Introduction to main concept and concerns

Many people to-day are reluctant to define themselves as feminists: the word feminism frequently evoking ‘an image of strident, unattractive women’ (Kourany et al, 1992: 1). However, at its simplest, feminism is concerned with the value of women and their lives. In a national poll, nine out of ten Irish women said they had heard of feminism. Four out of five of these women said they knew what it meant: 87 per cent seeing it as developing women’s confidence in themselves; 76 per cent as developing society so that women play a greater part; and 84 per cent as ensuring that the things that women value influence the development of the society and economy (MRBI, 1992). It is possible to identify analytically different kinds of feminism, reflecting different priorities as regards action; different ideas about the state and different kinds of mechanisms as regards change. Initially, attention will be focused on three of these: liberal, radical, and socialist feminism.

Liberal feminism has typically marshalled arguments about organisational efficiency and effectiveness, as well as broader ideas about democratic representation involving women’s rights as citizens (Lovenduski, 1997). Traditionally, equality in this perspective is defined very much in male terms: the ‘normal’ citizen is male; has no need for maternity leave and few responsibilities as regards child care or unpaid work in the home. There is an implicit acceptance of a male model of work-life balance, a ‘male’ organisational culture, hierarchical styles of management etc. Classical liberal feminism (e.g. Friedan, 1963) was particularly concerned with the removal of legal
and educational barriers in the context of paid employment. In an Irish context, the existence of the Marriage Bar and of differential wage rates for men and women (which persisted up to 1973) were targets for this kind of liberal feminism. However, by the 1980s liberal feminism internationally recognised that the removal of such barriers was not in itself sufficient, because of women’s greater responsibilities for child care (and consequent vulnerability to part-time employment, poverty, lack of promotion, etc). Liberal feminists such as Friedan in her later work (1981), argued for greater State involvement in mediating between paid employment and family responsibilities. Overall, liberal feminists see the state as a potentially neutral arbiter, which has been captured by one group (viz. men). The solution as they see it, is through education to firstly, increase the proportion of women in state structures; and secondly, to reduce or eliminate men’s prejudicial attitudes. The question as to whether this is sufficient to change the wider societal context, organisational ethos, or work/family balance is typically ignored by liberal feminism. Quite simply, liberal feminism suggests that if women want to succeed in the world of paid employment, they must do so on male terms, within organisations based on the male as the norm. Thus: ‘Liberal feminism has brought to the surface the suppressed truth that the state is gendered, and has used this truth to inspire a formidable and sustained politics of access’ (Connell, 1994: 142).

For radical feminists, gender is an institutional reality. Some radical feminists see this as related to biology, while others see it as related to social and cultural factors. The historical existence of male dominance is referred to as patriarchy i.e. culturally constructed ideas about male supremacy and privileging that are embedded in procedures and processes inside and outside the workplace, as well as in attitudes
about what is ‘natural’, ‘inevitable’, ‘what women want’. Connell suggested that the majority of men benefited from what he called ‘the patriarchal dividend’ in terms of ‘honour, prestige and the right to command. They [men] also gain a material dividend’ (Connell, 1995a: 82). Connell was at pains to suggest that most men do not want to oppress or exploit women. However, they are reluctant to forego privileging: being most comfortable if it appears that it is: ‘given to them by an external force, by nature or convention, or even by women themselves, rather than by an active social subordination going on here and now’ (Connell, 1995b: 215). Because men wished to be men, then patriarchal privileging persists.

Internationally, key issues for radical feminists have included sexuality and violence. MacKinnon (1983) focused on the way that rape law in the US was framed, arguing that so called legal objectivity was in fact the institutionalisation of men’s interests. Equally, it has been noted that in Australia, job evaluation schemas created by the state reflected its systemic patriarchal bias by valuing ‘male’ skills, attributes and activities more than ‘female’ ones. For radical feminists, the state, in its practices, procedures and organisational culture is a patriarchal power structure. Organisational culture is the concept used to refer to the complicated fabric of myths and values that legitimise women’s position at the lower levels of the hierarchy and which ‘chills’ women out when they attempt to step out of their ‘proper’ place into ‘men’s place’ in managerial structures. Radical feminism stresses that real equality must be based on a recognition and valuing of difference: whether this is biological difference or socially and culturally created difference. It is frequently pessimistic about the possibilities of organisational transformation in male dominated and male controlled organisational structures: ‘You may find a place, as long as you simulate the norm and hide your
difference. We will know you are different and continue ultimately to treat you as
different, but if you yourself specify your difference, your claim to equality will be
nil’ (Cockburn, 1991: 219). Attempts by liberal feminists to be accepted in such
organisations are, they suggest, conditional on women’s adjustment to a male norm.
When women themselves assert their difference (for example, through pregnancy)
this will be used to justify disadvantaging them.

