Gendered Structures in Action: 'Male' Versus 'Female' Agendas in a Family Rights Project

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INTRODUCTION

This article describes the formation of a family rights project in Limerick. It explains how the project came to focus on a rather narrow legalistic definition of parental rights, typified as a 'male agenda'. It explores the implications of this agenda for the attraction of parents to the project. Finally and more broadly, it raises questions about the relevance of partnership activities between statutory and community agencies, given the gendered nature of organisations (Acker, 1990) and the likely dominance of what is referred to as the 'male agenda'. The paper draws on documentary material concerning the establishment of the group, together with group evaluation material and qualitative data from individual semi-structured interviews with all the members of what came to be referred to as the Core Group in the family rights project.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FAMILY RIGHTS PROJECT AND THE ROLE OF THE CORE GROUP

The family rights project was one of the projects initiated by the structure called People Against Unemployment in Limerick

(P.A.U.L.), as part of a wider Poverty 3 EC funded programme, to promote the economic and social integration of least favoured groups in the area through a partnership between statutory and community agencies. The establishment of a family rights project was proposed by the health board (one of these partners) for inclusion in P.A.U.L.'s activities (P.A.U.L.'s Mid-Way Report, 1992). Within the health board there was an awareness that parents whose children were taken into care were likely to feel excluded and marginalised within their local community, and that they were likely to feel that they had little control over decisions, or indeed little information about their rights, in relation to their children when the health board was involved.

According to the P.A.U.L.'s Mid-Way Report, the objectives of the project were:

- To promote the rights of families who have children in care
- To input into policy and practice regarding children in care and their families
- To establish an independent forum which will provide a voice for families who have children in care
- To establish links with similar projects through the EC with a view to drawing up an agreed charter of rights
- To encourage the development of support services and other preventative services for families at risk.

P.A.U.L. (1992, p. 47)

The project was concerned both to change professional practice and policy in relation to children in care, and to develop what one could regard as a self-help group for families whose children were in care. Because of the dual focus, the project involved the establishment of two groups: a Support Group consisting of parents or other relatives whose children were in care; and a Core Group whose membership was envisaged in March 1992 as including two senior social workers, a community worker, a social worker in the fostering area, a staff member from P.A.U.L., a residential manager, the co-ordinator from the local voluntary agency (the Social Services), in addition to foster parents, residential care workers, parents who had children in care and two 'community people'.

The focus of this article is on the Core Group since it was seen by the project as the vehicle through which policy and practice would be changed. It was expected that it would be involved in the development of local and national policy in the area of child care and in the creation of improved relationships between those involved with children in care (i.e. social workers, residential care workers, parents and foster parents), as well as in the development of broadly supportive and preventive services to meet the needs of families who were 'at risk'. The project constituted a clear attempt by the health board to underpin community leadership in the area and to enter into partnership with a community organisation (P. A.U.L.). The senior social worker in the health board identified a co-ordinator for the Support Group. This co-ordinator was to be indirectly financially supported by the health board and integrated into the social work team, while remaining based in a voluntary body (the local Social Service Agency). P.A.U.L. agreed to contribute £2,000 p.a. to cover running costs, and to release a staff member to provide back-up to the co-ordinator on an ongoing basis, and to help to progress the project within the parameters of a commitment of 8-12 hours per month.

When the project was initiated (1992) it was described as a Network of Families with Children in Care. In March 1992, it was decided that the key objective of the project lay in promoting the rights of families who had children in care. This decision, together with the decision to postpone appointing the two community people, who had been seen as 'likely to be active in their communities, preferably in a family resource centre type situation and to be sensitive to the needs of parents with children who are in care' (Minutes, 30 March 1992), proved to have considerable implications for the shape of the project.

At that time, it was also decided that the project would involve establishing contact with parents who had children in care by working through the social work service. The co-ordinator of the project contacted all the social workers in the health board area and distributed a letter through them to those families (roughly fifty in number) who had children in care at that time. Other attempts made to contact them included holding an open meeting in a local hotel and publicising the existence of the network through the local radio. Through these efforts, and further referrals

directly by the social workers themselves, by July 1992 sixteen people (overwhelmingly parents) had been contacted by the co-ordinator, of whom eight were to become members of what was called the Support Group. Of the other eight contacted, two refused to become involved; one was unable to attend; and five came twice (most of these dropped out when some or all of their children were returned from care to them).

