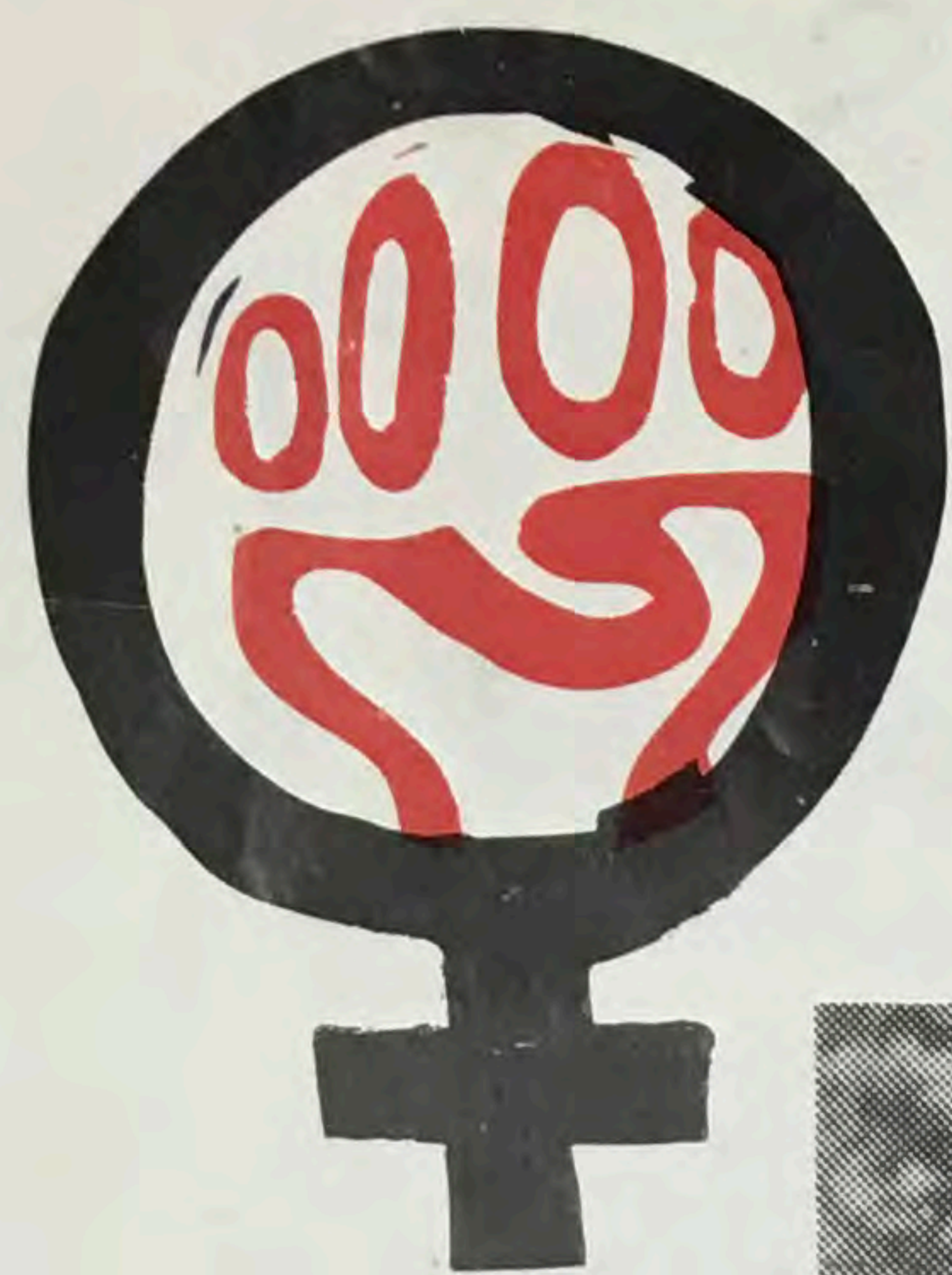
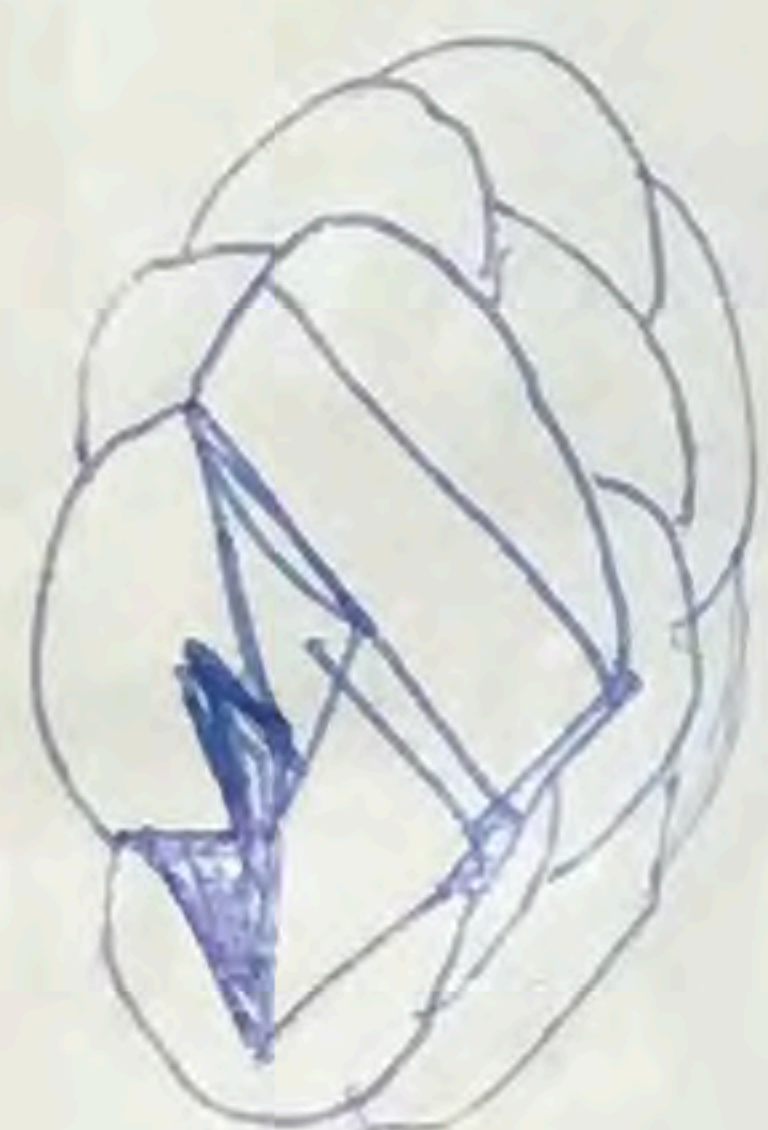


15p



# BANSHEE

Vol.1 No. 4 JOURNAL OF IRISHWOMEN UNITED



women  
and  
health

adoption

women's  
poetry

news  
reviews





# EDITORIAL

Now that Summer is here, Irishwomen United is taking direct action against daylight sexism. We are attacking sexist advertisements on the streets, invading all-male sports places and clubs that discriminate against women members, and disarming second-degree rapists who verbally insult us as we walk in the streets.

As women become more aware of sexism and support one another in the fight against it, it will die a quick death. But many people do not yet realize the psychological harm that sexism does – to women *and* to men.

Would men survive for long if everytime they went into public they had to prepare for assault – verbal and physical – just because of their gender? Why do they need to ~~keep up such a concerted~~ attack against us – What are they afraid of?

Is it just coincidence that the 40-foot “men only” swimming-pool in Dalkey is the best swimming-place on the east coast, and Fitzwilliam tennis-club which does not allow women members, has the best sports facilities in the country? Why does the same man who calls the human race “the brotherhood of man” feel so left out when a mixed audience is addressed as “sisters”? Why do people who think its okay for an adult to beat or verbally abuse a child at the slightest whim, register shock when a woman lashes out at a man who has insulted her?

Do men really think that it's best to set themselves up on pedestals of greed, injustice, and privilege, and then live in constant fear of the other sex in case they'll be toppled? Unfortunately, many of them do. And that is why the struggle against sexism must be waged by women, who know better – and want better.

For the sake of ourselves and all the human race, we must eradicate the social disease of sexism. So, **fight back sisters!** There comes a time when only anger is love.

## SUBSCRIPTIONS to 'BANSHEE'

I enclose £1 for the next 6 issues of 'Banshee'  
(Postage included)

Name .....

Address .....

Send to: 'BANSHEE' C/o Irishwomen United,  
12 Lr. Pembroke Street,  
Dublin 2.

# CONTENTS

Editorial	2
Red Bidy	3
Maria Montessori	4
Letters	5
History of Women Healers	6
Love Me Through This	7
Self-Help Health	8
Vive la Difference!	9
Maternity Hospitals	10
Women and the Constitution	11
Adoption Laws	12
Poetry	13
Outreach	14
Rumblings	15

## CONTRIBUTORS

Monica Adams; Angie Clinch; Pat Cobey; Colette Cullen; Maeve Donellan; Mary Doran; Mary Gallagher; Chris Heaney; Mary Jennings; Patricia Kelleher; Bernadette McLeavey; Breda McLeavey; Dee Melia; Josephine Murphy; Margaret Murphy; Ger Nolan; Anne O'Brien; Anne O'Donnell; Ros Pearmain; Betty Purcell; Karen Snider; Anne Speed; Sandra Stephen; Contraception Workshop; Employment Workshop;

## WHAT IS IRISH WOMEN UNITED?

We are a group of Women's liberationists who believe that the best perspective for struggle against women's oppression in Ireland lies in an ongoing fight around the charter of demands printed here.

We came together originally in April 1975 as a few individual women interested in the idea of building a conference to discuss a charter; what its demands should be and how a campaign should be built.

At this conference on June 8th, attended by approximately 100 women, we constituted ourselves as a separate group, Irish Women United – the only criteria for joining to be agreement on the demands of the Charter.

Irish Women United works on the basis of general meetings (discussions and action planning, at present every week in Dublin), joint actions (e.g. pickets, public meetings, workshops, at present on women in trade unions, contraception, social welfare and political theory) and consciousness-raising groups.



# RED BIDDY



Dublin journalists really love women!

There was a story in "The Irish Times" three weeks ago about a 93-year old Austrian man, who attacked a woman, threw her down a slope and raped her. In the headline to this story, the reporter reassured ageing males with rape fantasies, that "it's never too late".

At the same time there was a report in "The Evening Press", about The First Women's Bank, which opened in New York recently. The aim of the bank is to break the prejudice of the banking system against female customers. More than 80 pct of First Women's 70,000 shareholders, 11 of the 15 directors and 8 of the bank's 11 officers are women. The bank welcomes male as well as female customers and the report states, that since it opened last October it has been proved, that those people with money to deposit like the unorthodox concept of a bank run predominantly by women for women

Great! But guess what the caption to that article was - "Poor start for 'women only' bank"!

\*

Believe it or not, a priest while officiating at a wedding in Limerick recently gave a little speech of praise about the newly married couple. He said "when Paul looks at Teresa he sees an angel. . . . and when Teresa looks at Paul she sees an archangel". Later he quoted from the marriage text "The husband will be the head of this new home and the wife its loving heart". Wouldn't like to walk into that kitchen and see a head and a human heart sitting on the floor, where I thought Teresa and Paul would be!

"I WISH MY MOM WAS LIKE YOUR MOM."



"THE GRASS ALWAYS LOOKS GREENER IN THE OTHER GUY'S KITCHEN."

