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Stephanie Anketell
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Women, Welfare and the State

Stephanie Anketell

Law and European Studies

This paper poses a number of important questions with regards to women and their role both historically and currently in the Irish State Welfare system. It sets out to highlight the inequalities which suppressed females and those that continue to do so, the adaptation of roles within a socio economic welfare system and the important changes which have occurred in order to combat those inequalities and the improvements which have yet to come. This motion appealed to me not only because I feel strongly for the women of this country but I personally felt a need to explore the historic injustices which suppressed females and caused the gender gap and social inequalities apparent in Irish society. I shall in this article, aim to explain certain sociological phenomena which help to support my argument in relation to women inhabiting the dependant role. These shall include: dependency, gender segregation, gender roles, modernisation, globalisation, occupational segregation, feminism and stigmatisation. I will highlight key areas of modern concern and debate evidencing my argument with historical evidence and statistics. Finally I will conclude by illustrating the need for change in the nation’s internal mindset and external national welfare system.

The current Irish welfare system

In Ireland today, there can be no doubt that a metamorphosis has taken place in our economic, health-care and education systems but also undeniably in common households throughout the nation. One such change is the greater emphasis being placed on the advantages of a mixed economy of welfare that is fuelled by an increasing drive towards privatisation and an open competitive market where competition is supposed to bring with it a better quality of service
and a greater choice for the consumer within this welfare state. However, a problem still arises with regard to women and the concept that we are still a dependant sex within society today. Dependency is articulated as being connected to and subordinate to someone or something. An individual may be categorised as being emotionally, financially or politically dependant on others (Scott and Marshall 2005, p.143). Inequality and the gender gap is still a hugely controversial issue in this nation at present. One view in Ireland expresses the positive enhancements and progresses women have experienced which are clearly embodied in the monumental female representatives of Mary MacAleese and Mary Robinson at presidential level, female sports people Sonia O’Sullivan and Derbhaile O’Rourke and women politicians such as Mary Harney and Liz O’Donnell. A second view however, diametrically opposes the first claiming that little has changed or improved and that gender inequality and differentiation remains. This of course refers to women’s position with regard to wealth, poverty and income (Tovey and Share 2003, p.229).

An historical overview
Firstly we must assess the post-colonial welfare state, the policies in place and the rates of employment, wages and opportunities offered to women in that era. Women’s struggles date back to the 1916 Easter Rising where they played a huge role in the revolutionary brigade against the British. Carrying out vital tasks, they enabled the Republican Army to plan and engage in rebellious combat. They acted as couriers often bringing vital information to Irish fighting units, ministered the sick, tended the wounded and performed domestic chores. The references to women in such revolutionary battles are rarely highlighted nor is their assistance widely known or mentioned because they were not seen to have participated as equals. In their revolutionary organisation, “Cumann na mBan”, they merely replicated their traditional domestic duties in revolutionary fashion (Hoff and Coulter 1995, p.119). There are three main reasons why
women, and in particular mothers, have yet to gain the recognition they deserve in Irish history. First, men have written most of the history and as result have omitted female political contributions from our history. Second, Irish historiography has concentrated on politics and personalities as the causal factors in Ireland’s developments much of which excluded women participants during that time. Third, because they had no jobs or incomes of their own, women were considered to be powerless. The social history of women has only begun to be written (Tovey and Share 2003, p.178). Women’s post colonial identity was at stake. According to Gosta Esping Anderson’s article, “Women in a new Welfare State”, “women’s economic dependence was near absolute in post-war decades. This dependency was doubly reinforced because few married women worked and if they did, their wages were typically low” (Anderson 2003, p.599). The Irish Free State government tried to restrict the role of women in Irish public life. The 1922 constitution gave women the right to vote and to hold office on equal terms with men but then was subsequently undermined by legislation that denied political identity to Irish women. The Irish Free State government of 1927 proposed the extreme step of removing women from jury service altogether but under the Juries Act women could opt in and volunteer to serve on juries if they so chose (Hoff and Coulter 1995, p.121). Nationalism was the underlying case where women struggled alongside men to usher in a new, nationalist state (Byrne and Leonard 1997, p.46). In 1932, De Valera described the ideal woman from a dominant male political belief in terms of motherhood which was to “produce and educate sons in the nationalist tradition and to be good and virtuous citizens of the new state”. The main concern of a woman in that era therefore was to inculcate in her sons in particular, a love of country, of Gaelic culture and of freedom of Ireland (Hoff and Coulter 1995, p.117).
In 1937, the Irish constitution notoriously recognised and emphasised the place of a woman in Irish society and her special contribution “within the home” (Tovey and Share 2003, p.240). It was the mother who instilled and maintained in her husband and children all that was disciplined, moral and civil. The mother was also the organisational link between the newly institutionalised power of the Roman Catholic Church and the family. Inglis argues in his book, Moral Monopoly, that the “church could be understood as an organised system of power which conditioned and limited what Irish people did and said” (Inglis, 1998 p.193). The way for the mother to obtain the blessing and approval of the priest was to bring up her children within the limits laid down by the Catholic Church. Through engaging in the same humble tasks of moralising children and looking after the sick, elderly and dying, mothers began to attain a similar perspective on the world to that of priests and religion. This was a crucial alliance with the church for it was through this similarity of practices and perspectives that mothers fostered the vocations among their children and on which the church depended to grow and prosper. According to Marx, problems in religion are ultimately problems in society. He expressed that religion is “the opium of the masses” used by oppressors to distract people from their own life situations and hardships. Women especially followed the word of the priests in order to combat the material realities and economic injustices in their own lives (Cline 1998).

