

The Origins of Domestic Violence in Ireland

by Erin K. Lambert

Les origines de la violence conjugale en Irlande sont questionnées par l'examen de l'implication sociale et spirituelle des femmes dans la tradition celtique et dans l'Irlande moderne.

A common perception of violence against women is that historically, women have always lived in the shadows of violence. This concept of gender violence provides justification for violence against women and an excuse to allow the issue to remain ignored.

"There are approximately two and a half million women in Ireland, give or take a few hundred, as they do, relentlessly or indifferently, every year" (Smyth 193). Violence has carved an implacable presence in the lives of Irish women living in both the Republic and Northern Ireland. Though this violence is sustained by internal strife known as "The Troubles," violence against women has not been caused nor maintained by the war alone. The Catholic Church perpetuates the hostile climate through misogynistic doctrines that in turn, taint many aspects of Ireland's political and legal systems.

A common perception of violence against women is that historically, women have always lived in the shadows of violence. This concept of gender violence as an inherent part of the human condition provides both justification for violence against women as well as an excuse to allow the issue to remain ignored. If this argument is true, then half of Ireland's citizens are innately more violent than the other half (O'Faolain). To challenge this argument as well as to propose solutions to gender violence, the causes and cultural factors that maintain such violence must be examined.

The origins of gender violence in Ireland may be more clearly defined by comparing the social and spiritual roles of women in Celtic tribes with those of modern Irish women. Did gender violence exist within the Celtic tribes that settled Ireland and if so, how was this violence maintained? If violence against women did not exist within these tribes, why and how did gender violence infiltrate modern Ireland?

Women in Celtic Ireland

I am the womb: of every holt,
I am the blaze: on every hill,

I am the queen: of every hive,
I am the shield: on every head,
I am the tomb: of every hope.

—from *Song of Amergin* (Graves 13)

The Goidelic branch of Celts that settled in Ireland were matrilineal; that is, kinship was traced through the mother.¹ Like all Celtic peoples, these tribes worshipped a mother-goddess. Their laws were based on decisions that were passed down by a woman who carried the namesake of the mother-goddess, Bridget (MacManus). Thus, the primary social and spiritual identity for both the Celtic man and woman was feminine.

Though Celtic Ireland consisted of several small kingdoms that were ruled by kings, these kings were legitimized only by marriage to the mother-goddess (Gallagher). She was, by an extension of her function as Mother Earth, the tribe and its territory. This greatly influenced how women were treated within the tribes because each woman was symbolic of the goddess, especially the tribes' priestesses who were revered by men as their spiritual link to the mother-goddess.

This concept of the mother-goddess as the tribe and its territory was later damaged by Christianity. While women symbolized the land's sacredness, Christianity changed the perception of women through the church's possession of the land (Goodrich).

Though the patriarchal structure of the tribes was similar to the social and political structures in Ireland today, the matrilineal influence within each tribe made women equal on all social and private levels. The tribes' social structure was divided into three classes: first, warriors, then the Druids, artists, and historians, and third, small farmers and minor craftsmen. Placement within these divisions was neither hereditary nor imposed on the basis of gender. Rulers were chosen according to their strength as leaders and divisions were based on talents and abilities. Women existed in all three divisions and in fact, fought with men in battle (Caldecott).

... in Ireland, from the remotest time of which we have any record, historical or legendary, woman stood emancipated, and was oftentimes eligible for the professions, and for rank and fame ... casual references to druidesses, poetesses, women physicians and women sages, prove that in the very remote days in which these legends were created, there was nothing uncommon or surprising in women filling these positions. (MacManus 151)

While the Celts revered the goddess as the ultimate life-

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source, they also understood her capacity to take life as well. If a crop was infertile or destroyed, the goddess was neither good nor evil. This is an interesting point to keep in mind with regard to the pro-life movement in Ireland today. The creation and continuance of life was not the duty of the mother-goddess; she created by choice. Birth

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control was acceptably practiced because sex and procreation were not necessarily related² (Gadon). The use of the blossoms and seeds of poplars and willows prevented conception in women (Goodrich). Fosterage of children was common among the tribes to strengthen links of loyalty which also freed women from many of the modern expectations placed on Irish women regarding birth and child-rearing (Caldecott).

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Gender violence in Celtic Ireland

This history leads us to an obvious question: how did violence against women infiltrate Irish society and how is this violence maintained? Many signs point to Roman influences. Norma L. Goodrich has suggested that although Rome never successfully conquered Ireland, Rome's conquests with other Celtic branches throughout Europe probably influenced the traditions of Ireland's Celtic tribes. The Romans, like the Greeks, restricted women, "to the production of offspring and the performance of household duties" (Goodrich 395).