Socialist feminists are concerned with a fundamental re-structuring of society in terms
of both class and gender hierarchies. They are concerned with the nature and effect of
the, at least analytically separate, systems of capitalism and patriarchy. As Hartmann
(1981) noted, a purely class analysis gives: ‘no clues about why women are
subordinate to men inside and outside the family and why it is not the other way
around’. A socialist feminist restructuring of society involves a change in the value of
women’s work- whether this is unpaid work done by women in the home or the
valuing of predominantly female work outside it. For socialist feminists, the state
represents patriarchal and capitalist interests. Some have emphasised the way in
which state policies are underpinned by ideas about masculinity and femininity (e.g
the idea in the 1960s and 1970s that girls were ‘naturally’ not able to do honours
maths). The situation of lone parents, who are frequently dependent on social welfare
because of the absence of child care, and are expected to be both in paid employment,
and to care for their children twenty four hours a day highlights the contractions in the
state’s position. Socialist feminists are concerned with the diversity of women’s
experiences (e.g. the experiences of poverty amongst working class women, or the
discrimination experienced by Traveller or refugee women). They differ from radical
feminists insofar as they do not see gender as the most fundamental, most widespread
and most devastating model of oppression. They point out that although the state assumes that men’s interests are the norm, in fact it privileges middle class (white, heterosexual) men. Thus, socialist feminists see women, working class men, gay men etc as potentially making common cause.

**Brief Review of Evolution of this approach**

In Ireland a concern with feminism is rooted in a number of intellectual traditions including the history of the Irish Women’s Movement (Mahon, 1995; Smyth 1988 and 1993; Connolly, 1996, and 2001); international studies of equality policies (Gardiner, 1997); the impact of the women’s movement on aspects of state policies (Good, 2001); and an exploration of women and social policy in an Irish context (Kennedy 1999, Barry, 1998).

Feminist activity, in the late 1960s and early 1970s emerged in what has been described as the (second) Women’s Movement. It was an attempt to promote change within patriarchal power structures (such as the economy; political and legal structure) and cultural systems that reflected and reinforced a differential valuation of men and women. Very early on, we see the utilisation of international pressure by an ad hoc Committee of ten women’s organisations in Ireland so as to bring about the establishment of the First Commission on the Status of Women in 1970. This sort of strategy is typical of liberal feminism. In Ireland, in the early 1970s, typical liberal feminist concerns were equal pay and equal access to paid employment. However, the strategies used by the Women’s Movement included a variety of grass roots mobilisation- something which is much more typical of radical feminism. Such strategies included the public launch of the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement on
the most popular television programme of the time (The Late Late). Such strategies generated questioning of patriarchal control that legitimated the response by the State to EU Directives in the area of paid employment in the 1970s. In Ireland radical feminism was concerned with family and sexual issues: radical action centreing mainly around the three abortion (1983; 1992; 2002), two divorce referenda (1986 and 1996) and legal initiatives around crisis pregnancies. In the 1970s and 1980s a wide range of organisations, reflecting both radical and liberal feminist influences, emerged from within the Women’s Movement to provide support and services for women that were not provided by the wider institutional structures. They included Fertility Guidance Clinics; Cherish, to support pregnant single women; the Women’s Political Association; Rape Crisis Centres; the Irish Women’s Aid Committee etc.

