There have been many changes at a structural and cultural level in Irish society over the past twenty years. Since the early 1970s, different wage scales for men and women in the same jobs have been abolished; the "marriage bar" obliging women to retire on marriage from a variety of jobs in the public service has been lifted; inequalities based on gender have been substantially eliminated from the social welfare system; legal entitlement to maternity leave, without the possibility of dismissal, has been established, and extra-marital births, as a proportion of total births, have increased six-fold. On the other hand, many aspects of Irish women's lives have not changed. Like many European women, Irish women are still underrepresented in the political system, at the higher echelons of the economic system, and in the church structure. Like other European women, their average wage is lower than men's; they are typically found in a small range of paid occupations; and they typically carry the main responsibility for domestic and child care activities. In addition, and in contrast to their average European counterpart, married women's participation in the Irish labor force, although it has increased dramatically over the past twenty years, is still very low, with 73.1 percent of Irish married women not being in paid employment in 1992 as compared with an average of 58.4 percent in other European Union countries.

When Ireland joined the European Community in 1973, the Republic became bound by a series of directives as regards equal pay and equal treatment in the area of access to employment and social security. These directives were sometimes implemented very tardily indeed. It is fair to say that the Irish state has consistently been a reluctant assentor to European directives.
in the area of women, with the initial pressure for legal change in all of these areas coming from Europe, followed up by individual legal action and group pressure from within Ireland. The discourse which has been opened up through this process has allowed Irish women to define themselves as equal within the employment area. However, as the Second Commission on the Status of Women in Ireland noted: “Equality for women in spheres other than work does not have any underpinning in the Constitution: the basic law of our country.” The dominant cultural discourses in Ireland through which women are still defined are those related to caring and service—to reproduction and familism—discourses supported by the dominant structural realities—the church, the state, the family and community worlds of invisible patriarchy, and the economic system. The paragraphs to follow will show that these discourses raise the question of resistance, and the shape it can take at a societal and individual level, which may be located in the context of similarities in the behavior of Irish and other European women.

Over the past twenty years there has been a good deal of interest in the social and cultural construction of femininity, and in particular in the extent to which patriarchal ideology has attributed to women such characteristics as submissiveness, passivity, and self-sacrifice which are particularly conducive to patriarchal control. Indeed, it has been argued that “Femininity is a man-made construct, having essentially nothing to do with femaleness.” In her early work, Mary Daly stressed the importance of women saying no to what she called “the morality of victimization,” and yes to what she called “the ethics of personhood.” In this context, Robert Parker’s and Hilary Graham’s distinction between “caring for” another person in the sense of tending them, and “caring about” them in the sense of “feeling for” them is useful. Gillian Dalley has argued that at an

4 See Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).
ideological level these are indissolubly linked in the case of women, but not in the case of men. Dalley argues that it is possible for men to care about someone, without being expected to care for them; while this is not so in the case of women, since day-to-day tending is interwoven with definitions of femininity and embedded in ideological concepts of mothering.  

Although they are obviously not peculiar to Ireland, such ideas seem particularly appropriate to it. Despite little quantifiable, empirical evidence, it is possible to argue that an ideology of femininity in Irish society is closely interwoven with “tending” in the sense of caring for children, seeing to housework, and looking after vulnerable or dependent members of the family or community; self-sacrifice, particularly to a husband and children; submissiveness, to appropriate authority figures, and self-effacement. This discourse implies that the appropriate contribution of all women—regardless of their age, life stage, domestic situation, talents or wishes—lies in caring and service within the context of women’s economic, social, and psychological dependence on men.

The attitude of the Irish state to the centrality of such “duties” is implied in Article 41.2 of the Irish Constitution, which pledges that mothers will not be obliged by economic necessity “to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.” Such attitudes are also evident, albeit less obviously, in the continued inequalities in the division of domestic labor in the home, 7 as well as in various regulations concerning social welfare—particularly in the difficulty that women with children experience in being identified as available for work, and hence, in getting Unemployment Assistance Payments. 8

Further, the image of a passive, self-sacrificing “mother” figure has strong roots in Irish Catholicism: linked indeed with an image of Mary as a woman who obeyed without question and who devoted her life to the service of her Son. 9 These themes have been steadily repeated by the Irish

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Roman Catholic Hierarchy over the years: the idealization of motherhood, the importance of family life, the nature and importance of women’s lives of service and self-sacrifice fitting together easily within a critique of materialism and selfishness.\(^{10}\)