In June 1992 it was noted in the minutes that parents' involvement might be inhibited by a suspicion of social workers. Alternative explanations, such as the idea that parents who felt unable or unwilling to maintain contact with their children might not be attracted by a focus on rights, were not considered. Furthermore, although there was an early recognition that parents might, because of their own personal problems, need support other than in relation to their children (Minutes, May 1992), this was not seen as relevant. Meetings of the parents and relatives (i.e. the Support Group) and of the Core Group continued (except during the period June-September 1993) on a monthly basis up to the end of the evaluation (November 1994).

Core Group meetings were particularly concerned with issues related to a rather legalistic conception of parental rights, as well as with more practical issues revolving around access, reviews, and whether foster mothers should be called 'Mammy'. Attendance by foster parents was uneven. It was clear, at the group evaluation session, that there was no consensus within the Core Group about whether it was a vehicle for promoting the rights of parents who had children in care or was a forum within which the extent and limits of conflicting rights might be explored. The initial members of the Core Group, including the co-ordinator, were all highly committed to the issue of parents' rights. The staff member from P.A.U.L., who chaired many of the Core Group meetings, was also highly committed to the perception of the Core Group as a vehicle for promoting parents' rights. There was a certain tension however, between this view and another view of the Core Group which saw it as a forum for the clarification of the extent and limits of parental rights, within the context of other possibly competing rights (such as the rights of foster parents). Indeed the poor attendance of the foster parents makes sense in view of the failure of the Core Group to handle the tensions involved in balancing

these competing rights. Without recognising and exploring such potential conflicts, the ability of the Core Group to have an impact on policy and practice was reduced since parental rights typically exist within a context of competing rights.

It was striking that issues related to parental rights were for the most part irrelevant to the members of the Support Group (who were in fact predominantly female: see O'Connor 1996). They simply wanted the opportunity to develop and/or to maintain an emotional bond with their children, and were happy to avail of the access to health board personnel provided by the Core Group to enable them to do this. They adopted the rhetoric of parental rights as a way of legitimating their own requests for increased access to their children. The atypicality of those who were in the Support Group, as compared to other parents with children in care, is vividly illustrated by the fact that 88 per cent (fifteen out of seventeen) of their children (who were in fact in long-term care) were seen regularly, mostly at least every two to three weeks. The majority of these children were phoned even more frequently than this. This pattern was extremely unusual. O'Higgins (1993, p. 116) found that less than two fifths of the children in care in her study in the Mid-Western Health Board were visited regularly by their parents. This pattern is typical both in Ireland and elsewhere (see Rowe and Lambert 1973; Millham *et al* 1986).

Not too surprisingly then in this context, there was difficulty recruiting members to the Support Group. This had been noted in other studies in the Limerick area (Wogan 1992; Moynihan 1993). For the Core Group, who did not start from a position of recognising parental problems in discharging their responsibilities, the difficulties of attracting Support Group members were seen as tactical rather than philosophical. In this context the issue of parental rights and the danger of their erosion by the state and by foster parents were self-evident; parents who had children in long-term care, and who were concerned with issues related to control and access were seen as typical: this was in fact the kind of behaviour that it was felt should exist.

In the context of the overall project, the concern with parental rights meant that the very real needs of parents (predominantly mothers) for services to compliment or support their day-to-day parenting were not seen as relevant to the project. Equally

importantly, the concern of the project with rights implicitly discouraged parents who were not seeking to assert such rights (i.e. those who had low levels of contact with children in care, and because of guilt or inadequacy had effectively withdrawn from their children's lives).