The 1990s saw three very different kinds of developments. Firstly, although the phrase has not been generally used in Irish feminism, the 1980s and 1990s were characterised by an increase in what Australian work has called ‘femocrats’ or bureaucrats committed to advancing a feminist agenda (Franzway et al, 1989; Mazur, 2001). Some of these were activists in service organisations that became increasing institutionalised. Others were in the expanded and increasingly professionalised Council for the Status of Women (now the National Women’s Council). Still others were in organisations and agencies that became ‘embedded within the state’, for example, though the social partnership process; in the Department of Equality and Law Reform etc (Good, 2001). Their existence needs to be located in a wider institutional context characterised by the election of Mary Robinson, the first woman President of Ireland; the establishment of the Second Commission on the Status of Women and the creation of a separate Department of Equality and Law Reform
(1993-1997) which monitored the implementation of the recommendations of that Commission. Secondly the 1990s also saw the rapid growth of locally based (mainly working class) women’s groups concerned with women’s poverty and with empowering women in their families and communities. One might regard such developments as reflective of socialist feminism although they typically did not describe themselves in these terms. These groups typically used non-hierarchical methods of organisation. Their work was facilitated by funding from a variety of State and EU Resources (such as the New Opportunities for Women funding: see Doyle, 1999). Thirdly, the 1990s also saw the strengthening of a feminist intellectual critique of Irish society. Up to then, with a small number of notable exceptions, there was little written about the Women’s Movement and its importance in Irish society. This was perhaps not surprising given the hierarchically and numerically male dominated nature of Irish Universities (see O’Connor, 2002). In the early 1990s all of the Universities in Ireland had Women’s Studies Programmes at undergraduate and/or postgraduate level, with a total of approximately forty Women’s Studies courses in existence (albeit under-resourced and with inadequate staffing levels). Feminist publishing also flourished in the shape of Attic Press, the Irish Journal of Feminist Studies and University publishing initiatives by the Women’s Studies staff and students. These developments stimulated a wider ideological challenge: including a critique of the social policy area for its exclusion of a gendered analysis of citizenship (see for example Kennedy, 1999); a critique of employment equality and broader welfare and sex equality policies (Gardiner, 1997; Mahon, 1998). The Universities obligations in the equality area; the importance of role models for that half of the undergraduate and postgraduate student populations who are women; and a major anonymous University wide funding initiative on behalf of Women’s
Studies, premised on increased mainstreaming, offers some hope for the continuance of an intellectual critique of those structures which create and transmit knowledge.

**Mainstream Variants of Feminism in Current Use**

In Ireland, by far the most common variant is liberal feminism. Implicit in it is a concern with access and representation, reflecting a concern with legitimacy, democratic deficits and imperfect citizenship. This perspective ‘treats patriarchy as an accident, an imperfection that needs to be ironed out’ (Franzway et al, 1989: 15). The assumption is that once awareness has been created and stereotypical thinking changed, the state and other structures will be gender neutral. In the meantime an attempt needs to be made ‘to level the playing pitch’: with positive action being allowed in the 1998 Equality Act. Radical feminism has also had an influence (O’Connor, 1996; 1998; 2000; Department of Equality and Law Reform, 1999; Humphreys et al, 1999), particularly in terms of a critique of gendered organisational procedures and cultures; sexual harassment, the devaluing of ‘women’s work’; the peripheral location of ‘women’s units’; and the underlying relationship between masculinity and management.

Psychoanalytical feminism, post-modern feminism and global feminism are mainstream variants although they are less prevalent in Ireland. Psychoanalytical feminism recognises that work, whether paid or unpaid, is also about meaning and identity. Thus it opens up the whole question of what women want and value, and the way this is affected by their early experiences within particular societies. Thus, for example, it is arguable that there is a cultural expectation that ‘love labour’ (Lynch, 1989; Lynch and McLoughlin, 1995) should be embedded in women’s identity in
Irish society. Equally, one might suggest that some men’s underlying fear of, and hostility towards women (see Clare, 2000) reflects the traditional pattern of women’s dominant responsibility for child rearing (see Chodorow 1978 and Dinnerstein 1977). Preference theory (Hakim, 1995) has become one of the most popular contemporary faces of this broad area in the UK. Hakim argues that women are responsible adults who chose to be either home centred uncommitted workers or committed workers. This perspective pays little attention to the context in which that choice is made. Thus, for example, in 1971, when the Marriage Bar was in existence, only 7% of married women were in paid employment in Ireland. To assume, as preference theory does, that this pattern simply reflected women’s commitment seems very problematic.

Post Modern feminism has been concerned with deconstructing all unitary explanations and with understanding and valuing the position of ‘Other’ (the marginal, the devalued etc). Theorists such as Irigary (1993) have challenged us to reflect on how we can know what it is to be a woman since language itself is patriarchal. Post Modern feminism arguably ignores the fact that, in countries such as Ireland, gender is the frame within which adults are seen and evaluated. In such a context behaviour and achievements are not gender neutral: Thus, for example, the ambition and single mindedness of a Chief Executive has quite a different flavour if that person is a man or a woman. Similarly, promiscuous sexual behaviour is seen very differently for the same reason. The area that is “mapped” by gender varies, of course, between different societies. However in Ireland, regardless how we see ourselves, we are seen as women. New feminism, which has emerged as a reaction to Post Modern feminism, ‘concentrates on the material realm of inequality’ (Walter, 1998: 5/6). It stresses the reorganisation of paid work so as to achieve a better balance
between work and family; comprehensive child care (free) for all children whose parents want it; tackling poverty and violence; and men wanting to, and taking on, the same responsibilities as women in the home. Also part of a New Feminist agenda are issues related to importance of increasing women in public positions of power and providing education and training for women in what Walter calls ‘dead-end’ jobs. Essentially however this is simply a selective version of the agendas of liberal and radical feminism.