Yet, conquerors cannot oppress women or replace a matrilineal culture through war alone. Julius Caesar, who led the Roman wars against the Celts, tampered with Celtic history by omitting any references in his writings of the involvement of Celtic women in battles. The Celtic goddess Bridget was held subject to the Celtic god Ogma (Graves 23). Arguments against land ownership by women were justified by employing the tribes' spiritual symbolism of "woman as land"; if she is the land

then she does not need to own the land (Gallagher).

The Romans also introduced rape as a means of controlling women, as it was often committed by Roman gods. In fact, Zeus is credited for having committed at least 19 rapes (Goodrich). No where in Celtic mythology had a Celtic god raped or justified rape. Thus, the feminine social and spiritual roots of the Goidelic tribes were distorted, not replaced, by exaggerating the patriarchal structure within the tribes.

Women in modern Ireland

I am Ireland/and I'm silenced
I cannot tell my abortions/my divorces
my years of slavery/my fights for freedom
it's got to the stage I can hardly remember
what I had to tell/and when I do
I speak in whispers

(Medbh)

Many changes have taken place in Ireland, such as the Divorce Referendum that was passed in the spring of 1996 that gives abused women a legal window out of marriages that are literally killing them. In March of the same year, a Domestic Violence Law became effective that allows health boards to apply for protection, barring, or safety orders on behalf of victims (Siggins).

Since November 1996, there have been over 9,000 calls to women's shelters reporting domestic violence. Women's Aid reports that applications for barring orders have increased from an average of 74 per week to 122 (Sheridan). According to the Minister of State at the Department of the Tanaiste, Ms. Eithne Fitzgerald, a quarter of all crimes committed each year in the state are against women (Siggins). Eighteen per cent of women (nearly one in five) report that they have been abused at some point in their lives. This statistics is in agreement with the 1997 Progress of Nations report that states that between one in five and one in seven women will be victims of rape in their lifetime. The report notes that between 25 and 50 per cent of all women have suffered physical abuse at the hands of an intimate partner (Cullen). Though Irish women are gaining ground legally, domestic violence continues to escalate.

In her article, "Paying Our Disrespects to the 'Bloody' States Women Are In," Ailbhe Smyth writes that the number of reported rapes "shot up from 76 in 1979, when the first rape crisis centre opened, to 1,479 in 1990, ... in [a] twelve month period ... Dublin police had to respond to a total of 3,500 cases of domestic violence" (207). Smyth stresses that these figures are more an indication of

"women's public refusal to allow men to rape them quietly" than that of an accurate reflection of the number of domestic violence cases (206).

Indeed, more victims are speaking out but often at their own expense. In December 1994, Lavinia Kerwick made a public statement condemning the judge who decided to adjourn sentence for a year on the man who raped her by his own admission. The judge based his decision on the fact that the man had a clean record with good references from his employer. Lavinia Kerwick made her appeal publicly to the Minister for Justice and in doing so, became the first rape victim to publicly identify herself. She announced herself a victim of a violent crime "perpetrated against her because she was a woman, because women are open territory" (Smyth 207). As Smyth writes: "... it is a terrible indictment of a society that it can or will only change when extreme pressure is applied to its conscience and its public face in the form of the publicly exposed pain of real flesh and blood women" (207).

Unfortunately, this appears to be one of the strongest and most effective forms of self-defense and social justice for Irish women. Due to the often stifling climate induced by the Catholic church, when public testimony such as Ms. Kerwick's occurs, it causes a great deal of controversy for the government, the church, and the public. The immediate actions executed by the church and state to silence victims often add fuel to public outrage and shake people's faith in the institutions.

The church's "self-preservation and closing ranks are more important than appreciating the genuine fears of so many people" (Dunne). While the Catholic church often targets the media when it exposes officials of such crimes as child sexual abuse, the media is an essential tool for women speaking out against domestic violence.

"When Home Is Where the Hurt Is," the most recent document from the Conference of Religions in Ireland, makes a weak but notable effort to address Ireland's domestic violence problems (Coulter). The Archbishop of Armagh, Dr. Sean Brady, states in the document's cover letter that, "We live in a culture of violence. Domestic violence is now a serious social evil.... We must all try to build a future that is free from violence. Tackling violent relationships and the root causes of them is a good way to start" (Coulter).

The document encourages churches to recognize domestic violence as a sin and even warns that the importance of suffering professed in Christian dogma can be used to justify domestic violence (Coulter). While the document certainly offers hope for a future forum on women's issues within the Church, at best Dr. Brady's statements simply point to the Church's inadequate understanding about the "root causes," as he states, of domestic violence.

