



Remembering the Irish Women's Franchise League

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The demand for universal suffrage in Britain and Ireland grew steadily during the nineteenth century, mainly inspired by the American and French Revolutions and the philosophical discussion of citizenship and civic rights that arose from those seminal events. In the initial aftermath of the revolutionary decades at the end of the eighteenth century, female suffrage was not a major issue, and the campaigns to extend the franchise outside the control of the propertied class focused on securing the vote for "male persons", as they were described in the Representation of the People Act 1832.¹ It was not until 1866, when John Stuart Mill presented a petition for female suffrage to the House of Commons, that the debate about women's right to vote first got an airing in establishment circles.

The Irish suffrage movement did not really flourish until the beginning of the twentieth century when numerous organisations were set up throughout the country. The radical Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL) was founded one hundred years ago by Hannah and Francis Sheehy-Skeffington and Margaret Cousins, and its members were also involved in the labour movement, Irish nationalism and the cultural revival. Although it was modelled on the British-based Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU)² and adopted their militant methods, the founders of the IWFL were determined not to be absorbed by that organisation, primarily because they were anxious to establish a clearly Irish identity for their own campaign.

In 1908, the Irish suffrage movement also included the Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise League, the Munster Women's Franchise League, the Irishwomen's Suffrage Federation, the North of Ireland Women's Suffrage Committee, the Irish Women's Suffrage Society and the Irishwomen's Suffrage and Local Government Association (IWSLGA). The number of suffrage societies prompted Louie Bennett and Helen Chenevix to set up the Irish Women's Suffrage Federation in 1911 to co-ordinate the work that was going on all over the country. Bennett also founded the non-militant Irish Women's Reform League which focused attention on the social and economic position of women workers. The (Anglican) Church League for Women's Suffrage was founded in 1913, and as late as 1915 the Irish Catholic Women's Suffrage Association was created. The IWSLGA was probably the best known of the various organisations. Unlike the multiplicity of sectarian groups, it attracted both nationalists and unionists, but it was strictly non-militant and focused on petitions, meetings and letters to the press to forward its demands. The founders of the IWFL (including Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington and Margaret Cousins) believed that the IWSLGA was too "genteel" to make any significant impact on Irish society.

The issue of militancy was a contentious one within the international suffrage movement. Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington distinguished between militancy and militarism, believing that suffrage militancy was firmly within the Irish tradition of resistance to oppression. She associated the IWFL and their programme of window smashing with the women who had stood against the landlords during the Land League struggles in the nineteenth century. She pointed out that male disapproval of the IWFL tactics was because the average man would "only applaud the stone-thrower as long as the missile is flung for them and not at them". However, she refused to differentiate between women's fight for emancipation and the struggle for national self-determination.

In 1912, the IWFL began publication of *The Irish Citizen*, a suffrage weekly paper which

provided a forum for debate between the various women's groups, including those involved in the struggle for national self-determination. Suffragists argued that women should not simply champion the cause of Irish independence if they were still going to be disenfranchised second-class citizens in an independent Ireland. Conversely, nationalist women believed that while Ireland remained under British rule women's suffrage would not liberate Irish women, but would simply provide women with a say in an illegitimate parliament.

The attitude of the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), led by John Redmond, did not bode well for women's position under Home Rule, which was the most popular solution to the 'Irish question' on offer before the First World War. The IPP was anti-feminist, attracting criticism on this score from many quarters. A conference organised by Redmond in April 1912 to consider the Home Rule Bill specifically excluded women. Redmond claimed that giving votes to women would increase the power of the clergy. The IPP MPs held the balance of power in the Westminster parliament, and they used their position to defeat the Conciliation Bill which would have granted limited suffrage to women, albeit with a property qualification. In July 1912, Prime Minister Asquith, "that large obstacle to women's suffrage in England", visited Dublin, and the IWFL organised protests. At one, a meeting addressed by Redmond, feminist protestors were attacked by stewards and Home Rule supporters who objected to the women's heckling.

Between the summer of 1912 and the outbreak of war in August 1914, 36 women were convicted for suffrage militancy in Ireland, although forced feeding of hunger strikers was not introduced as it was in Britain. Suffragist demonstrations were initially attacked by mobs and their meetings disrupted by police raids as well as unruly hecklers. As a mark of solidarity with the women, James Connolly travelled from Belfast to Dublin to speak at one of the IWFL's weekly meetings which was held in the Phoenix Park, and members of the ITGWU provided protection and offered escorts to women as they left the meetings.

This extract from the Annual Report of the IWFL for 1913 reflects the spirit of the members and the wider significance of their methods, which were adapted successfully by nationalist and republican groups:

The militant spirit is as strong as ever; several new recruits have passed through the ordeal of imprisonment in Ireland, and have asserted (and won) at the risk of their lives the principle of political treatment for political offences. Our League has also foiled the attempt of the government to enforce the Cat and Mouse Act³ in this country, and the magnificent public spirit aroused by this attempt has strongly reinforced the ranks of militancy in Ireland, while many recent events have immensely strengthened our hold upon the popular mind in Ireland. The working classes particularly have shown themselves friendly, and have rallied to our support whenever called upon.

