

## **The Irish Patriarchal State: Continuity and Change**

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### **Introduction**

This chapter is concerned with exploring continuity and change in the ways in which the Irish state directly or indirectly facilitates patriarchal privileging, advances men's interests or embodies gendered concepts in its procedures or policies which have implications for resource based relationships or gender role constructions. Furthermore, since the state is a complex structure, contradictory elements and crisis tendencies will also be explored, so as to better understand the possibilities and limits of change.

Daly (1994: 102) noted that 'state theory has privileged the relationship between state and class, class being configured largely in terms of men's experience' (see for example Peillon, 1982; O'Riain and O'Connell, 2000). The gender of those involved in the state structures or the gendered implications of state policies is typically ignored in these contexts. Feminist research on the other hand has been particularly concerned with the impact of welfare policies on women, particularly their responsibilities as regards caring and dependency (Williams, 1997; O'Connor et al, 1999). In this chapter the focus will be on three levels:

- **Composition** of its administrative, executive and corporatist structures;
- **Policies and Discourses:** focussing both on those specifically related to gender; to aspects of the distributional system and to economic growth
- **Crisis Tendencies and Contradictions:** Since the state is a complex structure, contradictory elements and crisis tendencies will also be explored.

### **The Nature of the Patriarchal State**

The state is commonly defined as including at a minimum the Houses of the Oireachtas, the civil service, the judiciary, police and army. Brown (1992) suggested that there were four modalities of state power related to its patriarchal character: firstly, the juridical-legislative dimension involving the formal constitutional or legal aspects; secondly, the capitalist dimension involving the exploitation of women in the paid and unpaid labour force; thirdly, the prerogative dimension reflecting the state's ability to define what policies are in the national interest and its legitimate monopoly as regards the use of force by the police and the military; and fourthly, the bureaucratic dimension with its hierarchical procedures and discourses. As she sees it, 'its multiple dimensions make state power difficult to circumscribe and nearly impossible to injure' (Brown, 1992:7). Franzway et al (1989: 18) highlight the fact that the priorities defined by the state, which are the basis for its social and economic policies, reflect its patriarchal character: seeing the state as 'part of the dispersed apparatus of social control which works as much through the production of dominant 'discourses', i.e. ways of symbolising and talking about the world, as it does through naked force'.

Connell suggests that each state has 'a well marked gender regime' (2002:103) that is a set of structures 'involving a gendered division of labour, power and cathexis, related to the wider gender order in that society' (1994: 151). As part of division of

labour, 'the elites of politics, bureaucracy, the judiciary and the military' were 'almost everywhere entirely composed of men'. He also suggests that those structures that reflect 'women's interests are articulated in relatively peripheral parts of the state apparatus'; with 'women's work' typically being seen as less central to societal economic and social well being. The second element in Connell's state 'gender regime' is the structure of power with bureaucracy being seen as the form of institutionalised power central to the modern state. As such, it is characterised by 'the cultural masculinisation of authority' and by 'forms of hegemonic masculinity oriented to technical knowledge and personal competitiveness' (Franzway et al, 1989:46). Such structures can be seen as incompatible with feminism (Ferguson, 1984)- as 'social constructions that arise from a masculine vision of the world and that call on masculinity for their legitimation and affirmation' (Davies, 1995: 44). Putting it another way, definitions of masculinity, masculinised authority and male privileging are embedded in these structures; women's place in them is defined by men and it is a subordinate one. Women can only move upwards in them, by 'ignoring difference, acting as equal' (Davies, 1995)- a fragile strategy since women's status as honorary males may be withdrawn at any time: '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). The third element in Connell's 'gender regime' is cathexis or the patterning of attachments- not only those between men but also those that embody the motif of male authority and female service and subordination (e.g. male boss and female secretary). This stress on attachments has resonances with Hartmann's (1994:570) concept of patriarchy as 'a set of social relationships between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity amongst men that enable them to dominate women'.

For Connell (1995: 82) the majority of men benefit from the 'patriarchal dividend' in terms of 'honour, prestige or the right to command. They also gain a material dividend'. Thus Connell enables us to understand why patriarchal structures are maintained, if sometimes reluctantly, by individual men. Thus the gendered reality of the institutional structures is 'reflected the commitments implicit in conventional or hegemonic masculinity and the strategies pursued in an attempt to realise them' (Connell, 1987: 215). For Hartmann too, men as men can hope to benefit, at least to some extent, from the status quo: 'all men, whatever their rank in the patriarchy, are bought off by being able to control some women' (1994:570). Thus, although capitalism, patriarchy (and ethnicity) can be analytically distinguished, in practice they make accommodations with each other and all are implicated in the state.

For Connell, the gender regime in the state reflects that in society. Walby (1990) sees the state as one of the dominant sites of public patriarchy, with Mahon (1994) suggesting that Ireland, even in the early 1990s, was moving to public patriarchy. The ongoing patriarchal nature of Irish society is reflected in the fact that its rank on the Gender Empowerment Measure is lower than its rank on the Human Development Index (16<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> respectively: as compared, for example, with Sweden's rank of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> respectively: UNDP, 2005). The patriarchal nature of Irish society may be seen as reflecting the influence of the Institutional Roman Catholic Church; the economic system (particularly the farmers and the business sector: Breen et al, 1990; Peillon, 2001); external forces such as the European Union; the cultural and social

construction of heterosexuality as well as the impact of the women's movement (O'Connor, 1998). The state of course is not a monolithic structure, so that elements within it, such as the orientation of the political parties, Ministers, or General Secretaries in the Civil Service; as well as unions, wage negotiation arrangements, EU Directives etc. may undermine aspects of its patriarchal character (O'Connor et al, 1999; Daly, 1994).

