

## **Writing a sexual revolution: contraception, bodily autonomy and the women's pages in Irish national newspapers 1935–1979**

Between 1935 and 1979 the importation and sale of contraception and the publication of information about birth control was illegal in Ireland. Political discourse on the issue was grounded in religious doctrine and the issue was virtually invisible in terms of media content. But in the 1960s as the state embraced free trade and introduced free second level education, the nature of the women's pages of the national newspapers changed. Amid the international rise of feminism, the pages moved away from an exclusive focus on domestic-related concerns to make visible the demand for bodily autonomy and the legalisation of contraception. Such a change not only had the effect of making these long ignored issues visible in public debate, it also helped to frame those issues as a political rather than a moral issue. Such an approach incurred the wrath of those who viewed contraception as a moral evil and saw those who advocated its legalisation as a threat to the existing order. This article assesses the media invisibility of the issue in the early decades of the Irish state, examines the changing nature of the women's pages in the 1960s, and assesses their contribution to the development of public discussion of birth control and its legalisation in 1979.

### **Keywords**

Contraception, journalism, press, Ireland, social change, newspapers

### **Introduction & legislative context**

Following independence from Britain in 1922, the Irish state embarked on a nation building project based primarily on the precepts of the religion of the majority. As 92% of the population identified as Roman Catholic in the 1926 census, that church was the undisputed arbiter of morality in Irish life, and its annual message to the faithful – the Lenten Pastorals – warned of the dangers lurking in foreign dances and music, alien dress codes, alcohol consumption, dance halls, risqué literature, and British Sunday newspapers.<sup>1</sup> What followed was a glut of legislation to address the hierarchy's concerns and an acknowledgement from the political class that independence constituted a political rather than a social revolution: in 1923 the new state's minister for justice, Kevin O'Higgins, described the new Irish political establishment as 'probably the most conservative-minded revolutionaries that ever put through a successful revolution'.<sup>2</sup> All political parties were careful to publicly demonstrate that their political programmes did not contradict the teachings of the Church and in 1937 the Irish Constitution, while granting freedom of religion, recorded the 'special position' of the Church as the faith of the majority of the population. A key concern for the Catholic hierarchy of the 1920s was the presence of publications – books and British periodicals – that advised on or advocated birth control. Following much lobbying and vigilante activity against newsagents, the state established a Committee on Evil Literature in 1926, the report of which led to the Censorship of Publications Act 1929.

Although primarily aimed at books that were deemed to be indecent or obscene and at newspapers that devoted substantial space to crime news of a sexual nature, the legislation also banned information on birth control. The censorship board established by the Act was empowered, under Section 6, to impose a permanent ban on any book deemed to advocate 'the unnatural prevention of conception'. In relation to periodicals, Section 7 of the Act

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<sup>1</sup> Census figures taken from <https://www.cso.ie/en/census/>

<sup>2</sup> Irish Parliamentary Debates (Dáil Éireann), vol. 2 (col. 1909), 1 March 1923.