Pre-industrial societies concentrated on the production within the family home involving all household members. This included crop rotation, sowing and weaving. However, the development of modern industries and mechanized factors separated family members. Men were employed by local industries and were involved in local affairs, politics and the market while women were responsible for childcare, preparing food and other domestic values (Giddens 2003, p.390). The strong male breadwinner system in Ireland caused the
exclusion of women from the labour market and this instigated their treatment as dependant in tax and social security (Byrne and Leonard 1997, p.169). The government’s definition of a post-colonial identity was such that a woman’s role would be restricted to the hearth and the home where they could keep alive traditional values (Hoff and Coulter 1995, p.122). These values were upheld and publicly empowered by state ministers and the Catholic Church. The Minister of Industry and Commerce informed the cabinet that “if employment is to be balanced in the Free State government, certain avenues must be reserved for men” (Hoff and Coulter 1995, p.109). In the Conditions of Employment Act 1935, the Minister was given the power to ban women in specific areas of employment and authority such as police and prison services in an effort to impose gender quotas on industries (Hoff and Coulter 1995, p.110). This was also reflected in the Catholic Church views where bishops often referred to the evils of women working outside the home and the moral decay seeping into the country (Hoff and Coulter 1995, p.128). The Catholic Church portrayed women as weak, fragile beings who must be protected by both the state and furthermore the priests. According to Tom Inglis (1998, p.188)

“This was not just a strategy of the Catholic Church but was part of a wider puritan strategy by which women were forced into exaggerated femininity, magnifying their relative weakness into complete helplessness, their emotionality into hysteria and their sensitivity into a delicacy which must be protected from all contact with the outside world”.

Nationalists found it easy to support the churches teaching on women that legitimated and encouraged traditionalist views of a woman’s “natural” role as submissive wife and mother. They held similar views about women and their roles and functions in society. As elected politicians, they enacted legislation on marriage, the family and employment that was informed by Catholic social teaching. Women became quickly marginalised in the new state, but feminist activists did not passively accept the situation. The first major surge in female
employment came about during World War 1 when a labour shortage enabled women to temporarily fill men’s positions. Feminist organisations encouraged females to integrate into the public sphere. Feminism explored the patriarchal world in which we live. They drew attention to gender divisions and challenged the unequal practices in place which allowed for male domination (Fulcher and Scott 2007, p.63). One of the most influential feminist organisations that emerged in Ireland in latter years in order to counteract the subordination and dependency of women was “The National Women’s Council (NWCI)”. This committee was founded in 1973 and is the national representative organisation for women and women’s groups in Ireland promoting equality, human rights and empowerment for all women. Their unitary vision is of an Ireland where all women and men have equal power to shape society and their own lives.

