



**THE IMPACT OF
PARTITION ON
WOMEN IN THE NORTH**

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To understand the impact of partition on women in the North, we have to remember that, until 1921, the island of Ireland was not partitioned. Attitudes to women, the family, and sexuality had been hugely impacted by the trauma of the Famine and were similar across the island. Gone were the more traditional approaches to family life and sexual mores, over which the churches had had little control.

Until the Great Famine of 1845–1851 the custom in Ireland, among all but the large farmer class, was to divide the land between all the sons in a family as they married. This was the pattern in Ulster as well as the rest of the island; it could be done at any time, so people were able to get married very young. Early marriage meant many children and, from the end of the seventeenth century, a rapid rise in population. This rise was boosted by the very low rate of infant mortality which, as a result of widespread breastfeeding and the nutritional value of the potato, was below 10 percent—half that of most parts of Europe.¹ So while the population was around 1.5 million in 1673, it had risen 4 million by the 1780s over 8 million.²

At this time, marriage for the majority was based on love and on the skills which each partner brought to the family—the man provided land and farming skills to grow the staple crop of potatoes, and the woman brought weaving and spinning skills which provided extra money to buy tea, sugar, and whatever else was needed by the household. Her input to the agricultural

work of the family was also important. Before the famine, women made an essential contribution to the family economy. As late as 1841, women accounted for more than half of the non-agricultural workforce. Most of their economic independence was based on spinning wool, cotton, and linen. But the growth of factory competition undermined this—between 1841 and 1851 the number of spinners fell by some 75 percent. Only in the Belfast region, where linen became a factory industry, did this work survive the combination of the Famine and the Industrial Revolution.

The economic and social changes that coincided with the Famine forced the workers and rural poor of Ireland to drastically alter the form of their families, as it became clear that if a repeat of the ‘Great Calamity’ was to be avoided, the custom of dividing the land between all the sons in a family would have to be discontinued and the land passed on to one son only. Further, the number of children born to families would have to be limited. Since there was no access to reliable contraception, strict regulation of sexuality became necessary, and the era of late marriages and ‘permanent celibacy’ began.³

The Carnival of Reaction

Connolly had predicted that partition would bring a ‘carnival of reaction’ North and South. From women’s point of view, this was all too true. In the South, divorce was made illegal and even information about contraception was banned. The chair of the Censorship of Films and Publications Committee was given to clerics, and the Church’s grip on education and the hospitals was confirmed. In 1935, Section 16 of the Conditions of Employment Act allowed the minister for industry and commerce to prohibit the employment of women workers in industry. It gave unlimited power, with no right of appeal, to the minister and could have brought a blanket ban on women workers if the politicians so decreed.⁴

Women in the North were needed to work in the linen and textile industry and did not suffer the same level of exclusion from the workforce as women in the South. Nonetheless North and South, the sectarian, indeed confessional, nature of both states meant a heavy hand of sexual repression and severely limited options for women.

In 1937, the South's new constitution gave a special place to the Church and also to women. The special place for the Church was at the head of Irish society. The special place for women was in the home. What this meant was that women were expected to work or have a life outside the home only while waiting to get married. It was a life of drudgery, isolation, and grinding poverty for most working-class women. Not only were they busy keeping house and rearing children, most had little choice but to find some kind of work to do in the home to supplement the family income. Sewing, knitting, washing, ironing, and housecleaning for better-off women were the only ways they could bring in money to make ends meet.