Some (such as MacKinnon, 1987) have argued that the state is inevitably patriarchal. Connell (1994:163) however argues that the state has been 'historically patriarchal as a matter of concrete social practices. State structures in recent history institutionalise the European equation between authority and a dominating masculinity; they are controlled by men and they operate with a massive bias towards heterosexual men's interests'. Since he does not see the state as inevitably patriarchal, Connell (1995) invites speculation about the conditions under which there is more/less of an equation between authority and masculinity and more/less of a bias towards heterosexual men's interests.

### **Composition of the Patriarchal State: Continuity and Change**

The composition of the state is symbolically important in terms of undermining the equation between masculinity and authority, and in affirming women's existential value-a value that is not recognised by a patriarchal society that humiliates them (Therborn, 2005). Such composition has been of particular concern to liberal feminists (O'Connor, 2004). Connell (1994:142) credits them with a variety of successes internationally, including the enactment of anti-discrimination laws and equal opportunity programmes, but argues that it has limitations since it 'has no way of explaining men's resistance other than through prejudice' and cannot 'grasp the character of gender as an institutional and motivational system, nor develop a coherent analysis of the state apparatus or its links to a social context'.

In looking first at the composition of the administrative arm of the state, it is argued that the Civil Service is illustrative of a context where some weakening of the patriarchal structures has occurred, under the influence of liberal feminism, supported by the EU, coinciding with a Strategic Management initiative involving the linking of objectives as regards gender equality with more broadly based management objectives, an agenda supported by the largely female Civil and Public Servants Union (CPSU) and the Public Service Employees Union (PSEU).

As is evident from Table 1, the top echelons of the Civil Service remain overwhelmingly male (with 88-90 per cent of those at General Secretary and Assistant Secretary being men) despite the use of gender monitoring since 1987. However, there have been very substantial changes, particularly since 1997, in the proportion of women at Principal Officer, Assistant Principal and Administrative Officer Level. In the latter two grades, women are now a critical mass, constituting between a third and a half of those at this level. The goal of having one third of posts at Assistant Principal level held by women within the next five years (Department of Finance, 2001a: 7) was achieved by 2003- illustrating the usefulness of target setting in a context where such targets are supported by unions and management and ultimately tied into pay through Strategic Management Initiatives. As part of the latter, Departments were required to set goals for the participation of women in promotional processes and to

actively seek their increased participation in such competitions (Department of Finance, 2001b:11). This reflected an acceptance by Civil Service management that to maximise the potential of all civil servants, they needed to undertake affirmative action ‘if women are not to be discouraged in their promotion prospects by the double burden of work and caring and the gender stereotyped attitudes of management’ (Humphreys et al, 1999:190-191). In such a context, creating change ‘is a matter of unpicking a complex texture of institutional arrangements which intersect with the construction of masculinity and femininity’ (Franzway et al, 1989: 31). It involves changing mechanisms related to recruitment and promotional practices and procedures; those related to the range of job experiences available to women; the kinds of knowledge, skills and ways of working which are seen as valuable; and the gendered embodied image of authority in organisational cultures where one group (men) attempt to define another group (women) as unsuitable (O’Connor, 1995; 1996; 1998 and 2,000a; Mahon, 1991; Mahon and Dillon, 1996).

**Table 1: Percentage of Women at each Grade in the Irish Civil Service over time (1987, 1995, 1997 and 2003)**

Grades	1987*	1995*	1997**	2003***
<b>General Secretary</b>	0%	4%	5%	12%
<b>Assistant Secretary</b>	1%	6%	10%	10%
<b>Principal Officer</b>	5%	13%	12%	20%
<b>Assistant Principal</b>	23%	23%	24%	34%
<b>Administrative Officer</b>	26%	21%	37%	56%
<b>Higher Executive Officer</b>	34%	37%	39%	47%
<b>Executive Officer</b>	44%	51%	54%	64%
<b>Staff Officer</b>	67%	75%	75%	79%
<b>Clerical Officer</b>	68%	79%	79%	78%
<b>Clerical Assistant</b>	83%	82%	82%	

\*Co-ordinating Group of Secretaries (1996:48), quoted in O’Connor (1998a: 221);

\*\* Humphreys et al, (1999: 53 and 55); \*\*\* CSO (2004b)

Change is not of course inevitable nor all embracing. Thus for example, the proportion of women at General Secretary actually declined between 2001 and 2003 (from 16 per cent to 12 per cent) as did those at Principal Officer (from 25 per cent to 20 per cent: Centre for Advancement of Women in Politics 2005). No mechanisms seem to have put in place to tackle the implications of differentially valued ‘male’/‘female’ areas of work for promotion. There has also been no attempt to tackle gender based discrimination in the same way as religious based discrimination was tackled in the Northern Ireland Police Force (viz 50/50 selection of those above a merit level). It is also not clear what measures have been taken to deal with the fact that up to 40 per cent of women principal officers/ assistant principals stated that they had been unfairly treated because of gender; or the fact that two thirds of women at general/assistant secretary level said that they knew of colleagues who had been treated unfairly because of their gender: Humphreys et al 131/132).