Whenever you hear a woman being called a lady, be suspicious that she's being discriminated against. The trickery of unequal prize-money for the "Ladies Championship" at Wimbledon is obvious. But in spite of a threat to boycott Wimbledon next year, women tennis players have been told by the chairman of the Championship Committee, Sir Brian Burnett, "You will never receive the same prize money as men. You are not worth the same".

The set-up in golf clubs is a little more subtle. The special "Ladies Subscription" makes sure that women can only use the golf-links on a few days in the week, and in the clubhouse itself, it usually means special bars and snooker rooms for men only.

If you go to a dance and "ladies choice" is announced, you are being told, that for that one dance you may choose a partner, the men will choose in all the rest.

Clearly the society that says "Ladies First" really means "women last". \*

Mount Athos in northern Greece is the only entirely monastic state in Europe. It is a self governing community of 20 greek orthodox monasteries and contains many rare objects of Byzantine art and priceless manuscripts.

This year the monks renewed their centuries old constitution, which forbids women and female animals from entering their community. They will not even drink milk because it comes from a female. Where do they think they came from?



Love is ...  
...the glow you get  
when he digs into  
your cooking.

"Irish Independent" (June 16th) Coincidence? Or the lesson that the way to a male chauvinist pig's heart is with a pitch-fork?

Schools' psychologist Brigid Foy warns girls to get out of jeans and jumpers and to wear more feminine gear, otherwise "boys will be confused about their sex roles". Oh dear!

This brought a spate of reaction mostly from men, ranging from the hysterical headline in "The Evening Herald", that "Girls in jeans are sexy!" to a psychologist's comment, that "It would be more psychologically damaging for girls to wear clothes, that they didn't feel free in."

Then there was the little girl who asked, whether she had played with boys or girls at the beach. "I don't know", she said, "they didn't have their clothes on"

\*

Patriarch Alex Joseph of the American Mormons, supported by arch sexist writer Henry Miller, thinks he's all mod, to be plugging polygamy. But sexism is not just modern - it goes back thousands of years. You see those supporters of polygamy, only talk about a man happily married to several wives. They ignore the fact, that the average woman needs more sexual stimulation than the average man, and they never mention the word polyandry - a woman having several husbands. In fact a woman demanding sexual freedom and fulfilment is a sure way to send these trendies quaking back to monogamy.

The same fear of the strength of women's sexuality is shown by fanatical advocates of the "Billings" method of contraception. If a woman's lover or husband understands sex only as sexual intercourse and she wants to avoid pregnancy and she is using the "Billings" method, she is in real trouble. This "method" means, that for

one week out of every month she must avoid sexual intercourse. That's the week around ovulation time - the time when most women experience an upsurge of sexual drive, which of course, many men are afraid of. Hence "Billings", hence monogamy, hence polygamy - ad adnauseam

\*

One aspect of the American Bicentennial is that its War of Independence caused the almost complete extinction of the Iroquois indian tribe.

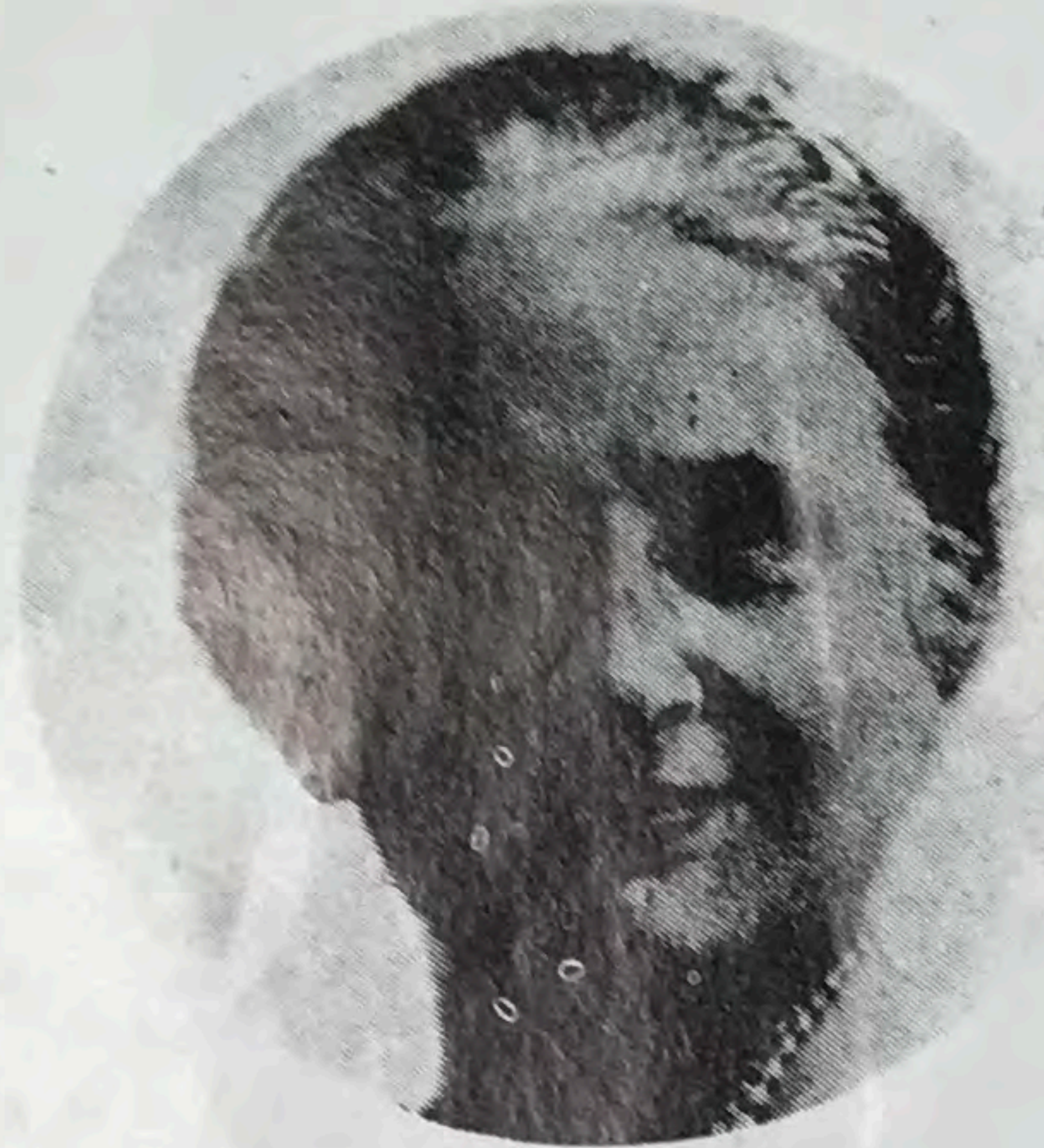
The Iroquois took the British side and after the war General John Sullivan under Washington's orders, took revenge on the Indians by destroying their villages and burning their cornfields.

Earlier in a rebuke from "Good Peter" the chosen orator of the Iroquois in their negotiations with Governor Clinton, he asked the patriarchal rulers to have more respect for the Iroquois women: "Brothers! Our ancestors considered it a great offense to reject the counsels for their women, particularly of the Female Governesses. They were esteemed the mistresses of the soil. Who, said our forefathers, brings us into being? Who cultivates our lands, kindles our fires, and boils our pots, but the women? Our women, Brother, say that they are apprehensive. . . . They entreat that the veneration of our ancestors in favor of the women be not despised; the Great Spirit made them. The Female Governesses beg leave to speak with the freedom allowed to women and agreeable to the spirit of our ancestors. They entreat the Great Chief to put forth his strength and to preserve them in peace. For they are the life of the nation".



# Maria Montessori

## a pioneer in children's liberation



The Montessori method of education is known throughout the world. The revolutionary who founded it – Maria Montessori was born in Ancona, Italy, in 1870. Her father was a military man, conservative, distant and noted for his impeccable politeness. Her mother was Renilde Stoppani, niece of Antonio Stoppani, the great philosopher-scientist-priest. Mother and daughter resembled each other in appearance and temperament, and there grew between them an affection and understanding that lasted till her mother's death in 1912.

Even as a young pupil in Ancona the beginnings of her later philosophy were starting to take shape. When playing with her friends – she was generally the leader – she puzzled them with her expression of disapproval – “You! why you are not even born yet”. She was later to describe human development as a series of new births at consecutively higher levels. One day she overheard a teacher speaking critically of the expression in her eyes. She never raised ‘those eyes’ in the presence of that teacher again.

### “I know I shall be a doctor”

At fourteen her scholastic ambitions had expanded and grown. She now had her own ideas about her education. She was very interested in Mathematics so she would prepare herself for a career as an engineer – disregarding the fact that such a career was unthought of for a woman, and refusing to consider teaching, the career hoped for by her parents. As the ‘high-class seminaries for young ladies’ did not cater for such ambitions Maria attended classes at a technical school for boys. After some time her interest changed to medicine. This was even more outrageous than considering engineering, and as far as everyone but Maria was concerned certainly impossible. But she went ahead, unconcerned

with the cries of horror, and managed to get an interview with the head of the Board of Education. When he told her she could not go ahead with this idea, she thanked him and added quietly “I know I shall be a Doctor of Medicine”. Not long afterwards she became the first woman medical student in Italy. On top of this achievement she won a series of scholarships year after year.

### “The harder you blow – the higher I go”

Having been admitted to the faculty of medicine, another series of difficulties began – those caused mainly by her ‘fellow’ students. Annoyed by her intrusion into their previously all-male domain and jealous of her academic success they tried, for months to wear her down and break her spirit. They gradually learned, however, that she wouldn't be frightened, and in time their persecution turned into a grudging admiration of her pluck and good-humoured indifference. One day they passed her in the corridor making their usual sneering remarks. “Blow away my friends” she cheerfully replied “the harder you blow the higher up I shall go”.

Other difficulties at the university cropped up, besides the animosity of the male students. It was not considered proper that she should dissect dead bodies in the presence of the men students, so this work had to be done alone in the evening, often working among the corpses long after darkness had set in. Her way was made still more difficult by the opposition of her father, who all along had disapproved of the career she had chosen.

### Revelation

Under the burden of so many difficulties the young woman began to feel disheartened, and suddenly, one evening, rushed from the dissecting room determined to find another career less strewn with obstacles. On her way home she passed an old beggar-woman. It was not the woman but the young child sitting beside her that caught Maria's attention. The child was playing with a piece of coloured paper, and the expression of serene happiness in the possession of that worthless scrap of paper filled her with an emotion she couldn't explain. She turned and went directly back to the dissecting room and from that moment she never again felt revulsion towards those uncongenial surroundings. From that moment

too she knew she had a vocation, but it was not to reveal itself in full for some years yet.

### Lion-tamer

Though her father disapproved of her medical studies, her mother Renilde never doubted her daughter's ability, and stood by her as friend and sympathiser all the way through. But even her father's opposition was swept away the day she gave her graduation speech. Prejudice in the audience was high and some had come just to create a disturbance. “I felt like a lion-tamer that day” she later remarked. Her personality was so fascinating and her speech so brilliant that the crowd cheered when she had finished.

### Feminist Delegate

Maria Montessori thus became the first woman in Italy to take the degree of Doctor of Medicine. In that same year (1896) she was chosen to represent the women of Italy at a feminist congress held in Berlin. Here she championed the cause of working women and did so with such effectiveness that she appeared in the newspapers of many countries. In 1900 she attended a similar congress in London and here attacked the exploitation of child labour.