Global feminism has highlighted the extent to which gender is affected by lines of social cleavage apart from class and race within an increasingly globalised world: such cleavages arising from imperialism, colonialism etc. It is particularly concerned with the oppression experienced by Third World women, and seeks to challenge the implicit ethnocentrism in much First World feminist thought. It can be seen as lying within the broad tradition of socialist feminism since it is concerned with ‘the oppressive results of colonial and nationalist policies and practices, how Big Government and Big Business divide the world into the so-called First World (the realm of the haves) and the so-called Third World (the realm of the have-nots)’ (Tong, 1998: 226).

Feminism has been compared to other social movements, such as environmental or civil rights movements, which also rely on popular awareness and mobilization. However, implicit in feminism is a fundamental challenge to the patriarchal order that underlies the main institutional structures (whether these are the institutional Church; the economic system; the legal or political system etc). This is arguably related to a certain coyness surrounding individuals’ identification of themselves as feminists. A
further consequence is that the elements in a feminist agenda that will be taken up by these institutional structures are those that are most compatible with other agendas and least disruptive of the patriarchal order. Thus for example, job sharing initiatives, which are predominantly taken by women and used to reduce their opportunities as regards promotion are likely to attract more support than fundamental changes in promotional mechanisms, re-evaluation of the value of women’s work or challenging male organisational cultures and styles of management.

**Major Criticisms**

There are four main types of criticisms. Firstly, there are those that argue that institutions, including the State, are gender neutral so that feminism as a gendered explanatory framework is irrelevant. Secondly, there are those who are critical of the two most common frameworks: arguing that liberal feminism is concerned with women who are already privileged; and that radical feminism is an extreme view endorsed only by those who are ‘man haters’. Thirdly, there are those who argue that women’s position ultimately reflects their preferences and/or their biological make-up, and thus that it is inevitable or what women want. Fourthly, there are those who see a focus on feminism as unacceptably challenging male authority.

The first argument, namely that organisations in general, and the state in particular, are gender neutral, is one that is implicit in much popular thinking and in the views of classical sociologists (such as Weber). However, since the late 1980s increasing attention has been paid to ‘gendered process internal to the bureaucratic process of the State’ (Witz and Savage, 1992:6). Increasingly it is accepted that once one accepts that ‘staff’ bring their personal interests into organisations and that these
shape the way they discharge their functions, [one] must also accept that gendered perceptions, practices and attitudes will be present too (Halford, 1992:172). In terms of authority and division of labour, it is difficult to see how an argument that gender is not relevant can be sustained. In Ireland, almost three quarters of administrative, executive and managerial positions are held by men; areas of predominantly female employment tend to be lower paid than areas of predominantly male employment; women’s hourly earnings in the industrial sector are roughly three quarters of men’s; the tiny proportion of executives in the private sector who are women earn 75% of their male counterparts-and this is not due to lower levels of education for women (O’Connor, 2000; NDP, 2001).

