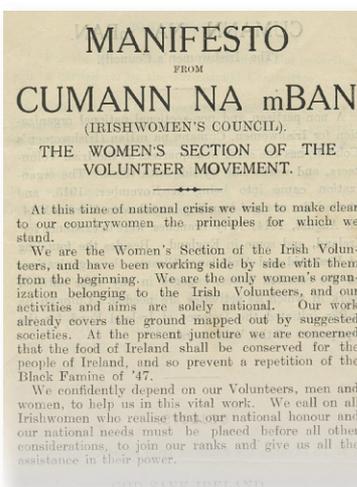




Hannah Sheehy Skeffington (front row, extreme left) takes her seat before the 1919 Sinn Féin Ard Fheis with, among others, Harry Boland, Éamon de Valera, Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith. IRISH INDEPENDENT/NLI COLLECTION



Left: the 1914 Cumann na mBan manifesto. UCD ARCHIVES

Right: Kathleen Clarke, widow of Tom Clarke, in mourning clothes some time after he was executed, with her sons John Daly Clarke, Tom Clarke Jnr and Emmet Clarke. NATIONAL LIBRARY



Below: The Proclamation of the Irish Republic.

Equality was a cornerstone of Proclamation



Importance to women activists of the promise of equal citizenship cannot be underestimated, writes **Mary McAuliffe**

IN May 1936, after the publication of the draft of a proposed new constitution, which was to be put to referendum for acceptance by the Irish people in 1937, journalist Gertrude Gaffney, in her *Irish Independent* column, made a call to arms from feminist activists and nationalist women to defend the women's rights. Under the proposed constitution, she argued, women 'are to be no longer citizens entitled to enjoy equal rights under a democratic constitution but laws are to be enacted which take into consideration our "differences of capacity, physical and moral and of social function"'

In particular, many feminists were angered by predominant discourse in the draft on: The life of women within the home; allusions to her inadequate strength; and the proposed restrictions on her working rights. The President of the National University Women Graduates' Association, Professor Mary Hayden, of UCD, called on women not to "let the empty promises of needless 'safeguards' and vague declarations of the value of 'her life within the home' blind our women to the fact that, under this proposed Constitution, her opportunity of earning, her civil status, her whole position as a citizen will depend on the judgment of perhaps a single minister or a single state department as to her "physical or moral capacity".

Former Free State Senator Kathleen Clarke, widow of Thomas Clarke, one of the signatories to the Proclamation, and her

fellow former Senator, feminist campaigner Jennie Wyse Power, argued that the inclusion of articles which regulated the rights of women workers and articles 40.1 and 40.2 which placed women firmly in the domestic realm were a betrayal of the promises of the 1916 Proclamation and principles of equality contained therein.

Both Senators Clarke and Wyse Power had a long history of using the promises of equality in the Proclamation to counter the constant chipping away at women's rights as full and equal citizens by the governments of the Irish Free State from 1922. As early as 1925 Senator Wyse Power objected to the Juries Act, which sought to prevent women serving on juries, as 'unconstitutional'. She argued that the Act went against the rights guaranteed to women in the 1922 Constitution, to be equal citizens; rights first promised in 1916.

Later, in opposing the 1936 Conditions of Employment Bill, Senator Clarke said that section 16 (which curtailed the rights of women workers) went against the spirit of the Proclamation; "that proclamation gave to every citizen equal rights and equal opportunities, and it seems to me that if you legislate against one section of the community... where are the equal opportunities provided for in that Proclamation?"

Although its meaning and intent had already been severely limited by legislation in the 1920s and 1930s, the importance to women activists of the promise of equal

citizenship in the Proclamation of 1916 cannot be underestimated.