### Human dignity for children

Ten years were to pass before she would realize what her principal mission was to be, ten years of varied and incessant work. During this time, as assistant doctor in a psychiatric clinic she was appalled at the conditions under which the mentally retarded children lived, and set about establishing an educational system for them, so she might “place human dignity within their grasp”. For three years she worked with the children, and under her method of instruction they developed to such an extent that they were able to present themselves, successfully, at a public examination, alongside normal children. Her success was greeted by loud applause, but Montessori was pondering another course – why were normal children being kept back so much that they could be equalled by these unfortunate pupils? She felt certain that the same method applied to normal children would “develop and set free their personality in a marvellous and surprising way”.

For the next seven years, while herself a lecturer, she re-enrolled as a student to study psychology and philosophy. She also studied nervous diseases in children, practised in the clinics and hospitals in Rome, and even carried on a private practise of her own for a time.

### ‘The Children's House’

But the time came when all these activities were sacrificed, and her time devoted to the education of normal children. It began when she was offered the position of starting a school to cater for the young slum-children of Rome, and so the first Montessori “Children's House” was established. In that little room in a slum quarter in Rome a new child was discovered “as if a higher form of personality had been liberated”. These children began to display qualities which were to amaze observers the world over. In brief, these qualities included – a wonderful mental concentration which refreshed the children rather than tire them, a love of repetition, a love for order, ability to choose freely and responsibly their own work, a preference for work over play, no need for rewards or punishment, a love of silence, a deep sense of personal dignity and a spontaneous self-discipline.

Knowledge of the happenings in the Roman slum spread rapidly. People came from all parts of the globe to observe the wonders in the Children's House. Just as knowledge of the method spread, so did its practice. Montessori lived on for over forty more years, years in which she worked incessantly, establishing schools, training Directresses, writing and lecturing.

Her son, Dr. Mario Montessori became her partner in this work, and is now the Director General of the International Montessori Association.

Honours were conferred on her in many countries, and her time was in constant demand. But she didn't get tired in her old age – like the children the work seemed to refresh and refill her with energy.

### Fitting theory to observed development.

As her schools sprang up like mushrooms around the world, Montessori was again pondering a further course. Her method needn't only be applied to very young children, but could apply to older children, and right through adulthood. By fitting theory to observed development and not the reverse, by respecting the dignity of each individual, the liberation of the child could blossom into the liberation of all humankind.

At the age of eighty-one, Maria Montessori died in Holland, on 6th May, 1952.



# NEWS

## 40ft. - "Men Only"?

The forty-foot-men-only bath pool located at Sandycove, is an extremely convenient natural swimming area, being situated only 7 miles from the city centre and being largely unaffected by the tidal fluctuations one can swim or dive in this beautiful spot at any time of the day, night or year - if one is a MALE. Women have been prohibited from swimming here since this part of our coastline was taken over and made exclusively male in the early years of this century. A ladies and childrens' swimming pool existed at one time, but was encroached upon by men and no longer exists.

### THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of the 40 ft. swimming pool proves very interesting.

After the exodus of the British military from it, it was taken over by the Sandycove Bathers' Association, dressing shelters and a diving board were constructed under the name of a private club. Legally, this was an infringement of the Common Laws, i.e. "that no person may hold private a piece of the Irish foreshore". Therefore, according to the Constitution women (or anyone else) should never have been excluded - to do so violated the law of the land. In the 1930's the land after the foreshore, was owned by the Minister for Finance, and leased to the club for a nominal sum of 10 shillings per annum. This land is now owned by a private householder and the same lease applies. But, the Sandycove Bathers' Association have no legal right to prevent any person from using this land and water.

### SOCIOPOLITICAL RIGHTS

Apart from the legal rights, the sociopolitical rights must be taken into consideration here. Blatant discrimination was practiced against women excluding them by virtue of their sex - from swimming in an area of water which is the only place to swim at low tide along this coastline.

### PETTY MODESTY

One can trace this discrimination back to the negative attitudes held towards women at the time, especially by the Catholic Church. The clergy having always comprised a large section of the Club's membership. An anti-women attitude held sway, along with the Church's moral stand on modesty and sex, whereby to regard the body as unknown and permanently covered was seen as a virtue. Behind this virtuous veneer however, lies the fear of knowing and accepting the body in a positive and healthy manner. Linked to this question of modesty is the issue of power, whereby some Brethern may feel weakened by the fact that they show their sexual arousal so clearly.

### TOTALLY UNJUSTIFIABLE DISCRIMINATION

We do not deny the right of any group to meet exclusively for their own purposes, but when their reasons for doing so, are based on such petty, prudish, selfish and discriminatory tenents, we hold it is totally unjustifiable. Acting against unjust discrimination towards women I.W.U. for two years have been trying to break down the barrier of ignorance and fear.

### TIME FOR CHANGE

The 'private' club no longer exists, neither the sign "No women or dogs allowed", but the "Gentlemen Only" sign still stands, and a similar Dun Laoghaire Corporation road sign - they, along with tradition succeed in preventing women from swimming there. These traditions must be changed - will be changed, and the way to do it, is for women to use the pool. Do not wait in the car for your men friends anymore - just walk straight in poast the desk - contribute to the upkeep if you wish, and enjoy the water and the sun.

## LETTERS

Dear Sisters,

*I don't think Michael O'Leary is fifteen years old (Red Biddy). He is centuries old. He has behind him a long part of oppressive maleness, a thousand years old history of sexism and hatred of women; he is a modern version of the centuries old sexist.*

*Michael O'Leary is not a joke! He is the man who denies contraception to unmarried women, while, he - an unmarried man - goes nowhere without a pack of rubbers in his pocket, which he intends to and does use, whenever he gets the chance. Or so the story goes - let him deny it!*

*Since he feels he has a right to control over our sexual lives, ought we not to ask him to publicly account for his activities, rather than make harmless jokes about him at no one's expense but ours?*

*Apart from that, thank you for the magazine. It's great - and write on sisters.*

*Rosine Auberting, Paris.*

Dear Sisters,

*Having left Ireland in the days when a magazine from I.W.U. was but a hopeful wish, you can imagine my delight in finding the first two copies of Banshee in a parisian flat. How nice it was to read through them and not only find the old familiar faces but also scores of ones as yet unknown to me, in this and that photograph.*

*The magazine is excellent - of course. However, in the article on the single woman, I was amazed to find you state, that the only alternative to risking an unwanted pregnancy in Ireland is "not to have a sex life at all".*

*Admittedly, heterosexuality is the norm everywhere, but since we all know, that it is not only the cause, but the perpetuating force of sexism, why continue to support the myth, that it's the only framework within which women can exist. All those women in the movement, who have rejected it, know that heterosexuality is man's primary weapon for maintaining their*

*dominance and keeping women in their place. And from it sprang all the other accepted norms of this man's world, such as oppression, ruthlessness and greed for power.*

*As long as women submit to men's sexual agression - otherwise known as heterosexuality - their choice can indeed be little better than loneliness or unwanted pregnancies. But many so-called single women can and do break out of this straitjacket and put their energy emotional, sexual and mental, where it belongs - with other women.*

*Mary Dorcey, Paris*

Dear Banshee,

*I disagree with some of the emphasis in your article on "Lesbianism and Feminism" (Banshee No. 3). It is true that men have used heterosexuality as a weapon against women - that is men's shame, and shows how*

*sexually pathetic they can be. But some men can relate sexually to women in equal dignity.*

*The man "who breathes on the next pillow to a woman each night" is not necessarily her oppressor. Patriarchal society equates maleness with agression against the female. But this is a perversion of nature. In the animal world the female has the right to choose, and rape amongst wild animals is unknown. It is not "maleness" that makes a man see a woman as his enemy - but perverse patriarchal conditioning.*

*The struggle for lesbian liberation should not be seen as seperate from heterosexual womens liberation. Patriarchy oppresses us all. As feminists we must support one another in the fight for the right of ALL women to a self-determined sexuality.*

*Bernadette McLeavey  
Greenpark Road, Bray*



# HISTORY OF WOMEN HEALERS

It is ironic that the concept of self-help health groups is such a novelty in Ireland and that women are so much in awe of the medical profession when in fact women were the first healers.

## KNOWLEDGE OF WITCHES

Women in primitive human society developed the science of organic medicine, using vegetation, before there was any notion of the profession of medicine. At the height of Witchcraft in the Middle Ages, the witches (wise women) of Europe were proficient in the use and manufacture of pain-relieving and hallucogenic drugs, were performing abortions and surgery, assisting at births and had discovered many secrets of human psychology for mental healing. So great was the witches knowledge that in 1527 Paracelsus, considered the "father of medicine" burned his text on pharmaceuticals, confessing that he "had learned from the Sorceress all that he knew".

The power of the witches was a threat to the Mediaeval Status Quo, because they encouraged the ordinary people to take control of their own lives and destinies and they had a feminist approach to religion – seeing the primary life-force as female, not male. Hence the persecution of witches by the Church and State between the 14th and 18th century, which put to death millions of women.



## THE RISE OF MEDICINE

Coinciding with the persecution of witches, the practice of medicine in Europe was becoming a prestigious and lucrative profession. The establishment of medicine as a profession, requiring university training, made it easy for the authorities to ban women legally from practice. Most of the universities were closed to women, and any woman who opened practiced medicine, not having got a University degree, could be fined or imprisoned.

By the nineteenth century healing was considered so much "a man's job" that pioneer women medical students Dorothy Reed and Maria Montessori were ostracised by their relatives and persecuted by their fellow male medical students. And women had by now become so much the passive victims of the medical profession that the church was able to instruct doctors not to relieve women's pain in childbirth saying that it was their just punishment for the sin of Eve.

## SOCIAL CHANGE

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the growth of the Popular Health Movement in America helped women to gain control in the field of health. This movement was the medical front of a general social upheaval stirred up by the feminist and working-class movements. "Ladies Physiological Societies" – the equivalent of our "know-your-body" courses, sprang up everywhere, and women are supported in their struggle to enter medical colleges.

## WOMEN AND MEDICINE TODAY

Now that we no longer have to fight so hard to become part of the medical profession we can view it in a more critical and far-reaching way. We can see that women entering medical school in greater numbers than before is not enough for women's liberation in the field of mental and physical health. A medical diploma does not necessarily guarantee expertise in healing – either of oneself or others. Every effort should be made by all women to take hold of and share medical knowledge. We must look back to our women ancestors and learn the truth about organic medicine and witchcraft, we must insist on having equal access to the best professional medical training that is available to-day and we must speculate about how women's health could be in the future.

The combination of self-help projects, know-your-body courses and literature, counselling, women's free clinics, with female power in the established profession of medicine, are vital for the future of women's mental and physical health.

## FAMILY PLANNING CLINICS

37 Watergate St., Navan,  
CO. MEATH.

Tel. 046 21143

Mon. 7.30 – 9.30 p.m.

Tues. 10.00 – 12.30. mornings.

8 Tuckey St.,  
CORK.

Tel. 021 55681

Tues. 7.00 – 9.00 p.m.

Wed. 7.00 – 9.00 p.m.

Thurs. 10.00 a.m. – 12.30 p.m.

7.00 – 9.00 p.m.

## CHERISH

An organisation for single parents and families, run by single parents. This unmarried parents association employs social workers in its Dublin branch.

DUBLIN 2 Lr. Pembroke St. Dublin 2.

Meetings every 2nd Wednesday at 8.30 p.m.

Tel. 01 682744

LIMERICK Centre was opened in November 1975 –  
Contact Mary Kerrigan

Tel. 061 61989

DROGHEDA There is currently a centre being set up.  
Details when it opens.