Discrimination and violence against women are maintained by more than religion in Ireland. Veeder suggests that nationalism has placed unrealistic demands on women historically, convincing women that they are responsible

for the nation's sustenance in unique, oppressive ways.

Woman became as sexually intangible as the ideal of national independence became politically intangible.... Thus it might be argued that a sociological transposition of Irish women into desexualized and quasi-divine mothers corresponds somehow to an ideological transposition of Ireland from a Fatherland ... into idioms connoting a Mother-land ... the mother has always been the powerful unconscious symbol for one's forfeited or forbidden origins. (22)

Ireland's nationalism is a primary example of this cultural twist. The ideal Irish woman, "... was first and foremost a mother who inculcated in her children, her sons in particular, a love of country, of Gaelic culture and tradition, of freedom for Ireland." Furthermore, "... women's role was to produce and educate sons in the nationalist tradition ... [and] putting the good of the nation above her own motherly desires" (Valiulis 117). The pro-natal doctrines of Catholicism support these nationalist obligations by controlling Irish women's reproductive lives.

Conclusion

The church, state, and the laws governing the state view women as appendages of men who, without question, share the same religious and political views by virtue of their gender alone. This assumption, and the refusal by government and religious leaders to question this assumption, maintains violence against women in Ireland. Due to the lack of knowledge regarding women's issues on the part of government and church, much of the injustice suffered by Irish women remains unchallenged. How can laws be enacted to protect women and promote their interests by a legal system that does not recognize its own failings regarding women's rights? How can women become more vocal and visible within a church whose doctrines maintain much of the violence that plagues Irish women?

Ireland's Celtic culture was not replaced as much as it was overshadowed by a patriarch that distorted the image of woman and used her strengths against rather than for her. Why are men abusing and killing women? Because they can. Irish women have no spiritual significance within the current religious dogmas that influence Ireland's political and legal systems. Thus, Irish men lack the social and spiritual connections to women that were prevalent in Celtic society. Furthermore, Ireland is void of a spiritual impetus to challenge the current trends of gender violence. Ireland has lost its identity with a mother-goddess, forcing Irish women to struggle for their own identities within a hostile culture. The problem is, it's killing Irish women.

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city's homeless. A version of this article was presented at the 1996 Women's Conference on Global Violence Against Women in Richmond.

¹Ireland was occupied by many races throughout history. All of these races are believed to have separated from the main Celtic stem and then blended again into one tribe of Gaels (MacManus).

²Sex and sexuality within these tribes differed greatly from modern Irish culture. Homosexuality was as prevalent and as accepted as heterosexuality largely because masculine and feminine traits were equally desirable in both sexes (Gadon).

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Women's Aid

In 1974, Women's Aid opened one of the first refuges for women in Ireland. The Women's Aid movement in Ireland is part of the international battered women's movement, with locations throughout the island, though Women's Aid in the North is separately funded, and works with different legal, judicial, and police systems. In 1995 Women's Aid conducted a national survey of women in the Republic of Ireland, and a more detailed area study of women in North East Dublin. The results were published in a report entitled *Making the Links*. Eighteen percent of all women surveyed reported that they had been the victims of violence and almost every woman knew of another woman who had been. Apart from the too few and inadequately funded refuges, there are no statutory services for women experiencing violence in the home or their children. In 1996 the Domestic Violence Act was made law in the Republic allowing safety orders which prohibit further violence without obliging the violent partner to leave, and barring orders which order the abuser to leave or avoid the family home for up to three years. In April 1997, the Irish government published a *Report of the Task Force on Violence against Women*. The focus of the Task Force was on domestic violence and the goal was the establishment of a coordinated and coherent body of services—refuges, health, police, and the court system—the result of which would be interventionist programs and preventative strategies.

With the government's Task Force recommendations, Women's Aid published the report *Zero Tolerance: A National Strategy on Eliminating Violence Against Women*. They adopted an Election '97 campaign entitled "Target Zero—The Action Campaign Against Male Domestic Violence," providing kits that included 30 demands to eliminate violence against women, questions to ask your candidate, draft press releases, and declarations to be signed by candidates to ensure their attention and support for anti-violence policies and programs. A series of brochures were distributed and include powerful information about violence against women. One key point is that the prevention of violence against women and children is not simply a women's or a family matter, but the responsibility of all and that members of communities need to tell the violent male his behaviour is unacceptable.

Women's Aid is an organization whose aim it is to provide advice, support, and accommodation for women and children who are physically, emotionally, or sexually abused in their own home. For more information, write to them at P. O. Box 791, Dublin 7. Tel: (01) 874-5302/3, Fax: (01) 874-5525. Freephone: 1-800-341-900.