The Irish community is by far the largest ethnic group by migration in London when second generation is included, comprising 9.6 percent of the total and 12.2 percent of the white population (Action Group for Irish Youth, 1995).

In this article, I provide a brief profile of young Irish women's migration to London and present some accounts of displacement as expressed by Irish women who have taken part in my study of Irish women, emigration and national identity. As my research is still in its early stages these themes emerge from only an initial analysis of some of the women's accounts. Cherry Smyth (1995, p.221) describes her emigration in terms of 'a struggle against displacement' which is a recurring theme amongst the Irish women migrants to London taking part in my study. Before exploring this theme further, I want to sketch an outline picture of Irish emigration in the 1980s and provide a brief profile of recent Irish women migrants in London.

The 1980s saw a return to high levels of emigration from Ireland due to economic recession. Most emigrants in the 1980s migrated to Britain (mainly London) where there was more chance of employment and career development. Bronwen Walter's analysis of the 1991 Census Action Group for Irish Youth (AGIY) suggests that the number of young Irish people in London increased sharply in the 1980s and this is particularly so in the case of young Irish women (Action Group for Irish Youth, 1995; Roots and Realities, 1993). There was an 81 percent increase in Irish-born women between the ages of 15-24 in London between 1981 and 1991 (Roots and Realities, 1993)

Irish born women are clustered on the west side of Inner London and adjoining boroughs. Growth since 1981 was greatest in Outer London Boroughs, notably Harrow, Waltham Forest, Enfield and Hounslow (Action Group for Irish Youth, 1995).

While some Irish emigrants in the 1980s and 1990s leave Ireland with a high level of education and with plans for career advancement (Mary Corcoran, 1994 calls this group 'eirepreneurs')! many leave without qualifications or plans for their future lives outside of Ireland. Jim Mac Laughlin's 1994 survey of Irish families and emigrants in 1989, suggests that emigration from Ireland today, as in the past, 'is a survival strategy which allows poor families in particular to shed their surplus sons and daughters' (1994, p.10). He also found that many emigrants are leaving at a very young age suggesting a lack of preparedness for living in a new culture in the absences of family and friendship networks. Large numbers of emigrants are emigrating before finishing secondary school education (Mac Laughlin, 1994, p.10). Mac Laughlin suggests that

for many Irish young adults the teenage years are years of considerable psychological stress, augmented by the threat or reality of emigration. Forty percent of emigrants to Britain in this survey left Ireland before they were 20 years old, and two-thirds had left before they were 22 years old (1994, p.11).
Bronwen Walter's analysis of the 1991 Census, suggests that the Irish experience disadvantage in the areas of housing, unemployment and health. These issues have also been identified in many previous studies and surveys (London Irish Women's Centre, 1993; Walter, 1989; Connor, 1987; Kowarzik, 1984). Bronwen Walter (1989, p.94) suggests that an 'immediate crisis facing young Irish-born women is homelessness'.

The full extent of this problem remains concealed by informal arrangements made within the Irish community leading to overcrowding and stress (Walter, 1989, p.94).

The need for ethnic monitoring is being called for by all Irish welfare agencies in London and, in 1994, the Commission for Racial Equality funded a research project to establish whether discrimination towards the Irish in Britain exists. This initiative received a mixed reaction in the media 'from disbelief in The Sun through to attacks in the Sunday Times (Irish edition)' (Hickman and Walter, 1995, p.6).

Despite economic restructuring and representations of Irish emigrants to Britain in the 1980s/90s as taking up a more diverse range of jobs than in the past, Mac Laughlin’s 1989 survey results suggest that 40 percent of men emigrants worked in construction. Just under 50 percent of women emigrants in Mac Laughlin’s survey worked in lower middle-class jobs ‘like secretarial work, nursing, teaching and banking’ (1994, p.11). As Mac Laughlin points out, while this work profile might suggest that Irish women do better than Irish men migrants in the labour market, when it comes to wage levels, men involved in the construction industry earn more. Although the men may be financially better off, the women’s work positions offer more security of tenure, holiday pay and other important conditions of employment (Mac Laughlin, 1994). Bronwen Walter points to the clustering of Irish migrant women in ‘low status and poorly rewarded jobs’.

A very close resemblance between the work patterns of the Irish-born and Afro-Caribbean women suggests that certain groups of migrants shoulder a disproportionate share of traditional female work in London (1989, p.93). Evidence from the 1991 Census suggests that unemployment for Irish-born men is higher, at 17.1 percent, than for the rest of the white population. The figure for women, at 8.1 percent, is below that of most other ethnic groups, although, like other white women, Irish women are strongly represented in part-time work (Action Group for Irish Youth, 1995). ‘Unemployment totals for Irish women include only those entitled to register and greatly understate the actual numbers’ (Action Group for Irish Youth, 1995).

