4

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

L. Connolly, *The Irish Women’s Movement* 
© Linda Connolly 2002
areas of injustice. These women aroused hostility, anger, fear and derision, especially in the corridors of political power, but they succeeded 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