

Women in the North: their long struggle for freedom

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In the 19th and early 20th century, women in the North East of the island of Ireland were crucial to that region becoming ‘the linen capital of the world’. Indeed, it was the close ties of industry in the North East to the British Empire that provided the economic basis for partition when the rest of the island won its independence in 1921.

Partition brought the ‘carnival of reaction’ that James Connolly had feared and women on both sides of the border suffered from the existence of both reactionary states. This article looks at some of the ways in which the Northern Ireland state has been, and continues to be, a disaster for women’s rights.

From the inception of the state, women in Northern Ireland have lagged behind their sisters in Britain when it came to rights and wage levels. Despite the reliance of the linen mills on female labour, and despite the dominance of Protestant religions, the ideological attitudes towards women in the North was little different to that in the Catholic South of the country. Neither the mills, nor working class families, could survive without women’s employment – yet women’s primary role was seen as the home and their wages reflected that.

This insistence that a woman’s place is in the home, while at the same time needing women workers to keep the economy going, is illustrated clearly by the saga of state-funded day nurseries during and after the Second World War. The war effort needed women in munitions and armament factories, at the same time as demand for linen rocketed. In Britain, this demand for female labour led to the provision of state-funded day nurseries from 1939 onwards. The Unionist government resisted setting up nurseries to cater for working mothers in the Six Counties, although it did establish some childcare facilities to help care for children who were evacuated from

Belfast following the heavy bombing of the city in 1941.

By 1943, the Unionist government was under a lot of pressure: it was seen as not doing its bit for the war effort, it lost three local by-elections and women workers were in huge, and growing, demand in the munitions, aircraft and linen industries. It finally relented and agreed to set up a series of nurseries across Belfast, catering at their height for about 500 children. The nurseries opened from 7.00am to 6.30pm and children were provided with three meals a day, which led to a huge improvement in their physical health.

When the war ended, most of the wartime nurseries in Britain closed but in Northern Ireland they stayed open and more were added because there was a boom in demand for linen and women workers’ skills were required more than ever. Four Belfast mills actually opened their own state-funded workplace nurseries in the years after the war (McShane, 1987). However, this embrace of nursery provision lasted only as long as the boom in demand and, once this declined in the early 1950s, the voices against state provision of child care were heard again until, by 1955, all the nurseries closed.

As today in relation to abortion and LGBTQ rights, in the years after the war, the Catholic bishops and Unionist politicians united to condemn the continued provision of day nurseries. McShane (1987) details the Lenten pastorals and sermons at confirmations from 1945 onwards where the Bishops said that the nurseries destroyed the ‘natural’ and ‘divinely ordained’ traditional family. One bishop argued that the development of state welfare services were “the infiltration of bureaucratic state control into family life...the result of a pagan concept of society”. What the bishops were saying was very similar to Unionists like Lord Glentoran who attacked nurseries in a Stormont debate “The proper place for a

child aged two to five years, or two to ten is in his own home.... We must have an ideal.... that the man should be able to support his wife and family”.

But even though the nurseries had closed, the idea of a ‘family wage’ which a household could survive on was an ideal few families could achieve and women had little choice but to continue to work outside the home. With the advent of the welfare state, more jobs opened up for women – particularly in the NHS and in the expanding education system. For the first time, working class girls were able to access secondary education and go to University. However, in the North, getting a University degree didn’t guarantee a decent job if you were a Catholic. Discrimination against Catholics brought the civil rights movement in 1968, a movement in which women especially women workers played an important role.

Civil Rights

Looking back on the civil rights movement 50 years later, seeing thousands of women chanting “one man, one vote”, it’s clear that the movement was gender blind. But the chair of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was Betty Sinclair, while in Derry, Bridget Bond and Cathy Harkin were very much part of the leadership of the movement. However, both nationally and internationally, mention NI civil rights and, on the Left at any rate, it is a woman’s name – Bernadette Devlin – that will spring quickest into the conversation. Bernadette Devlin (now McAliskey) was the spokesperson of the Left, representing the masses of people who took to the streets for civil rights and speaking especially for the working class. She recalls no awareness, until she became a mother, of being made to feel in any way inferior because of her gender. It was not that she was not aware of the growing women’s liberation movement in the United States. Immediately after the 1969 Battle of the Bogside, she travelled to the United States. There, she met women involved in the women’s liberation movement. But, she says “I had two basic educations there: that all the white people I met were richer than anybody I knew here and that my comfort level in terms of culture, class, conversation was with people who worked *for* them. So, I found myself sitting in kitchens and pantries and laundries in Irish-American houses talking with the black woman who reared their children. And the women in the feminist movement all had a woman who ‘did’. And you know, when you are invited to somebody’s house to eat,