Although the right of women to work was not restricted by legislation in the North, the 'carnival of reaction' ensured that working-class women could not presume that they would benefit from the changes won by their counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom. Every aspect of the welfare state that workers won in the years after the Second World War was resisted by the Unionist government in Stormont and Catholic bishops alike. The bishops issued pastorals arguing that the state has a duty to secure a family wage, but that the development of state welfare systems was 'the infiltration of bureaucratic state control into family life...the result of a pagan concept of society'⁵. For example, universal free secondary education, easier divorce, and free contraception were introduced in the North several years after Britain and only when Stormont could no longer resist.⁶

The North was not immune to the ideology that said a woman's place is in the home, even while women were a vital part of the workforce. In Britain, the years of WWII saw the opening up of the workplace to women, and the 1950s saw a steady growth in the numbers of married women working.⁷ Although the North was part of the UK and also at war, there was great resistance to women taking up 'men's jobs', and Stormont refused to provide the kind of social services—like nurseries, time off for shopping, and state-run restaurants—which since 1939 had made it much easier for married women in Britain to work.

It was 1943 before Stormont was pressured into opening nurseries in Belfast, and then only when the demand for women workers in the munitions, aircraft, and linen industries had become irresistible.

While women did leave the workforce in Britain in the immediate aftermath of the war, they soon rejoined it—although they were not generally welcomed in the heavy industries where they had worked in the war years. In the North, it looked for a while as if the needs of industry would override the conservatism of the *Kinder, Kirche, Kuche* Stormont government. While a large proportion of wartime nurseries were closed in Britain after 1945, in Northern Ireland the nurseries actually expanded. A post-war boom in the linen industry meant that a high demand for women workers remained. However, by 1950 the linen boom had begun to wane, and it was over by 1955. As demand for women workers slackened, the nurseries were no longer needed to attract them. Of thirteen nurseries in Belfast in 1950, only two were not closed by 1955, and they remained open as nursery schools only. Unionist MP Lord Glentoran explained in a Stormont debate forced by two independent women MPs, members for Queen's University, why the nurseries had to go:

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.⁸

Of course, with wages much lower than elsewhere in the UK, few men earned enough to support a family and working-class women had no choice but to work anyway.

Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes

While working-class women in the North had more opportunities for employment, they did not escape the sexual repression that had been imposed on the island. While the 'Republic of Shame' has been steadily exposed since the 1990s,⁹ it is only in recent

years that the voices of the victims and survivors of historical abuse in orphanages, Magdalene laundries, and Mother and Baby Homes in the North have been heard. The report into Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene laundries in Northern Ireland, commissioned by the interdepartmental working group established by the NI Executive in 2016, was published in January 2021, just a few weeks after the report of the Mother and Baby Home Commission in the South. Even the most cursory reading of the two reports shows how similar the treatment of women and girls who were pregnant outside of marriage was on both sides of the border. The stories in both reports of the mistreatment and abuse of the women and girls are sadly similar. The only difference is that the Northern report includes details about a number of Protestant as well as Catholic Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene laundries. The main Protestant Mother and Baby Home was Thorndale House, run by the Salvation Army. It is clear from the report, and from the subsequent BBC Spotlight programme, that ‘the Salvation Army treated the girls the same way as the nuns did, there was no difference’.¹⁰

What one of the women quoted in the report said sounds very like what has been said about some of the orders of nuns:

I wanted to let people know that the Salvation Army is not the organisation that it purports to be. That it was, its members then, and I don’t know anything about them now, that its members then were not, they were not Christian, they were not caring, they were in no way sympathetic, they were too, with the exception of possibly one girl, they were sadistic and horrible. There were rules and regulations that didn’t need to be. And they were just made as a punishment for us. And to be forced to carry your baby and just hand her over and just walk away was a terribly, terribly hard thing...¹¹

There was as much state involvement in the homes in the North as in the South, with women and girls

convicted of petty theft or vagrancy sent by the courts to Thorndale or to Magdalene laundries. In fact, the report estimated that state welfare authorities were involved with some 23 percent of entrants to Mother and Baby Homes.