In looking at the gender composition of the Irish state, it is also important to look at the representation of women in the political executive- i.e. in the Dail, Senate, Cabinet, local government and European Parliament. With the exception of the latter, women are still seriously under-represented in every area (NWCI, 2005a). Thus women hold only 14 per cent of the seats in the Dail (Lower House); under 17 per cent of those in the Senate (Upper House); roughly one in five of those at Cabinet Ministerial level (21 per cent) and those in Local Government (19 per cent). There is no suggestion that these patterns are changing rapidly- with the National Women's Council (2005) noting that the proportion of women in the Dail has risen by one per cent over the previous ten years. Biological arguments as regards the inevitability of such patterns are challenged by, for example, Sweden where 45 per cent of the seats in the Lower House are held by women; women constituting 52 per cent of Government Ministers (UNDP, 2005). They are also challenged by the fact that women made up 38 per cent of those elected from Ireland to the European Parliament in the 2004 elections (roughly double the proportion of women elected to that Parliament in 1984; and well more than double the proportion of women elected to the Dail). It may well be significant that 40 per cent of the women elected to the European Parliament were independents, as compared with under 10 per cent of the women elected to the Dail. Furthermore, particularly small proportions of women were elected to the Dail from the two main parties (Fianna Fail and Fine Gael: Centre for the Advancement of Women in Politics, 2005) –thus implicitly suggesting that there are issues as regards these parties interest in promoting gender representation.

Gernet (2005) suggests that transnational networks are important in promoting gender equality in Latin America, with a critical factor in this process being state leaders' desire for international legitimacy and acceptance. However she noted that national factors were particularly important in the case of gender quotas. Thus in Argentina, open democratic institutions, a vibrant media and civil society, strong women's rights organisations committed to gender quotas, support by state officials (including the President) and a political culture which saw such gender quotas as advantageous were critical in ensuring the enactment and implementation of such laws, with effects on the representation of women in the Parliament (Interestingly, Argentina scored higher on Gender Empowerment Measures than on the Human Development Index: UN, 2005). It is arguable that the latter two conditions at least do not exist in Ireland. Thus, for example, although state guidelines were put in place in 1991 requiring Ministers to ensure that at least 40 per cent of all nominations to State Boards were women, implementation has been poor with the overall representation of women on such Boards, fifteen years later, being 28 per cent. Furthermore, the lowest levels of representation are in areas where resourcing decisions are likely to be made. Thus there are no women at all on the Boards of the Central Bank or the National Treasury Management Company. Equally revealingly perhaps, the only Boards which have more women than men are the Equality Authority, the Legal Aid Board and Combat Poverty (NWCI, 2002). Such patterns reflects a widespread tendency for state implementation to be poor- particularly in areas (such as gender quotas) where there is no perceived electoral advantage. Thus despite the fact that an association with the specific objective of increasing the number of women in political life was founded in the 1970s (the Women's Progressive Association, subsequently called the Women's Political Association) such quotas have never been widely supported, or even discussed by women's groups in Ireland, possibly because, at grass roots level, a great

deal of the energy of the women's movement was absorbed by reproductive issues (Peillon, 2001)

Offee (1984) suggested that democracies dealt with legitimation problems by establishing agencies that, although typically funded by the state, operate at a distance from the central state apparatus. Such structures are designed 'to disburden the state of claims and thus ease its chronic legitimation problems' (Keohane, 1998: 88). In Ireland, a large number of such bodies occupy ambiguous structural positions constituting an 'administrative jungle' (Adshead, 2003:119) and including commercial, developmental, health, cultural and regulatory structures (IPA, 1997: 128). In general the representation of women on such structures is also poor. Thus for example, of the 34 City and County Enterprise Boards, only two met the 40 per cent recommended level for gender balance; while of the 34 County and City Development Boards only one even approached the recommended level.

The under-representation of women in the political system reflects a wider pattern- i.e. the fact that in liberal democracies, participation is dominated by members of powerful and privileged groups. Unless diversity is respected and appreciated, members of the dominant group will be held in higher esteem than those in subordinate groups, and political parties that nominate women, will not only fail to get them elected, but will lose seats that could have been won with a male candidate (see Baker et al, 2004 for a review of work in this area). It is arguable that this process has been evident both in the case of the Progressive Democrats and in the Labour Party. A gender differentiated, party designated list system, with proportional representation in multi-seat constituencies has been shown to be most effective in increasing representation of groups such as women. There is no evidence that this is even being considered.

The Irish state has attempted to deal with the issue of representation through an approach that has often been characterised as corporatist or semi-corporatist (Allen, 2000; Peillon, 1995). Thus in the late 1980s, a national process of social partnership was initiated, initially involving the (overwhelmingly male) traditional social partners i.e. the employers, the trade unions, the farmers and the civil servants. In 1996, partnership status was extended to the voluntary and community sector including women, people with disabilities, the unemployed etc through organisations such as the National Women's Council of Ireland, Conference of the Religious in Ireland, National Association for the Unemployed etc., with a corresponding expansion of the range of policy initiatives being discussed. Through this process, the state confers 'a monopolistic representational legitimacy on certain organisations and grants them a presence in policy-making arenas in exchange for ....support for agreements reached through corporatist negotiations' (Meade and O'Donovan, 2002:1). This can be seen as a blend of representative and participatory democracy- indeed as a kind of 'communicative democracy' (Young, 2000) where previously silenced or absent voices are drawn into policy making, prompting the re-assessment of taken for granted assumptions and alternatives. However such arrangements are increasingly being seen as problematic, since they directly or indirectly delegitimize dissent by encouraging self censorship, maintain control over the agenda and ultimately marginalize those who challenge the state legitimated view (Allen, 2000; O'Donovan, 2001). Thus the issue is not simply one of representation, but of the ideological privileging by the state of certain kinds of knowledge and implicitly, of the voices of

particular kinds of participants. In the case of women this seems to have been an example of cooptation (i.e. accepting them into the process, but not delivering in terms of policies: Mazur, 2001: 22). Indeed, the National Women's Council of Ireland did not endorse the 2002 social partnership agreement, since it did 'not in any way progress equality for women' nor address the needs of the socially excluded (NWCI, 2003). There are now no women's groups involved in the social partnership process (McGauran, 2005).