A 'FEMALE' VERSUS 'MALE' AGENDA: THE WIDER SOCIAL CONTEXT

Within a society which has placed considerable constitutional and moral emphasis on the family, one would expect to find well developed family support systems to enable all families (for the most part mothers) to discharge their responsibilities towards their children. Thus one would expect that services which could relieve, support or compliment the work of women in the home caring for their children would be prioritised. Indeed, since the overwhelming majority of children leaving care return home (Department of Health 1991, Chapter 4) it obviously makes sense to take steps to support such parents. This focus on services which support or compliment the day-to-day activities of parents (predominantly mothers) is referred to here as the 'female agenda', although it is recognised of course that it may be promoted by women and/or men.

The importance of such services is particularly acute amongst women who lack resources to purchase substitute care, who lack safe play areas, have poor housing etc., and who themselves do not enjoy the actual experience of day-to-day care of their children. (Even amongst financially and socially privileged mothers enjoyment of day-to-day care of children varies considerably, with only roughly half of them even moderately enjoying it (Boulton 1993; O'Connor 1993).)

It is obviously possible that neglect (which has been identified as the most common reason for placement in care: O'Higgins 1993, pp. 90-91) may arise in a situation where child care responsibilities are considerable and relentless, where financial constraints do not allow for regular 'breaks' and where there is no perceived escape; 'neglect' in this situation being a kind of helpless passive resistance. It has been shown that children who were admitted to care primarily because of neglect were more

likely to be from families which had no kin and/or neighbour support, and to have parents with emotional and/or psychological problems (O'Higgins 1993, p. 39). Such psychological problems are not of course peculiar to women who have children in care. Thus, Whelan *et al* (1991) showed that in their national sample study, roughly one in five women who are full time in the home experience psychological distress at any one point in time. It is arguable that such distress has an important impact on both mothers and children, even in those situations where it does not culminate in the child's admission to care. The question as to whether services which support or compliment their activities should be provided by the state before the stage is reached when the child is seen as being 'at risk' has only recently begun to be discussed. State-supported child care for under fives is virtually non-existent in Ireland (Gilligan 1991; Millar *et al* 1992). Children from one-parent families of various kinds - especially those with children under five years old - are particularly vulnerable to placement in care and are over-represented by a factor of 2.5 in the population of children in care (O'Higgins 1993). In interpreting this trend, the time-consuming and emotionally-demanding nature of caring for children of that age, and the virtual absence of non-stigmatising state-funded child care facilities has been rarely noted (See O'Connor 1992 for a discussion on this). Typically, the issue of support has been dealt with in rather a limited way (i.e. through the provision of Lone Parents' Allowance).

In academic literature there has been an increasing recognition of the need to distinguish between 'caring about' and 'caring for' children, i.e. between (emotional) concern and (practical) tending (Parker 1981; Ungerson 1983). This distinction can be helpful to parents who have given their child life, who care for the child at an emotional level, love him/her and are concerned about his/her well-being, but who for psychological and/or social reasons, need to share the practical 'tending' in a way which our society does not legitimise unless care is actually paid for by the parent (and hence implicitly under their control). It is important to note that the very recent implementation of the long-awaited Child Care Act 1991 constitutes a potential change in the role of the state since it requires health boards to provide 'child care and family support services (S3.3, and see Gilligan 1992). This has implications for

our concept of mothering, and our ambivalence about the state supporting or complimenting that activity. It remains to be seen to what extent this 'female agenda' will in fact be underpinned by health boards.

In the context of what is being referred to here as the 'male agenda' (although it must be stressed that it may be promoted by women as well as men) the key issue is parental rights. These rights are seen as subsuming the rights of the child and over-riding the rights of other carers such as foster parents. These rights are seen as being rooted in the biological tie between parents and child, and are seen as existing regardless of the extent to which the parent has been involved in the day-to-day care of that child. Implicit in the idea of parental rights is an underlying concern with the extent of intervention by the state in families; and in particular, a concern with the extent to which such intervention undermines parental rights. This agenda reflects a patriarchal concern with issues related to authority and control; hence its depiction as a 'male agenda'.