The second criticism is rather different. There are two specific elements to it. Criticisms of liberal feminism focus on its concern with middle class, well-educated women (i.e. women who are relatively advantaged by comparison with other women). This criticism implicitly endorses a rather colonial view of women. It implies that in so far as such women have a ‘comfortable’ if subordinate place within the structure, this is, or should be, sufficient. This would be seen by many as a highly offensive view of women. In addition, underlying this criticism is a concern with the failure of liberal feminism to explore all possible sources of discrimination, oppression etc. Attempts have been made to develop frameworks that incorporate multiple axes (for example, socialist feminism or global feminism). This is a very difficult exercise, and raises the question of the relationship between these elements (for example, is a black, working class, lesbian woman four times more oppressed, or do these forms of oppression interact other than in an additive way). Class as an analytical concept has long faced similar difficulties, although in Ireland, these have not diminished an
academic acceptance of the concept. Hence, the question as to why the partiality argument is used in the case of liberal feminism needs to be raised. The second part of this criticism focuses on radical feminism and implies that the name itself is sufficient to indicate that it is an extreme perspective, and hence by definition, unacceptable. Some suggest that all radical feminists are biological essentialists and/or man-haters. This is simply not true. Radical feminism does, as the word radical implies, go to the root of the issue. At the heart of radical feminism is a challenge to the relatively lower public value attached to women. It questions the societal value, reflected in the wages and working conditions of those in areas of predominantly male activity (such as engineering) and predominantly female activity (such as nursing or primary teaching); and the relative importance of expenditure in such predominantly ‘male’ or ‘female’ areas. In a world where both women and men do roughly the same total amount of paid and unpaid work, it looks at the implications of the fact that internationally, women undertake disproportionate amounts of unpaid work (UN, 2001). Indeed many writers and dramatists have depicted Irish women as strong, coping and courageous, while Irish men have been presented as weak, sometimes over-dependent on maternal approval and often as rather pathetic figures. This view however ignores the increasing importance of the machinery of the state, and the subordinate position of women within it and in the wider public arena.

The third criticism suggests that women’s position ultimately reflects their preferences and/or their biological make-up. Given the rapidity of change in Irish society over the past thirty years it is difficult to sustain an argument that biology is destiny. Thus, for example, the middle aged grew up hearing that it was not ‘natural’ for women to be paid as much as men; that married women did not want to be in
paid employment etc. Such views are now seen clearly as (quaint) social and cultural constructions. The question as to whose interests such views serve is increasingly seen as crucial.

The fourth criticism specifically focuses on feminism as a challenge to male authority and is quite visible in contemporary Irish society. Thus, for example, feminism is depicted as emasculating men; it is seen as in some way responsible for boys’ under-performance at school and for male suicides. Situations where women are promoted over their male counterparts are seen as indicating that the candidate is unqualified other than in terms of gender; with promotion of women by women being seen as particularly problematic (in stark contrast to promotion of men by men). The devaluation of child care by a patriarchal legal system and hence its allocation to women, is resented by some men who want to share custody of their children. Incoherent rage and a twisted sense of protectiveness sometimes appears to have been reflected in the murder of wives and children. Civil rights for blacks in the US in the 1960s were bitterly opposed—as indeed was the end of slavery in the 19th Century. At the heart of such attitudes lies a failure to accept societal and cultural change: change which is also politically and economically necessary and morally desirable.

Overwhelmingly the changes that have occurred in Irish society since the Women’s Movement in the late 1960s and 1970s have been in individual behaviour (e.g in family size, paid employment etc). In many cases they have occurred despite, rather than because of institutional support from the patriarchal structures of the institutional Church; State; economic system etc. What is required is a re-framing of gender relations within this changed society. For the most part such institutional structures
have been strikingly unwilling to do this. This is despite the fact that every day we see individual men making such adjustments in their day-to-day lives- because of their ties to wives, lovers, daughters and mothers.

**Select Irish Case Study: The Civil Service**

The state is not, of course, a unitary phenomenon nor is its position in gender politics fixed. The state is typically seen as including not only the Houses of the Oireachtas but also the civil service, judiciary, police, army and state-run enterprises. In this section, we will look at the impact of feminism on one particular part of the state apparatus viz the Civil Service. It will be suggested that the Civil Service has been affected by feminism, both indirectly (i.e. through the influence of the EU Directives and financial requirements) and directly (through the influence of grass roots feminism and/or femocrats). It will be argued that the main influence has been liberal feminism, and the effect of this has been greatest when it has coincided with other agendas (whether these have been those of the EU; Trade Unions etc). Prior to looking at this, some key aspects of the legislative situation and policy context will be outlined. These are seen as part of the context for, and to some extent the effect of, civil service action.