The Troubles brought new examples of the usefulness of the Homes/laundries for the Northern state. Viewed as a place of safety by statutory and other agencies, a number of girls and women deemed to be in a crisis situation arising from the Troubles were sent to St Mary’s Laundry, Derry, run by Good Shepherd nuns. In 1972, an 18-year-old was brought to the Good Shepherd Convent by the police, who had rescued her from being tarred and feathered; why the victim of such rough justice should be incarcerated was not considered. In 1973, another young woman, this time from a Protestant background, arrived at the convent accompanied by a Protestant clergyman. She had a Catholic boyfriend and the UDA had threatened her. In 1976, a 16-year-old was placed in the Derry Laundry by her Parish Priest ‘because an army officer had complained to her mother that she had been frequenting an army base’. Police dropping off women or girls or attending a call-out at the Good Shepherd Convent needed a military escort, and it was widely rumoured in the city that the laundry’s van had been adapted to allow British soldiers to travel in it into ‘no go’ areas for surveillance purposes.¹²

What is different, of course, about the Northern report is that it is part of the United Kingdom. In fact, one would assume that after the setting up of the welfare state in 1948, what happened in the Mother and Baby Homes in the North would be very different to what happened in the South. The reality, however, is that so much of it is the same.

One of the explanations we have heard from apologists for the Catholic Church is based on the level of devotion to the Catholic Church, and to the purity promoted by the Virgin Mary. The idea is promoted that it is this devotion that led to families

putting their daughters into a Mother and Baby Home.

What the Northern report shows is that the collaboration between church and state had nothing to do with devotion and everything to do with the control of women. One of the points made in the report gives the lie to the idea that the homes survived into the '60s, '70s, and '80s because that's how society worked then. The report records that only one in four unmarried pregnancies ended up in Mother and Baby Homes, and these tended to be from the middle class and 'aspiring' working-class families. It seems it was the concern of such families to hide what they saw as the shame and loss of respectability brought about by pregnancy outside of wedlock that led to most of the admissions to the Mother and Baby Homes.

At a time when cross-border contact was denounced, babies of every religion seemed to be trafficked across the border without interference from either state. From 1950, adoption legislation in the North allowed adoption abroad but only under specified circumstances, e.g., with a licence from the court. The report found evidence of babies born to mothers in one of the Mother and Baby Homes being adopted by families in the South, in Britain, and in the USA. However, despite finding that some 500 babies had been adopted outside the six counties, the report found little evidence that these adoptions complied with legislation. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that many of these adoptions were illegal.

Some of the babies who were brought to the South had been given false birth certificates and had their identities destroyed, with their adoptive parents being named on their birth certificates. It is important to note that while the majority of these babies were from Catholic families, not all were. The report identifies a number of babies born in Thorndale who crossed the border into the Irish Free State. The majority travelled with their birth mothers, suggesting the mothers came over the border to give birth and then returned. In some cases, babies were taken over the border with

women who are named but whose connection to the child is not explained. The report says it is 'unclear as to whether they were birth mothers travelling back home or the babies were being moved by a social worker or a foster parent'. Babies were also sent to the Bethany Home in Blackhall Place, Dublin, a Mother and Baby Home with links to the Church of Ireland.¹³

As in the South, only the trade unions spoke up for the rights of women in the laundries. Researchers found good records of what the laundry industry was like during WW2. By 1942, laundries in the North employed 3,181 and had an annual turnover of £700,000 (equivalent to about £27.5m today). The report details a meeting to discuss the wartime organisation of the industry where a representative of the National Union of General Municipal Workers asked 'whether Convent laundry wages were governed by Trade Board Regulations'. If so, he continued, 'such laundries should be asked to observe them'. He was told that 'the kind of labour employed in such laundries was necessarily exclusive and specialised', but he was promised that the matter would be referred to the Ministry of Labour. The report noted that 'there is no record that it ever received any consideration at that point or any other time by government officials at Stormont.'¹⁴

Reproductive rights

It has been suggested that the law on abortion in NI is now one of the most progressive in Europe. Undoubtedly, we have a combination of intransigent religious-fundamentalist politicians and a militant women's movement to thank for that.

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, by 2013, she would not have been able to get the abortion she needed in Belfast because women's rights had regressed since the agreement. This regression was due to the 'chill factor' in relation to abortion which had been encouraged by North's fundamentalist politicians such that the number of legal abortions carried out in the North dropped from 80-100 per year in early 2000s to 30-40 in 2012 and just twelve in 2017.