Recent developments in the area of child sexual abuse have raised issues about the appropriate nature and extent of parental rights and the role of the state in this situation. McKeown and Gilligan (1991) in one of the very few Irish studies on this topic showed that, looking at all confirmed child sexual abuse cases known to the community care teams in the Eastern Health Board area in 1988, the average age for females who were abused was 9.2 years, and for males, 7.9 years (with one third of all confirmed cases being less than six years old). In more than half of the confirmed sexual abuse cases, the child was abused in its own home; in roughly three fifths of the confirmed cases, the abuser was a male relative (i.e. father, brother, uncle, grandfather etc.); and in roughly a quarter of the confirmed cases the abuser remained living in the same family home as the child. These findings implicitly raise fundamental questions about the extent and nature of parental rights, and the extent to which the rights of the child can, in all circumstances, be assumed to be protected by the parent. The appropriate role of the state in this situation is only beginning to be dealt with: it is a focus of the most important published document exploring this issue (the Report of the Kilkenny Incest Case 1993).

Frequently, social work services are the front line agency which represents the state in these situations. In the context of a 'male agenda', their position is fraught with contradictions. On the one hand social work intervention can be seen as weakening parental authority. This intervention can be legitimated in the context of 'professionalisati on': defining a profession as a 'special status in the division of labour supported by official and sometimes public belief that it is worthy of such status' (Friedson 1970, p. 198). However, insofar as the concerns of the profession revolve around the maintenance of the family unit and respect for the ideal of domestic privacy, social work intervention and particularly the disruption of the family by the state is inevitably problematic. Howe (1992) has suggested that in Britain social workers in this situation are becoming increasingly concerned with investigating and gathering evidence, thereby avoiding the tensions implicit in the need to take action (whether at the level of rehabilitation, therapy or welfare).

There is very little evidence on the extent and nature of social work intervention in Ireland. The Report of the Kilkenny Incest Case implicitly raised issues about the extent to which social workers effectively colluded with patriarchal authority, both within the home and in the wider community. In the wake of that report, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that the protection of children from sexual abuse and non-accidental injury is seen as a priority in social work training and practice (see Kelleher *et al* 1995). Yet, there appears to be an ambivalence about the under-mining of parental authority (as reflected in the use of voluntary care orders). The tacit unwillingness to challenge abusers of male power is reflected even more vividly in the lack of priority attached to dealing with domestic violence (despite the fact that such violence has been shown to have a very negative effect on children: Casey 1987; Lyons *etal* 1993; Kelleher *etal* 1995). In this situation, the endorsement of a 'male agenda' with its stress on parental rights arguably constitutes a subtle resolution of a fundamental tension.

It is plausible that, in view of these tensions and the sensitivity of those in senior positions in professional and bureaucratic structures to a language of rights, and to a concern with authority, that the 'male agenda' is likely to be the basis on which partnership

activities with voluntary or community agencies (whether involv-
ing men or women) are most likely to be initiated. Equally, it is
likely that people who will be seen as 'appropriate' partners are
likely to be those who endorse a similar agenda (whether they are
men or women). In the Limerick family rights project the
chairperson of the Core Group saw the main objective of the Core
Group as 'promoting the rights of parents who had children in
care' (in effect however promoting the rights of the small and
atypical members of the Support Group). This position was
supported by the co-ordinator of the Support Group (who, as
earlier noted, was chosen by the senior social worker), arguably
because she supported what has been called the 'male agenda'.

It is important to recognise that a 'male agenda' can be pre-
sented as concerned with empowerment, and/or as an attempt to
equalise the power of the family versus the state. It can even
appear to be a pro-woman initiative. However, it is argued that in
its concern with rights it is remote from the concerns of those
parents (predominantly women) who are concerned with the day-
to-day care of their children. It fails to recognise this 'female
agenda', and implicitly endorses the subsuming of children's
rights into parental rights, and the obscuring of the rights of other
carers, such as fosterparents-assumptions which are particularly
problematic in the case of children in care.

