera, she opposed the new state on many fronts, disagreeing with compulsory Irish and the increasingly low status of women.

'PROPAGANDIST' FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

Dorothy is perhaps best known for her self-proclaimed role as *'propagandist'* for the new republic. Her 1937 book *The Irish Republic* was commissioned by Eamon de Valera and presented an unapologetically Fianna Fáil and anti-Treaty perspective on recent Irish history.

MARRIAGE BAR

The 1937 Constitution strongly discouraged women from the public sphere, stating that *'mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties within the home'*. The most significant consequence of this was the *marriage bar*, in force for forty years until 1973, which forced women in civil service jobs to resign upon marriage.

SOCIAL CONSERVATISM

While Dorothy Macardle continued to be critical of the conservatism of the Irish Republic, her life and work was continually pressed into service by de Valera for propaganda purposes. This highlights the contradictory nature of the new state when it came to women – it was fully prepared to use the efforts of women such as Dorothy Macardle to promote itself, but nevertheless pushed forward a programme of social conservatism that kept women firmly in the domestic rather than the public sphere.