From 2001 to 2016, the Family Planning Association (FPANI) was back and forth to the High Court in Belfast trying to get the courts to force the Department of Health to issue guidance clarifying when abortion is legal in Northern Ireland (NI). In 2004, the Court of Appeal instructed the department to issue such 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 is legal when a woman's mental or physical health is in 'grave' danger of 'serious and permanent damage' due to a pregnancy.

At the time, the DUP's Iris Robinson was chair of the assembly's multi-party Health Committee. In October 2007, Robinson challenged Minister McGimpsey's guidelines by moving a motion opposing the proposed guidelines and calling on McGimpsey 'to abandon any attempt to make abortion more widely available in Northern Ireland'. The DUP, Sinn Féin, and the SDLP supported the motion. Unsurprisingly, since McGimpsey was its appointee as health minister, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) opposed it, but they 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, a purpose which has informed the law against abortion for over 700 years. Only when the rule had been clearly stated should the scope of the exception have been considered.¹⁵

This move from Robinson was the start of over ten years of a 'holy alliance'¹⁶ of Catholic and Protestant fundamentalists determined to ensure that there would be no progress on abortion rights in the North. After assembly elections in May 2011, the DUP made sure that it took the Health Ministry. To the delight of anti-abortionists, every health minister appointed from then until January 2020, when Robin Swann of the UUP took the position, has been a fundamentalist, evangelical Christian. The three DUP Health Ministers from 2011 until the collapse of the assembly in 2016—Edwin Poots, Jim Wells, and Simon Hamilton—are all associated with the Caleb Foundation. Caleb is 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 in the *Belfast Telegraph* described the position of Caleb's supporters thus: 'Where 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.'¹⁷

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 used in their response ('Dedicated to God and his Holy Mother') to the 2010 consultation. 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*. The objective of interventions administered to a pregnant woman must be to save the mother's life or

protect against real and serious long-term or permanent injury to her health. *Intervention cannot have as its direct purpose the ending of the life of the unborn child*¹⁸ (my emphasis).

Anyone who has followed the tortuous debate on abortion in the Republic 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.¹⁹

The Poots guidelines were obviously meant to scare doctors away from providing abortions to those who need them. Just in case the doctors were not frightened enough, in early 2013 the attorney general John Larkin sent a circular advising obstetricians and gynaecologists to ensure they were working within the law and that failure to do so put them at risk of prosecution and imprisonment. Larkin was the leader of the Catholic-fundamentalist wing of the ‘holy alliance’. On a radio panel in 2008, before he was attorney general, he was asked whether abortion would sometimes be justified in the case of foetal abnormality. He replied: ‘If one is prepared to contemplate the destruction of a highly disabled, unborn child in the womb, one should also be prepared to contemplate, I think, putting a bullet in the back of the head of the child two days after it’s born.’²⁰

Later in 2013, there was a high-profile case of a woman (Sarah Ewart) who had received the tragic news that the much-wanted baby she was expecting did not have a brain (anecephaly) and would die at birth. Having sought legal advice, her medical team were told they could not legally provide abortion for FFA in Northern Ireland. Her outraged mother contacted the BBC and a news team accompanied Sarah and her husband to England to end the pregnancy.

How had women’s rights in Northern Ireland, part of the ‘United Kingdom’, come to such a pass? The history of the North is littered with the absence of civil and political rights being ignored by Westminster, and so it was with women’s rights. It was not unusual for social legislation passed in Westminster to be applied to NI some years after Scotland, England, and Wales. But in 1972, the Stormont Parliament was prorogued due to its mishandling of the mass civil rights movement. With Stormont down, the NI Abortion Law Reform Association (NIALRA) approached Merlyn Rees, the Labour Party spokesperson, who told him, ‘Matters of this kind, important as they are of themselves must take second place at the moment to the major problem of bringing peace to Ulster’. William Whitelaw, who was the Northern Ireland secretary at the time, simply noted that ‘this does not seem an opportune time to raise this subject’.²¹ This was to be the approach taken by the British government right up until the abortion referendum in the Republic in 2018.