Overall then the composition of the Irish state, at both its senior administrative and executive levels, remains predominantly male dominated, with continuity despite change being the dominant motif. It is obvious from international comparisons, that such patterns are not biologically inevitable. Indeed, changes in the proportion of women at middle management levels of the Civil Service since 1997 illustrate the extent of change that is possible, in a context where that change is supported by unions and by management and is interwoven with Strategic Management Objectives and hence with pay. At present in Ireland although there is political and public acceptance of the need to ensure representation by geographical area, the need to ensure gender representation in the political system has evoked little support. Such representation reflects and reinforces the valuation of difference and potentially facilitates the mainstreaming of issues that are currently culturally defined as a special focus in women's lives in Irish society (viz. those relating to what Baker et al 2004 called 'love, care and solidarity'-activities that are still disproportionately carried out by women: McGinnity et al, 2005). Of course gender composition does not guarantee the existence of 'women friendly' policies. Nevertheless it is symbolically important in dealing with 'cultural misrecognition' (Frazer, 1995) and affirming women's existential value (Therborn, 2005).

### **Policies and Discourses reflecting the Patriarchal Nature of the State**

Connell sees the state as having a major stake in gender politics. It is not staffed by 'degendered automatons' and is characterised by '*gendered* perceptions, practices and attitudes' (Halford, 1992:172; see also Acker, 1990). It has been seen as systematically structured in such a way that 'its actions are more often in men's interests than in women's' (Walby, 1990: 160): 'What feminists are confronted with is not a state that represents 'men's interests' as against women's, but government conducted as if men's interests are the only ones that exist' (Pringle and Watson, 1990:234). Indeed Brown (1992: 14) suggested that it 'increasingly takes over and transforms the project of male dominance'- 'it mediates and deploys almost all of the powers shaping women's lives-physical, economic, sexual, reproductive, and political-powers wielded in previous epochs directly by men'. She argues that the role of the state as 'provider, equaliser, protector or liberator' is enmeshed with the increasing regulation, dominance, dependence and exploitation of women, at the same time as its power and privilege, like that of post-modern masculinity, are disavowed. This section focuses firstly on specifically gender related policies; secondly those concerned with social welfare and children, and thirdly those concerned with economic growth.

### ***The State, Irish Women and Gender Policies***

Liberal feminism, which sees the state as a key actor in alleviating discrimination, has been an important institutional reality in Ireland over the past thirty-five years (Smyth

1988, Mahon, 1995). Thus, in 1968 an ad hoc committee of ten women's organisations requested the state to set up the first Commission on the Status of Women -exploiting the possibilities created by a UN Directive asking member governments to examine the status of women in their countries (Connolly, 1997). This led to the setting up of the First Commission on the Status of Women in Ireland in 1970-less than ten years later than the President's Commission on the Status of Women in the US (Mahon, 1995) and at the same time as the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada (O'Connor et al, 1999).

The importance of external factors such as international normative pressure on state leaders (Gernet, 2005) and legal pressures from the European Community (now the EU: Peillon, 2001) have also been stressed. In Ireland, state leaders have, for whatever reason, never appeared to be under such normative pressure in the area of gender equality. On the other hand, European Directives were vital in the removal of the Marriage Bar in 1973 (the Marriage Bar prohibited women in a variety of occupations, including the civil service and second level teaching, from continuing paid employment after marriage: see O'Connor, 1998); in ending higher wage rates for married men; in ending women's lower and briefer social insurance payments, and the related discriminatory practices and policies surrounding their eligibility for unemployment assistance (O'Connor, 1998). The Irish state's lack of understanding of the nature of discrimination was illustrated by the fact that in 1986, in what purported to be an attempt to implement the 1979 EU Directive on Sex Equality in Social Security Schemes, it introduced 'compensatory payments' for men but not for women, leading to the conclusion that: 'Indirect discrimination has become so embedded in State Practice that it is not even perceived' (Fourth Report of Fourth Joint Oireachtas Committee on Women's Rights, 1996). These 'compensatory' payments were found to be discriminatory in 1995-the taking of that case to the European Court of Justice in 1987 reflecting the strength of a working class Women for Equality Group in Cork. Hence it seems plausible to suggest that although European Directives played a critical part, their enforcement, even in the mid 1990s reflected pressures from women's groups (Connolly, 2002 and 1997)

Within an Irish context, issues surrounding contraception and abortion have also clearly revealed the patriarchal nature of the state as it tried to maintain control over women's bodies, and were a focus of radical feminism in the early 1970s. The struggle for contraception spanned almost 25 years, with anxieties about Aids in the early 1990s eventually leading to the definition of condoms as a public health issue and hence their availability in vending machines in 1993. Abortion is still not available in Ireland although the Supreme Court has established a right to it in certain circumstances. One of the most disturbing indicators of the state's desire to control women's bodies was a constitutional referenda in 1992 on women's right to travel outside the county, up to then a basic and uncontroversial right (Smyth, 1992; Mahon, 1995; O'Connor, 1998).