allowed for a three-month ban when ‘several issues of a periodical publication recently theretofore published have usually or frequently been indecent or obscene or have advocated the unnatural prevention of conception’. A second offence resulted in a permanent ban on the periodical. In addition, Section 16 made it a criminal offence (punishable by a £50 fine and/or six months’ imprisonment) for anyone to print, publish, sell or distribute any book or periodical that advocated ‘the unnatural prevention of conception’ and Section 17 banned as indecent any advertisement pertaining to medical products relating to sexually transmitted diseases or the prevention of conception. As noted by John Horgan, the parliamentary debate on the legislation ‘was notable for the almost universal acceptance of the edicts against literature dealing with contraception’.<sup>3</sup> A similar process followed for the banning of contraception proper. Established in 1930, the Committee on the Criminal Law Amendment Acts and Juvenile Prostitution (better known as the Carrigan Committee) led to the Criminal Law Amendments Act 1935, Section 17 of which made it an offence (punishable by a £50 fine and/or six months’ imprisonment) ‘for any person to sell, or expose, offer, advertise, or keep for sale or to import or attempt to import into Saorstát Eireann for sale, any contraceptive’. Such was the sensitivity of this legislation that normal parliamentary process was by-passed in favour of a small all-party committee examining the Committee’s report ‘with a view to avoiding as far as possible public discussion of a necessarily unsavoury nature’.<sup>4</sup> As Michael Cronin has pointed out, Ireland was not an exception in banning contraception: France, Italy, and Spain banned contraception in the early part of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> And, as Yvonne Galligan has noted, Ireland was not an outlier in reversing its ban on contraception: Italy legalised contraception in 1968, France in 1974 and Spain in 1978.<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that contraception in this article refers to ‘barrier’ methods of contraception as the contraceptive Pill, which became available in Ireland in 1963, was never banned Ireland, being prescribed by doctors as a ‘cycle regulator’ rather than as contraception.<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, the early decades of twentieth-century Ireland was marked by the unavailability of contraception and the policing by the censorship board of books, newspapers and magazines that might address the issue of family planning. In May 1930, the censorship board released its first list of banned books. Of the thirteen titles, ten related to birth control and included Family Limitation; What every Mother Should Know; and The New Motherhood by Margaret Sanger; Wise Parenthood; Radiant Motherhood; Contraception; Early Days of Birth Control; and Married Love by Maire Stopes; On Conjugal Happiness by Leopold Lowenfeld; and The Pivot of Civilisation by Margaret Sanger. All were banned for advocating ‘the unnatural prevention of conception’.<sup>8</sup> Bans on British newspapers for the same reason soon followed: the New Leader was banned in May 1930 and again (permanently) in October 1930 and the Daily Worker was banned in 1931 and again (permanently) in October 1938.<sup>9</sup> By 1938, six British newspapers had been banned for ‘advocating’ birth control.<sup>10</sup> This activity continued throughout the 1940s and 1950s and

<sup>3</sup> John Horgan (1995), ‘Saving Us from Ourselves: Contraception, Censorship and the ‘Evil Literature’ Controversy of 1926’, Irish Communications Review 5: 61–67 at 66.

<sup>4</sup> National Archives of Ireland (hereafter NAI), DJ H247/41B (cited in Mark Finnane (2001), ‘The Carrigan Committee of 1930–31 and the Moral Condition of the Saorstát’, Irish Historical Studies 32:128, 519–36 at 528.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Cronin, Impure Thoughts: Sexuality, Catholicism and Literature in Twentieth-Century Ireland (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 69.

<sup>6</sup> Yvonne Galligan, Women and Politics in Contemporary Ireland: From the Margins to the Mainstream (London: Pinter, 1998), 143.

<sup>7</sup> Galligan, Women and Politics in Contemporary Ireland, 144.

<sup>8</sup> Irish Times, 14 May 1930.

<sup>9</sup> Irish Times, 28 May 1930 & 8 October 1930; 6 August 1931 & NAI, 90/102/104, memo dated 13/10/1938.

<sup>10</sup> NAI, 90/102/137.

encompassed banning British government reports, academic research, and the unofficial banning of The Observer newspaper. In October 1949 the censorship board banned the report of Royal Commission on Population on the grounds that it advocated birth control. During the successful appeal process, it transpired that the censorship board automatically banned any book that mentioned birth control, without considering, as it was required to do, the scientific merit of the work along with the nature and extent of its circulation.<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, Alfred Kinsey's ground-breaking research into human sexuality, *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* (1953), was banned on the grounds of being 'indecent or obscene'. And, in April 1956, the secretary of censorship board exerted pressure on The Observer's distributor not distribute an edition of the newspaper that carried part three of its 'Sex in Society' series. Entitled 'Family Planning' the instalment's advance advertising had caught the eye of the board's secretary, Brian MacMahon who telephoned the distributor to warn him of the possible consequences (£50 fine and/or six months' imprisonment) should the paper be distributed. Having examined the newspaper at Dublin Airport in the company of Customs personnel, the distributor declined to accept the consignment and surrendered it to the state.<sup>12</sup> It was in such an environment of official censorship and unofficial suppression that Irish newspapers operated a policy of steering clear of any mention of birth control lest they be accused of somehow endangering the morality of the Irish people.

