The Irish Women’s Liberation Movement: Radicalism, Direct Action, Confrontation

Introduction

The appearance of new radicalism in various political forms in Ireland, in the late 1960s, marked a departure from a long period of abeyance into a second wave of feminism. An individual movement’s ‘success’ is typically measured on the basis of substantive reforms. Promoting institutional change is generally considered the business of organisations concerned with equal rights. However, as Staggenborg states:

movements can also succeed in bringing about changes in ‘collective consciousness’. In the case of the women’s liberation movement, changes occurred in the way in which women thought about their sexuality, their health and their reproductive rights. To achieve this change in women’s consciousness, the movement bypassed established organisational channels to reach women directly through new kinds of educational forums. (Staggenborg, 1991: 43)

In 1970, the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement (IWLM) mobilised in the public arena. This type of feminism took the form of more expressive and spontaneous action. A matrix of informal radical feminist groups, many in the universities or new suburban housing estates, subsequently mobilised throughout the country. The IWLM is important for the dramatic impact it had on the Irish public:

the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement (IWLM) burst forth upon a surprised public followed by a mushrooming of women’s groups each campaigning all over the country vigorously against different
areas of injustice. These women aroused hostility, anger, fear and
derision, especially in the corridors of political power, but they suc­
ceeded in bringing about many badly-needed reforms and radically
improving conditions for women. For many the early years of the
70s seemed to herald a new dawn. (Fennell and Arnold, 1987: 7)

The original group of activists in the IWLM were considered extremely
radical and aroused widespread interest. In particular, their methods of
protest were highly controversial:

A small group of women succeeded, in a remarkably short space
of time, in attacking the sacred cows of social and political life in
Ireland. They caught the attention of the media as no group of Irish
women had ever done before shocking, controversial, galvanising
substantial numbers of women to take action – or to publicly voice
their support – on a whole range of new issues. (Smyth, 1993: 251)

Who were the IWLM?

The distinctive character of the IWLM was related to the particular
social composition of the founding group and the strategies employed.
The group had no direct structural links with the historical women’s
movement in Ireland, or indeed with the parallel ad hoc committee on
women’s rights:

Until comparatively recently I believed that the... 24 members of
that group... were the women’s movement of Ireland. Well no they
weren’t – because recently I was asked to research the forthcoming
edition of the Field Day anthology which writes Irish women into
history. I discovered that three years before we came on the scene a
group of Irish women had got together to pressure the Fianna Fáil
government into a First Commission on the Status of Women...
(June Levine, address to WERRC Conference, May 1995)

The IWLM was clearly more attuned to the radical style of activism,
already mobilising internationally in new social movements. Radical
feminist organising in America had an influence because some of the
founding members were there when second-wave feminism emerged:

I was a founder member ... none of us knew what we were at! It was a
time when we were taking a lot of our political ideas from America – the