you would normally get up and help to wash the dishes. And they would say, ‘no, leave that. I have a woman who does that.’ And that woman would, inevitably, not be white. And I was asked a question at a press conference: do you think that you are oppressed as a woman. And my honest answer? I said ‘hold on a minute; all my life I have been aware of my own class and my own nationality and my own religion. And I consider myself to be oppressed on all three counts, but I don’t have the time or the space, just yet, to even countenance any more oppression. If I *am* oppressed as a woman, please don’t tell me about it!’ And that was true.”

Bernadette Devlin’s *The Price of My Soul* is the only contemporaneous account of the early days of the civil rights movement. In it, again and again, she draws a picture of a movement where women stood shoulder to shoulder to men, without any indication of a difference being made, within the movement, between them. The state, of course, did. On page 136 of *The Price of My Soul*, she describes a confrontation with the police during the Burntollet march in January 1969. At a fork in the road outside Dungiven, the police were blocking the planned route and the marchers were determined not to be re-routed. Bernadette was one of three women in the front line of the marchers who, linked arm-in-arm, were going to push their way through the police who they outnumbered almost ten to one. One of the ‘big burly policemen’ said ‘Ah now, girls, this is no place for you. Move you into the back line for we don’t want to fight girls’. Despite her reassurances that they were not going to fight at all, this policeman broke the cordon saying ‘I’m not fighting women’.

The material gains made for working class people in the North as a result of the Civil Rights Movement had a huge impact on women’s lives. For the women, it was improvements in housing that mattered most. After all, they were the ones who had to try to look after children in the cramped conditions in which most Catholic and Protestant working-class families were forced to live. It was women who had to try to bathe children in a tin bath in the kitchen-living room that was also someone’s bedroom at night. It was women who had to heat the water, wash the family’s clothes and then rinse them in freezing water before putting them through a mangle and try to dry them somehow in the dreary damp of a Derry winter. It was women who had to try to cook and keep a hygienic living space within crammed, clammy quarters. By the

time internment was introduced in August 1971, thousands of houses had been built in Derry and across the North, all of them with bathrooms – transforming the lives of all, but especially the lives of women.

Perhaps the biggest gain that the CRM brought for women was that it broke the logjam of decades of conservatism bred by unquestioning adherence to the Churches, to their elders and ‘betters’ – and to men, especially their husbands. The surge of freedom felt by thousands of women when they downed tools and took to the streets, ignoring the threats of factory managers to sack them, happy in the knowledge that “if we all went out, they couldn’t sack us all” spread to other parts of their lives as well. When parents told them that they weren’t allowed to do this or that, they discovered that the 60s may have taken their time coming to Ireland but they had arrived! This civil rights activist interviewed in 2008 talked about how much being on the marches and at the barricades changed women’s attitudes:

There was a whole generation that just rose and changed in a couple of years. And the men had to change their views. It was amazing how many women, even women of my age, who were afraid to go against their husbands and go out and do things. But that didn’t last... civil rights in Derry definitely opened the floodgates for younger women... I say civil rights did away with slavery for women in this country. (quoted in Horgan, 2009)

Of course while, generally speaking, women may have gained a confidence in the course of the struggle that helped some to develop new kinds of more equal personal relationships, this didn’t apply to all. For many women, their private lives remained dominated by gender roles that saw them continuing to carry the ‘double burden’ of work inside and outside the home. And for some, the reality of domestic violence, physical and sexual, gave the lie to the talk of freedom on the streets, just as it continues to do today.

The Troubles

While men were more likely to die or be imprisoned in the course of the Troubles, women faced a particular burden as those expected to hold the family – and community – together while the men ‘took care’ of politics. Although women were killed and served hundreds of years in prison, talking to women who lived through the worst of the Troubles, their main memory is of fear and anxiety for their sons, their husbands, their brothers or

fathers. They worried that their sons or husbands would “get involved” in the struggle; they went up and down the road to the prisons, scrimped and saved to buy books and other treats for those inside; and their hearts broke as they buried their sons, brothers, husbands.