### Misquided beginnings

The adage that fat babies make fat adults is true – overfeed a baby and you will sentence her or him to being a fat adult, or a dieting adult. Fat adults are often made from the instructions on baby food packs. Their well-intentioned parents mix more powder than is recommended with the same quantities of liquid supposing the meal to be more nutritious. In fact the mix is dehydrating and when the baby screams it is mistakenly fed again, when what it really needs is water. Breast milk, by contrast, is the only balanced baby food. While obesity in children and adults is the disease of the western capitalist countries, malnutrition is the disease of the third world and severe malnutrition in infancy has been shown to have a detrimental effect on intelligence.

Humans are not the only species to die of starvation, they are the only species to die of starvation by their own choice. They are also the only species who make themselves and their animals fat.

### Fatness fed by habit

Fat babies and fat children are made; fat adults make themselves, in the sense, that they do not change their eating habits so that their weight normalises. Good and bad family eating habits are largely governed by tradition, culture and economic considerations. Bad eating habits are those which make you fat and unhealthy; it is desirable that they should be changed since obesity, as well as being personally inconvenient, frequently agonisingly embarrassing and unattractive, shortens your lifespan and is a major contributor to heart disease. In order to change your eating habits you have to re-educate yourself, learn what essential nutrients different

# Love Me Through This

foods contain, how to substitute one food which is unpalatable for another which contains similar nutrients in similar ratios and above all you have to learn how much you personally need in a day.

### Protective layers of fat

If you are fat, you eat too much or too much of the wrong foods for you. Glandular disturbances are rarely the cause of obesity, though they are frequently used as an excuse. However the reasons why people eat too much are more complex. It may be that they do not understand their requirements or the food value of what they eat. Many people however do understand and simply go on being fat or becoming fatter. Sometimes they are involved in a slow campaign of self destruction, sometimes fatness is a spacesuit to keep sexual predators at bay.

Anorexia nervosa is the other extreme of self destruction, which has become the disease of the

middle class adolescent. In our time and culture to be sexually desirable is to be slim, but being slim will mean rejecting unwanted sexual advances and cast you as a sexual object. But being fat means, that someone will have to love you through your protective layers and love for yourself. Being fat may also be a way of dealing with other people's dislike of you – saying they dislike you because you are fat, rather than because you are what you are. Being fat may also be a way of defusing the of your own power, with which you are unable to deal, so that you become a crippled person, whom other people can look down on and laugh at. Being fat may be the only way for a person to cope with their life situation and such people will only reach and maintain a normal weight, when they are psychologically ready to do so.

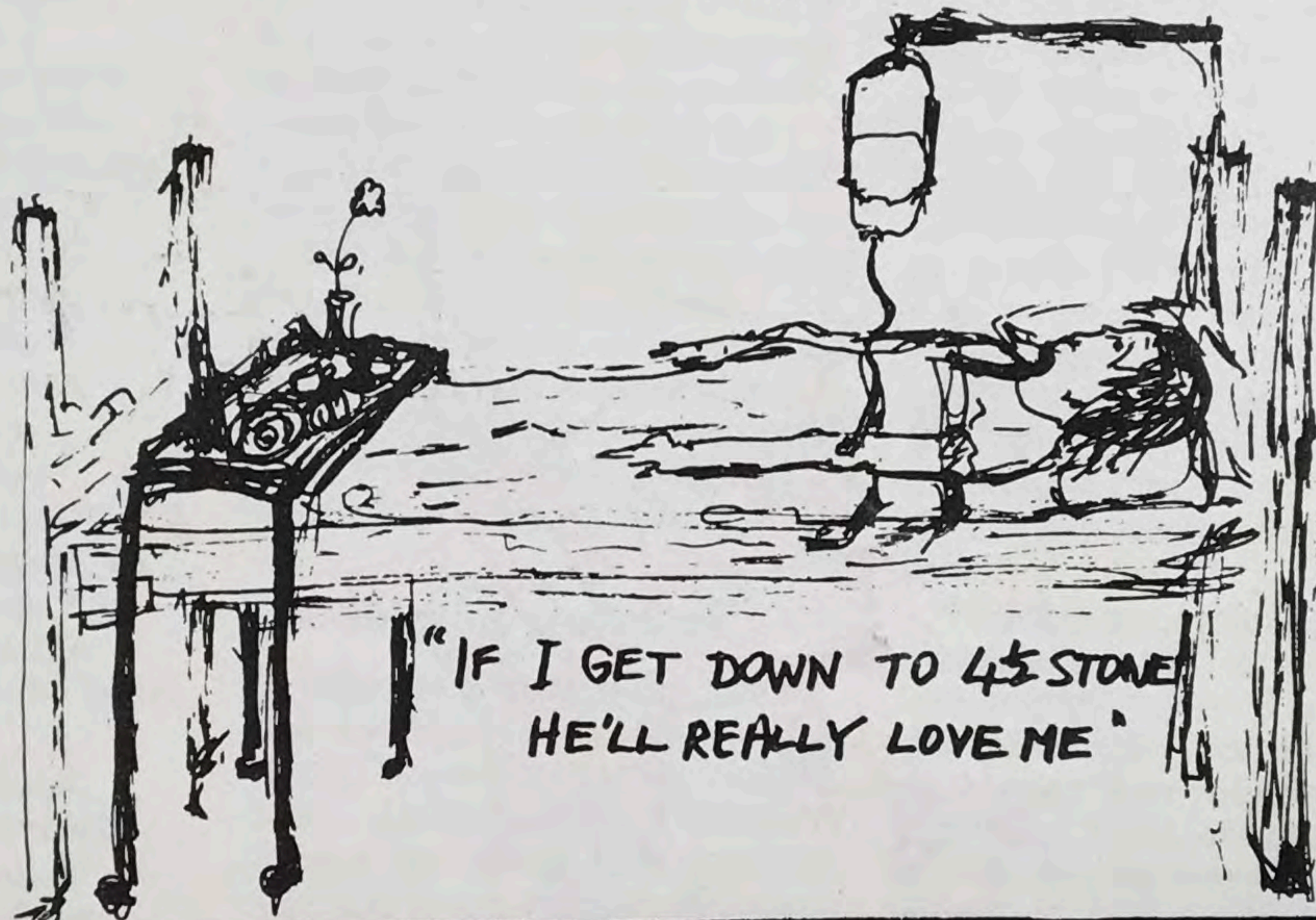
Without that psychological impetus, no electric massages, cold and hot bandage treatments, slimming pills,

physical jerks, injections, wiring up or any other miracle cure in the world will make you slim to stay slim. If you diet for any reason or person other than yourself, you will embark on a losing battle. Crash dieting and single food dieting over a short time may be adequate, if you have over-indulged during a series of festivities, but as long term measure, they are inadvisable. Such diets, by their nature, not only lack a variety of nutrients, which the body requires, they are also difficult to stick to in social eating situations, as they become boring or because they are expensive or because they leave you with a deep kind of anger at being deprived of little goodies, so that the obvious thing to do is to go out and binge to compensate for the deprivation.

### Complementary exercise

Apart from educating yourself about the foods you eat, it is also necessary to educate yourself about exercising. In the last few years a lot of exercise and diet clubs have become very popular. Most of these clubs get results by basing their programme on competition. For this reason they do not work for some, as the organisers fail to understand the psychology behind the people who are fat. There are lots of different ways to exercise. The best approach is to find out what appeals most to you and what you most enjoy doing. A thin body is as inefficient as a fat body, if it is weak and sluggish. Exercise so that what you are doing gives you pleasure.

Most women's bodies are underdeveloped, thus helping to perpetuate the idea, that women are physically inferior to men. As women we must explore and use the unrealised resources of our own bodies.



# PAIN - 'just our imagination'

There is only one time in my life I can ever remember really wishing I was born a man. That was when my periods came for the first time and brought with them monthly agonies. I used to lie in bed for the first two days I had them crying incessantly and tearing the sheets in efforts to relieve my pent-up tension and strength. This was my first introduction to the gift of

fertility, and I remember feeling sadly that this was the end – of childhood, of fun and of fearlessness for me. My first period was perhaps the worst as I was under the impression that once it came I would have it every day until I was fifty. I remember confiding to my best school-friend that I wouldn't be able to play chasing after school any more because of it!

If my ignorance appears funny in retrospect, that of the doctors I attended is frightening. No less than two suggested to me that my problem would be solved as soon as I got married – though they didn't explain to me how my commitment to love and honour and obey would widen my vaginal tract. Another told me authoritatively that I was suffering from dysmenhorrea and gave me some yellow tablets to take for four days before my period was due. I was excited by this

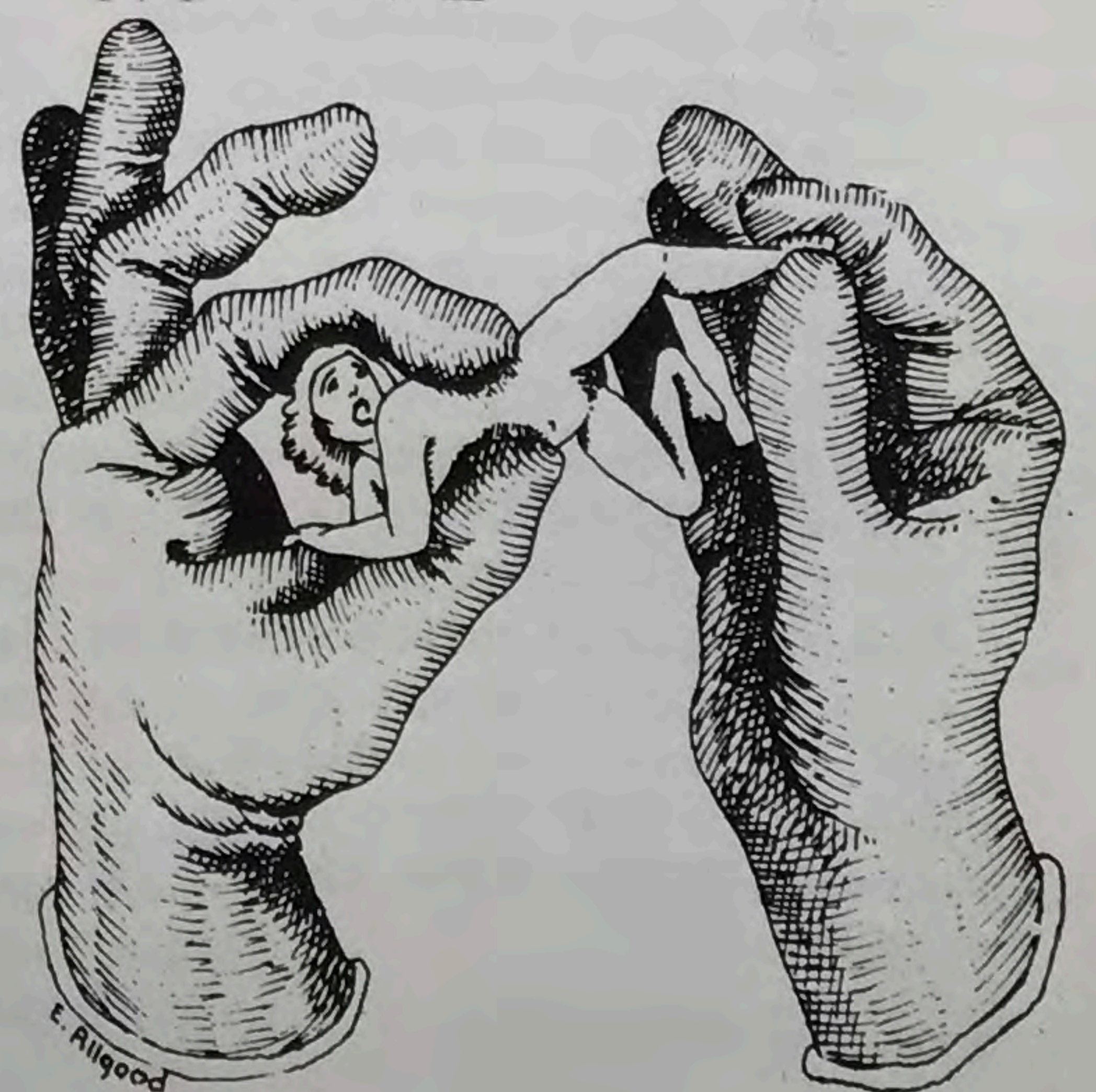
classification of my problem and I assumed that it meant this doctor knew and could cure my problem. I was wrong. The tablets were useless and when I went back to him he called my mother in and suggested an operation in Holles St. hospital.