It has been suggested that the efficacy of pressures from the women's movement, from women's policy agencies and femocrats (women oriented women) are affected by the political opportunity structure (O'Connor et al, 1999). Thus success in the gender equality area in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s occurred in a context where the women's movement was at its height; where anti-feminist organisations had no political credibility with mainstream political organisations; where reformist left wing



governments existed at national and state levels; and where there was a tradition of response to feminist pressure as well as the existence of a centralised wage fixing system (Sawer, 1991). There is considerable international evidence that parties on the left are most likely to be favourable to gender issues and such parties have traditionally been weak in Ireland. Thus the establishment of the Second Commission on the Status of Women by the state; the publication of its Report in 1993 (Connolly, 2002; 1997; O'Connor, 1998) and the monitoring of the implementation of that Report by a separate Department of Equality and Law Reform, charged with 'the elimination of inequality' occurred during those periods when Labour and Democratic Left were in Government (with Fianna Fail in 1994; and with Fine Gael from 1994-1997). The merging of the Department of Equality and Law Reform with the Department of Justice in 1997 and the assignment of that senior ministry to a member of the Progressive Democrats who sees inequality as providing incentives in a dynamic liberal economy (Irish Catholic- quoted in Mc Gauran, 2005: 79) has not facilitated the advancement of gender equality. This has been reflected in Ireland's ranking on a global gender gap index (including type of work, maternity benefits, perceived discrimination and government provided childcare) at 51<sup>st</sup> out of 58 countries: a broadly similar position to Bangladesh (53<sup>rd</sup>) – and substantially lower than France (9<sup>th</sup>) or Thailand (39<sup>th</sup>) (Lopez-Claros et al, 2005).

Assumptions that the existence of policies is synonymous with their implementation are widely accepted as false in an Irish context. Thus, largely due to pressure by the European Commission, the state endorsed gender mainstreaming i.e. 'incorporating a gender equality perspective into all mainstream policies as these are developed, implemented and evaluated' (McGauran, 2005: 1; see also Crowley and Mc Gauran, 2005). However, in evaluating the implementation of gender mainstreaming in the National Development Plan 2000-2006, McGauran (2005) found basic failures: only one of the seven main monitoring committees had a 40/60 gender balance; equal opportunities was a criterion for project selection in only just over one third of the projects; there was no incentive/sanction to encourage implementation of gender mainstreaming; and the structures promoting it were peripheral to the central policy making processes in the civil service. Indeed, McGauran (2005: 87) concluded that the resistance to mainstreaming 'certainly suggests the operation of patriarchy in the system'. Male 'champions' did exist, although they were rare, and a price was typically exacted from such men within an organisational and societal context that provided little support for their position. She noted that 'collectively, men seem to be better than women at defending their interests, particularly in relation to employment and market access' (McGauran, 2005:84).

Overall then, although the state, under pressure from Europe and the women's movement, ended some of the most overt forms of gender discrimination, the state has shown little understanding of gender discrimination and little commitment to the implementation of recent policies in the area, with the dissolution of the Department of Equality and Law Reform in particular militating against this. This area has perhaps been characterised by the greatest level of change, although continuities are all too apparent.

### ***The State, Women, Social Welfare and Child Care***

Connell suggested that the state 'becomes involved in generating and transforming the basic components of the gender order' thus being a 'creative force in the dynamics of

gender' (1994: p 157 and 158) with ' a considerable, though not unlimited capacity to regulate gender relations in the society as a whole' (op. cit, p155). There has been much more evidence of continuity than change in this area. Thus in its social welfare policies the Irish state continues to effectively promote a male breadwinner model, with its implicit assumptions as regards women's performance of unpaid work in the home (Mahon, 1998; Conroy Jackson, 1993). This of course is not peculiar to Ireland, with most European welfare states doing this to a greater or lesser degree. However, post 1970 Swedish and Denmark policies recognised women as both workers and mothers (Daly, 1994: 112), although there is no evidence that the Irish state is looking to these as models of best practice. In Ireland, a woman's social welfare 'claim depends on the rights of the husband....In that sense, such women do not enjoy social rights as citizens' (Peillon, 2001: 19). Even social welfare schemes that developed specifically for women do not really see women as individuals 'but as passive victims of misfortune' 'based on a perception of a woman as dependent, as a person who deprived of the support of a man, needs state support' (Peillon, 2001: 21). The extension of the Lone Parents payment to men in 1997, at first sight, can appear to reflect a similar depiction of men and women (although it was interesting that this payment was extended to men without any pressure from the courts, the wider public or the EU). This needs to be located in a context where all social welfare payments, apart from child benefit, are automatically paid to the man, with the latter's permission needing to be given for this arrangement to be varied, even though payments to the woman are much more likely to benefit children (Rottman, 1994).

Nevertheless, state support for lone mothers implicitly undermines a definition of hegemonic masculinity rooted in male economic control. However such economic control is replaced by sexual control since lone parents cannot cohabit while receiving the payment. Furthermore, the level of financial independence that recipients enjoy is limited: with 42 per cent of lone parents being consistently at a high risk of poverty (NWCI, 2005b). In addition, in a context where childcare and household work is overwhelmingly done by women (McGinnity et al, 2005) lone mothers have considerable difficulties undertaking paid employment. Thus, one in three lone mothers are at risk of poverty, as compared with roughly one in ten lone fathers (Nolan and Watson, 1999). Paradoxically such women's financial position is potentially better than their married counterparts in so far as the latter have no specific financial entitlement to support from the state, despite the fact that the Constitution recognises the importance of 'the woman's life within the home' in contributing to 'the common good' and asserts that the state shall 'endeavour to ensure' that mothers shall not be obliged to participate in paid employment (Article 41 (1) and 41(2) respectively). Thus although caring work is 'an indispensable service for a dependent person' (Murphy, 2003: 10) it is implicitly seen as of no value with implications for those (predominantly women) who undertake such work.