Today, there are few women who think that what we live with in the North today is adequate compensation for the deaths and the years in prison. Throughout the Troubles, the NI Women’s Rights Movement tried to keep women’s issues on the table, highlighting the particularly vicious nature of some of the domestic violence in what one writer has described as an “armed patriarchy” (Galligan, 2002) and raising the lack of abortion rights in the region. Joan McKiernan and Monica McWilliams’ research in the early 1990s exposed the additional threats to women from husbands or partners who had easy access to guns. We have seen from the Catholic Church how sexual abuse can be perpetrated on an ongoing basis in an organisation which is accountable only to itself. The story of the cover up of the sexual abuse of Mairia Cahill and others by IRA men who were moved around when complaints surfaced, just like priests had been, is only the tip of the iceberg. There are many more stories that are yet to emerge from women still afraid to tell them.

But at least during the Troubles there was hope – the hope that when it all ended there would be a “bright, brand new day” where the suffering would be over and a better society would emerge. Unfortunately, when the peace arrived it was in the form of a ‘peace process’ that ensured that, when the fighting ended, nothing much more was gained than had been won by the civil rights movement before the shooting war began.

The 1998 Belfast (“Good Friday”) Agreement promised to make up to women for at least some of their suffering in the course of the Troubles. The Agreement included a specific affirmation of “the right of women to full and equal political participation.” In fact, women’s rights were not enhanced after 1998. Rather, women in the North have seen their rights being undermined, even bartered, for political expediency. One of the most obvious examples of this has been in relation to abortion rights. Even as the Agreement was being negotiated, the Blair government was assuring the main parties that, if the parties agreed a deal, they would not implement Labour party policy and extend the Abortion Act to the North. Although Mo Mowlam wanted to “help women”

in NI, she said she couldn't because it would "stir up the tribal elders".

This bartering of women's rights was seen again in 2008 when the Labour government suggested amendments to the 1967 Abortion Act could be introduced through the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill. A cross-party group of MPs led by Emily Thornberry, a loyal Labour MP, announced a plan to introduce a motion to extend the Abortion Act to Northern Ireland. Thornberry pulled the motion at the last minute, after the Prime Minister told her it 'would put the Stormont administration at risk'. However, Diane Abbot refused to bow to her party leaders and tabled the motion. When the Bill was debated in October 2008, then Leader of the House, Harriet Harman, used parliamentary manoeuvring to ensure the amendments would not reach debate. The DUP had supported Gordon Brown's plan to introduce 42-day detentions without charge for terror suspects in return for assurances that the 1967 Act would not be extended. Describing the government's actions as 'an egregious example of cheap political advantage', the *Guardian* (22 October 2008) concluded: 'It is bowing, it would seem, to what one blogger calls the Stormont Boys Club.'

The North is next

The landslide vote in the Repeal referendum catapulted abortion rights on the island into the laps of Westminster politicians. The size of the vote meant that the old lie that "no one in Ireland supports abortion rights" could no longer be told. Demands for decriminalisation of abortion in the North and across the UK got traction as "the North is Next" was declared by young pro-choice activists and taken up by politicians rattled by the size of the Repeal vote. Without that result, it is certain we would not have seen most of the front benches of both sides of the House of Commons standing on Mon 4th June to assent to a three-hour emergency debate on abortion rights in Northern Ireland.

This overnight change in attitudes to abortion by some politicians comes after 20 years of seeing abortion rights going backwards in the North. Until the 1998 Belfast Agreement, and particularly until the devolution of powers to the Stormont Assembly in that year, women's reproductive rights in the North were ahead of the South. So, in 2002, when Deirdre Conroy received the tragic news that one of the twins she was carrying had

died and the other had Edwards Syndrome, a condition which usually ends in miscarriage or death shortly after birth, she was able to travel to Belfast and get the termination she sought there. That is because abortions were carried out routinely in hospitals in the North for reasons of foetal impairment generally, not only for fatal conditions. However, she would not be able to get the abortion she needed in Belfast today because women's rights have regressed since the Agreement.