This was more than I could stand. I told my mother I was not going to be a guinea pig under anesthetic for these people who knew as little about my problem as I did. I decided pain was to be my lot in life and that was that.

By sheer coincidence I went on the contraceptive pill when I was fifteen and as though by magic, the pains stopped!! What struck me most forcibly about this was the chance and haphazardness of my "cure". I thought how strange it would be if someone with bad sight was cured by headache pills!

Because frankly I don't believe that period pains are beyond

science or are impossible to come to terms with. The real problem would appear to be that totally lax attitude taken by both medical research and the medical profession to what is after all, "only" a woman's problem. Sure isn't most of it "just our imagination!!!!!"





# A Background To Self-Help Health

"..... Women are a colonised people, with our history, values and cross-cultural culture taken from us, mined for their natural resources (sex and children) and deliberately mystified. . . . We must begin as women to reclaim our land and the most concrete place to begin is with our own flesh. Self and sister education is a first step, since all that fostered ignorance and self-contempt peel away before the intellectual and emotional knowledge that our women's bodies are constructed with great beauty, craft, cleanliness yes Holiness. . . . Identification with the coloniser's standards melts before the revelation dawning on a woman who clasps a speculum in one hand and a mirror in the other. She is de-mystifying her own body for herself and she will never again be quite so alienated from it. . . . (Robin Morgan)

In more concrete terms then, how do we experience this colonisation process and how can we start to overcome it? This article attempts to outline some of the ways we are alienated from our bodies and our awareness of health and to show how a self-help group can be a process of re-establishing trust and confidence in ourselves. Sharing and learning from our own experiences we define our own terms and our own culture – we reclaim our own land.

How do we experience this 'colonisation' process?

Firstly, using an example of a study carried out recently in a general hospital in Ashton in England with 250 women – all of whom had been in hospital for gynaecological conditions – colonisation of our bodies means a fair amount of ignorance, embarrassment and indifference. Only about half of the survey could name the parts on a diagram of female sex organs and most were very muddled about their function. For example only one in five knew that the womb was where the foetus developed. Perhaps the most chilling comments came from those women who said they were quite confident to leave this – their body – in the hands of the profession whose business it is.

Secondly we may feel

embarrassed shy or have many fears which may prevent us from acting on signals we are receiving from our bodies. In the Isle of Wight a survey found that women attending a cervical smear showed many other disorders of one kind or another and had either not noticed any symptoms or were too shy to approach their doctors. "Thousands of women must be plodding on, therefore, feeling under the weather but too afraid or ignorant to do anything about it. At best this is unnecessary and worst downright dangerous" commented the researcher.

Embarrassment, shyness even shame are the predictable reflection of our culture which has denied women's experience for so long by meeting it with patronising attitudes, derision and indifference. One of the effects of the women's health movement has been to communicate their experience to male doctors – most of whom have realised for the first time that a cold speculum may be uncomfortable to their patients; that for a woman greeting her doctor with her legs

as the manifestations of disorder, dysfunction and disease. More significantly, they are not 'merely' normal but also vital functions. Women are often approaching doctors at very crucial phases of their lives – phases which will mark fundamental and irrevocable changes in their existence; tranquillisers are just not conducive to promoting the kind of growth and maturity these changes demand and can reflect a basic insensitivity and indifference to a human being's authentic needs.

The third way in which colonisation is felt is the way in which our experience is denied. For those who overcome these kinds of shortcomings mentioned above in their dealings with the medical profession and who attempt to assert more control over their bodies and lives perhaps in pregnancy, childbirth, using contraception or coping with the menopause they are often met with at best a defensive hostility or at worst ignored. Probably we all



tied up and her genitalia exposed can be more than embarrassing it can annihilate communication.

This murky fog of confusion and prejudice that can make us feel very apprehensive when approaching doctors is further compounded by the curious 'green curtain syndrome' where what is actually taking place in the mystery of the gynaecological examination is left to the shuddering imagination of the literally disembodied woman! The purity and simplicity of a woman's inner sanctum have been transformed by the medical profession into a mysterious, complicated territory forbidden to women that involves expensive, humiliating even sadistic medical treatment, drugs and surgical procedures. The normal functions of the human female have been designated by medical textbooks

know examples of this – friends, mothers, sisters who have accurately conveyed symptoms to complacent or patronising doctors who have denied their existence.

For example, how many women have correctly assessed the imminence of childbirth and have been left alone "it'll be hours yet dear" to give birth? – one woman recently had her child in a corridor having had her protests ignored. Another woman – with chronic symptoms of an ectopic pregnancy which resulted in a burst fallopian tube – was told on the night that it burst that "it was probably indigestion". . . . These are basic violent denials of our experience – the colonisation of our senses by those who think they know best, know better than us.

## Self-Help Health Groups

Self-help groups like those which have taken place in Dublin over the last 18 months are a response to these colonising processes. We are reclaiming our bodies, senses and minds – we are defining for ourselves our own experience of health and strength. If we are to be *responsive*, *responsible* and autonomous human beings we need to be attuned to the flood of messages our bodies are relaying daily so that we can act freely and independently. So our self-help groups are basically educative in function; we need to learn about our bodies – how we can look after them better – enjoy them more and check for irregularities. Groups of women meet for about 6 weeks once a week and share information, feelings and experiences of subjects like menstruation, sexuality, pregnancy, contraception, childbirth, experiences with doctors, hospitals etc. We learn how to do breast exams, to detect vaginal infections early, to use a speculum so that we can de-mystify our bodies – get to know what our vaginas and cervixes are really like. We are also interested in techniques which help us to reduce tension, relax and feel more alive.

But this is only a start. We hope that others will feel encouraged to start their own groups in their own areas. We are planning an 'advanced' health workshop in September to develop skills and experience for those wishing to start groups and for those interested in exploring in more depth areas such as sexuality, relationship, health maintenance, etc. etc. – whatever seems important to the participants. We would like to experiment with role playing and similar techniques that may be interesting to explore.

Our other project and concern is work towards an Irish Women's Health Resource Book. A great deal of research is needed for this on hospitals, maternity care, patient's rights, information on drugs such as tranquillisers, diet and other specific areas relevant to women's health. We need people to collect resources and who may be willing to share their own experiences. One or two groups have started working towards this aim. A meeting will be held at the end of August or beginning of September to try and coordinate all these activities. If you are interested in any of these ideas or in coming to a health workshop or in contributing towards a health resource book please contact Ros Pearmain, tel. 322710, Nicola Quinn, 680005, or Fionnuala Brennan 685210.

Next month: – "How the takeover happened – women healers to nurses".



# WOMEN AND HEALTH

## Vive La Difference!

Ever ask what makes women different from men?

Jobs, education, expectations, social roles, the way we dress, etc. — these ARE differences but they are only skin deep, only part of the social conditioning each of us women and men, experiences in the process of our growing up and living in our western, 20th century society. (Ever hear of the ancient Irish, the Greeks, the Africans? In those societies BOTH men and women were the demons for the long hair, flowing dresses, the gold bracelets, rings and things. Terrible vain.)

### The implications of difference

The apparent differences we see today are only artificial but they are not unimportant. No differences no matter how artificial can be unimportant when they can produce the tragedies, the oppressions, the maimed and crippled forms of human life which we know result too, too often from the socially imposed distinctions between female and male.

But let's take a good look. Let's get right down to it — remove the clothes, the trappings. Yes, there is something real that separates the sexes. Our bodies are different. Our physical and sexual functions are different.

Physically, men are simple creatures — perpendiculars, straight lines, all up and down. Their sex, when it works, is generally (so much their loss) localised to the genitals; it is efficient in so far as it is direct, to the point. And there it ends. For men, sexual expression is a life-long series of repetitions of the same brief act.

Women, on the other hand, are circular, composed physically of curved lines without end, whorls of flesh. Women's shape is the physical fact which relates to a much deeper sexual fact. Like her body, woman's sexual capacities and response are endless, cyclical, and circular.

Female sexuality, unlike male sexuality, is not limited to copulation. Menstruation, pregnancy, birth, breast feeding, all of these, which are exclusively female, are part of our sexuality.

### Differences seen as problems

It is only the measure of our oppression that these very things which make us us — make us female — are so often referred to as women's problems. They are not our problems, or our shame, although in this male dominated world, in the male dominated world of medicine, we too may have become so debased in our oppression, that even we sometimes think of them as our problems. Such thinking is despair, because

what is our pride, our joy, what is the essence of our femaleness is being denied, put down to problem.

Our femaleness is a problem, not in itself, but in so far as we have to struggle for its recognition, for its survival in a world of male values that constantly belittles, de-values, sneers and mocks at what is female. Irish male society is aggressively vicious in this. The greatest insult which an Irishman can throw at another man is to call him a cunt. What does this say about the way men regard women? You may not like the language but, sisters, it is all around us, shouted everyday of the week from the mouths of our sons, our brothers, our husbands, our men friends.

The fact is that the various and complicated aspects of female sexuality are deeply enriching and is some ways very self-contained. They have nothing to do with men, which is why men fear them and try to belittle and ignore them.

### An enriching pregnancy

A pregnant woman is not a cow and a woman who is true to herself knows she does not feel like a cow, even if she is being treated like one by male doctors. She is in touch with life in a way that no man can ever be. It is an experience of simple, stark dignity and for many women, if their lives are not a tangle of problems and anxieties, it is a time of tremendous energy, creativity, sexual ripeness, desire and beauty. Is it any surprise then that many women say they never feel better than when they are pregnant?

Power and courage, the will to go on: those qualities so coveted and claimed by men are nowhere to be seen in this world as they are to be seen in the strength of a woman giving birth. And there is no satisfaction, no pride so complete in a job well done as when a woman looks for the first time at that new child and sees it is all there, four limbs, one head, ten fingers and toes. Do you remember? Can you imagine? A woman conceives the life, carries the life, brings forth the life. She does what only a woman can do. Philosophies, governments, art,

they all *talk* about LIFE but only a woman can produce it.

### The wet blanket of male dominance

Women should and do take pride in this female act of birth because it is the very heart of life and human existence. Often, however, this pride is kept secret, or mixed with much anxiety about becoming just another "one of those baby producers". The cause of this is male domination, males values which are NOT life centered, but power centered and it dismisses what it cannot do, or seeks to reduce women to simple reproductive units. Through the centuries, there has been an inexorable drive on the part of men to *simplify* women, either to be mothers or harlots, or sterile old maids when the truth is we are all and everything and at the same time. Such complexity terrifies the simple mind!