The introduction of the EEC Directive as regards equal pay in 1975 was as the insistence of France who already had legislation and who did not wish to be at an international disadvantage within an economically integrated Europe. Ireland’s compliance with this directive was prompt, reflecting the fact that European pressure at that time was combined with grass roots feminist influences. However, the 1974 Anti-Discrimination (Pay) Act and 1977 Employment Equality Act had a limited
effect on the male/female wage gap because women and men continued to do
different kinds of jobs, and men continued to be disproportionately represented in
senior positions. Indeed the very way in which the 1977 Equality Employment Act
was phrased and interpreted by the courts implicitly endorsed a subtle acceptance of
the differential treatment of men and women. The Nathan versus Bailey Gibson case,
drawing on legal precedents from the European Court of Justice, clearly established
that if a practice affected one sex more than another, then indirect discrimination was
an issue. Thus, taken-for-granted differential treatment of women became
problematic. In some arenas however it continued to occur because indirect
discrimination had become so embedded in state practices. Thus, for example, the
overwhelming majority of state funded FAS programmes continued to be targeted at
those on the Live Register, although it was recognised that, since women were less
likely than men to be on this Register, this ‘suggests indirect discrimination in access
to vocational training’ (Fourth Report of the Fourth Joint Committee, 1996: 22).
Provisions for positive action were included in the EU Amsterdam Treaty (1998).
Under the 1998 Employment Equality Act (Section 24) positive action is permitted:
‘removing existing inequalities which affect women’s opportunities in the areas of
access to employment, vocational training and promotion, and working conditions’.
However, such measures targeted at compensating women for existing disadvantage
‘remain largely untried’ here (Doyle, 1999:137). Case Law in the European Court of
Justice has further clarified the issue where both candidates are equally qualified, but
one sex is under-represented in posts at that level (the Kalanke v Bremen (1995) and
the Marschall v Land Nordrhein Westfalen (1997) cases). In Ireland, debate about this
kind of positive action has not even begun. It is also well established that Ireland has
one of the least developed systems for State subsidised non-stigmatising child care in
the EU. Maternity Leave was introduced in 1981, although it was not particularly generous by comparison with other EU countries. Parental leave was introduced in conformity to an EU Directive in 1998 and is unpaid (and the EU has already had to instruct the State to extend its coverage). ‘Family friendly’ policies are promoted but such policies, although they facilitate individual women’s attempts to reconcile work and family, frequently militate in practice against their promotion. There is an EU Code of Practise (1996) recognising the implicit gender bias in job classifications but this has received almost no attention.

In addition to its influence at a legislative level, the influence of the EU has also been important in terms of financial pressure. In 1996, the European Commission noted that, although limited targeted funding initiatives for women were important, they were not sufficient. Thus, regulations governing the Structural Funds placed a legal obligation on Member States to gender mainstream policies and programmes receiving Structural Funds: firstly, by analysing their implications for women and men (gender impact assessment) and secondly, by checking that the gender dimension has been taken into account at every level of decision making (gender proofing). Hence, gender mainstreaming was adopted in the National Development Plan (2000-2006) and an NDP Equality Unit was established to address mainstreaming issues (thus providing some in-house femocrat influence). The five year review process after the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (1995) indicated that major challenges remained. International pressures combined with femocrat influences and grass roots feminism led to the formulation of a Draft National Plan for Women (2001). The main focus is on what Mazur (2001:5) has called descriptive representation (i.e. the presence of women) as opposed to substantive representation.
(i.e. activities or ideas ‘that favour women’s interests in their full complexity’); with the mechanisms to improve women’s under-representation in senior positions being particularly vague.

Overall, there has been a consistent pattern of moving forward on gender initiatives in response to legal and/or financial pressure from Europe. Broadly similar patterns can be seen in the case of equality policy within the Civil Service itself. The accession of Ireland to what was then the EEC necessitated the removal of Marriage Bar in the Civil Service in 1973 and the ending of the practice of having different wage scales for men and women doing identical work. In 1986, the Civil Service announced its commitment: ‘to employment policies, procedures and practices which do not discriminate on the grounds of sex or marital status, and which promote full equality of opportunity between men and women’ (Civil Service, Circular:15/86). Its Code of Practice referred to recruitment and training practices and procedures and stressed that single sex training programmes should continue to be provided and encouraged as laid down under Section 15 of the 1977 Employment Equality Act. References to promotion were vaguer, with no reference being made to the various rules and arrangements existing within particular grades and departments. The impression that the commitment of the civil service to liberal equality measures was until very recently indeed, mainly rhetorical is suggested by a number of phenomena. We will focus on three of these viz legal cases taken by Civil Servants themselves; the relative lack of change in the proportion of women at senior level; and the attitudes emerging from a study of civil servants commissioned by the General Secretaries themselves.
Firstly then, despite the monitoring mechanisms established in the mid 1980s, practises which were fundamentally discriminatory continued to exist and only came to light through legal action - typically taken by the union. The hollowness of the 1986 Code of Practice as regards job-sharing became apparent in 1997, when employees in the Department of Finance took a successful case against that Department when it would not allow them to job share. Job sharers (who were predominantly women) were also credited with less service than full-time workers when they were being considered for promotion (which was widely affected by seniority). This was seen as discriminatory by the European Court of Justice in 1997. A number of other cases have been taken and won: including one where the Irish High Court found that there was systematic discrimination against female clerical assistants who were put at a lower level than their male counterparts in the paper keeper grade, when both groups were included in the clerical officer grade.