In the context of the family rights project it is worth noting that
the women in the Support Group used the rhetoric of rights to
advance their own case as regards their desire for increased
contact with their children. It has been argued elsewhere (O'Connor
1996) that in the Support Group the focus on rights partly
obscured their own needs as regards therapeutic care. In terms of
the overall project, it has been argued that it diminished the appeal
of the Support Group since the majority of those parents who had
children in long-term care did not find the rhetoric of rights
relevant to them; and for various reasons (including guilt, feelings
of inadequacy etc) did not have high levels of contact with their
children (and were ambivalent about moving to this position).

It is to a more detailed explanation of the Core Group that we
now turn.

A 'FEMALE' VERSUS 'MALE' AGENDA:
THE POSITION OF THE CORE GROUP

This section draws on material from both individual interviews with all Core Group members, and from a Core Group evaluation session. The group session focused particularly on the extent to which the project had promoted the rights of families who had children in care. In the individual semi-structured interviews, attention was focused on the Core Group members' perceptions of the objectives of the group and its perceived effects, as well as on the relevance of preventative and/or broadly family support-type services as a way of helping parents whose children were 'at risk'.

In both contexts, almost without exception, the members of the Core Group saw issues related to prevention and more broadly-based family support services (i.e. a 'female agenda') as effectively irrelevant. Some of them saw services such as community child care workers, day nurseries, the community mother's programme, home-makers etc. as 'in theory useful but something that was way down the road'. One or two of the Core Group mentioned, in their individual interviews, that community-based child care .workers and/or family support workers, could prevent children from coming into care on a long-term and/or short-term basis. The dominant feeling, however, was that at present such issues were not relevant: 'our agenda is to deal with the people who have children in care ….' In fact, in view of the characteristics of the Support Group, its specific concern ended up being with one small group of parents who had children in long-term care, with whom they had a high level of contact, and with whom it wished to have an even higher level of contact. For these parents, support services such as those described above were seen as irrelevant, the main objective being to underline their 'rights' in relation to their children, within the context of both the perceived erosion by the state of these rights (through the social work service), and of effective competition at an emotional level from the foster parents whose rights were based on the reality of their day-to-day care of the child.

In its composition, the Core Group potentially constituted a forum for the negotiation of relationships between parents, foster

parents and social workers. In order to act as such, the Core Group would have had to reject a 'male' agenda where the rights of the parents were seen as absolute. It will be shown that there was little willingness to do this (especially amongst the chairpersons of the Core Group and the co-ordinator of the Support Group).

At the group evaluation session it was clear that there was no real consensus about the objectives of the Core Group. A variety of models were put forward by the members. Thus, it was depicted as a kind of 'steering group', a forum for 'raising consciousness', 'heightening awareness' and 'giving direction'; one where 'the needs of parents whose children were in care could be addressed' and where they could be 'given their rights'. On the other hand, it was also seen as 'a bringing together of parents, foster parents and social workers to hammer out matters of mutual interest'; 'a forum where various partners can look at issues' and one in which the perspectives of a variety of people involved in child protection and welfare could be shared.

There were certain tensions implicit in these models, particularly between the depiction of it as a forum for all those involved with the child, and as an arena where parents' complaints would be taken on board in an attempt to rectify the imbalances in the power relations between social workers and parents. This tension was implicitly recognised by some members of the Core Group. Thus, they noted that the parents' agenda had come to dominate Core Group meetings: something that was depicted by them as appropriate in a way since 'the very setting up of the group was for the natural parents', and 'they had more of a right than anyone else to their children'. However, others noted that this meant that the 'children's rights and foster parents' rights were left to one side', and that there was 'no overall focus'. In this situation, it was not felt possible to 'deal with issues more challengingly' or to balance these various rights since 'we are there to respond to the parents'; people who, it was recognised, were vulnerable and might well have been 'unintentionally humiliated in the past'.