Take menstruation. Most men, if they admit the fact into their minds at all do with a cool and distant consideration and then back away. And yet, menstruation is nothing if not fabulous. Through it, we are in harmony with cosmic event.

The tides of the oceans and hence great seas, rivers and lakes move with the moon bringing a flow or an abatement of water, causing seasonal fertility to vast areas of land and sustenance for millions of people.

Every twenty eight days there is a new moon.

Every twenty eight days a woman produces an egg.

This egg can fertilise, grow, and develop into a new harvest of people, a new generation.

Left alone, the egg is washed out in a flow of blood which cleanses the basin, canals, and cavities of our sex and prepares the way for yet another egg.

The constant rhythm of a woman's body is in tune with the harmonious motions of the universe and the earth. And it carries its own internal scale, for sexual appetite often rises and falls with the progress of the menstrual cycle. We should tune into ourselves,

know, understand, and take pleasure in ourselves, in our variety.

Similarly, our psychological dispositions change with the menstrual cycle. Have you ever noticed the surge of creativity you have around the time of ovulation? Feel like you could take the devil by the tail. Similarly, there is a sense of containment, deep quiet, and apartness often just before the beginning of blood flow. It is a great time for thinking, for taking a look at the world, life, from a different angle. A stillness as before rain. Deep thoughts from your own head.

### Breast feeding feels good

Breast feeding is the last word and has almost been as much abused as woman herself.

The Victorians were too fastidious and sexually prudish to have anything to do with anything as ripe as breasts. So, in the name of science, it was declared that baby was better off on a bottle or a wet nurse. Meanwhile respectable ladies, in their most private and unmentionable thoughts, longed to suckle their young. Male authors sometimes penetrated this fact and introduced scenes of gross titillation into their books of pornography. Who was being satisfied? Men, of course. Mothers could neither suckle nor read pornography.

Not too long into this century, things came full circle and it was decided that breast fed babies were likely to be stronger, healthier, more immune to disease than bottle babies. Women were urged to breast feed and the reasons usually had to do with baby's health, general household economy, efficiency etc. etc. Everything was considered but the mother herself.

There was only one doctor I ever read (and she was a woman) who spoke the truth. Woman should breast feed simply because it feels good. It is sexy, intirely sensuous, and it does things for your womb that are not purely medicinal. Watch a cat nurse her kittens. Listen to the purring. See that impenetrable self containment. So breast feeding can be for women — total gratification, a time of pleasure when all other cares can go hang themselves.

Women must begin to know their own sexuality, to want it and to expect its total expression. For too, too long we have expected nothing and that is just what we got — nothing, but slam bang thank you ma'am.

Know ourselves. Love ourselves. Each of us is a woman.

*Age cannot wither her  
Nor custom stale her infinite  
variety.*

*(courtesy of Willie Shakespeare)*



For too long the elite of the medical profession – entrenched in its power and privilege – has used many tactics to preserve its mystique as custodian of the nation's health. The hoarding of medical knowledge within the profession is the basis on which they further this privilege. In no field of medicine is this as true as in Gynaecology and Obstetrics. Medical training teaches students to think of people as patients, so when the 'patients' are all women with uteruses and foetuses and the doctors are men, who can have neither, prevalent societal attitudes of women as objects become more exaggerated – women become a collection of hysterical wombs and interesting cases.

### Actively Managed Childbirth

The vast majority of us who give birth are not 'ill'; we are not patients, we are pregnant women in labour. But in modern society, childbirth has been taken out of the home, and now tends to be seen (by the medical elite trend-setters) more as an illness than as a natural event with special emotional significance. This is why maternity hospitals here, in England, and in the United States, have been able to get away with a crime which many victims feel rates higher than rape – namely "Actively Managed Childbirth".

This pseudo-scientific, pretentious title involves hooking otherwise healthy pregnant women onto a hormone 'drip'. Its effect is to make the rhythm of contractions go haywire, with no advance warning and with greater force than normal. This endangers the child (increased foetal distress admitted) and also the mother's future physical well-being by overstraining and perhaps permanently weakening the pelvic floor muscles.



# Women In Maternity Hospitals

## Development of "the drip"

To see why this malpractice became widespread we must examine the history of 'the drip'. Way back in the sixties, Professor A.C. Turnbull of Oxford University developed "a most efficient means of artificial induction of labour" by dripping oxytocin into the veins of a pregnant woman. Then the masters of the big maternity hospitals had a great idea. Instead of just using this procedure for women who needed it i.e. those whose pregnancy had gone beyond term, why not hook as many women as possible onto it and re-arrange hospitals on a 9 to 5 schedule? After all, it would be much more convenient for the doctors and hospitals, as an induced labour is 3 to 4 hours shorter.

## Disregard for women

So the spine-chilling reasoning went and of course "mistakes" happened. Babies were born premature and died. Women's pervises were ruptured. But the hospitals would not give up their scheme for battery-chick production despite the raised voices of some humane and distinguished medics. In some hospitals the percentage of women put on the drip was as high as 75%. As statistical evidence of physical damage belatedly appears, this percentage is slowly decreasing.

Most of the women induced for non-medical reasons for more than a decade have been duped into it by appeals to our sense of responsibility

"It will be better for the baby"; "It's better off in the cot". Some of us, strongly in labour, have found ourselves hooked up as a matter of procedure – "We'll put you on the drip, dear", without an explanation or a warning of the extra risks we were running. We didn't know what it was, nor did we know that our rights were being infringed. Even if we were fully informed and prepared, we were in no position to resist.

## Depersonalisation in hospital

At the door of the hospital we leave the world behind. We are not allowed to bring the child's father or a friend on our uncharted journey. Big brother reaches out and there we are – shaved, temperature taken and bereft of our rights and dignity between starched sheets, in a sea of beds and efficient and sometimes impersonal nurses. From the healthy pregnant women of a few hours before we have become 'patients' – to be injected with painkiller without our consent or plugged into a powerful hormone at their whim, and expected to push the child out while lying on our backs – an impossibility. Often we are not talked to, but our 'case' is discussed across our heaving uterus. It's as though we're not there.

Sheila Kitzinger describes the "intense loneliness, an isolation even from the person one is oneself in that other non-labour existence, and a disorientation in time, space and relationships reaches its peak when a woman is left alone . . . in the late first stage of labour . . ."

### List of suggested reading on childbirth in this society.

1. **Our Bodies Ourselves**  
Boston Women's Health Collective.  
Available in Greenacres Chapter on childbearing especially ref. to section on induction pps. 191-192
2. "Woman on the delivery table"  
Sheila Kitzinger in 'Women on Women'
3. Everywoman, contains some brief and worrying statistics on differing rates of forceps delivery and other medical intervention in different societies.
4. **Natural Childbirth**  
Forget the overcomplicated graphs and its a good preparation for natural childbirth
5. "Obstetricians welcome reversal of trend in cases of induced labour". Irish Times, Wed. June 30th 1976.
6. "The Childbirth Revolution"  
Sunday Times, October 13th & 20th 1974.  
Oliver and Louise Gillie.  
An indictment of convenience inductions and damage done to women and children as a result.
7. "Human Circadian Rhythms"  
Conroy and Mills. Circadian Rhythms in Birth. Available in library.

Among the labour-ward staff we are unlikely to encounter anyone who has gone through the process of birth, so no-one knows where we are at. The god-consultant's juniors carry out his policies, matron rules with an iron hand in the cause of efficiency, midwives pop in to see if we are fully dilated yet and re-appear to help or instruct a trainee midwife with the episiotomy (often unnecessary), and then the junior doctor re-appears to stitch us up. The system leaves little room for the intensity of our emotions as we bring another person into the world, and there is little scope for individual solutions. The effect of such mistreatment can be traumatic, especially if the child is not given to us to hold upon birth.

## A Warning

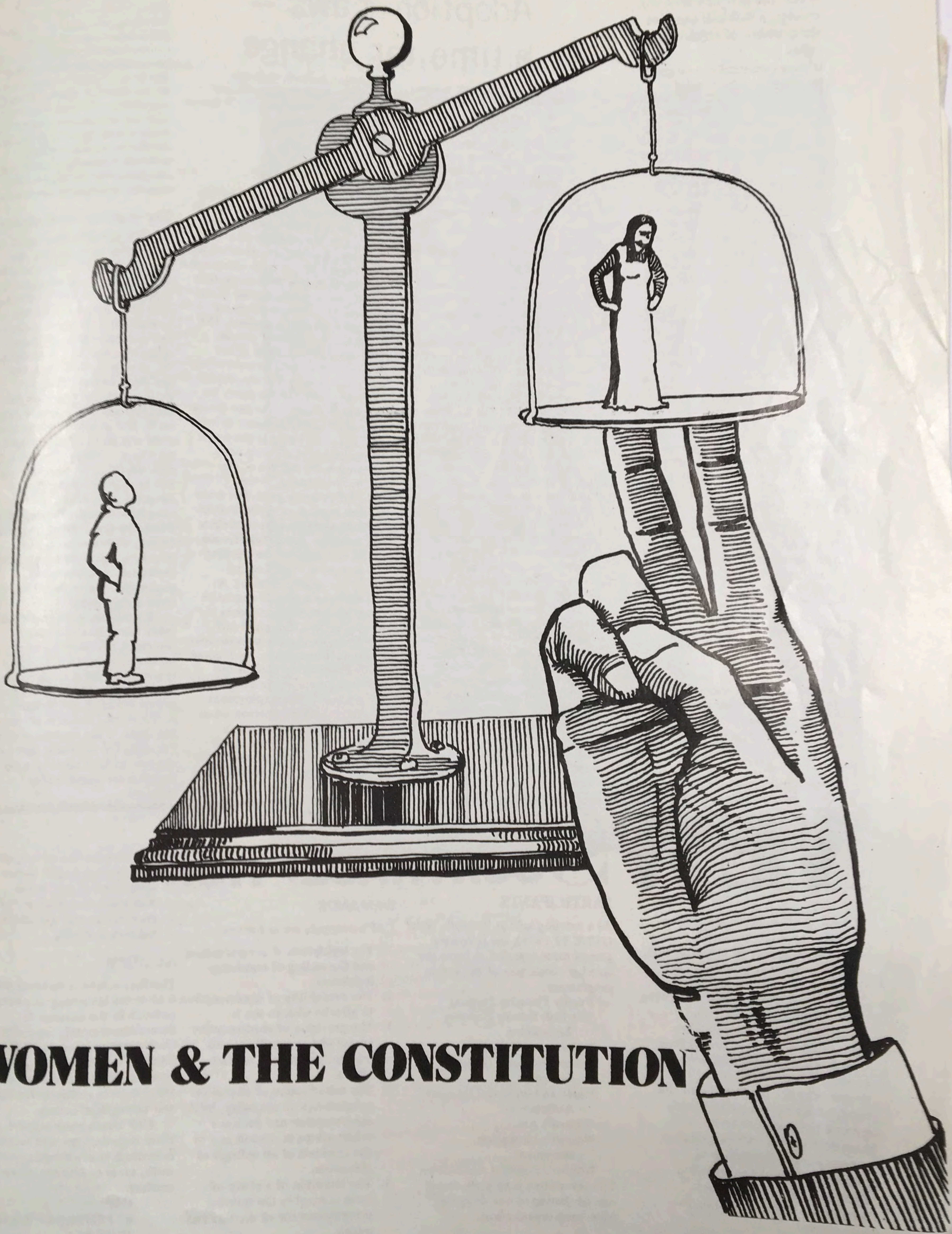
We cannot rule out the risk of being inhumanely treated in maternity hospitals in some or all of the ways described here. Hospitals have reassured us that modern obstetrics is enlightened and scientific and that any 'horror stories' are just old wives tales, or 'hysterical' reactions, individual cases of oversights on rushed nights. But too many of us are victims of hospital crimes against humanity for our 'cases' to be "individual".