What this tells us is that Margaret Thatcher’s famous remark that Northern Ireland is ‘as British as Finchley’ was never taken seriously by politicians in England. Northern Ireland was always seen as a temporary state which was essentially Irish and needed to be kept in line with what was happening on the rest of the island when it came to controversial matters like abortion and gay rights. Again and again through the 1980s and into the 1990s, British secretaries of state said this was ‘not the right time’ to give women in Northern Ireland the same rights as their sisters in England, Scotland, and Wales. In 1995, the FPANI started to campaign for a commission of inquiry into the need for abortion in Northern Ireland. The Tory secretary of state Patrick Mayhew called a meeting of ministers and senior civil servants in the Northern Ireland Office, where all agreed that there ‘was benefit in keeping the overall political temperature in Northern Ireland as low as possible’ and a decision was better deferred until times might be ‘somewhat cooler’. The one female Minister present wondered aloud if ‘in following this analysis the time would ever be right to make a change’.²²

In 1997, when New Labour came to power, there was real hope that the Abortion Act would finally be extended to NI. After all, both the new PM Tony Blair and the new secretary of state for Northern Ireland Mo Mowlam had voted in opposition to extend the Act to NI. It turned out this was wishful thinking. Mo Mowlam adopted the same position as her predecessors—that this was ‘not the right time’. She feared, as she put it, ‘stirring up the tribal elders’. Some members of the Women’s Coalition later alleged that, in order to encourage the parties to sign up to the Good Friday Agreement, a promise had been made *not* to extend the act.

When the opportunity to extend the act came about in Westminster in 2008, it turned out the rights of women in NI had been sold out again—this time to the DUP in return for that party’s support for Gordon Brown’s proposals to detain terrorist suspects for up to forty-two days. The parliamentary manoeuvres organised by the leader of the house Harriet Harman were blasted in an editorial in the *Guardian* newspaper:

It has long been rumoured that they [the DUP] were promised there would be no changes to abortion law affecting Northern Ireland, an egregious example of cheap political advantage which ignores the government’s commitment to promoting reproductive rights and maternal health around the world. It is bowing, it would seem, to what one blogger calls the Stormont Boys Club.²³

The struggle for decriminalisation of abortion

Abortion pills were a game changer for women on the island of Ireland. They allowed pregnant people to cause their own abortions and changed the campaigning of pro-choice activists in the North. Women on Web was established in 2006. In late 2008, after the Westminster debacle, a BBC Spotlight programme revealed that police and doctors were

concerned that women were accessing pills on the internet and self-managing abortions in their own homes. In 2012, the World Health Organisation published a guidance document saying that self-management of abortion using Mifepristone and Misoprostol (a.k.a. abortion pills) was perfectly safe up to the ninth week of pregnancy.²⁴ From that time on, pro-choice campaigners promoted the use of the pills as an alternative to expensive and disruptive travel. The extension of the Abortion Act came to be seen as no longer relevant, and the demand for decriminalisation of abortion became the central demand of the pro-choice movement in the North.

Part of the advantage of dropping the call to extend the 1967 act was that it exposed the hypocrisy of Sinn Féin representatives, who, when asked about their position on abortion, would say that they were ‘against the extension of the 1967 Abortion Act’, without ever explaining what they *did* favour. That quote, that they are ‘against the extension of the 1967 Abortion Act’, was the republican version of the British government’s ‘Now is not the time’. Either way, women were left in a situation where those who could afford, and were able, to travel could get an abortion in England, and those who didn’t have the money or the childcare or the information had to continue unwanted pregnancies.