The difficulties of long-term foster parents were recognised by some Core Group members since 'these are the people looking after the child, probably for the next fifteen or sixteen years, the ones doing the twenty-four hour a day caring'. Yet it was recognised that 'at a Core Group meeting the foster parents would

feel the least strong'. For key members of the Core Group (including one of the chairpersons and the co-ordinator of the Support Group) this tension was felt to be inevitable because it (the project) is 'strengthening the parent'. The perceived benefit for the foster parents was described as 'learning more of what it is like for parents who have a child in care' and 'heightening their awareness of the issues that are there for the parents'. There was no interest in exploring the different contributions both could actually make to the child's life, nor the mechanisms through which the structural and cultural tensions implicit in these relationships could be managed. This was reflected in the fact that there was no overt recognition of the competing interests in the Core Group. The chairpersons (and the co-ordinator of the Support Group) tried to create a context where the Core Group was seen as 'for the parents'. The situation of the foster parents was seen by them as one which could not easily be explored without giving them support, a support which was implicitly seen as likely to undermine the position of the parents.

In this situation, it was difficult to see the foster parents remaining committed to the group unless some attention.was paid to this issue, despite their feeling that 'if it's helping the natural parents, it's helping the children, and they are the important ones'. There were largely unexplored issues surrounding the nature of fostering itself and around the expectations of the health board of foster parents (in the sense of whether they saw them as foster carers, comparable at an emotional level to child care workers in residential centres, or effectively as 'psychological' parents).

There was a good deal of uncertainty about the effect of the Core Group on the attitudes of foster parents. It was stressed that training for foster parents was increasingly dealing with the issue of their responsibility towards the parents as well as towards the child. The question of having parents who had children in care providing an input into the Foster Parents Training Programme (part of the outreach activities of the Core Group) was seen as important. For several members of the Core Group a commitment to the child's 'roots', was linked with an 'inclusive' concept of fostering (Holman 1980), i.e. one which recognised the contri- bution of both natural parents and foster parents to the child's well-being. However, within the context of the Core Group the

issue of sharing with parents the experience of being a foster parent was seen as an inappropriate focus.

Within the Core Group a context was created where parents' rights were assumed to be absolute relative to those of foster parents and/or residential staff. There was also a perception of the Core Group not only as a pressure group for parents, but as a way of supporting both the parents and their advocates in their relationship with the health board. It was noticeable that in the Core Group, the practice of referring to natural/birth parents as 'the' parents was firmly established. On speaking individually to members of the Core Group, the practice frequently changed, and they were often referred to as 'natural parents' or 'birth parents'.

There was a feeling at the group evaluation session that the Core Group should 'not go off on their own agenda'. It was noted that the issue of calling foster parents Mammy and Daddy 'seemed to be stronger for us (i.e. Core Group) than for them (i.e. Support Group) at the end'. The parents themselves, a number of Core Group members noted, 'can accept it - they can deal with it, if it is genuinely coming from the child'. For the key members of the Core Group it was not an acceptable practice. For them, the issue was clear cut: 'There are the parents - there is no other term. If we say anything else, we are wrong, except in a situation where they haven't seen them for years - and even then, they are still their parents'; 'They have only one parent and this is the birth parent - they will leave care at eighteen years, the only one static person is the parent'.

The Core Group's refusal to take on board a concept of parenting which would include the foster parents is not unusual, either in terms of health board policy, or indeed in terms of general cultural practice. The Mid-Western Health Board Child Care Policy and Practice document (1991) makes no specific reference to foster parents, although they are implicitly included in the references to guardians and carers and hence are expected to participate in reviews and to have their views taken into account, along with the parents and children. Neither the Child Care Act (1991) nor the Mid-Western Child Care Policy and Practice (1991) document deals explicitly with potential conflicts between these parties as to what is in the child's best interest. It is eminently possible that all the parties involved might have very different

views on this. In this situation, it is perhaps inevitable that the health board will be faced with the task of defining and clarifying relationships between foster parents and parents. The health board in question has - perhaps instinctively - used somewhat different types of placement for various children in order to minimise this tension. Thus, in a context where most children in care are placed in foster care, children whose parents are married are much less likely to be there (i.e. 62 per cent of them being placed in foster care, as compared with 90 per cent of those whose parents are not married: O'Higgins 1993, p. 48).