Being female in Irish society is very closely tied up with the bearing of children. Indeed, the word “mother” is used effectively interchangeably with woman in the Irish Constitution (41.2.1 and 41.2.2). It emerged also in the positions endorsed in what has become known as the “abortion debates” prior to the 1983 and 1992 referenda.\(^{11}\) This was clearly spelled out by Attracta Ingram who noted that

> Vesting the unborn with an absolute right to life can be thought consistent with the mother’s equal right to life only if our image of woman confines her to a natural and social role of reproduction and nurture. . . . The trick is performed by supposing that her natural human identity and proper social role is reproduction.\(^{12}\)

Within the context of the ideological parameters of the state, the Roman Catholic Church and invisible patriarchy, the existence of women’s personhood other than at a reproductive level was effectively a non-issue. Furthermore, although a Women’s Right to Choose Group within the Irish Women’s Movement was established in 1979, the focus of the abortion debate even within the movement did not center around the issue.\(^{13}\) Rather, moral, legal and medical issues dominated. Indeed, if we accept that a woman’s personhood is naturally, inevitably, and totally expressed in reproduction, then the question of a possible conflict between her rights and those of the unborn revolves around the extent to which birth is likely to endanger her physical life, and this indeed became defined as the “substantive issue” in the Second Referendum on abortion in 1992. The sub-

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sequent Supreme Court ruling that the amendment to the Constitution had in fact introduced a right to abortion in the event of there being "a real and substantial risk to the life, as opposed to the health of the mother," further implicitly underlined the idea that woman's natural "human" identity was reproduction.

The absence, in the abortion debate, of any discussion of the social and personal consequences of conception also implicitly revealed the perceived irrelevance, within the dominant discourses, of the actual effect on women's day-to-day lives of rearing that child—including her ability to cope with another child, the implications of such a child for the other children in the family and for the marriage. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the family—effectively, the mother—is and will continue to be the main long-term carer. Yet, there remained in the debate the implicit assumption that, by guaranteeing the continuance to term of the child's life in the womb, its future care would be guaranteed. One can argue that both the church and invisible patriarchy could afford to neglect such issues, since the day-to-day task of child care is not seen as their responsibility. This, indeed, is not a peculiarly Irish phenomenon. Despite slight increases in men's participation in housework and child care internationally,¹⁴ it is women who continue to do the bulk of both, and to a greater degree in Ireland than in other European Community countries.¹⁵

Interestingly, the censorship of information that followed the first referendum on abortion in 1983 had not been anticipated.¹⁶ It involved for example a ban by Radio Telefís Éireann of any live discussion of abortion on radio or television; the removal of such women's self-help books as Our Bodies, Our Selves, and even the removal of British telephone directories from public libraries. It also involved the taking of legal action against the Dublin Well Women Centre, Open Line Counselling, and the Union of Students because they were seen as providing such information. The need for and the existence of referenda on such issues implicitly raised questions about the status of women's personhood, in the sense of their perceived status as moral beings. Yet referenda on women's right to travel and to information were necessary in the wake of the "X" case involving a fourteen-year-old rape victim who was prevented from leaving Ireland by

the attorney general in order to have an abortion with her parents’ support and consent.\textsuperscript{17}

Within the patriarchal Irish cultural tradition, the family is an important symbol of collective identity, unity, and security. Even so, many aspects of the lifestyle which seen as peculiarly “Irish”—for example, pub-culture; the nonsexual sociability captured by the concept of \textit{craic}—take place outside the family setting. Essentially a conservative document, the 1937 Constitution gave special importance to “the family,” but included both conservative and libertarian principles. The latter formed the basis for a recognition of the rights of the individual members over and above the competing rights of the unit. This is reflected in, for example, the Status of Children Act, 1987. The relevance of these ideas for the ideology of familism has not really begun to be discussed. It is in a sense revealing that Michel Peillon does not identify “family”\textsuperscript{18} as a key theme within Irish culture; indeed, it is possible that, it is not a key theme, as from a male cultural perspective, it is not seen as requiring any great commitment of men’s emotional or physical energy. On the other hand, ideologically, women’s “destiny” lies in subsuming their identity, and committing their time and energy to “the family.” Rowley has noted the irony in the discourse involving the family: “The woman was subsumed under the family, in the name of protecting individual freedoms against state control.”\textsuperscript{19}