Development was a key concern in Ireland and essential for the regeneration of a country which seemed to lack the economic and social prowess apparent in other European countries (Bruce 1999, p.152). Development was based primarily on theories such as modernisation, globalisation and major diversifications in legislation. Modernisation played a huge role in the late 19th century and beginning of World War 2 in transforming the structures of less developed societies. Traditional forms of society relations had been built upon small scale, homogenous and closely regulated communities. The modern transition involved mass migration of people from rural regions to expanding cities. Simple structures became complex and mechanised, institutions multiplied and the archaic values of past generations dissipated (Scott and Marshall 2005, p.421). People’s roles in the economy changed dramatically.

The adaptation of roles
A role highlights the social expectations attached to a particular social position. Sex roles separated the biological differences between the two genders. They
defined specified behaviour, category of work and everyday demeanour of men and women. Conjugal roles further separated the conduct of man and wife internally in the domestic sphere (Scott and Marshall 2005, p.569-570). Humans become socially adapted to their specific roles when the external contours of their culture are replicated inside their minds and personalities (Bruce 1999, p.40). Modernisation shifted the centre of gravity away from agricultural to industrial work and further still to white collar work (Mac Curtain and O’ Corrain 1979, p.104). In 1926, 60% of women worked in either agriculture or the domestic sphere but this figure would be dramatically altered due to the processes of modernisation and globalisation (Tovey and Share 2003, p.248).

Globalization encompassed the emergence of global patterns of consumption and consumerism (Marshall and Scott 2005, p.250). Transnational corporations (TNC) are companies which operate within nation states; they reinforce the idea of the world as a single market by transferring commodities between the borders of every nation. The Irish economy witnessed a rapid and large scale expansion through the extensive investment of TNC’s. They maintained however, Ireland’s dependent status in the international economy and the increasing feminisation of that dependency. They were major contributors in increasing levels of women workers. The bulk of work for women was low skilled and low paid and focused predominantly on “pink collar” jobs (Tovey, Share and Corcoran 2007, p.260). In 1992, 77% were to be found in the service sector.

Notable changes in legislation in the past 22 years played a vital role in the increased participation of women in the labour force. Such changes include; the removal of the Marriage bar enabling married women to work. Under the Marriage Bar, which was abolished in 1973, women working in the public and civil service had to resign as soon as they married. Many women lost their cover under the social welfare system when they left work, and either did not qualify
for a state pension when they retired, or only qualified for a smaller state pension. A wife’s income was deemed to be her husband’s for taxation purposes and a woman was not entitled to unemployment benefits as it was assumed that some man would provide for her (Scannell 1988 p.128). The Anti-Discrimination Act of 1974 aimed to ensure equal pay between genders. The Employment Equality Act of 1977 made it unlawful to discriminate on the basis of marital status. The maternity protection act 1981 offered maternity protection for employees expecting a baby (Reynolds 2008).

Despite these incremental modifications, women still faced discrimination in the forms of occupational segregation, unequal representation in top level employment positions especially in education and healthcare, discriminatory wages and insufficient recognition of voluntary domestic services. In a mixed economy of modern welfare we continue to see that social stratification ranks individuals and families into levels of class that share unequally in the distribution of status, wealth, education and employment. Whilst some women are breaking the mould and entering male dominated occupations, there is a minority who progress and who occupy powerful or leading positions in such professions (Giddens 2003, p.391). Women are underrepresented in decision making structures at both national and regional levels. Only 14% of TD’s in Dail Eireann are women while they account for 34% of members of state boards and fewer than 20% of regional and local authorities (Central Statistics Office 2007). The education and health sectors employed the highest proportion of women, with around 80% share of the total work in these sectors. Not surprisingly however, women are not well represented in senior level positions. The European Industrial Relations Observatory on-line report find that “glass ceiling” obstructs women in management. A report by the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) published in March 2002 concludes that the presence of a “glass ceiling” means that there is a low level of female
representation in senior management positions in Ireland. This “glass ceiling” it is argued is created by a number of structural and attitudinal barriers. Certain jobs are classified as strictly for females, traditionally nursing, cleaning and child minding and for males, building, carpentry and mechanics. This reflected the notion that men are more logically minded and women more in tune with their emotions, and the greater respect men earned in labour domains was evident in their prioritisation ahead of women for promotions into positions of seniority (Dobbins 2002).