This regression should be blamed on the "chill factor" in relation to abortion which has been encouraged by Northern Ireland's fundamentalist politicians such that the number of legal abortions carried out in the North has dropped from 80-100 each year until 2002 to 15-16 in 2015. The law governing abortion in the North comes from the time before trade unions were legal. The 1861 Offences Against the Person Act criminalises abortion and endorses life imprisonment as the punishment; however the law has been updated somewhat by the 1937 'Bourne judgement' and by a series of court cases in the 1990s. The 'Bourne judgement' refers to the acquittal in England of a doctor who had performed an abortion on a fourteen year-old girl pregnant as a result of multiple rape. The judgement accepted that abortion is legal if continuing the pregnancy would leave the woman 'a mental or physical wreck'. The Bourne judgement, like the judgement in the X case in the South, is notoriously unclear, which is why the 1967 Abortion Act had to be introduced in Britain.

Following a case taken by the Family Planning Association (fpaNI), the Court of Appeal instructed the Department of Health in 2004 to issue guidance and investigate barriers to obtaining legal terminations. In January 2007, Ulster Unionist Michael McGimpsey, then Health Minister in the Assembly's power-sharing Executive, issued guidelines for consultation. These stated that abortion was legal when a woman's mental or physical health is in 'grave' danger of 'serious and permanent damage' due to a pregnancy (DHSSPS 2007).

At the time, Iris Robinson of the Democratic Unionist Party was chair of the Assembly's multi-party Health Committee. In October 2007, Robinson challenged Minister McGimpsey's guidelines by moving:

That this Assembly opposes the introduction of the proposed guidelines on the termination of pregnancy in Northern Ireland; believes that the guidelines are flawed; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety to abandon any attempt to make abortion more widely available in Northern Ireland. (NIA Debate 22 October 2007: 26).

The DUP, Sinn Fein and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) supported the motion. Unsurprisingly, since McGimpsey was its appointee as Health Minister, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) opposed it, but emphasized that this position did not signal support for liberalised abortion access. Alliance had a free vote. Robinson's motion was passed without difficulty. She subsequently wrote to Minister McGimpsey that the Assembly's Health Committee 'fully endorsed' advice from the Association of Catholic Lawyers of Ireland that:

The starting point of the Guidance should have been a clear statement of the illegality of abortion in Northern Ireland: that it is a crime punishable by a maximum of life imprisonment ...The Guidance should then have recalled the central if not sole purpose of this prohibition: the protection of the unborn child...Only when the rule had been clearly stated should the scope of the exception have been considered (Robinson 2008).

In March 2009, guidelines for medical staff were finally issued. These were minimalist statements of when abortion is lawful in Northern Ireland, for example only where 'it is necessary to preserve the life of the woman' or where 'there is a risk of real and serious adverse effect on her physical or mental health, which is either long term or permanent' (DHSSPS 2009: 1.4). The Guidelines reminded medical practitioners that performing an abortion illegally or assisting in such a procedure carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment (ibid.: 1.8) But McGimpsey's guidelines did reflect the law as laid out in the court cases and, as the courts had ruled, provided information on care pathways. For example, it explained what doctors should do if they thought a woman qualified for an NHS abortion because of her physical or mental health. They indicated that if you are a doctor who doesn't want to be involved in abortion, you need to pass the woman onto another doctor. It really seemed that women would have access to abortion in the North under limited circumstances, and that the most difficult cases at least would be looked after in their local hospitals.

Those Guidelines were challenged in court by the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC), leading to the guidelines being withdrawn.

After Assembly elections in May 2011, the Reverend Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party made sure that it

took the Health Ministry. To the delight of anti-abortionists, every Health Minister appointed since then has been a fundamentalist, evangelical Christian. The three DUP Health Ministers from 2011, Edwin Poots, Jim Wells and Simon Hamilton are all associated with the Caleb Foundation, an organisation set up in 2009 to promote law and government in line with biblical thinking - whose associates refer to themselves 'jokingly' as 'The Caleban'. Liam Clarke of the Belfast Telegraph describes the position of Caleb's supporters thus: '[W]here the Taliban is pushing for an ultra hardline version of Sharia law based on its own reading of the Koran, Caleb wants to see a Bible-based society with every law measured against scripture.' (Clarke, 2012)

In April 2013, only after the intervention of the courts, Edwin Poots issued completely new guidelines. The advice to clinicians in the Guidance echoes the language the Association of Catholic Lawyers of Ireland. The opening clause reads:

The aim of the health and social care system must be *protection of both the life of the mother and her unborn child..... Intervention cannot have as its direct purpose the ending of the life of the unborn child* (DHSSPS 2013: 1.1, author's emphasis).