Having sketched a picture of Irish emigration to England in the 1980s and 1990s and some examples of how the experience of emigration is gendered, I now want to look behind the statistics to some of the people that these figures include. I am currently researching emigration and Irish women’s relationships to their national identity, in other words their sense of being Irish. Part of my study is based on group discussions with Irish women in London about what it means to be an Irish woman and how being Irish is affected by migration to London.
Negotiating Irishness in London

Because it is usually women who deal with schools, health centres, social services and other services in Britain, women are frequently exposed to everyday attitudes to the Irish (McAdam, 1994). Mary Hickman and Bronwen Walter (1995) suggest that

Through their productive and reproductive roles Irish women have always had wider contacts beyond the ‘community’ than have Irish men (Lennon, 1988, p. 16). This has exposed women directly to racism at a personal level, but helped conceal them as a group (Hickman and Walter, 1995, p. 14).

Marie McAdam (1994) points out that the assumption is often made that Irish women assimilate more easily into British society. Many of the women taking part in my study see themselves as adapting to their new environment better than Irish men but the level of work and skill that goes into their everyday negotiation of their Irishness remains invisible. They represent themselves as more capable and adaptable than Irish men, for example Mary* has the following to say ‘You know we survive, we find work and develop ourselves and make the best of it, the men aren’t always as good at that...’. Yet, this sense of adaptability often disguises the difficult negotiations involved in ‘adapting’. All of the women express a consciousness of being Irish which is accentuated by living in England. In one group discussion the work that women have to do to maintain a sense of Irishness in London is discussed.

(Mary)
...You think about being Irish. Your roots are very strongly Irish. You get very emotional about your patriot home when you see them on the television playing sports and stuff like that. I actually feel more Irish away from home, than I felt in Ireland. I wasn’t aware of feeling Irish when I was at home - I was just there, you don’t have to think about it. But anything to do with being Irish... I find in this country you’ve got to go for it more. You’ve got to sort it out yourself, even simple things like if you go to mass on a Sunday, you’ve got to find a church, there’s nobody that knows... If you need a priest you’ve got to find a priest, in Ireland there’s always one looking over your shoulder! I find that very difficult, very different if you want to go for something you’ve got to go and do it yourself...At home...there’s so many back-up networks you don’t even think about it, somebody knows somebody, everybody knows somebody, you fall into place with things, but you don’t seem to find them over here... It’s very much isolated. The English over here, I don’t know half my neighbours, I haven’t spoken to half my neighbours in the two years that I’ve lived over here.

(Sue)
The English are like that too, they don’t know each other. They don’t...At home everybody knows their next door neighbours or somebody down the road...

(Mary)
That’s what I’m saying, that it’s a different lifestyle....

Although Irish women see themselves as adapting and getting on with life in England, they also speak of the many efforts that they have to make in order to maintain their Irish identities whether through the Catholic church or cultural activities. The cultural back-up networks are missing and they are forced to think
more about which aspects of their Irish identity they want to maintain. Their sense of difference (from English people) is accentuated at points of crisis in life. Mary, later in the discussion, speaks of one time in particular when she felt she was Irish in England rather than Irish in Ireland and highlights the sense of displacement that living in England brings about for her.

I must say one of the times just recently I’ve had an experience where I’ve felt very much Irish in England, and it wasn’t a nice experience at all... my brother died in Ireland in October and it was the first real tragedy since I moved over here and I didn’t like coming back. I went home on my own because it was an emergency situation so my husband or my children weren’t with me. I came back on my own and I came back into a situation where I work where I live and there are sixteen staff in the pub where I am and I came back on a Thursday and by Monday nobody had even said to me I was sorry to here about your brother. These are people I work with and live with, customers, everything. That absolutely made me feel more isolated than I have in the eight years that I’ve lived in England. There is no concern, there’s no natural understanding of the closeness of a family life I find in this country and that to me I hate, I really hate and I will never get used to it. They can’t see the support, there’s no support network within families here....

For Mary, her Irishness is very much connected with her family, the support of family members and family rituals around death, birth and marriages. Her perceptions of English life and English people is in relation to values of family closeness and community which she associates with Ireland and Irishness. She expresses a sense of displacement that she ‘will never get used to’. Instead, her life in England involves the process of adapting while, at times, being acutely aware of how her life might be different if she lived in Ireland.

