

Women, suffrage and class



The groundwork for equality was laid well before events of 1916, writes **Mary McAuliffe**

FROM the mid-19th century, middle-class suffrage women in Ireland campaigned for the right to vote on the same basis as men. As well as seeking the right to vote, they supported changes to legislation on married women's property rights, they sought access to third level education and an improvement in the conditions for middle-class working women.

A major campaign which many of the early suffrage pioneers were engaged with was the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869. In an effort to combat the spread of venereal diseases, especially among the members of the armed forces, the government introduced such stringent controls on women suspected of prostitution that middle-class women felt it reinforced the sexual double standard and undermined the civil liberties of all women. Belfast-based Isabella Tod, educator and reformer, and Dublin-based suffragette Anna Haslam were active in the Ladies' National Association which was founded in 1869 to campaign for repeal of the Acts.

Because of her work on the campaign Tod became convinced of the necessity of female participation in the public realm, and in 1872 she set up the first Irish suffrage group, the Northern Ireland Society for Women's Suffrage Committee. In Dublin, in 1876, Anna Haslam founded the Dublin Women's Suffrage Society, which later became known as the Irishwomen's Suffrage and Local Government Association.

While there were suffrage societies and groups in most urban centres in Ireland, the number of women, mostly protestant and middle class, actively engaged in suffrage campaigning remained small through the later 19th century. They were reformist rather than militant and used the 'soft' campaigning techniques of letter-writing, organising drawing room meetings, gathering signatures on petitions, contributing to supportive publications, issuing pamphlets and co-operating with their English counterparts. They supported the introduction of private members' bills in the House of Commons,

especially in 1884, when women were not included in the Reform Act which extended the male franchise. One of their successes came in 1898 when the Local Government (Ireland) Act allowed certain women to vote in and sit on rural and urban district councils and on town commissions.

However, by the early years of the 20th century, suffrage activists began to become more radical and militant. In 1908 Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and Margaret Cousins set up the Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL), which represented a new generation of suffrage activists who had lost patience with the moderate, reformist tactics with the older suffrage organisations, and, influenced by the militancy of the British Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), were determined to push their ideology of 'Suffrage First, before all else'.

More radical and outspoken than previous suffrage groups initially, its main aim was to achieve female suffrage within the context of the campaign for Home Rule. Despite the support of individual

members, John Redmond's Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) was, in general, not in favour of female suffrage. However, the IWFL launched a determined campaign to have the right of women to the vote included in the third Home Rule Bill. In order to stabilise its political alliance with the Liberals and secure the passage of Home Rule, the

IPP refused, in March 1912, to support a conciliation Bill in the House of Commons which would have granted a limited female franchise.

The following month, when the third Home Rule Bill was introduced, it did not include a provision for the female franchise. In response the IWFL stepped up its militant campaign. Chaining themselves to railings and breaking windows in public buildings including Dublin Castle, the GPO and Custom House, led to a swift response from the authorities. Several activists, including Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, found themselves arrested and imprisoned.

In July 1912, two members of the WSPU travelled to Dublin to protest at a visit of Prime Minister Asquith. They threw an



In Dublin in 1876, Anna Haslam (pictured) founded the Dublin Women's Suffrage Society



axe which missed him and grazed John Redmond. The women, Mary Leigh and Gladys Evans, were arrested, imprisoned and went on hunger strike. Despite the fact that many of the Irish women resented the intrusion of WSPU members in Irish affairs, Sheehy Skeffington and other IWFL members in prison at the time went on a sympathetic hunger strike. The IWFL women were not force-fed while on hunger strike and were soon released, but Sheehy Skeffington did lose her job as a German teacher because of her imprisonment.

By 1913 militancy was dying down, and the suffrage movement was becoming more engaged with the labour movement. Members of the IWFL had taken an increasing interest in the plight of women workers, and, in 1911, Sheehy Skeffington and Countess Markievicz shared a platform with Delia and James Larkin at the launch of the female trade union, the Irish Women Worker's Union (IWWU). Here Markievicz declared that while women may not have the vote a "union such as now being formed will not alone help you obtain better wages, but will also be a means of helping you get votes".

During the Lockout of 1913 many of the middle-class IWFL women and the

working-class IWWU women worked together in the soup kitchen in Liberty Hall. However, working-class women did not, in general, join the IWFL, as Helena Molony later said, there grew "a deep feeling of social consciousness and revolt among women of a more favoured class, [which] passed over the heads of the Irish working woman and left her untouched". Rather the more radical middle-class suffrage campaigners began to lean left in their thinking, and influenced by the thinking and support of James Connolly, most of them joined the IWWU and, later, the Irish Citizen Army.

By late 1914 the largest women's organisation in the country was nationalist rather than feminist in orientation. In April 1914, Cumann na mBan was founded with the aim of creating an organisation where advanced nationalist women could work for the cause of Ireland. Its manifesto initially spoke of funding and "arming a body of men" for the defence of Ireland. This seeming auxiliary status to the Irish Volunteers did not endear it to suffrage activists. *The Irish Citizen* condemned its "crawling servility to the men", while Sheehy Skeffington described Cumann na mBan as little more than "animated

Second class citizens in health of the nation

Improvements were experienced unevenly, writes **Susannah Riordan**

LEVELS of health in Ireland improved enormously in the 30 years before the Easter Rising. However, the health of poor women and children, especially infants, gave cause for concern.

Rates of smallpox vaccination were high and incidences comparatively low. The numbers of deaths from scarlet fever, typhus, and gastro-enteritis (the main killer of infants) were all falling. Tuberculosis was an anomaly. Ireland was one of the few developed countries in which the tuberculosis mortality rate was not falling. In 1911 the disease still accounted for 13pc of all deaths.