Anyone who has followed the tortuous debate on abortion on this island will know that the final sentence of that clause upholds Roman Catholic teaching that only 'indirect' abortion is permissible; if doctors remove an embryo or foetus in the process of removing a fallopian tube or a uterus then that is not an abortion under Catholic teaching. But removing the embryo or foetus to save a fallopian tube or uterus is a 'direct' abortion and not allowed under Catholic teaching. Thus we have the bizarrely ironic scenario of the Rev Ian Paisley's party ensuring that the very "Rome Rule" which he campaigned against for a lifetime applies in Northern Ireland (Horgan, 2015).

Meanwhile, women in the North have easier access to the abortion pill than do those in the South and the number of women choosing not to travel to England but to self-administer a safe but illegal abortion with the online support of WomenHelp.org or Women on Web was growing year on year until Westminster was forced to allow women from NI access free NHS abortions in England. Many more women now travel from NI for abortion - proving that abortion is very much a class issue, the number of women having (free) abortions in the April to June quarter of 2018 was 66% up on the same quarter

in 2017, when they had to be paid for privately. However, there remain those who cannot travel for a range of reasons – caring responsibilities, illness, abusive partners, lack of legal status – and these women continue to use abortion pills obtained over the internet. Several women have been charged with offences under the 1861 Act for using abortion pills and while suspended sentences means no one has been jailed, a conviction under this law has serious implications for the future job and travel prospects of those involved.

Until the massive vote for Repeal, it seemed as if change was unlikely to come to the North. The main reason for this is not the lack of support for abortion rights: 7 out of 10 people told the 2016 NI Life & Times Survey that they believed abortion should be a matter for medical regulation, not criminal law and 63% said that it's a woman's right to choose. However, the way that Stormont is set up means it is unlikely that any contentious legislation will ever be passed through it. The parties who used to govern at Stormont were unable to agree an Anti-Poverty Strategy; they were unable to agree a Gender Strategy, or a Sexual Orientation one; they have been unable to agree what kind of education should be available at secondary level, or on whether age equality legislation in relation to goods and services should apply to all ages. So it's pretty unlikely that they will ever agree an abortion law – which is why pretty much everyone in the North thinks that Westminster should decriminalise abortion and force them to make a new law....if Stormont ever returns that is.

Life after Birth in Northern Ireland

Having anti-abortion policies does not mean that Northern Ireland is “pro-life” or “pro-child” in its policy approach. Rather, it is “pro-birth”. For example, the North is the only part of the UK not to have a fully-funded childcare strategy. As in the South, childcare is horrendously expensive; it is also scarce. In 2013, there was only one registered childcare place for every six children. In 2014, the cost of a full-time average childcare place in NI was £162 per week – this is 44% of the median net weekly earning, and almost FOUR times the average cost for childcare in OECD countries. For over half of families, the monthly childcare bill exceeded the mortgage/rent payment (Employers for Childcare, 2014).

Now, it is women and their children who are being hardest hit by the cuts to public services and to welfare

benefits (Horgan and Monteith, 2012). Many people have already forgotten the 2015 “Fresh Start” Agreement (FSA) between Sinn Féin and the DUP; but its effects are just beginning to be felt because the FSA agreed a deal to extend ‘welfare reform’ to the North. The cuts to benefits introduced as part of those reforms affect women most – because women manage family poverty, they do most of the worrying when ends simply won't meet. Women with large families are most at risk of being in severe and persistent poverty. Yet the FSA accepted the imposition of a benefit cap on households, regardless of how many children there are in them. That cap on benefits has now been extended to working tax credits. So, in a region where abortion is not available and childcare is scarce and expensive, a woman faced with a third or subsequent pregnancy will know that she will not receive a brass farthing towards the upkeep of that child, should she and her partner lose their jobs or be unable to work due to illness or disability.

This “two child policy” is a huge blow to reproductive rights; the right to choose must include the right to choose to have children, or to continue an unintended pregnancy if that's what the pregnant person decides. But abortion clinics in Britain are already reporting that women say they are ending a pregnancy that they might have welcomed but for this 2-child policy. The Tories say that families should only have children that they can afford to look after – which is what most of us do. But no one can know if they will lose their job in the future, if a relationship will break up etc. It is shameful that political parties like Sinn Fein and the DUP which both claim to be family friendly agreed to give Westminster permission (“legislative consent”) to bring this policy to the North.