For the most part, Irish women's needs are addressed by the state only insofar as they coincide with 'its prescription of female domesticity under article 41 of the constitution' (Yeates, 1997: 158). Thus the state has been very reluctant indeed to tackle the child care issue other than by encouraging the establishment of child care facilities, despite the fact that Government policy has encouraged women's participation in paid employment since the 1990s. Such a focus on facilities has limitations, not least because parents cannot 'shop around' for good value constrained as they are by the delivery/collection of children. Indeed, the Irish state has been

described as ‘trailing behind its EU counterparts, particularly in terms of accessibility and affordability of child care’ –spending .4 per cent of GDP on early education and childcare services as compared with the 2 per cent spent by Sweden and 2.4 per cent spent by Denmark (NWCI, 2005b: 3 and 39). Not coincidentally, Ireland has the second highest rate of relative child poverty in the EU (NWCI, 2005b).

In the 2005-06 Budget, in the face of a defeat in two by-elections in commuter areas where child care was a crucial electoral issue, a Fianna Fail/Progressive Democrat government put forward the first phase of a five year National Childcare Investment Programme- aimed at both ameliorating the very high monthly child care costs of dual earner households, while at the same time providing token recognition of the value of mothers’ care for under fives. Thus it increased Child Benefit to all mothers (covering less than a quarter of the cost of such care outside the home); in addition to providing a direct lump sum annual payment of E 1,000 to all parents of five year olds or under; while also promising to increase both paid and unpaid Maternity Leave by four weeks (respectively) in 2006, with further increases in 2007. Such measures although welcome as a gesture in the direction of recognising the cost of child care and the value of women’s work in the home, exacerbated overall income inequalities; covered less than 40 per cent of child care costs outside the home and reflected an ongoing state failure to recognize the fundamental changes that have occurred. They contrast with the National Women’s Council of Ireland (2005b) plan for not only increasing paid maternity leave; providing paid parental and paternal leave; but also subsidizing full day care for one and two year olds; providing universal early childhood care and education for all three and four year olds and subsidising extended care for all children up to fourteen year olds. In the absence of such state recognition, roughly one third of parents with pre-school children and almost a half of those with children in primary school relied on unpaid relatives to care for their children, although this was the preferred method of care for only four per cent and 11 per cent of all parents respectively.

Overall then despite changes in policies and in societal patterns, the picture is one of continuity as regards attempts by the state to rhetorically value but not support women’s caring work in the home, while simultaneously encouraging increases in women’s paid employment (O’Hagan, 2004). Thus although ‘The redefinition of .....femininity has been an integral element of the ongoing processes of economic restructuring on a global scale’ (Prugl, 2004), this has been effectively ignored by the state, the consequent tensions being individualised.

### ***The State, Women and Economic Growth***

Acker (1998:205) has noted that ‘it is real men who make and remake, within and between their organisations, the so called economy’. In this context it is perhaps not surprising that existing measures of economic growth under-estimate women’s contribution by defining Gross National Product/Gross Domestic Product to exclude unpaid work in the home. This is seriously misleading since it effectively ignores 25-40 per cent of such output (such work being disproportionately done by women). Fahey (1990:168) has noted that the technical difficulties of including such work in such measures ‘seem no greater than those encountered and circumvented in other areas’ (see also Lynch and Mc Laughlin, 1995).

In Ireland state policies explicitly tried to create industrial jobs for men in the 1960s and 1970s (Pyle, 1990), with the state arguing that this was in the national interest. Up to the late 1980s, industrial manufacturing was seen as an essential driver of economic growth, with the ongoing support of agriculture being defined as a strategic objective-both of these areas being compatible with an implicit prioritising of male paid employment. In the late 1980s in the face of high levels of unemployment, there was a reluctant focus by state development agencies on tourism and other service activities (although it was striking that those that were targeted, such as for example, golf courses, reflected male priorities and were likely to be sources of male employment).

A variety of explanations have been put forward for the phenomenal economic growth rates in the 1994-2000 period (in excess of nine per cent per annum- dubbed the Celtic Tiger although O'Connell, 1999 noted that that term 'had misconstrued the gender of the animal'). Many of these explanations featured the state as a key player (see Barry, 2005 and Adshead 2005 for an overview of these). Since such growth was achieved 'through a combination of 3.7 per cent annual productivity growth and an employment growth of 5.5 per cent' (Mc Loughlin, 2004), the fact that this employment growth was largely met by drawing married women into the labour force is particularly important. Paradoxically, the state can take some credit for this since it was an unintended effect of state policies which had excluded married women from paid employment in a variety of areas until 1973; had imposed a baby bar until 1981 (when Maternity Leave was introduced) and had continued to effectively discourage their participation in the 1980s through the cul-de-sac nature of Return to Work courses at a time of high unemployment (Cousins, 1996). In the 1990s, the demand for labour and the dramatic rise in house prices, despite the state's very limited contribution to parents' child care costs, potentially created the context for the development of state infrastructure to support child care and other work in the home. This has not happened, with little recognition by the state of the implications of the fact that economic growth has occurred to a very large extent on the backs of married women.

Connell (1994: 137) suggested that the dominance of market oriented technocrats leads to a reshaping of higher education to focus on training men and draining money away from areas that have a high proportion of women (such as arts/humanities and social science). Such trends have been obvious in Ireland. Thus the number of graduates in technology, science and maths in Ireland is the highest in any EU country, and double the European average (Department of Education and Science, 2005). However, the total number of scientists employed in Ireland in 2004 was less than the number of graduates produced over a five year period; scientists making up less than four per cent of all professionals in 2004-exactly the same as seven years previously (Turner and D'Art, 2005). Investment in research and development in Ireland by multinational and (particularly) by indigenous enterprises is substantially below that of the EU (and even further below the US: OECD, 2004). Barry (2005) noted that the recently developed science and technology policies seem directed primarily towards research and development in multinational enterprises-a strategy which maximises our exposure to external developments; it is also a strategy whose sustainability has been questioned (Sheehan, 2005; Barry, 2005) not least because of the disinterest of high achievers (who are disproportionately girls) in such areas.