Within the Core Group the three way relationship between parents, social workers and foster parents was effectively simplified by focusing on the parents' attitudes, feelings, desires and wishes, especially in relation to social work practice. The question as to whether the Core Group was 'too neat: an easy forum for very complex issues that it is not going to deal with adequately' was raised by one of the chairpersons of the Core Group at the Group evaluation session, but was neither discussed not resolved.

SUMMARY

This paper starts from a position which sees organisations as gendered:

> Gender is not an addition to ongoing processes, conceived as gender neutral. Rather, it is an integral part of those processes which cannot be frequently understood without an analysis of gender. (Acker 1990, p. 139)

This perspective is then used to explain the focus of the family rights project on the rather legalistic rights of an atypical group of parents whose children were in long-term care. This sort of focus, it is argued, makes sense in terms of a 'male' agenda which is concerned with rights, and which is located within a context where it is assumed that all parents who have children in long-term care want (or at least should want) to have their (exclusive) rights in relation to them recognised. This sort of agenda is contrasted with a 'female' agenda, which is rooted in a recognition of the difficulties that some parents (typically mothers) have in

the day-to-day care of their children. This latter perspective starts from a position where it is recognised that there is a need to supplement and/or compliment the activities of many mothers in this area, because of the twenty-four hour a day nature of caring activities.

The family rights project which was one of the projects initiated by the P.A.U.L. partnership came to be dominated by a 'male' agenda, with the Core Group which was responsible for the overall direction of the project effectively endorsing this viewpoint. Thus, the 'rights' of parents were seen as unambiguous and uncontroversial and as effectively subsuming the rights of the child and obscuring the rights of foster parents. The rights of both sets of parents may collide in the case of children in care; one or both may be in opposition to the child, or to the foster parents. Hence, it seems unhelpful to assume that parental rights are unambiguous and undisputed. Yet, this was an underlying assumption of the Core Group's activity and management philosophy and was indeed the rationale for the institutional support of the project.

At a management level, there was no recognition of the reality of the fact that many parents who have children in care have social and emotional difficulties which make it impossible for them (and indeed undesirable for the child) to have responsibility for their children in an unsupported situation. It has been shown elsewhere that the therapeutic care for the individual members of the Support Group was not central (O'Connor 1996). Furthermore, the needs of those (more typical) parents of children in care whose problems are such that they do not wish to keep in contact with their children were effectively ignored. Indeed the implicit assumption of the project, that parents ought to want to keep in touch with their children in care, was arguably such as to deter parents who (for various reasons) did not feel this way, from participating in the Support Group.

For the most part, day-to-day care of children is women's responsibility in Ireland. Services which directly or indirectly enable parents to care for their children on a day-to-day basis are likely to be of particular benefit to them. Activities related to this objective (i.e. the 'female' agenda) was seen as of little importance by the Core Group. Issues related to a rather legalistic definition

of the 'rights' of parents were seen as key; such issues arguably reflecting an underlying concern with minimising the power of the state in intervening in families. This can be seen as reflecting a patriarchal concern with issues related to authority and control within the family and with the obscuring of the rights of others (the child, foster parents etc). Perhaps even more importantly, there was an implicit assumption that (unlimited) parental rights were legitimate.

Given the agenda of the key members of the Core Group, it is perhaps not surprising that the whole question of the typicality of the Support Group was not explored. The development of support services and other preventative services for families at risk was effectively ignored in the project. Issues which were related to the needs of a wider group of parents who had children in care tended to recede.

It has been shown elsewhere (O'Connor 1996) that the Support Group was important to the members in providing them with an opportunity to meet people in the same situation as themselves etc. However, the family rights project was not simply envisaged as the creation of a self-help group for parents and relatives who had children in care, and hence it is appropriate to explore the wider issue of the effective agenda underlying the Core Group's activities.

The exploration of this aspect of the family rights project raises issues about the extent to which partnership activities involving statutory and community agencies are likely to facilitate, support and compliment the day-to-day tending activities of parents (predominantly mothers). In so far as they do not do this, then they will not address the very real needs of many parents (predominantly mothers) who are responsible for the day-to-day care of children.

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