Abortion pills meant that the idea that NI was ‘abortion free’ could be challenged. In 2013, Paul Givan (DUP) and Alban Maginnis (SDLP) brought a proposal to Stormont to allow abortions only on NHS premises—a move designed to close the Marie Stopes clinic that had been providing a small number of abortions in line with the law. Within forty-eight hours an open letter was signed by over one hundred people, mainly women, declaring that hundreds of abortions take place outside NHS premises each year. The signatories admitted to breaking the law by either using the pills themselves or helping others to get them. The letter succeeded and the proposal was defeated when Sinn Féin used the petition of concern to block it.

While in the Republic of Ireland authorities turned a blind eye to the practice of self-managed abortions,

the state in the North made what turned out to be a big mistake. It adopted a more punitive approach and started to prosecute those found to have used abortion pills. In 2015, a mother was charged with obtaining pills for her fifteen-year-old daughter, and in January 2016 a twenty-one-year-old pleaded guilty to procuring an abortion using pills. She received a suspended prison sentence. That same year, a couple accepted a police caution—which means admitting one has committed an offence; that offence remains on one’s record for at least six years. On International Women’s Day in March 2017, two activists’ homes were raided by police looking for abortion pills. That same month, fifteen to twenty women had their pills seized by customs; police officers visited most of them and asked them to come to the station for questioning. None were charged subsequently with any offence.²⁵

The arrests, the raids on activists homes, and in particular the charging of the mother with getting pills for her fifteen-year-old daughter caused outrage. The authorities seemed to rely on isolated, often vulnerable, individual women quietly accepting their suspended sentence, hoping fear of arrest would stop others from getting the pills from the internet. This ignored a couple of realities. The first is that desperate women will do desperate things, no matter what the law says; the safety of abortion pills means that they are well worth the risk compared to the dangerous methods women have used in the past to end intolerable pregnancies. The other reality is that activists had been openly acknowledging since 2012 that they were breaking the law, yet none had been so much as questioned by the police still less arrested or charged. It was clear that the state’s strategy was to go after isolated, vulnerable women rather than activists who had the strength of the movement behind them. This just made us all much angrier and more determined to change things.

The charges against the mother led to a second open letter admitting widespread breaking of the law. This time it was signed by over 230 people. Anger, and alarm, at the arrests was felt not only in the North but also in Britain where the 1861 act still applies today.

The prosecutions saw pickets outside PSNI stations in Belfast and Derry, where young women carried placards saying ‘I am not a criminal’.

In an attempt to force a political trial, three older women in Derry who had received abortion pills in the post for pregnant people who didn’t want police turning up at their door handed themselves into the PSNI complete with evidence of their breaking Section 59 of the 1861 Offences Against the Persons Act. Like others who had the strength of the movement behind them, they were not charged despite their confessions.

From 2016 onwards, the pro-choice movement in the North swelled with hundreds of young activists, raging at the impossible ‘choices’ available to them in their home place. The prosecutions were deeply unpopular; even people who would prefer abortion to be illegal did not think anyone should be prosecuted for having one. In 2016, the NI Life & Times Survey found 71 percent of respondents agreed both that abortion should be a matter of medical regulation, not criminal law, and that no one should go to prison for having an abortion; by 2018, after the prosecutions had been widely publicised, the proportions agreeing with those two statements had risen to 82 percent and 89 percent respectively. In 2016, a clear majority (63 percent) agreed that ‘it is a woman’s right to choose whether or not to have an abortion’; in 2018, that had risen to 72 percent.

The Abortion Rights Campaign is an all-Ireland movement, of which the North’s Alliance for Choice is a component part. The campaign in the North was hugely strengthened by the movement in the South. Activists from the North travelled South (or in Derry’s case North into Donegal) to canvass in the repeal referendum. Young people from every ‘community background’ canvassed for repeal. When the overwhelming yes vote was announced in the yard of Dublin Castle, it was celebrated as loudly in Derry and Belfast as in Dublin and Cork. The three young women who gave their handmade ‘The North is Next’ placard to Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle

O'Neill were highly representative of the Northern women's movement—with different 'community backgrounds' and sexual identities but united in the fight for change.