Furthermore, in Ireland service activities are the main sources of employment (67 per cent) and will increasingly be so, with manufacturing under pressure from economies with lower cost bases. Fitzgerald et al (2005:14 and 6) note that there is a need to refocus policy more towards that sector since 'the services sector is taking up the 'baton' driving growth' 'the dramatic growth in services exports.....shows that such a model of economic development is potentially sustainable for the future'. Construction and consumption are seen as drivers of such economic growth in Ireland since 2000 ( Barrett et al, 2005; Mc Laughlin 2004; Mc Cormick, 2004). It is at least theoretically possible that areas such as domestic child care; the export of nursing services, or indeed of academic expertise in say the arts could be drivers of economic growth in the future (at least two of these areas predominantly employing women). This has not even been considered by the state. It is possible to see this as reflecting a taken-for-granted prioritisation of male employment (O'Connor, 1996; see Lukes' 1974). Alternatively in a society where the political system remains clientelistic and male dominated, politicians are likely to be more responsive to lobbies from the construction industry or multinational corporations (Barry, 2005) than child care, nursing or arts lobbies.

Such gender blindness easily goes un-remarked not only in the male dominated administrative structures but also in academia. Thus for example, O'Riain and O'Connell (2000: 324) argued that the economic boom of the 1990s reflected the state's success in creating 'a new technical middle class' ... 'combining entrepreneurs and technical professionals'. They juxtaposed them with a second group 'of unionised workers, many in the public sector' 'caught between a burgeoning service sector of casual employment and a weakening welfare effort' (op cit. p 339). It seems plausible to suggest that the majority of the first group were men and second group, women, but no reference was made to gender. Such omissions are not of course peculiar to them.

This raises the question of the conditions under which policy content is most likely to coincide with the goals of the women's movement. Good (2001) argued that this occurred in the area of youth training in the mid/late 1990s. This may have reflected the state's greater willingness to challenge patriarchy in more working class as opposed to middle class contexts; and to do so under particular conditions including increasing labour shortages in the 1990s; a weakening of a strong breadwinner model; an emphasis by a centre-left government on gender equality and especially the influence of the Dept of Equality and Law Reform as an 'insider' women's policy agency; the appointment of women as ministers in key areas as well as pressures from the EU as regards gender auditing of its resources in the area of training.

Overall then, women's contribution to economic growth has been steadily ignored – and the implications of the fact that the Celtic Tiger was fuelled by dramatic increases in married women's participation in paid employment have not been faced by the state. Thus, despite dramatic economic and social change, continuity in the privileging of male (particularly middle class) priorities has been most obvious, although youth training in the 1990s illustrated the kinds of factors that could modify such processes.

### **Crisis Tendencies and Contradictions**

Although the state has been widely seen as patriarchal, women's movements, individual women and their male allies have frequently turned to the state for improvements in gender equality (see for example, Morrow et al, 2004). Connell

suggested that the 'state's position in gender politics is not fixed and that crisis tendencies develop in the gender order that allow new political possibilities' (1994: 160). He identified the tendency towards a crisis in the legitimation of patriarchy (partly based on the decline in religion which he sees as an important element in the cultural defence of patriarchy). He also identifies other crises consequent on the rise in women's educational levels; their increasing participation in paid employment, their professionalisation, their increasing presence in the state, their potential unionisation, as well as the rise of second wave feminism which he sees as having a base in higher education and in the professions.

Such crisis tendencies are very evident in Irish society. Thus the influence of the Institutional Roman Catholic Church has declined, not least because of a loss of credibility consequent on a series of sexual scandals over the past ten years. Women's participation in paid employment has increased dramatically over that period so that now almost one in two women are in paid employment. Ireland has had a strong (and relatively unusual in the OECD) tradition of providing women with cultural capital through education- such a pattern reflecting and reinforcing the traditional strength of women's position in the home and their resistance to the transmission of land through the male line (O'Hara, 1997). For the past ten years, such patterns have been clearly reflected in girls remaining in education longer and outperforming boys in state examinations. Not surprisingly then women constitute just over half of those in professional positions although the proportion of those who are managers or administrators, at 29 per cent, is lower (CSO, 2004a)

The state itself is a complex and contradictory structure. It is potentially more susceptible to claims of equal rights than corporate power since it is 'a set of institutions supported by public finance' (O'Dowd, 1991:97). Equality policies are more common in the public sector than in the private sector; with family friendly arrangements such as job-sharing also occurring much more frequently in the public sector (O'Connell and Russell, 2005). The ability of unions to enforce such equal rights has also been important element in the public sector. Thus the overwhelmingly female Civil and Public Servant's Union (and their male executive) have been very successful in a number of legal actions challenging direct and indirect discrimination by the state against its female employees (for example, a settlement of E 34 million made on behalf of clerical assistants: Department of Finance, 2003).

Although women are under-represented at senior levels in the professional hierarchies in Ireland, as elsewhere (Paterman, 1992; Pascall 1997; O'Connor, 1998), the expansion of the state creates a demand for female labour. Thus, a study of Irish graduates within three years of graduation, showed that the girls were more likely than the boys to be employed in the public sector (Russell et al, 2005). The average gross hourly and weekly wages of such graduates were higher than their female counterparts in the private sector. Nevertheless male graduates in the public sector were more likely than their female counterparts in that sector to receive occupational pensions; employer sponsored training; free/subsidized meals and bonuses. Furthermore, the average gross hourly earnings of the male graduates in the public administration part of the public sector were significantly higher than those of their female counterparts. Thus it appears that although the more transparent pay scales in the public sector promoted gender equality; and did so to the greatest degree when women graduates were in the more 'gender appropriate' areas; and in situations where

the state's performance was tightly controlled by institutional procedures; yet discretionary payments revealed male privileging.