## Changing the System

It will take a concerted plan of action to force the medical profession to let us have our children in the style we choose. Most of us will want at least a familiar face beside us. Some of us will opt for home deliveries, which are becoming increasingly difficult to arrange. All of us want help and information and reassurance so that we can give birth with dignity and greet our newborn with love and joy.

For some of us the callous, insensitive way our children have been treated after birth has caused the worst emotional scar. We can see why we are mistreated. Our babies have no way of analysing a bright glaring world where they are dangled aloft like a prize, hands and legs making futile swimming movements as they cry for comfort and quiet and dark and body love. It doesn't always happen, but we can't guarantee that it won't until we make ourselves and our children's needs heard.





# WOMEN & THE CONSTITUTION



This is the first of a series of articles, which will examine the question of children's rights.

Is there a practical and caring alternative to adoption for children who are not part of the two parent, one sibling set-up which appears to be a necessary pre-requisite to family life in the eyes of society and government at this time?

Obviously there must already be someone looking after the needs of the children who are not eligible for legal adoption. We can include in this category children who are born within a marriage and who have not been orphaned; abandoned children; children over the age of seven.

The Adoption Bill 1976 at time of writing is being discussed in the Senate. This Bill as it stands does not include any provision for these children. Senator Mary Robinson has asked the Leader of the House for an assurance that the Bill will not be rushed so as to allow certain amendments to be proposed. However, even if the most comprehensive amendments are made to the 1952 Act there would still be an argument in favour of alternatives to adoption being available for some children.

### Single Parents

Let us first of all look at the predicament of a mother in a "single parent" situation. When I say "single parent" I don't necessarily mean unmarried. I would include in this category "separated" and widowed mothers. If the mother decides not to go to work but to stay at home to devote her full energy and attention to rearing her family, thereby fulfilling her Constitutional role, (I refer to Article 41, Section 2, of the Constitution of Ireland:

*"In particular the State recognises that by her life within the home woman gives*

# Adoption Laws — a time for change

*to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved"*

and

*"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,"*

### State Provision

The State provides for her and her family as follows:

A widow's maximum personal contributory pension is £11.00 per week. She is entitled to £3.70 for each child.

A deserted wife's maximum benefit is also £11.00 per week plus £3.70 for each child. Both the Widow's Contributory Pension and Deserted Wife's Benefit are subject to Social Welfare Contribution Conditions, i.e. a certain number of Insurance Stamps paid in the years prior to widowhood or desertion. If a widow or deserted wife does not fulfill these contribution conditions she may apply for a Social Assistance Pension or Allowance which is subject to a rigid means test. A widow will receive a maximum of £10.25 plus £3.40 for each child. A deserted wife will receive the same. An unmarried mother, no matter how many Insurance Contributions she has paid is not eligible for Benefit. She may apply for Social Assistance in which case she will have to satisfy a means test. If she qualifies for assistance her maximum rate is £10.25 plus £3.40 for each child. If a mother receiving assistance decides to go out to work her assistance will decrease, for

example a mother with one child earning between £20 and £21 per week will receive 55 pence per week assistance.

### Crippling Strictures

Unless a mother is housed by the Local Authority she must pay, in most cases, a financially crippling mortgage. The position of a separated woman or a deserted wife with regard to mortgage repayments and home ownership is at present under review as the Family Home Protection Bill 1976 plods its way through the Oireachtas. The "single parent" can of course, fall back on the charity of her family, thus causing overcrowding and subsequent rows, the children as always suffering the most. So, in order to feed, clothe and house her family a mother must, in most circumstances work. If she wants to earn any sort of living wage she must work outside of the home, "homework" being notoriously badly paid. She must in most cases, make private child-minding arrangements for babies and toddlers. Older children can spend some part of the working-day in school, excluding, of course the school holidays. A housekeeper would of course be the ideal solution, but unless the mother earns a very good salary the employment of a housekeeper is out of the question. An Income Tax Allowance of £165 is the only concession made by the State towards the employment of such a necessary person when the "sole parent" is working.

So if there is to be a viable alternative to adoption the "Sole parent" family must receive more help both practically i.e. improved

Income Tax Allowances and Social Welfare Benefits and Assistance and socially by the provision of support services for sole parent families e.g. government sponsored creches and homes for short term stays during times of crisis or illness; availability of Social Workers to visit and counsel as required, etc. Society must learn to appreciate the immense responsibility involved in rearing a family alone and grant the sole parent the security and respect she deserves.

### The implications of adoption

Where a parent, having made the decision to part with her child decided that adoption would be best for that child she should have a guarantee that her child will go only to a family where h/she is wanted for his/her own sake, and not as a remedy for an already ailing marriage, or as a companion for an only child to complete the ideal nuclear family for mothers who do not want the inconvenience of pregnancy and birth. She should know that her child will go to a home judged not on a basis of financial wealth, but on a wealth of love and care, with lots of affection from the adoptive parents and children already within the family. There should be Social Workers available to help with post adoptive problems and visits to adoptive parents on a regular basis to ensure that the welfare of the child is paramount.

If a natural mother is given every financial and social assurance necessary to bring up her child in comfort, and a reasonable period to make her decision, plus the best independent advice available, she will arrive at the correct decision for her and her child. If she decides to offer her child for adoption then her chances of later regretting her decision are considerably reduced.

# NEWS CONTRACEPTION

CAP — the Contraception Action Programme is the name of a national campaign on contraception, which has been launched on the initiative of Irishwomen United. Since its foundation (June 8th 1975), Irishwomen United has been involved in the struggle for the right of all women to control their own bodies. The responsible use of contraception is an essential prerequisite for the exercise of this right, which has been consistently ignored by successive Irish governments. CAP was established to press for the legislation of contraception and the provision of full Health Education and Distribution Services relating to birth control.

### PARTICIPANTS

At a meeting held in Buswells Hotel (JUNE 22 1976), the following groups came together to form the steering committee of the action programme

Family Planning Services  
The Irish Family Planning Association  
Irishwomen United  
Labour Women's National Council  
North Dublin Social Workers' Association  
Women's Aid  
Women's Liberation Movement  
Women's Political Association

The committee is an open-ended one consisting of one delegate from each organisation.

### DEMANDS

CAP's demands are as follows:

1. The legislation of contraception and the ending of restrictive legislation.
2. The availability of contraception to all who wish to use it.
3. The provision of contraceptive advice and counselling in all maternity and child welfare clinics.
4. The introduction of education programmes on sexuality, birth, contraception and personal relationships in schools and in the curricula of all colleges of education.
5. The inclusion of a study of birth control in the training programmes for all doctors and nurses.

The distribution of contraceptives free through health service clinics and at controlled minimum cost through G.P.'s pharmacies and specialised voluntary clinics.

### ACTIONS

The first action to be undertaken by CAP is the launching of a national petition in the autumn to demonstrate public support for contraception. This petition is only one of a number of actions being considered by the committee — these include rallies, lobbying TDs and taking legal action.

CAP needs your support. All these organisations and individuals interested in contributing either work, ideas or finance, please contact:

CAP  
67 PEMBROKE ROAD  
DUBLIN 2



# to the fighting women of dublin

Sometimes On Thursdays –  
Letters to the Editor –  
A face on a bus is never blank.

by Karen Snider

- A. my lover lives in a hole  
underground scratching  
windows in the dirt  
on thursdays  
3 a.m.  
we meet  
in the shade of a stunted tree  
and listen to the dry  
leaves rattling
- B. dear mister believe it or not  
today i met a man with no face  
excuse me i asked the man is  
this your face no the man  
shouted that is not my face  
excuse me is asked the man is  
that your face no the man  
lunged this is not my face  
will you find your face  
no the man gasped i  
have no face
- C. the woman on the bus shape  
her sour-apple gum and bounced  
a baby on her knee  
but don't you see  
i begged between bubbles  
we are women and we are much  
more  
than what we are  
she asked her baby if she  
should believe me:  
it clung to her bosom and cried
- A. my lover dances she taps  
my spine she loves  
the way mother always wanted  
love to be she  
moves senses to creation  
she spawns a swirl a flow  
she fills my mouth with poetry  
she sings the wine's been ordered  
she believes in the irrational  
healing  
of wounds she teaches my blood  
to rise she floods my rivers with  
magic  
together we dance alone
- B. dear sweet susie answer pretty  
i haven't bled for 2 years my  
mother thinks it is because  
my lover is a woman my father  
thinks it is because i hate  
men my lover thinks it is  
because i feel guilty my  
friend george thinks it  
is because i don't want  
babies i feel fine
- C. on the bus the woman she  
chews her gum fine she  
chews like a cow on a shllside  
she works her cud she swallows  
hard she fills her four stomachs  
with what she can't say while  
the ghost of her mother  
stares through her child's eyes  
hush hush  
there there  
it will be okay



- a.A. sometimes on thursdays i go  
to the tree  
before three  
and stare at the branches  
curled back like fingers waiting  
to scrape a dead black sky  
and put my head on the dirt  
between my knees and listen  
to the leaves crying  
i am not alone while i lie  
in the dark and wait
- b.B. hail mary cross your self  
a woman in dublin she drowned  
her self her children her skin  
floating a protest of bones a  
woman  
in small town ohio threw her  
week old  
child at the neighbours because  
they all  
were making a hideous noise

- hail  
mary full of grace a woman  
in everyday everyplace is  
crossing herself and  
calling your name
- c.C. hush hush the woman on the  
bus  
is tired her feet are more  
than swollen her gum is more  
than stale and she is tired of  
trying  
to forget i'm beside her  
is tired of denying the woman  
inside her a hungry baby  
squirms in her arms and  
nursery rhymes will no  
longer do:  
there was an old woman who  
lived in a shoe  
who lived in a shoe  
who lived in a shoe



# OUTREACH

## Women in other countries

### BRUSSELS

Women are soon to have a department in the E.E.C. Commission dealing exclusively with the problems of legislation for women. The bureau, to be staffed by women, will be operational this Autumn, according to the European Commissioner for Social Affairs Dr. P. Hillery. It will have the power to draft commission proposals in the whole field of women's rights and to change existing legislation. It will provide information for women's rights groups within the E.E.C. and help to enforce legislation already agreed to by the E.E.C. Council. Other projects being undertaken by the Commission include a major inquiry into women working in agriculture, and a film about equal pay and women's rights. This film is to be shown later this year on the T.V. networks of the nine member countries.

### NORTHERN IRELAND

The Coleraine Women's Group has made several advances in their struggle to improve the lot of single parents in Northern Ireland. They have discovered the existence of a policy document produced by the N.I. Housing Executive which gives deserted wives, single mothers and widows equal rights with men on their entitlement to housing in their own names. Although this document was produced in 1974, few Social Workers knew about it, as the Housing executive made little or no attempt to publicise its existence.

In addition, the group has been instrumental in getting the Dept. of Health and Social Services to provide home helps for fatherless families. Formerly home helps were available only to motherless families to enable husbands to continue working while their wives were sick. Now single women, widows etc. who normally look after their children will be entitled to home help if they become ill.

### ITALY

The number of women delegates in the Italian Parliament has almost doubled as a result of recent general elections. After a campaign more directed to women voters than any since the second World War, 61 women were elected, compared with a total of 31 in the last Parliament. Nevertheless the total number of women remains only a small fraction — 6.5% of the legislature. By far the most women members are in the ranks of the Communist Party which has 47, the Christian Democrats have 11 while the Socialists have only one.