### **The media landscape and women's pages**

As Breen et al have observed, the first forty years of the new Irish state (1920s–1960s) 'were notable for institutional continuity rather than change [and] economic orthodoxy, Catholic social teaching, and the doctrine of self-sufficiency had proved inhospitable soil for anything but a minimal state'.<sup>13</sup> During this period all the national newspaper titles either championed the role of the Church in Irish society or knew that to critique it was to court an ecclesiastical backlash. Established in 1905, after its proprietor, William Martin Murphy, had attended a conference that heard calls for the founding of a truly Catholic Irish newspaper, the Irish Independent was distinguished most by its Catholic ethos. It regularly devoted two full-page length columns every year to the hierarchy's Lenten pastorals, and was an enthusiastic supporter of the censorship legislation, which it described as 'a fair and reasonable scheme for checking a grave menace to public and private morality without unduly interfering either with the liberty of the Press or the liberty of the subject'.<sup>14</sup> As a socially conservative newspaper, it did not editorialise on the ban on contraception in 1935. In contrast, the Irish Times, which was established as a pro-union newspaper in 1859, but which by the 1920s represented the views of the state's minority Protestant population, editorialised against developments that it viewed as impinging on the civil rights of its readership. Referring to the censorship legislation it queried why the state sought 'to enforce the teachings of one Church upon those members of other Churches who claim the right of public judgment in the matter of birth control?'.<sup>15</sup> It also criticised the ban on contraception noting that the ban would encourage the spread of disease and increase the rate of

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<sup>11</sup> NAI, 90/102/235.

<sup>12</sup> NAI, 90/102/139.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Breen, Damien F. Hannon, David B. Rottman and Christopher T. Whelan, Understanding Contemporary Ireland: State, Class and Development in the Republic of Ireland (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1990), 1 & 4.

<sup>14</sup> Irish Independent, 13 August 1928.

<sup>15</sup> Irish Times, 29 September 1928.

infanticide.<sup>16</sup> As the voice of the political party, Fianna Fáil, that would, more than any other, hold power in Ireland over the course of the twentieth century, the Irish Press articulated that party's views on Irish unity, the need to revive the Irish language, the primacy of rural living, anti-urbanism, and economic self-sufficiency and established these tenets as the dominant orthodoxies of Irish political life to which all other parties and newspapers had to react. Established in 1931, during the following year's general election it stressed that the political philosophy of its political masters was in accord with the Papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*.<sup>17</sup> It did not comment editorially on the 1935 ban on contraception.

At all three national newspapers the women's pages were confined to content that primarily centred on shopping, fashion and cookery. While it is arguable that these women's pages maintained a media presence for women, it is equally arguable that such an approach was commercially driven, deprived women of a political voice, and relegated them to a house-bound citizenry.<sup>18</sup> For example, in 1936 the women's page of the Irish Press observed that 'women think first in terms of clothes, food and general adornment of person and home, before they put their minds to outside matters'. Much of this content was motivated by the fact that women controlled much of any household's spending power; a point acknowledged by the Press when it noted that 'the main bulk of advertising is devised for women's eyes and for her interest. It may not be the woman who pays, but it is certainly the woman who buys'.<sup>19</sup> Writing scathingly in 1939 about the confines placed on women journalists Anna Kelly of the Irish Press observed that they were all too often assigned to cover 'social events where the description of frocks and hats were considered essential to the readers' happiness'. This situation was, Kelly observed, 'based on the assumption that women readers take no interest in general news, that they will read only news that has a feminine appeal – a specialised appeal to the interests of their own sex'.<sup>20</sup> A similar situation pertained at the Irish Independent where its 'Leaves from a Woman's Diary' was compiled by Gertrude Gaffney. Part social-diary, part travelogue, part fashion column, it too found occasional space to critique the patriarchal nature of Irish society as when Gaffney chastised Trinity College's Philosophical Society for holding 'men only' events. Was it, Gaffney wondered, 'fear of feminine competition that is eating at the heart of this masculine stronghold?'<sup>21</sup> At the Irish Times, its women's editor, Barbara Dickson, wrote social features under her own name and fashion and cookery features under the penname Caroline Mitchell. In 1947 Mary Francis Keating, writing under the penname 'A Woman Correspondent', initiated the 'Report to Housewives' column that concentrated on home economics, nutrition and recipes. Occasionally Keating covered issues such as the obstacles women faced in securing part-time work, the need for legalised adoption, and the lack of support given by women to female candidate in local elections.<sup>22</sup> But, by and large, women's pages were, as recalled by Irish Times journalist Mary Maher, 'designed by male editors with the advertising department, for housewives whom they imagined had only one interest: to buy things to bring home' and the issue of birth control was not addressed in these pages (when contraception and birth control were occasionally mentioned by newspapers it was in the context of 'immoral literature' and

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<sup>16</sup> Irish Times, 25 June 1934.