Underpinning this familial ideology, Michelle Barrett and Mary McIntosh argue, is a “possessive individualism,” involving notions about privacy, autonomy and self determination—concepts which are used to define the parameters of the family unit.\textsuperscript{20} Within the family unit, however, the issue of the rights of all the individuals involved, particularly women and children, to privacy, autonomy, and self-determination is obscured, the implication being that, by some process of osmosis, their identities, wishes, etc. will coincide with those of the head of the household—or, if they conflict, they will be subsumed within it. This ideology is supported in Ireland by church, state, and the invisible patriarchy as well as by certain

\textsuperscript{18} Peillon, \textit{Contemporary Irish Society} (1982), p. 84.
\textsuperscript{19} R. Rowley, \textit{Administration} (1989), p. 46.
\textsuperscript{20} See Michelle Barrett, Mary McIntosh, \textit{The Anti-Social Family} (London: Verso, 1982).
sectors of the economic system as the farming community insofar as they are dependent on “family” labor—increasingly, the labor of wives.

Within the parameters of a peasant society where a low value was attached to individualization, and where women had some independent economic resources, the contrast in the position of men and women underlying the ideological commitment to the family was less extreme than it is today, and was effectively taken for granted. In the 1960s and 1970s, industrialization and rising levels of individualization were associated with an increased awareness of this issue. Michel Peillon’s work suggests that the only discourse within which it could be challenged was the dualism of equity-inequity, a position effectively endorsed by the liberal orientation of the most visible and continuous voice of the Irish Women’s Movement—The Council for the Status of Women. This discourse was seen by church, state and invisible patriarchy as problematic, ignoring as it did ideologies of caring and service, which were seen as key in defining women’s position.

Within a society where rhetorical commitment is given to equality but where education is particularly important in ensuring the future economic and social well-being of children and where access to education is related to family resources, the interests of women, especially upper- and middle-class women, whose lives are absorbed with their children, are well served by maintaining the discourse of familism, despite the fact that the family remains “an effective mechanism for the creation and transmission of gender inequality.” What is being argued here is that, in essence, the endorsement of familism effectively secures the privileged position of the upper and middle classes in Irish society and that this is seen as of benefit

23 See Peillon (1984), and consult his Contemporary Irish Society: An Introduction (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982).
to women from such positions whose lives revolve around their children. Interesting, this has not been recognized at an ideological level yet, despite the fact that it has been clearly established that

It [the family] is also, of course, the central mechanism for the transfer of property rights and the economic and political power associated with property. Family and kinship connections also provide a basis for recruitment to positions in economic and political organizations.\textsuperscript{27}

To present the dominant discourses of Irish women’s lives as starkly as this is, of course, to appear to succumb to the ultimate illusion—that of ideological closure. Of course, such closure does not exist. Thus, for example, the state does not act as a homogenous unit, and so certain elements of the state endorse particular ideologies while others effectively undermine them. Indeed, individual state departments frequently do not act in concert. Parts of the Department of Social Welfare are reinforcing male authority within a conventional two-parent family, while others are financially supporting lone parents, predominantly women, and providing community empowerment programs for them. Moreover, in the past twenty years we have seen changes in the relationship between church and state in Ireland and this has created “space” within which resistance can occur. Thus, for example, we have moved from a position where contraception was not legally available, in the early 1970s, to one where it was available only to \textit{bona fide} married couples in 1979, to one where today condoms are on sale in slot machines.

We have seen individual women, or groups of women, confront the system dramatically. Such episodes have typically lasted for only one or two years with more conventional reformist skirmishing continuing in each of the major institutional structures of the church, the state and the familial and community worlds of invisible patriarchy.\textsuperscript{28} But we have seen also the quiet actions of individual women, who have reduced their family size by half over three-decade period, and who now, like other European women, are withdrawing from marriage.\textsuperscript{29} In Ireland, this is


\textsuperscript{29} See \textit{Rapid Reports} (Brussels: European Commission, 1993).
occurring in a situation where we do not have divorce and where, as yet, the overwhelming majority of men do not pay maintenance, so that typically, separations effectively mean poverty for women and children. Like other European women, Irish women are increasingly deferring entry into marriage. The Irish marriage rate was the lowest in Europe in 1992, and age at marriage in Ireland, as in the other European countries, is rising. We do not know whether this indicates deferral of marriage, or a more permanent state of nonmarriage.