Women’s work: maintaining connections between Ireland and England.

Another theme emerging in the above quote from Mary, and one that comes up in many of the group discussions, is that of returning to Ireland to keep in touch or for family events. Many of the women who are married or in relationships (even when with Irish partners) find that they frequently travel to Ireland alone to visit family. Because they live outside of Ireland another layer of their everyday life in England is taken up with keeping in touch with family and friends in Ireland. Although geographically separated from Ireland, emotional ties and responsibilities are not severed by distance. These aspects of young Irish women’s lives in London are often invisible to the outside observer.

Connolly et al, (1995) reinforce the significance of the work of keeping in touch when they suggest in their discussion of Irish migration to Britain in the 1950s and 1980s, that ‘[w]omen have...played a critical role in these migrations and in the maintenance of conceptions between the two societies’ (1995, p.3). This maintenance of conceptions is important to the survival of both societies and of Irish families which have recently been described as ‘transnational households’ (Mac Laughlin, 1994). It often involves Irish women in complex and emotional processes of translation as one culture comes into contact with the other. For example, Fiohnula describes being distanced from family in times of crisis which is complicated by having to explain and justify family commitments in Ireland and Irish cultural practices within an English work situation.
If I had found the same opportunities in Ireland that I found here, I think I would have been happier in the long run, because the practicalities that I have encountered in the last few years, with my mother’s failing health, my brothers, who have young children and their marriages are split up, I can see where I could have been of assistance and I’m not around, and you know, when you have a crisis in your family as I’ve had, and you’re a long way away, well, you’re a long way away, but you’re not there. And you’ve got to tell people in your work here that you’ve got to go away, and they’re not quite as understanding as they would be in an Irish situation...cos they don’t understand our position.

Fionnula wonders about how her life might have been different had she stayed in Ireland and suggests that migration is unsettling and often means living with feeling displaced. It also involves having to explain yourself to people who ‘don’t understand’. She knows that she is ‘not a long way away’ but has to accept that she cannot be ‘there’ for family members and friends in the same way as she would if she lived in Ireland. Other women describe the effects of ‘not being there’ in terms of hearing of a parent’s illness after the event or missing seeing your sisters and brothers growing up. One way to solve this sense of loss is to return to Ireland regularly. However, for many migrant women their financial positions prevents such frequent contact. For example, Nora in one group discussion pointed out that ‘the telephone call home takes a lot out of your weekly money, with a child and everything, I often think I can’t really afford to ring’. Keeping in touch involves time, emotional and financial resources and can be a stressful as well as enriching aspect of Irish migrant women’s lives.

Irishness - an invisible/silenced identity

Hickman and Walter (1995) suggest that the Irish, as an ethnic group in Britain are invisible. Irish ethnic difference is masked, according to Hickman and Walter, by the ways in which

‘colour’ has become a marker of national belonging and being of the same ‘colour’ can be equated with ‘same nation’ implying ‘no problem’ of discrimination (1995, p.8).

Maggie, in one group discussion, spoke of the responses she gets when she draws attention to her Irish identity and to anti-Irish racism. She speaks of her life in London as

(Maggie)

...a struggle to survive and that takes up most of your time... you know, if you talk about anti-Irish racism people look at you as if you had two heads as if what’s the problem, you’re white, you speak English, they don’t understand there’s a huge cultural difference and I don’t think I understood that there was a cultural difference till I came to live here and

(Researcher)
a cultural difference between.

(Maggie)

Between English people, like you know, English/British people and Irish people. And my English friends sort of say to me Oh you’re, oh, you do go on a bit about the fact that you’re Irish and I don’t notice, but possibly I do. But I only do it now because I’m living in England if I was still at home it wouldn’t be an issue....
Because Irishness is taken for granted in Ireland the need to question what it means and to define it in her own terms was not necessary for Maggie. Her consciousness of her Irish identity is heightened by living in England. Yet, she finds that any attention she draws to her Irishness in London is seen as too much and she is silenced or challenged. This process of silencing makes her doubt herself and whether she is taking her Irish identity too seriously. By pointing to the stereotypes of Irishness of discrimination, Maggie challenges perceptions of Irishness and attempts to define herself, and her Irishness in her own terms. Stereotypes generalise and suggest that all members of particular groups are the same. Stereotypes of Irish people deny individuality and different ways of being Irish.