Secondly, despite the (Second) Women’s Movement, and the Civil Service commitment to gender equality, positional authority has remained very much in male hands. This is clearly recognised in its new Gender Equality Policy (2001). This noted that although women made up 69% of the total Civil Service staff at the lower levels (i.e clerical officer to higher executive officer), they only constituted 23% of those at the higher level (assistant principal to secretary general). The percentage of women in the principal officer grade increased by only 1% between 1987-1997 (from 23% to 24%); although the proportion of women in the next grade (principal officer) increased from 5% to 12% over the same 10 year period. However, the representation of women at the very top is still very low: 91% of General Secretaries and 88% of Assistant General Secretaries being men (Draft National Plan, 2001-2005). These
trends are not peculiar to the Irish civil service (see Levinson et al, 1992; Canadian Government 1990; Bulletin on Women and Employment, 1994). Very similar trends also exist in the UK civil service (although the Marriage Bar was removed there in the 1940s: Hansard Society, 1990).

Thirdly then, in 1997, the Co-Ordinating Group of General Secretaries at the top of the Civil Service commissioned research to investigate the imbalance in the representation of women in the higher grades. One of the most important themes to emerge from this multi-faceted study involved promotional mechanisms. The authors noted that current arrangements were ‘complex, highly variable….and all too often opaque’ (Humphreys et al, 1999:182). Roughly half of both the men and women saw change in promotional procedures as key. When asked to recommend future improvements, promotion was also most often mentioned by both men and women (ibid:128-129). There was also clear evidence of gender variation in the experience of discrimination. Thus, 9% of men at Higher Executive Officer (HEO) level or above but 25% of women stated that they had been unfairly treated or discriminated against because of their gender (ibid:131). Amongst the women, this increased dramatically with level: up to 40% of women principal officers/ assistant principals stating that they had been unfairly treated because of gender; two thirds of women who were at general/assistant secretary level saying that they knew of colleagues who had been treated unfairly because of their gender (ibid:131/2). The most common area where discrimination was considered to have occurred was as regards promotion (ibid:131-132).
Humphrey’s et al (1999:190/191) highlight their concern about the gender implications of a reliance on seniority as a basis for promotion and recommend that affirmative action needs to be taken ‘if women are not to be discouraged in their promotional prospects by the double burden of work and caring, the gender stereotyped attitudes of management….’. They noted that although women were less likely than men to enter promotional competitions, they were as willing as men to allow their name to go forward for promotion in their own department. Departments are now required to set goals for the participation of women in promotion processes and to actively seek their increased participation (Department of Finance, 2001b:11). Such goals are, of course, entirely legal, and no more problematic than other strategic management goals. Across the Civil Service as a whole, there is a specific goal of having one third of posts at assistant principal level held by women within the next five years (Department of Finance, 2001a: 7). Reference is made to the development of an organisational culture which maximizes the potential of all civil servants, although no mechanisms seem to have put in place to tackle the reliance on seniority or the promotional implications of differentially valued ‘male’/’female’ areas of work. The effectiveness of this new policy remains to be seen.

Thus, the Civil Service can be seen as illustrative of a context where a (diluted) liberal feminist influence has come into play, under the influence of the EU, particularly in those areas where a feminist agenda has coincided with that of major stakeholders, and has marginal effects on patriarchal control. Interestingly, there has been no discussion of the relevance of the attempts made to tackle religious discrimination in the Northern Ireland Police Force (viz 50/50 selection of those above a merit level) as a way of tackling gender imbalance in the Civil Service.
Equally contract compliance and grant denial for employers who fail to meet their statutory obligations - the very measures long advocated by the sex, race and disability lobbies in Northern Ireland have not been considered.

It is important to stress that the patterns that have emerged in the civil service are by no means atypical. Broadly similar trends occur in the representative arm of the state: 80% of full Government Ministers are male; as are 76% of Junior Ministers (and 87% of TDs and 82% of Senators). These patterns of course are not peculiar to the state but also occur in the semi-state structures; in the private commercial sector and in academia etc (O’Connor, 1998 and 2,002; Dept of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 1998). Thus the patterns in the Civil Service can be seen as reflecting a wider Irish cultural pattern. In the US on the other hand, 44% of managers and administrators are women: the 26% in Ireland placing us below Spain (32%) and the UK (33%) and above Greece (22%) on this indicator (United Nations 2000:165). Interestingly, however, although Irish women only constitute only 26% of managers and administrators, they constitute two thirds of those in the professions. Thus their relative absence from such positions cannot be explained by their educational level.