One of the first issues the new government will have to deal with is the Abortion Bill, shelved because of the general election. The Women's Movement in Italy made its first great show of strength in 1975 with a pro-abortion march of 30,000. In the most recent action 50,000 women marched through Rome demanding repeal of the abortion laws dating from Mussolini.



### SOUTH AFRICA

Young black girls are being sterilised in South African hospitals without their consent, according to a German doctor, Dr. Martin Wolf. Sterilisations are carried out as a routine operation usually without knowledge or consent of the patients involved. The patients are very young girls of 10 and 12 years, who have come for minor operations such as appendectomies. Sometimes the patients are asked first, but the young patients who are unmarried or without children never know that the operation has taken place. Dr. Wolf claimed that the white doctors who carried out the sterilisations were proud when they did it and said it was a healthy way to keep the country.

### FRANCE

A five year plan to give women in France equality with men has been adopted in principle by the French Government. The plan, drawn up by Mme. Giroud the Minister for Women's Affairs, consists of 100 separate proposals and will cost about 20 billion francs to implement. The main areas covered by the plan are the areas of work, education and children. The ending of job discrimination on the basis of sex, the enforcement of

equal pay legislation in all sectors of industry and the introduction of flexible working hours are some of the proposals in the employment section of the plan. On education, it is proposed that from 1977 all boys and girls will learn basic domestic and mechanical skills. Sex stereotyping of roles is to be eliminated from school texts. A National Service of 6 months has been suggested for women to enable them to learn plumbing, electricity etc. In 1977 a state allowance is to be paid to all mothers of children under 3 years of age whether the mother is working or not. Mothers will be able to take extra unpaid leave of up to two years after the birth of a child without breaking her work contract. Child mind centres under local community control are to be set up, and childminding is to be recognised as a full profession. Every new building must now provide a large play area for collective use by children. It will now be possible for children to adopt either the mother's or father's surname.

The document containing the proposals is based on several intensive surveys of the needs of women and the actual state of discrimination, undertaken by the Department for Women's Affairs.



# RUMBLINGS



The Cuckoo's Nest is finally a cop-out. What could have been a significant comment on society and the type of institutions it uses to 'cure' and 're-adjust' us turns out to be a harmless piece of escapism which offends nobody, rouses nobody.

The woman portrayed by Nurse R. is a classic in American literature - The Great Bitch (whom we all know from Norman Mailer's 'lit' rantings Superkid must put down and keep down) hard, cold, unsympathetic, loving and loved by no man. The other kind of woman portrayed is, of course, the converse - The Great-Hearted Whore - loved by and loving *everyman*. In fact, the more 'human' types in the film are totally male and although there are stereotypes among them also, the whole effect is a sort of nice bunch of lads - God help them! thing.

The stereotyping of the women into dehumanised clichés plus the blatant antifeminism of action and dialogue obscured totally whatever criticism of our society the film was trying to make, and instead, the impression left with us is - if only Nurse R. had been more sympathetic, understanding, warm, kind (any word will do now you're on the right track) ultimately, of course, 'feminine', everything would have turned out hunky-dory. Whereas, in reality, she was, poor thing, but a 'tool of the establishment' - a nurse, uninvolved in major policy and decision-making, and had she been sunshine itself McM. would still have been lobotomised.

And this, essentially, is the cop-out, by localising all the sicker aspects of psychiatry and the hospital system in general in Nurse R. our anger is diffused, our target obscured - and instead of rising up in fury against a society which dehumanises us we pray for better individuals. Don't be duped! Nurse R. was a cat's paw - she took the rap for the maniacs who make the decisions. In fact the film was filled with fall-guys/girls - McMurphy, who wasted his energy, finally his life trying to change things alone; Chief,

who thought he was winning and in the end was but a stereotype of the American Indian - a free, wild man of the forest who served to distract us from the horrors of lobotomy.

**NUNS** Marcelle Bernstein, Collins, London 1976 £5.44 inc. VAT

Nuns and Lesbians must be the only two groups of women to be the continual victims of a morbid fascination on the part of the public. *Nuns* claims to be an attempt to answer the most usual and facile of the questions generally put of either group... "But what do they do?" The answer, according to Ms Bernstein, is that female religious do a great deal - and that they also do very little. Ambivalence characterises the whole book. Its most depressing feature, in fact, is its author's ability to occupy some 350 pages in the making of revelations that reveal precisely nothing. Description there is, and plenty of it, but none related to any position of positive approval or criticism. The effect is that of a collage - intimate confessions pasted on the thin brown cardboard of historical fact and legend. The only solid propositions that emerge are that individual nuns may differ from each other in a practical and theoretical definition of their role - we know that already) and that a wind of change - of sorts - is sweeping over the convents (and we knew that too, or at least we gathered that things were beginning to happen when those butterfly veils were abolished and the Primate of All Ireland apparently took a daily block booking on the first three rows of the stalls at the Gaiety). For the rest, the book is a mixture of a slightly voyeuristic enquiry into cloistered sexuality ("I crawl under the wall"?) combined with a respectful and saccharine description of convent innocence and efficiency.

There is no doubt at all that convents have produced extremely able and dedicated professional women. There is equally no doubt that if a woman chooses to become

a nun this is her business and the right of criticism belongs to nobody. But it seems extraordinary that in a book that purports to be an analysis of religious life in general there is no examination of the convent as an institution. What doesn't emerge is that convents, like it or not, will tend to operate as exaggerated extensions of the social norms that apply in a given time and place. The nun is the servant of a patriarchal church in a patriarchal culture. An order is as 'free' as the world around it allows it to be, not as it determines it should be. Thus Spanish and Italian nuns (to whom Ms Bernstein only grudgingly refers) live a more enclosed existence because they are products of a more 'macho' culture than their freer American sisters. Even in the 'freer' orders sacrifices are defined in wordly - and extremely superficial - terms. Bernstein's nuns 'give up' the Identikit woman's magazine trappings of femininity - clothes, make-up, dances, lovers, husbands, children - but retain a basic

apprehension of the woman's role that appears to be singularly reassuring. "The nuns make formal and measured prayer, but they are as matter-of-fact about it as women in a kitchen..."

In the end, *Nuns* is a demystification of the convent, an approving exposition of the notion that "they're just like us" combined with an acknowledgement of a magical "something else" that inspires religious to abandon the rewards of femininity and assume only its burdens. Nuns are the support troops of Father Church - they continue to provide the essential practical services within the traditionally 'feminine' fields of social work, nursing and teaching, they enhance the caring image of Christianity. All this within a framework that firmly rates them the second-class citizens of the Church. Ms Bernstein's book would have been a better one if she had explored the role of nuns from the Church's and society's perspective as well as their own.

## ADVERTISEMENT

Irishwomen United Women's Centre is in very bad repair - we need basic warmth and comfort for the long winter months ahead. Please contact us if you have information on the availability of cheap or free Carpets 20x22 and 13x10, tables, fabrics for curtains and cushions, wood for bookshelves and benches, or emulsion and gloss paints.

**ADAPT** - Association for Deserted and Alone Parents  
Can be contacted at the following addresses

**DUBLIN** - P.O. Box 673, Dublin 4 S. Bools 801961

**CORK** - P.O. Box 84, Brian Boru St. Cork  
Peggy Murray 021-42695  
Patrick Horgan 021-26871

**LIMERICK** - c/o Social Service Centre, O'Connell St. Limerick.  
Jude Cahill 061-48869



SISTERHOOD IS POWERFUL

# PREAMBLE: IRISH WOMEN UNITED CHARTER

At this time, the women of Ireland are beginning to see the need for, and are fighting for liberation. This is an inevitable step in the course of full human liberation. Although within the movement, we form diverse groups with variant ways of approaching the problem, we have joined together around these basic issues. We pledge ourselves to challenge and fight sexism in all forms and oppose all forms of exploitation of women which keep them oppressed. These demands are all part of the essential right of women to self-determination of our own lives — equality in education and work; control of our own bodies; an adequate standard of living and freedom from sexist conditioning. We present these demands as the following women's charter.

## 1 THE REMOVAL OF ALL LEGAL AND BUREAUCRATIC OBSTACLES TO EQUALITY:

- 1 i.e. with regard to tenancies, mortgages, pension schemes, taxation, jury service, equal responsibility for children, social welfare benefits and hire purchase agreements.
- 2 The right to divorce.

The Constitution should be reviewed with a view to examining the role of women and updated to eliminate discrimination against women.

## 2 FREE LEGAL CONTRACEPTION:

- 1 State financed birth-control clinics.
- 2 The right to a free, legal and safe abortion.

## 3 THE RECOGNITION OF MOTHERHOOD AND PARENTHOOD AS A SOCIAL FUNCTION WITH SPECIAL PROVISION FOR:

- 1 State support for programmes implementing the socialisation of housework, i.e. community laundries, kitchens, eating places etc.
- 2 State provision of an adequate place to live, irrespective of sex, age, number of children and marital status.
- 3 The provision of local authority, free of charge, twenty-four-hour nurseries, giving every satisfaction in respect of hygiene and education; to be staffed by trained personnel and under the control of the communities in which they are located.

## 4 EQUALITY IN EDUCATION— STATE-FINANCED, SECULAR, CO-EDUCATIONAL SCHOOLS WITH FULL COMMUNITY CONTROL AT ALL LEVELS, SPECIFICALLY:

- 1 An end to enforced conditioning of sex roles through curriculum, teaching methods and materials (i.e. textbooks, games etc.)
- 2 The provision of local pre-school centres for all desiring to use them
- 3 An end to segmentation of education, to be replaced by fully comprehensive second and third level schools, incorporating both technical and academic learning.
- 4 Ending of discriminatory barring from particular courses traditionally relegated to men; encouragement for women to enter these courses through programmes of reserved places, etc.
- 5 Funding and encouragement of a Women's Studies Programme at second and third level.
- 6 Provision of free creches on campuses
- 7 Provision of a women's centre on campuses
- 8 Equal access to further education for all women, regardless of age or marital status.

## 5 THE MALE RATE FOR THE JOB WHERE MEN AND WOMEN ARE WORKING TOGETHER:

Where the labour force is wholly female, the jobs done by these women should be upgraded and a national minimum wage implemented, linked to the cost of living increase. We reject the use of job evaluation techniques for the purpose of negotiating pay claims.

The right of women to have access to all types of employment, including all types of skilled, and promotion regardless of marital status, pregnancy or maternity.

The right to training and re-training for all occupations including apprenticeships, and the present system of apprenticeships to be restructured. That it be compulsory for all employers to make readily available day release courses, with pay, for all employees.

Working conditions to be, without deterioration of present conditions, the same for women as for men: in addition, the institution of worker-determined flexible hours. The removal of protective legislation should not be a condition to gaining equal pay, and should be extended to include men.

The right to statutory maternity leave of twenty weeks with full net pay; additional leave with pay in cases of illness connected therewith, the right to attend pre-natal and post-natal clinics as required.

Prohibition of dismissal from employment on the grounds of pregnancy or maternity.

Employers to ensure that every effort is made to facilitate employees who are pregnant insofar as the latter's duties are concerned, the guarantee of reintegration into employment without loss of status or service, the right to further training or re-training after statutory or prolonged maternity leave, and the option for equivalent forms of paternity leave.

## 6 State provision of funds and premises for the establishment of women's centres in major population areas to be controlled by the women themselves.

## 7 The right of all women to a self-determined sexuality.