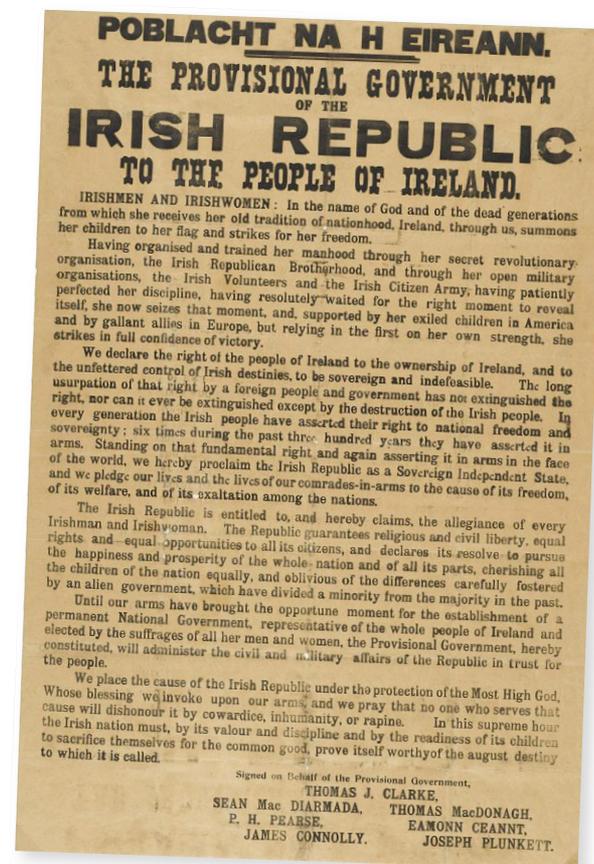
In its opposition to the 1937 Constitution, the Association of Old Cumann na mBan were particularly incensed about the inclusion of a reference to the "inadequate strength of women" (article 45.5.2): where, they wondered, were the feelings about the inadequate strength of women when they were engaged in "heavy muscular toil conveying machine guns, heavy explosives and rifles", during the War of Independence and Civil War. They felt that there was no need for the inclusion of these articles in a new Constitution as "the Proclamation of Easter week 1916 gave to us women equal rights and equal opportunities in simple language that no legislation could change or tamper with and on this Declaration of Independence did Cumann na mBan base its Constitution".

The main argument against the proposed 1937 Constitution was, for most women's groups, based on promises of equality contained in the 1916 Proclamation of Independence. In the simple, clear language admired by Cumann na mBan, the Proclamation claimed "the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman" and guaranteed "religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens". The Irish Republic envisaged by the signatories was to have a "permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland, and elected by the suffrage of all her men and women".

The importance of this promise of equality in the Proclamation was such that it became a touchstone for women activists in the succeeding years, especially as many of them felt that the subsequent Irish Free State viewed and treated women as second class citizens. The interesting question is how a promise of full and equal citizenship for women became a cornerstone of the Proclamation at a time when women did not even have the vote?

From the mid-19th century Irishwomen had campaigned for the right to vote and by the middle of the first decade of the 20th century that campaign had become more strident and militant. From involvement in the Ladies Land League in the early 1880s, through ongoing suffrage campaigns, as well as support of the campaign for Home Rule, and involvement in cultural nationalism, women had been engaged with all of the major political causes in early 20th century Ireland.

Groups such as Inghinidhe na hÉireann (founded in 1900 by Maud Gonne), the Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL, founded in 1908), the Irish Women's Workers Union (1911), and Cumann na mBan (1914), allowed opportunities for female nationalists, suffragists and trade unionists to contribute to the various political ideologies, debates and events of the day. As Countess Markievicz said in a speech to the Students' National Literary Society in 1909, this was time where there was a "chance for our women to... Fix [their] mind on the ideal





Front row: Madeleine ffrench Mullen, Miss Foley, Dr Kathleen Lynn. Second row: Rose McNamara, Kathleen Kenny, MJ Walsh, Mrs Lawless, Jenny Milner, Eileen Walsh, K Kennedy, May Byrne, Eileen Cooney, Annie Cooney. Third row: M Moore; K Lane; Sara Kealy, Gertie Colley, Mary O'Hanrahan, Ameer Wisely, Bridget Murtagh, Cilla Quigley, Julia Grenan, Stasia Twomey, B Walsh. Fourth row: Nora Thornton, Rose Mullally, Sheila O'Hanlon, Maria Quigley, Margaret O'Flaherty, Josie McGowan, Eileen Cooney, Josie O'Keefe. Fifth row: Lucy Smith, Nora Foley, Pauline Morecombe, D Sullivan, M Elliott, Mary Sullivan, Tilley Simpson, Catherine Treston. Sixth row: M Kelly, Brigid Brady, Jeannie Shanahan, Kathleen Barrett, Rosie Hackett, Margaret Ryan, Brigid Davis, Chris Caffrey, Patricia Hoey. Standing (left side): A Tobin, Aoife Taaffe, Marcella Cosgrave, Kathleen Murphy, Bridget Foley. Standing (right side): May Kelly, Maire Nic Shuibhlaigh, Lily O'Brennan, Elizabeth O'Farrell, Nora O'Daly, Mary Murray. (There was more than one photo taken on this occasion, which has contributed to some discrepancies in lists of names. This list is taken from Sinead McCool's *No Ordinary Women*, 2003).