Summary Review of Theoretical Utility

The relationship between feminist ideas, rooted in an inchoate social movement and their impact on policy making (whether at the level of defining the problem; setting agendas; formulating policies and implementing them) is by no means clear-cut. Like any unidimensional explanatory framework, its importance is difficult to prove, all the more so since the elements of a feminist agenda which are most likely to be adopted are those which are compatible with the agendas of other stakeholders. In Ireland with
a small number of exceptions, the whole question of the influence of gendered thinking on Irish policy has been little discussed, despite the fact that it is widely assumed that adult men and women have different interests, priorities and life styles. Internationally, the dominance of Post Modern feminism in the 1980s and 1990s moved feminism away from a concern with very real social inequalities to more esoteric concerns with language and literature. The increasing recognition of ethnic and racial difference, and of differences between First and Third World women’s experiences posed further challenges: challenges with which feminism is still struggling. Such challenges are typical of all major explanatory frameworks. However, within a country such as Ireland, which is still racially/ ethnically largely homogenous and where being male/ female is still crucially important in social and cultural terms, the relevance of feminism as a framework for understanding policy remains important. It is worth stressing that recognition of a gendered reality does not assume that this is simply created by biological differences between men and women. Rather, in a society where gender is a socially and culturally constructed reality, certain policies and priorities will seem obvious to those in hierarchically and numerically male dominated structures (for example, child care measures may well appear less important to those in these structures than the provision of international level sporting facilities).

The influence of feminism on public policy is debateable. On the one hand, on the assumption that feminism is a very powerful institution, it is sometimes seen as ‘causing’ a wide variety of undesirable social patterns (ranging from marital breakdown to male suicide). On the other hand, major institutions (such as the State (whether its representative or administrative arms); the institutional Roman Catholic
Church; the economic system; the legal system etc) do not unequivocally underpin and support a feminist vision. Feminism can be seen to have an effect particularly and in so far as, its interests have coincided at particular moments with those of other major (predominantly patriarchal) stakeholders. Feminist strength is arguably important in influencing the definition of problems and the setting and maintaining a feminist agenda. This can be reflected, firstly, in a grass roots women’s movement; secondly, in a feminist intellectual elite; and thirdly in terms of the positioning and strength of ‘femocrats’, whether in the state apparatus or more broadly in organisations concerned with women’s issues. Of course, a radical grass roots sector may actually provide alternative organisations (e.g Rape Crisis Centres in Ireland in the 1970s). These combined factors accounted for the prioritisation of legislation in the equality area in the early 1970s; and for the stress on job sharing, which was seen as simultaneously reducing women’s possibilities as regards promotion and providing much needed increases in the labour force in the 1990s.

Connell (1994: 161) has suggested that: ‘Too close an alignment with feminism gives offence to patriarchal ideology as mobilised in the churches, and to men’s employment interests as mobilised in corporate management and male-dominated unions’. In Ireland the (predominantly female) service sector is the main source of current and future employment; women are doing better educationally than men and including women in decision making positions within the economic system is seen by the EU as crucial to economic viability and political stability. For the most part, the actual policies that are formulated and implemented reflect the nature of the strategic alliances that are possible at any one moment in time. The net effect has been incremental change in those areas that are least corrosive of male authority, and most
compatible with other social objectives. However, the perceived legitimacy of voices which articulate women's needs and perspectives in all their diversity is still problematic.

Further Reading

Classics


Contemporary


Comparative


**Case Study Source Material**


Department of Finance (2001a) *Gender equality for the Civil Service*. Dublin: Stationery Office

**Other References in text**


Clare, A. (2,000) *On men: Masculinity in Crisis.* London: Chatto and Windus


**Key Words**
equality
family friendly
equality policies
Women’s Movement
EU
Positive action
Affirmative action
Organisational culture
Feminism: radical, liberal, socialist; Post Modern; global; new; psychoanalytical
State
Academia
Patriarchy
Discrimination
Promotion
Job sharing
Trade Unions
Social Partnership
Femocrats
Grass roots feminism
Working class women’s groups