Welfare reform has brought Universal Credit (UC) also. This new benefit has proved disastrous in Britain because it leaves claimants with no money at all for 5-8 weeks; it's not that the payments will then be backdated, rather the claimant has to go into debt or starve while waiting for their claim to go through. Emergency payments are available, but they have to be repaid over the first six months of the UC once it has started. Mainly as a result of UC, there are now around £1.5 million people in Britain living *in destitution*, (defined as going without bare essentials like food and shelter) 365,000 of them children (Fitzpatrick et al, 2018). There are some issues with UC that are of particular concern to

women; it replaces six benefits with one single household payment, with this payment going to one member of the household and traditionally this has been the man in a couple household. While it is possible for those in abusive relationships to ask for the payment to be split, many women in an abusive relationships would not be able to do this safely. Even in the most equal household, paying all benefits to one person will represent a loss of independent income for women, as UC now includes Child Benefit which has traditionally gone to the purse rather than the wallet.

Universal Credit is currently being rolled out in the North so, as this goes to print, we haven't yet seen the real impact of benefit cuts here. But researchers from Sheffield University have estimated that the effect will be that an average of £900 a year per household will be lost in NI as a result of welfare reform. Given that some households don't get any benefits, this means that some families, especially those with a disabled person, will lose up to £5,000 a year (Beatty and Fothergill, 2013).

The years of the DUP/SF coalition saw thousands of jobs cut in the public sector – over 3,000 teachers' jobs went with a further c1,500 support jobs in schools; up to 20,000 redundancies were planned in the civil service but after about 7,000 had been cut, the redundancy programme had to stop because there were too few civil servants to fulfil basic, necessary tasks. Health, housing, the environment, all saw redundancies. These job cuts are a big blow to young women studying today in the hope of getting a decent job in the future. Women make up 65 per cent of the public sector workforce, which provides the best quality work for women; the gender pay gap for full time employees is half that in the private sector. Family-friendly policies are more available in the public sector. Even if jobs become available in the private sector for women, it is unlikely they will match the pay and conditions of the jobs lost. This would result in a widening of the overall gender pay gap and worsening levels of female poverty.

Women, work & poverty in Northern Ireland

When it comes to work and poverty, women in the North are little different to those in the South. Despite the lack of abortion rights in the region, the fertility rate has not reached replacement level since 1991 - 2.1 children per woman. The average age of first time mothers in 2014 was 28.2 years, compared with 24.1 in 1984.

The number of births to teenage mothers has more than halved over the last 15 years, from 1,791 births in 1999 to a record low of 839 in 2014. Much of this reduction has been due to the easier availability of the morning-after pill which became available over the counter in 2001. In 2014, 40 percent of all births were outside of marriage; in Belfast and Derry cities, 60 percent of births were outside marriage.

Women are considerably more likely to be in paid employment now than ten years ago. In 2014, the economic activity rate for men aged 16-64 was 79.4 percent, while for women it was 67.2%. This gender gap has almost halved since 2004, when it was 20.6 percentage points. However, just under half of female jobs were part-time (49.7%) in 2014, compared to 21% of males. While most men working part-time say they would prefer to work more hours, most women working part-time do not. Women's employment patterns are influenced by the number of children that they have and the age of the children. In 2008, seventy three percent of women with no children were in paid work compared to 64% for women with two children. Women with children under 10 years old were less likely to be in paid work than those with children in the 11-15 age group, while women who were lone parents were much less likely than women in two parent families to work outside the home (Gray and Horgan, 2009).

Income inequality is even sharper in Northern Ireland than in the Republic. For example, in 2011/12, households in the top 20% of the income distribution had a weekly income 3.8 times higher than those households in the bottom fifth of the income distribution; while the bottom 53.4% of incomes were under £20,000 a year, the top 1.1% of incomes were over £100,000 a year and the top 0.3% over £200,000 a year. Barclays Bank Wealth Report says that the number of millionaires in Northern Ireland increased by 40% from 2010 – 2015.

As in the Republic, the only families who can avoid living in poverty are those where there are two adults in paid work. Some 56% of lone parents are living in the private rented sector where rents far exceed levels of Housing Benefit (Gray et al, 2009). Figures published in 2011 show just one in seven lone parents in Northern Ireland not in employment wants paid work, a smaller proportion than in any of the regions of Great Britain. Lack of infrastructure, such as childcare and public

transport, as well as the quality of work available may be factors contributing to this (Hinds, 2011). Even when lone parents are in full-time work they have twice the rate of poverty of couple families, thus family poverty is overwhelmingly female poverty (Davies, 2012).