In Ireland, there exists no institutional structure which legitimizes a feminist discourse—a discourse which is widely presented in Ireland, as indeed in many parts of Europe, as marginal. Interestingly, however, the majority of respondents—86 percent—in a Market Research Bureau Ireland national sample study saw feminism as “ensuring that the things in life which women value receive full consideration in how the society and economy develop,” while 75 percent saw feminism as “developing a society in such a way that women play a part.”

Within a social and cultural context where the costs of radical leadership are obvious, resistance has taken an unusual form. Individual women—“victims and saviours”—have emerged who have highlighted various “faces” of patriarchal control. This phenomenon has been particularly evident in the 1990s, although it did not begin then. Thus, Ailbhe Smyth refers to Eileen Flynn, who lost her job as a teacher because of pregnancy and cohabitation with a married man; to Sheila Hodgers, who died after giving birth, having continued her pregnancy without treatment of, or even knowledge of, her own life-threatening cancer; to Ann Lovett who died at fifteen giving birth in a Marian grotto, and to Joanna Hayes, a single parent, who was interrogated following the birth and death of her own baby, the concealment of that death, and subsequent “confession” to the murder of what turned out to be a completely different baby.

In a society where being a “victim,” and making “sacrifices” is part of the discourse of both femininity and Roman Catholicism, the emergence of these women as symbols is perhaps not surprising. The sheer speed with which women have come to occupy such positions indicates the tensions underlying the cultural definition of women’s position in Irish society in the 1990s. Five incidents in 1992-93 received very widespread media

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coverage: the “X” case, a case taken by the attorney general to legally re-strain a fourteen-year-old rape victim from leaving the country with her parents consent to procure an abortion, thus implicitly highlighting legal patriarchal control; the case of Lavinia Kerwick who, because of her willingness to identify herself as a rape victim, raised the issue of the personal effect of rape and the issue of sexual patriarchal control.32 The Patricia O’Toole murder, by an army recruit, was in some ways very different, for it raised issues about the appropriateness of women’s behavior in public areas—drinking, driving, being alone late at night with a strange man—issues unrelated to the central one of murder, but in themselves topics relevant to the discourse of femininity within which the discussion of O’Toole’s murder was set. Her case raised the issue of physical patriarchal control. The man who was found guilty of her murder wore his army uniform during the trial, which he was legally entitled to do, and this also raised the issue of the extent to which the state was actively colluding with physical violence toward women. The personal revelations of a twenty-seven-year-old incest victim in Kilkenny exposed the reality of sixteen years of sexual and physical abuse by a father, thus implicitly highlighting domestic patriarchal control, and the attitude of the state toward domestic violence against women and children. Finally, in his interview with Annie Murphy, the mistress of the former bishop of Galway by whom she had a child, Gaye Byrne inadvertently stimulated a public debate about the double standards latent in Irish attitudes to single mothers and fathers, in terms of their responsibility for contraception and the moral value of their contributions to their child’s well-being. This case raised the issue of patriarchial moral control.

These individual women, and the public debate they inadvertently generated, has played an important role in challenging the discourses within which women are traditionally defined. These individual “victims and saviours” inadvertently raised issues about patriarchal control at a legal, sexual, physical, domestic, and moral level. The frightening face of patriarchal control that they revealed has challenged the assumptions of trust, which are a key element underpinning the dominant discourses of caring and service, reproduction, familism, etc. This challenge has been heightened by the fact that a discourse of autonomy and of equality is already in existence within Irish culture, although it is typically not perceived as relevant to that 73 percent of Irish married women who are not in paid

32 See Kate Shanahan, Crimes Worse than Death (Dublin: Attic Press, 1992).
employment. For these women, the challenge is to develop a discourse within which their lives have value and which does not leave them exposed to the terrifying possibilities emerging from the discourse revealed by the cases involving these “victims and saviours.” This requires a deconstruction of patriarchal control, and the emergence of discourses which could build positively on the most basic of socially constructed differences—gender—in a way relevant to those whose lives are defined by discourses outside the arena of paid employment. At this point, we do not know whether Irish culture will respond to this challenge. It is, indeed, possible that the whole issue of patriarchal control will again be suppressed. In this situation, the fear of the violent and destructive face of patriarchal control may contribute to a change in the dominant discourse defining Irish women—a paradoxical, but by no means unrealistic resolution.

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