For a long time gender roles have occupied a central place in the nature-nurture debate. In patriarchal societies, it is often claimed that women are naturally better placed to nurture children. Many hunter-gatherer theories have come to support that difference in gender roles originate in differences in biology. Men asserted the need to hunt and gather while women adapted the need to take care of offspring. This may have attributed to the fundamentally distinct social roles that have evolved over time. In health service, women account for 30% of medical and dental consultants. Similarly, women accounted for 84.7% of primary school teachers but only 50% of primary school managers (Walsh 2007). Even though women make up the majority of workers in these sectors, their work has become stigmatised and feminised. This may be referring to women as naturally “nurturing” and maternally instinctive. Their contributions are undervalued in modern society. Girls now outperform boys in virtually all subjects in second level public examinations including applied mathematics and engineering though the perception of “male” subjects such as technical drawing and “female” subjects such as Home Economics persists and is reflected in the distribution of exam candidates in those subjects (Tovey, Share and Corcoran 2002, p.222). In 2006, 4,989 males sat the Technical Drawing exam compared to 442 females. Likewise, the gender disparity was evident in home economics where 11,253 girls sat the exam compared to 1,310
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males (State Examinations Committee 2006). There are significant numbers of males in Technical and Vocational schools compared to females. Subject choices such as Arts and Humanities are clear preferences of female students rather than Science, Maths or Physics. Even though women have the liberty to enter a wide range of employments, they are not preparing themselves for these opportunities by restricting their choice at second level (Mac Curtain and O’ Corrain 1979, p.105-106). This pattern continues throughout third level with men accounting for 85% of graduates in Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (Central Statistics Office 2007).

The notion of equality
Equal pay has been an issue since it was first debated by the Irish Trade Union Congress in 1917 and subsequently in the Anti-discrimination Act of 1974 yet women still, according to CSO reports earn roughly two thirds of men’s incomes. Although the gender wage gap may be narrowing women are much more susceptible to poverty after pensions and social transfers than men (Walsh 2007). According to the Economic and Social Research Institute (ERSI), “One in every four women in Ireland raising children or managing households on their own will experience poverty despite our economic boom” (Sinn Fein 2004). As inequalities have been constructed, dismantled and replaced by new ones, women’s inequality has been modified but not fundamentally altered as their structural position remains at the margins of social welfare (Byrne and Leonard 1997, p.161). The pressure on working mothers is increasingly relevant; mothers especially seem to suffer as there is less support and financial back up for them. In order for women to compete for the lucrative job offers and still raise a family a number of improvements in the workforce must be initiated. Policies should be instigated to enable employees to meet both home and work demands. Equilibrium of the worker’s and employer’s needs must be implemented (Giddens 2003, p.403).
A continuing growth of female dependency in Ireland is evident amongst lone parent welfare recipients. More than 80,000 lone parents are reliant on social welfare as their main source of income. The Minister for Finance declared on October 14th, 2008 that “the aim is to protect those who are most vulnerable in our country”. However, Budget 2009 has clearly failed to protect Ireland’s most vulnerable families (OPEN 2008). According to OPEN who work on behalf of lone parents; one in three lone parent households are in consistent poverty and 48% are at risk of poverty. The Census in 2006 stated there were 189,213 persons counted as lone parents 86% of whom were lone mothers. In 2002 a British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey was taken whether “women should stay at home when there is a child under school age”, amazingly 51% of men and 46% of women said yes. Other questions were also directed towards women’s welfare such as, “what are the responsibilities of women in exceptional circumstances” i.e. single parents with children either in or out of school? Also, “when should the government provide money for childcare costs?” (Davis, Evans and Lorber 2006, p.264). Another finding in the 2007 CSO report states that while women account for 50% of the total population, they represented 62.3% of carers (Central Statistics Office 2007). Unpaid domestic labour is of enormous significance to the economy. It has been estimated that housework accounts for 25%-40% of wealth created in industrial economies. Lone parents will be unable to become independently empowered unless an effective policy regime exists (Leonard and Byrne 1997, p.306). When both men and women are empowered to clarify their needs and priorities while apportioning work/family benefits for themselves, personal and professional conflicts would be reduced. If the labour market was adapted to suit the personal interests of its labourers and made compatible with family life, neither the work nor the domestic sphere would suffer as a result or be alienated from each other but would be harmonised in the process (The UL Women’s Studies Collection 1996, p.165). Although the NWCI and other female activist groups are committed to lobbying
the government and political parties to introduce progressive social policies, as well as working with other progressive leaders to increase their capacity to effect emancipatory social change for women, they will find it increasingly difficult to dissuade the internal mindset and attitudes of the Irish population and abolish the dichotomy between men and women. It will only be possible for women to realise their equal opportunities if attitudinal change occurs in order for the workplace to acknowledge that both men and women have domestic responsibilities and to make attempts to structure work to take account of reality and for men to assume co-responsibility for domestic and family commitments (Finneagan and Wiles 2005, p69). Domestic services underpins the rest of the economy by providing free services on which many of the population in paid work depend (Giddens 2003, p.398). Ireland although seemingly a wealthy and prosperous country currently holds a position of 16th in the World Economic Forum i.e. a table of 130 countries who are ranked by the extent to which they have reduced inequalities between men and women (Fulcher and Scott 2007, p.178).