In Ireland inhibitors to change not only exist within the patriarchal state but also within the wider society where left wing political parties have traditionally been weak. There are few structural sources of resistance- not least because the appearance of supporting a feminist agenda is a suspect position: '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 managements and male dominated unions' (Connell, 1994: 161). The unions (particularly those representing women), The National Women's Council (2005b), other women's organisations and (potentially) the Universities can be seen as structural sources of resistance. The unions have become enmeshed in corporatist processes; women's organisations and even the National Women's Council have little power, and the latter's status as a representative body can be eroded by dissent from right wing forces in Irish society; while despite the increase in the proportion of women faculty in the Universities, they are predominantly located at the lower levels, and in areas not seen as strategically significant by the state, with staff student ratios of up to 1:45.

Work by O'Donovan (2000) and Good (2001) noted that challenges to patriarchal policies promulgated by the state have come from individual 'femocrats' and groups of them. In a late modern world the possibility of resistance in the sense of both 'conscious activity to promote social change' (Dahlerup, 1986) muted protest by individuals and a general dissent from 'invisibility and silencing' (Faith, 1994) is at least potentially increased as women 'come to acquire partially or even wholly conflicting identifications' (Benton, 1981:181) and hence to reflect on the disjunctions between the taken-for-granted knowledge generated by social practices and the knowledge that can be articulated and critiqued (Haugaard, 1997). It is also possible that through such process they may come to question assumptions that their interests are the same as their male counterparts, although this seems to happen infrequently (O'Connor, 1995; McGauran, 2005). Resistance may involve challenging the socially created opposition between work and family; naming non-woman friendly aspects of organisational culture, procedures and practices; creating/mobilising allies; targeting key structures; whistle blowing and industrial action (O'Connor, 2001). It is most effective when it occurs in a context where strategic alliances can be made, particularly with those able to enforce change (such as the unions).

Mobilisation of anti-feminist forces has been visible in Ireland at two levels: firstly in the context of a range of what purport to be gender neutral initiatives, particularly but not exclusively in the educational system, which seem most likely to favour boys; and secondly in the mobilisation of individual men and men's groups around specific issues such as violence towards men and around fathers rights as regards child care custody. It is unclear to what extent there is popular or political support for such activities. In any case it is suggested that the greatest threats to change in the Irish patriarchal state come from economic structures and discourses that purports to be gender neutral but which in fact promote male privileging; and from a government which sees the facilitation of private profit as considerably more important than developing social welfare services and tackling patriarchal privileging.

## **Summary and Conclusions**

Despite rapid and fundamental societal change, continuity rather than change is the dominant motif of the Irish patriarchal state to date, although there are harbingers of more fundamental change. This continuity has been manifested in the predominantly male character of its senior administrative and executive structures; in its social welfare policies which continue to rhetorically value female domesticity; in the failure to recognise women's contribution to economic growth and in the generally unreflexive prioritising of a male agenda (particularly a middle class male agenda).

Considerable recent changes have come about in the gender composition of the civil service at middle management levels, with union support and the dovetailing of gender objectives with Strategic Management Initiatives. Such changes in the composition of the state are symbolically important in terms of undermining the equation between masculinity and authority, and in affirming women's existential value-a value that is not recognised by patriarchal society (Therborn, 2005). The contribution of married women to the Celtic Tiger, although not recognised by the state, has both exacerbated crisis tendencies and has provided the economic resources to begin to transform the family/state infrastructure. The fact that just over half of the professionals are now women poses challenges in a society where educational achievements have been depicted as strongly related to position. The state, supported by public finance is potentially more susceptible to claims of equal rights than those of corporate power. In this context it is not perhaps surprising that it offers better wages to recent female graduates than the private sector does. However just as the payment of compensatory social welfare payments in the 1980s revealed its patriarchal bias, so the relative privileging of recent male graduates in the 21<sup>st</sup> century reveals that same bias- this being evident in employer sponsored training; free/subsidized meals; bonuses and occupational pensions. In addition, the fact that the average hourly earnings of the male graduates in the public administration area were significantly higher than those of their female counterparts in that area suggests the existence of more underlying gender stereotypes. Union structures within the civil service itself have been the most effective sources of resistance to date to that patriarchal bias.

Patriarchal characteristics are not of course peculiar to Ireland: the United Nations noting that 'no society treats its women as well as its men' (UNDP, 1995: 75). However other countries at a broadly similar stage of economic development show a different pattern, with Ireland's international ranking on gender equality indices being less than impressive. There is no evidence that the Irish state is looking to such countries for models of best practice as regards gender quotas in the area of political representation; gender equality in the workplace or state/family infrastructures. Indeed, the current government has been singularly disinterested in even implementing state directives as regards gender balance on state boards.

It should perhaps not be surprising that in a patriarchal society the consequences of state action would not necessarily be supportive of women (Brown, 1992). The effective weakness of the Irish state in challenging those in hegemonic positions has been widely noted (Breen et al, 1990; O'Riain and O'Connell, 2000) and its limited efficacy in regards challenging patriarchal privileging needs to be located in this wider context. Nevertheless, given the extent of the changes that have occurred in the past ten years, more substantial change in the patriarchal state is not inconceivable.



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