The size of the yes vote for repeal was so big that it reached Westminster. Labour MPs there had been arguing for some time that decriminalisation was necessary and that public opinion in Northern Ireland was for change in relation to abortion and gay rights. The report of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Inquiry, which found the UK guilty of 'grave and systematic violations' of the rights of women and girls in NI, had been published and Westminster's Women and Equalities Committee also held an inquiry, leading them to declare that Westminster had to act to protect women's human rights. But the repeal landslide, although in the Republic, finally got the message through to

Westminster that DUP MPs do not represent the actual views of people here. For the first time, a majority in Westminster voted for abortion rights for NI. Pro-choice campaigners here are united in agreeing that the vote to repeal the 8th made a crucial contribution to this victory—especially as it prompted nationalist parties like Sinn Féin and the SDLP to drop their anti-abortion stances.

The all-Ireland women's movement

The women's movement in Ireland is a united one across the entire island. We saw this with the repeal campaign when pro-choice campaigners in the North were clear that the chances of our winning abortion rights were intimately tied up with result in the South. We saw it also after the rugby rape trial when women took to the streets of the South in their thousands, aware that if rape victims could be treated so poorly in Belfast courtrooms, this would impact on survivors of sexual assault in the South. As Eamonn McCann pointed out at the time, what we saw on the streets of Dublin, Cork, and Galway after the Belfast rape trial was not a movement *for* a united Ireland but *of* a united Ireland.

While the women's movement across the island seeks to be as inclusive as possible for people of all

genders, trans people, new Irish, people of colour, and Travellers, there are differences in approaches North and South to the issue of sex workers' rights. While the pro-choice movement generally supports sex workers' rights, many of the main women's organisations in the South support the Nordic model in relation to sex work. This is rejected by most of the main women's organisations in the North because it is rejected by most sex workers as dangerous. While it may not criminalise them directly, the Nordic model criminalises the activity sex workers are involved in and therefore forces them into working conditions that are more dangerous. Giving more power to the police is rarely a good thing for marginalised people, and criminalising the purchase of sex has not been shown to reduce exploitation or trafficking within the Nordic countries.

The socialist movement can take great hope from the all-Ireland women's movement—a movement that shows that a new Ireland *can* be built from the bottom up by the mass demand of people who want a better society. One hundred years after the partition of the island, there is a growing realisation that the border is an obstacle that must be removed. And to those who say a Socialist United Ireland is an impossible pipe dream, we can point to that all-Ireland women's movement and say, 'Look at what has already been won'.

NOTES

- 1 Lee, J.J. (1973) *The Modernisation of Irish Society, 1848-1918*, Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, p6.
- 2 Beckett, J.C. (1966) *The Making of Modern Ireland, 1603-1923*, London: Faber, p173.
- 3 For a full discussion of this era and the suppression of sexuality across the island, see Horgan, G. (2001) 'Changing Women's Lives in Ireland', *International Socialism Journal*, 91,, available from: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj2/2001/isj2-091/horgan.htm>
- 4 Ward, M. (1983), *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, Dingle: Pluto Press, p. 235

5 quoted in McShane, L. 'Day Nurseries in Northern Ireland: Gender Ideology in Social Policy', in C. Curtain, P. Jackson, and A. O'Connor (eds.) *Gender in Irish Society*, Galway: Galway University Press, p.258

6 Ditch, J. (1988) *Social Policy in Northern Ireland Between 1939-50*, London: Taylor and Francis.

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8 quoted in McShane, p.258

9 Hogan, C. (2019) *Republic of Shame: Stories from Ireland's Institutions for 'Fallen Women'*, Dublin: Penguin.

10 Interviewee in BBC Spotlight programme 9 March 2021.

11 McCormick, L. O'Connell, S., Dee, O. and Privilege, J. (2021) *Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries in Northern Ireland: Report Prepared for the Inter-Departmental Working Group*, Belfast: Dept of Health, p.199.

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