KILMAINHAM GAOL MUSEUM COLLECTION

of Ireland free, with her women enjoying the full rights of citizenship in their own nation..."

The actions of these advanced nationalist and feminist women in campaigning for the citizenship rights of women is vital in our understanding of the egalitarian ideals of the Proclamation, but equally vital are the alliances and networks which existed between these women and their male nationalist and socialist comrades, especially the alliances with those of the seven signatories who were supportive of women's rights.

The feminist campaigner and co-founder of the IWFL, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, recalled that James Connolly had assured her, a week before the Rising, that there was a full citizenship clause for women in the 1916 Proclamation and that six of the seven signatories were fully supportive of its inclusion. Who the demurring signatory was is unknown, but as Kathleen Clarke later mentioned, he was soon persuaded of the rightness of including full rights for women by the other men.

Looking at the statements and activism of all seven men prior to 1916, four of the signatories — Pearse, Ceannt, Clarke and Connolly — had been publicly supportive of the suffrage campaign prior to 1916. Patrick Pearse was a strong supporter of women's rights, saying in early 1916 that "every man and every woman within the nation has normally equal rights", while James Connolly was an avowed feminist

and was closely associated with many feminist women, such as Helena Molony, Kathleen Lynn and Countess Markievicz among others.

Two others, Thomas MacDonagh was married to, and Joseph Plunkett was in a relationship with, women who were members of both the separatist and feminist Inghinidhe na hÉireann and the militant suffrage IWFL (Muriel and Grace Gifford respectively). Both MacDonagh and Plunkett were fully supportive of the campaigns for women's rights. The inclusion of gender equality in the Proclamation therefore is a reflection of the importance and influence of the campaigns for women's rights on the thinking of the signatories and the alliances that women activists had with the advanced nationalist male leadership.

The Proclamation gave, as Hanna Sheehy Skeffington wrote in 1917, "equal citizenship to women", beating, she was proud to note, "all records except that of the Russian Revolution". The 1916 promise of full and equal citizenship formed the basis for the Cumann na mBan manifesto of 1918 which stated that the organisation was to "follow the policy of the Republican Proclamation [of 1916] by seeing that

women take up their proper position in the life of the nation".

The promise of equal citizenship for women also formed part of the 1922 Constitution which stated that "every person without distinction of sex... [shall] enjoy the privileges and be subject to the obligations of such citizenship". However, the reality of women's participation in the political and public life of the Irish Free State was soon undermined by the legislative, cultural and social ideals of 'respectability and domesticity' for women. Women who had participated in the fight for Irish freedom and who had rejoiced in the promises of the Proclamation were soon disheartened.

The Cumann na nGaedheal government introduced several pieces of legislation which positioned women firmly as second-class citizens, while, in 1932, if feminists had any notion that a De Valera-led government might be any better, they were soon disabused. As Hanna Sheehy Skeffington said of him, he was "well-meaning, of course, better than Cosgrave, but really essentially conservative and Church-bound, anti-feminist, bourgeois and the like".

By 1943 Sheehy Skeffington, when running unsuccessfully for the

Dáil said that "Irish women were given equal citizenship, equal rights and equal opportunities", but subsequent retrograde legislation and the 1937 Constitution had rendered the promises of equality in the 1916 Proclamation an "empty formulae" and "meaningless".

Perhaps, as many of the feminist and nationalist women later felt, if some or any of the signatories had survived, things would have been different. As late as in 1970, Rosie Hackett, a member of the Irish Citizen Army, the Irish Women Workers' Union and a trade union activist, who fought at St Stephen's Green/Royal College of Surgeons, remarked that if only "Mr Connolly were living, women would not be in the backward position we are in today".

Already by 1937 the Irish Women's Citizens' Association had noted that the position of women within the Irish State had deteriorated from the ideal implicit in the Proclamation. Gender equality, a cornerstone of that Proclamation, was by the second decade of the Irish Free State, despite the promise of 1916 and the achievement of the vote for some women in 1918 and equal suffrage for all in 1922, as distant a dream as it had ever been.

Dr Mary McAuliffe lectures on gender history at UCD Women's Studies. She is co-author of the forthcoming book 'Realists and Idealists: 77 women of the Easter Rising'. (March 2016)



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