Like the South, Northern Ireland has suffered swinging cuts to public services and to the community and voluntary sector since 2007. Women and children have suffered disproportionately from the cuts; the community women's sector has all but disappeared as funding has been withdrawn. The range of services provided by women's groups and organisations is extensive and include trauma counselling, support for those affected by domestic and sexual abuse, mental and physical health, education, training and employability, childcare, early years, after school and family support, diversity, health promotion programmes. Services on which women rely to allow them to work, such as the childcare provided by Gingerbread for lone parents, have closed. Even the larger, regional agencies have seen their budgets cut again and again. Because many groups that deliver services to women had smaller pots of funding provided by several different government departments, the cumulative effects of cuts by every department has seen many women's groups forced to close (WRDA, 2015).

It is hard to predict what the precise impact of all these cuts will be on society in general in the North. We can say for sure that community women's groups contribute to the mental well-being of disadvantaged women, a vital role in a society which has very high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and extraordinarily high rates of anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medication (Ferry et al, 2008; NIAO, 2014).

A report for the Commission for Victims and Survivors found that four out of ten people in the region have suffered Post Traumatic Stress Disorder because of the conflict. PTSD exacerbates all forms of mental ill-health. For women who are trying to manage poverty on a day-to-day basis, such daily stress exacerbates both their PTSD and other illnesses. Yet many of those victims of the conflict, now struggling with mental illness, are likely to lose up to £5,000 a year as a result of welfare reform. This is because Personal Independence Payment, which is replacing Disability Living Allowance, is designed to cut by one fifth the numbers who receive this benefit. Modelling by the Stormont Department that oversees welfare reform suggests that a quar-

ter of those currently receiving DLA will not receive PIP while a further third will see their benefit reduced, with those receiving DLA for reasons of mental ill-health most likely to be cut.

Pressure from victims did lead the Stormont administration to establish an Historical Abuse Inquiry to "examine if the institutions or the state failed in their duties towards children under 18 in their residential care and if failings were systemic". However, the Inquiry does not include examination of the abuse suffered by women of 18 and over in the Magdalene Laundries or Mother and Baby Homes – these institutions operated on both sides of the border and an estimated 30,000 women were confined in them, run ostensibly to house what were termed "fallen women". The Inquiry concluded that survivors should be compensated by the state but the absence of a government in Stormont, and the refusal of Westminster to do anything of which the DUP disapproves, means that survivors continue to hunger for justice.

Conclusion

This short survey of women in the Northern state demonstrates how that state has failed women; almost 100 years after the state was established, it is past time that the carnival of reaction is closed down. The conditions for a sweeping away of the border have never been better. In 2018 we had a demonstration of how that might happen. The mass pro-choice movement that has been building across the island since the death of Savita Halappanavar in 2012 responded to the verdict in the Belfast rape trial by taking to the streets. Thousands of people came out in Dublin, Cork, Galway although several of the issues they were protesting about don't apply in the South. As Eamonn McCann (2018) pointed out in Hot Press "one of the most striking assertions of Irish unity since partition came in the last few days of March when tens of thousands stormed the streets North and South shouting out together for change across the island..... These were not demonstration for Irish unity. They were demonstration of Irish unity". When the referendum to repeal the 8th was called, activists from the North travelled South to canvass, some of those living near the border on a nightly basis; for those further from the border, buses from Belfast travelled to Dundalk, Drogheda, Cavan and Monaghan every weekend.

When the Repeal votes were counted it was a land-

slide in favour of women's rights and quickly we saw politicians on both sides of the border change their attitudes to abortion rights. When the 40,000 strong March for Choice hit the streets in Sept 2017, not a single one of the larger parties anywhere on the island supported abortion rights. Less than a year later, most of them are claiming they "trust women".

This accumulation of small changes in society suddenly becoming massive, qualitative changes is not unheard of. In July of 1989, no one would have imagined that the Berlin Wall would soon be down; yet three months later, people power toppled it – without a border poll, without negotiations. Getting rid of partition and building a socialist Ireland is vital if women's rights are to be secured North or South. Only people power across the island can bring that about.

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