Irishness is not a homogenous identity whether in Ireland or in London. Later in the discussion, Anne points out the many differences amongst Irish people. She worked for a while in an Irish welfare agency and this highlighted how her life and her sense of Irishness differed from many of the Irish people she met there.

(Anne)

and that was where ...I discovered huge cultural differences in so far as, eh, the flow of people from there [Ireland] were people like I wouldn't have even come into contact with at home. You know your nice secure middle class, father headmaster and all that, and meeting people some of the people coming over, that you'd read about. You know, literally, literally, one pound fifty in their pockets and they'd come over here with that amount of money. But and then, you know, once you get over the shock of that the braveness and foolhardiness, whatever way you look at it, ...life is just very different and that struck me that their turn of phrase was different from mine even you know. As an east coast person and meeting people from much more south say, ...I notice differences more so between myself and themselves, you know that sort of emigrant coming over, but then likewise you can identity clearly differences between ourselves as Irish people and English people. English society if you like in terms of like language as well can be one thing, you know the way we speak...but I say about, as you say about the Irish pubs, and being in the Irish centre as well, brought it home and it was something that I actually found I backed off from, because again I didn't do any of that at home so I certainly wasn't going to start doing it here you know.

Anne wants to differentiate herself and her middle-class Irish identity from some of those using Irish welfare services in London who have different backgrounds from her. As well as class differences, she also points to differences amongst Irish people from different regions within Ireland. She highlights some of the many differences in how Irish women perceive their Irish identity. For most, the freedom to express their personal sense of Irishness openly is important. Others try to fit in by separating their Irish identity from their work identity, for example, Fionnula suggests

I had no family and no friends here when I came and my objective was to get myself as Anglicised as possible as quickly as possible for economic reasons as much as anything. So I don't have many Irish friends even now only a few who happened to come over anyway.

Fionnula felt that if she was to do well at work, she had better play down her Irish identity. She sees London as offering her the opportunity to meet different people
and is not keen to be part of an Irish community. As a white middle-class Irish woman, perhaps her access to a cosmopolitan lifestyle in London is greater than for many other Irish migrant women. Fionnula and Anne could possibly be seen as falling within the parameters of Mary Corcoran’s category of ‘eirepreneurs’ who ‘are tied to professional networks rather than immigrant networks and are as a result much less ethnically bounded in terms of their social interaction’ (1994, p.6). Those encountering housing, health and employment problems are more likely to be defined by official institutions as Irish and their needs and entitlements defined accordingly. Many such agencies have little or no knowledge of the demands, expectations or experiences that young Irish women encounter following migration to London. This lack of sensitivity to the complexities of their experiences is reinforced by their relative invisibility. While Irish migrant women in London have to adapt to living in England, different groups of Irish women have access to different resources in living their Irish identities and varying experiences of displacement in an English context.

Conclusion
I hope, in this article to have fleshed out some of the numerical data discussed at the beginning with some of the more subjective experiences of Irish migrant women in London. The experience of migration is a significant one involving varying degrees of physical and emotional displacement and the ongoing work of negotiating gender and ethnic identities.

If young Irish women are to overcome the high levels of housing, employment and health problems that they encounter following migration to London, then the achievement of visibility and recognition is just one of the necessary steps towards gaining appropriate support services. However, Bronwen Walter later suggests that ‘to a greater extent than is true for Irish men, Irish women’s needs are submerged within those of the white majority of UK descent’ (1989, p.23). As more Irish migrant women speak about their experiences, differences and commonalities will become more evident.

The London Irish Women Centre Report, Roots and Realities (1993) suggests that ‘the Irish community’ in London has, since the mid 1970s and early 1980s become more vocal and ‘politicised’. Irish groups began to address issues publicly and to challenge

the old strategy of post war survival - ‘keeping your head down, your mouth shut and going about your business without rocking the boat’ (1993, p.6).

As Irish women become more publicly vocal in Britain, perhaps their experiences of displacement which are reinforced by anti-Irish racism might be more openly acknowledged and addressed.

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Notes
1 As my research focuses on the Republic of Ireland, most of the discussion in this paper relates to the Republic.
2 Just under 30 percent of emigrants to Britain surveyed by Jim Mac Laughlin (1994) had third-level qualifications. Thirty-six percent of university graduates emigrated in 1988 (Corcoran, 1994).
3 Jim Mac Laughlin’s survey was carried out in rural and urban areas throughout the west and south of Ireland between February and June of 1989. He targeted 6,900 families and 2,200 emigrants.
4 The names used are pseudonyms as many of the women in the group discussions wanted to remain anonymous.