The need for change
The notion of women as dependent on men is overtly illustrated in this article. The historical evidence, social theories and past and present statistics I have discussed are testimony to this particular statement of women as dependent on men. “True equality is reflected both eternally in the individual and externally in society”. Equality as many feminists pointed out is not a simple matter of having the same education, the same wages or the same career as men. This view of equality sets up men’s lives as the ideal which women should aspire to. A deeper understanding of equality is based not on occupying male norms but on ending oppression of women, that is a situation where every woman can adopt freely and confidently her own route in life and make genuine decisions about her life as a woman (Beale 1986, p.187). It is frightening to imagine that
the female gender may never step free from the overpowering shadow of their male counterparts. Change is needed in the treatment of women in societal life both nationally and globally and increased support of their contributions to our daily existence must be highlighted, supported and rewarded. Irish studies indicate traditional attitudes toward management and professional levels continue to block changes (Mac Curtain and Corrain 1979, p.109). Bureaucratic organisations to this day validate and permit forms of male embodiment and invalidate or render impermissible forms of female embodiment. Feminist theorists in particular, have focused on the female body as the site where representations of difference and identity are inscribed (Davis, Evans and Lorber 2006, p.259). The contribution of mothers and wives employment income is critical. In the early nineties, welfare was mainly upheld by father’s earnings and job security but dual-income households are now the norm (Andersen 2003, p.603). The balance of power between men and women will not be redressed without fundamental change in organisations themselves and the ways in which they operate. Hierarchies tend to be fixed and bureaucratic institutions are slow to adapt. Power lies with those at the top and it is difficult for those in the lower echelons to make their voices heard (Beale 1986, p.189).

As a woman, I realise that the subordination and repression of the female gender still occurs today. It is an imperative in our modern welfare state that both men and women begin to dominate equally the superior positions of authority in employment, politics, wages and society in general. Sadly, I know that although female politics and ideas promulgate the diffusion of a wider cultural change in gender relations across society in general, it has had a pervasive effect across Irish society (Tovey, Share and Corcoran 2007, p.505). We cannot and should not simply ignore the monumental improvements that our generation has experienced and we owe a great deal to the female visionaries of bygone eras. Irish women, working together without denying their differences, have been
vital agents of change. They certainly do not accept the image of themselves as lurking behind walls and peering out of windows yet state welfare systems clearly continue to uphold the notion of women as dependent (Hoff and Coulter 1995, p.248).

References


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