Better health reflected many social changes. Measures had been taken by local authorities to address public and environmental health. Access to medical services and information about preserving health were becoming more widespread. But a general rise in household income was probably the most important development.

The old age pension, introduced in 1909, made a valuable contribution to family resources and may have improved conditions for every age group, not just the over-70s who were entitled to claim it. In 1911, the National Insurance Act provided maternity benefits for wives of insured workers. In 1915, 44,318 mothers — nearly half of those who gave birth — received this. It did not, of course, help the families of uninsured workers or the unemployed.

Higher incomes led to better nutrition. This meant greater resistance to disease and a greater chance of recovery. It also helped women to survive complications from childbirth. Deaths in childbirth fell from 6.18 per 1,000 in 1900 to 4.87 in 1920 but remained greatest among those who were poor and badly-fed.

Health improvements were experienced unevenly throughout the country. Life in rural areas was much healthier than cities due to fewer environmental hazards, lower incidences of infectious disease, better housing and access to better-quality food.

Dublin had the highest overall death rate of any city in Britain and Ireland. While this was declining, the impact was mainly felt among the wealthier classes. In 1909, the overall death rate in the affluent southern suburbs was 16 per 1,000 compared with 24.7 per 1,000 in the north inner city.

In Belfast, the death rate was 18.2 per 1,000 in 1909. However, the linen mills, which mainly employed young women and girls, were associated with a range of respiratory illnesses. Many contemporaries believed they were responsible for Belfast's unusually high death rate from tuberculosis among young women. Given the unreliability of urban milk supplies, the inability of millworkers to breast-feed for as long as other women may also have contributed to infant deaths in the city.

There were great discrepancies in infant mortality rates between city and town and between classes. In 1901, 150 infants died per thousand live births in urban areas, compared with 74 in rural areas. A baby born into a labourer's family was 17 times more likely to die within a year than one born into a professional household.



Children play in a street in Belfast, where, in 1909, the death rate was 18.2 per 1,000.

During the early years of the 20th century there was a new interest in the health of mothers and children. This arose from widespread European concern about national deterioration and a growing realisation that infant deaths could and should be prevented.

In Ireland, the official response was unenthusiastic. There was also strong local opposition to raising rates and taxes and religious suspicion of measures which intruded on the family. The vacuum was filled by pioneering women's organisations, both nationalist and unionist.

Maud Gonne became a champion of school meals for poor children when legislation to provide this service was not extended to Ireland. She founded the Ladies School Dinner Committee in 1911 and provided meals for 400 Dublin schoolchildren. The Committee also lobbied for Irish legislation. This was passed in 1914 and soon 4,000 Dublin children were being fed in national and convent schools.

In 1907, Lady Aberdeen, the viceroy's wife, set up the Women's National Health Association (WNHA) to educate women about preventing disease through better hygiene and nutrition. It established mother and baby clubs in Dublin and Belfast and, most importantly, made free or cheap pasteurised milk available to mothers.

Partly due to WNHA lobbying, local authorities were empowered to ensure that all births were registered. In 1915 registration became compulsory. Consequently, local authorities were able to identify poorer mothers — and it was inevitably poorer mothers — who were thought to be in need of advice on caring for their new babies.

Historians are divided about whether the drive to educate women about motherhood had much of an impact. Instructions from well-meaning middle-class social workers were often unrealistic. Hygiene was difficult to maintain by even the most house-proud mother on a small farm or in a tenement. Simple, nutritious food was not always available or affordable.

Women may have resented interference

with the traditional methods they had learned from their own mothers. Such advice may even have a detrimental effect, making practices like breast-feeding more regimented and therefore more difficult and unattractive.

Statistics reveal one major peculiarity about women's own health at this time. Usually, other things being equal, women enjoy a longer lifespan. In 1911, life expectancy for Irishwomen was 54.1 years, compared with 53.6 years for men. In England and Wales at this time, the difference was close to four years.

Strangely, it was only rural women who lacked an obvious female advantage. This suggests that while rural women were becoming healthier, they were less healthy than they should have been.

This can't be explained by the large size of Irish families. In 1911, 36pc of married women had seven children or more and this had an impact on their health, aging them prematurely. But, though women in towns and cities had access to better maternal healthcare, big families were equally common. Nor can the phenomenon be explained by harder physical labour in the countryside.

Historians have suggested that in other societies where there is little or no female advantage, it is due to cultural factors. If a low social value is placed on girls and women, they may have less access to scarce resources. Did girls have less access to food and healthcare than their brothers in late 19th and early 20th-century Ireland? Or, did feeding the men and children before sitting down to eat herself leave the Irish country mother dangerously undernourished?

Dr Susannah Riordan lectures in Modern Irish History in the UCD School of History. She is co-editor, with Dr Catherine Cox, of *Adolescence in Modern Irish History* (1915) and co-editor, with Professor Diarmaid Ferriter, of *Years of Turbulence: The Irish Revolution and Its Aftermath*



Female Irish Republican supporters pose for a photograph with an Irish tricolour to publicise a meeting in June 1916.

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collecting boxes”.

The IWFL was unwilling to accept the nation first ideology of Cumann na mBan despite the fact that many suffrage activists were on its executive. However as Cumann na mBan grew in urban and rural areas many suffrage campaigners and members of the IWFL joined, and although initially middle-class, by 1915 it had become a cross-class organisation.

Despite their class difference and arguments, most especially their debates about suffrage first or nation first, the women in Cumann na mBan, the IWWU, the Irish Citizen Army and the IWFL co-operated on many issues including resistance to any move to introduce conscription in Ireland once war broke out in 1914. The influence in the activism and ideologies of these women can be best seen in the inclusion of the promise of full citizenship in the Proclamation of 1916.

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*.