Connolly's support for the IWFL was a reminder that there were other issues besides votes for women and freedom from British rule that women should be campaigning about, in particular the appalling poverty endured by many of the Irish working class. During the 1913 lockout, women from the suffrage movement were actively involved in organising pickets and demonstrations and providing food for the locked-out workers and their families, wearing their IWFL badges while they carried out their volunteer work. The women workers of Jacob's biscuit factory were among the most militant of the strikers in 1913, and the membership of the Irish Women Workers Union came out in support of fellow trade unionists for the entire period of the lockout. Women who disagreed over the relative priorities of nationalism and women's suffrage were able to work together in support of labour.

Arthur Griffith's Sinn Féin was also a new organisation in 1908, and they did not oppose the demands of women in the way that the IPP did. However, what support they gave to

women's rights was grudging. Griffith himself had little time for the feminist cause, and also showed great hostility to the labour movement. He opposed higher wages for factory workers, claiming that this would hold back the growth of Irish industry. In 1913 Griffith called for the strikers to be bayoneted,⁴ and Sinn Féin denounced the *SS Hare* which brought food aid from the British labour movement to the locked-out Irish workers, because its cargo was made up of non-Irish goods.

The outbreak of war in August 1914 caused many suffragists to reassess their position and their attitude to the state. The IWFL took the stance of non-involvement in the war effort on the grounds of opposition to an imperialist war, in stark contrast to the British WSPU which suspended all suffragist activity in favour of support for the war effort. Sylvia Pankhurst was notable for her opposition to the position adopted by her mother and sister.⁵ While Francis Sheehy-Skeffington was a pacifist, Hannah was opposed to militarism but did not reject the idea of using physical force to achieve independence.

The foundation of Cumann na mBan in 1914, in response to the formation of the Irish Volunteers, was seen by many feminists as a retrograde step. Although Cumann na mBan insisted that they were a separate and independent organization, in effect they were an auxiliary force. It is clear that the organisation was set up as a response to women's exclusion from the Volunteers and that many Cumann na mBan women would have joined the Volunteers had they been allowed to do so. Editorials in *The Irish Citizen* referred to Cumann na mBan as the "Slave Women" for putting themselves at the service of men without demanding anything for themselves. The events of Easter week 1916 and its aftermath showed Cumann na mBan members in a more radical, even revolutionary light, although their role was airbrushed from the historical record for many years afterwards.

The Easter rebellion underlined the warning that Connolly had given IWFL members in 1912 and later, that the national issue would come to dominate all others and that female suffrage and the needs of the labour movement would be subordinated to it. In 1918 the IWFL worked hard to ensure that Constance Markievicz would be the first woman elected to parliament, but they constantly had to deal with the unwillingness of male Sinn Féin members to treat women as equals. The Representation of the People Act 1918 had conceded the right to vote to women over the age of thirty, although they had to be ratepayers or the wives of ratepayers, so the property qualification remained. During the War of Independence, *Irish Citizen* editorials expressed disappointment that only 42 women were elected as councillors in the 1920 local government elections, because of the disproportion between this number and the total female population. There was also anger about the failure to extend the franchise to women aged between 21 and 30, when men aged over 21 had no such restriction.

Under the provisions of the 1922 Irish Free State Constitution, all citizens over the age of 21 were enfranchised and, in theory at least, the limitations on Irish women's access to the full rights of citizenship were removed. However, the provisions of the Constitution were not applied to that year's 'Treaty Election', meaning many women were barred from voting. Northern Irish women had to wait until the Representation of the People Act was amended in 1924 to extend the franchise to all citizens over 21, with no property qualification. However, for many years after partition, the only women who were elected to the Stormont parliament were staunch unionists whose priority was "to preserve the safety of the Unionist cause".

The 1922 Constitution was to be the last piece of progressive legislation affecting Irish women that would be enacted for over fifty years. During the 1920s and '30s in particular, consecutive Irish governments worked with the Catholic Church to put women's domestic role on a statutory footing, thereby undermining their rights as equal citizens of the state. Although the IWFL discontinued its activity after 1922, many of its members were involved in the campaigns against such reactionary measures as the 1924 Juries Acts, restricting

women's right to serve on juries, the imposition of marriage bars in the public service, and the terms of the Conditions of Employment Act 1936. They were unsuccessful in persuading de Valera to remove Article 41 of the 1937 constitution,⁶ but their hard-fought campaign reminded the Irish state of their capacity for militant action and tempered the worst patriarchal impulses of Irish society.

Notes

- 1 The Act was commonly known as the 'Reform Act' and it introduced wide-ranging changes to the electoral system of the United Kingdom, which had included Ireland since the Act of Union 1801.
- 2 The WPSU was founded by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia.
- 3 The Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill Health) Act 1913 was popularly known as the Cat and Mouse Act. It allowed for the temporary release of hunger strikers when their health was endangered. Once fit they could be returned to jail.
- 4 Peter Berresford Ellis, *A History of the Irish Working Class* (Pluto 1985), p 197.
- 5 Sylvia had been expelled from the WSPU in January 1914 for speaking at a mass meeting in the Albert Hall in defence of Larkin and the locked-out Dublin workers, but the main issue of contention was the support of the East London Federation of the WSPU for the Independent Labour Party, and Sylvia's insistence that class politics was as crucial as female suffrage.
- 6 Article 41.2 of Bunreacht na hÉireann reads as follows:
 - (1) In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.
 - (2) The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.