<sup>17</sup> Mark O'Brien, *De Valera, Fianna Fáil and the Irish Press: The Truth in the News* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2001), 48.

<sup>18</sup> Louise Ryan, *Gender, Identity and the Irish Press 1922–37: Embodying the Nation* (New York: Edwin Mellin Press, 2002). For perspectives on women magazines see Cairiona Clear, *Women's Voices in Ireland: Women's Magazines in the 1950s and 1960s* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Irish Press, 21 March 1936.

<sup>20</sup> Irish Press, 10 February 1939.

<sup>21</sup> Irish Independent, 11 November 1932. Interestingly, Gaffney travelled to Spain to cover the civil war for the Independent in 1937.

<sup>22</sup> Irish Times, 22 January 1949; 3 December 1949; 30 September 1950.

censorship, statements from Catholic bishops, and to a lesser extent, debates on population numbers and emigration).<sup>23</sup>

While continuity rather than change was the watchword of the first four decades of Irish independence, the state's decision, in 1959, to abandon economic protectionism and embrace free trade had a transformative effect on the state. As GNP grew at an annual rate of four per cent between 1959 and 1963 urbanisation increased, emigration declined and more women joined the workforce. Free second level education was introduced in 1967 with the number of students completing secondary education increasing from 4,500 in 1950 to 19,000 in 1970. There was a similar expansion of third level education – from 7,900 in 1950 to 25,000 in 1970.<sup>24</sup> The introduction of an Irish television service (RTÉ) in 1961 was also a milestone, though in terms of social issues, the controversy it generated very much depended on the work of a new generation of women journalists that successfully merged the role of journalist with social campaigner from the late 1960s onward. Before we turn to examine the contribution of these journalists it is important to note that, even though Ireland was changing, the ban on contraception remained in force as did the ban on birth control information. While a reforming Censorship Act had, in 1967, replaced the 'permanent ban' with a maximum twelve-year ban in the case of books banned on the grounds of being indecent or obscene, the permanent ban penalty remained for books judged by the censorship board to advocate the 'unnatural' prevention of conception. The penalties of a three-month ban (first offence), and a permanent ban (second offence), for newspapers or magazines that 'advocated the unnatural prevention of conception' over several editions also remained in place. So too did the provision that made it a criminal offence for anyone to print, publish, sell or distribute any book or periodical that advocated 'the unnatural prevention of conception'. In addition, the Catholic world was awaiting the Pope Paul VI's response to the Papal Commission on Birth Control, which had found, in 1966, that birth control for married couples was morally justifiable. When that response came in 1968, in the form of Humanae Vitae, it rejected the Commission's findings and declared that all contraception (including the Pill, which had become available in 1961 and was never banned in Ireland) in all circumstances was morally wrong. The public disquiet was palpable: while the Irish Independent noted that 'many married couples will find it hard to understand the Pope's reasoning', the Irish Press' religious correspondent predicted the encyclical's 'widespread rejection by clergy and laity'.<sup>25</sup> For its part, the Irish Times noted that while the decision 'may conform those who look for a rock of certainty' it would 'sorely trouble' many married couples.<sup>26</sup> Significantly, it was the church's own discussions of and divisions on the issue of contraception that allowed for greater public debate of birth control and bodily autonomy – a debate that would have been unthinkable in previous years. It was in this environment that a new generation of women journalists sought to nudge the women's pages of national newspapers away from domestic related issues towards topics such as family planning, feminism, and women's rights generally. And, while Yvonne Galligan has described the subsequent campaign to legalise contraception as 'a silent revolution on the part of women', the opposite is the case: the campaign was media-centric, publicly political, and physical in its protest strategy.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Mary Maher, 'Introduction' in Elgy Gillespie (ed.), Changing the Times: Irish Women Journalists 1969–81 (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2003), 11–12.

<sup>24</sup> Adrian Redmond (ed.), That Was Then, This is Now: Change in Ireland 1949–99 (Dublin: Stationary Office, 2000), 45–51.

<sup>25</sup> Irish Independent, 30 July 1968; Irish Press, 30 July 1968.

<sup>26</sup> Irish Times, 30 July 1968.

<sup>27</sup> Galligan, Women and Politics in Contemporary Ireland, 142.

### The new women's pages

As noted by Paul Ryan 'the manner in which Irish people spoke about sexuality changed dramatically between 1963 and 1980' with Ryan attributing part of this change to the manner in which Sunday Press advice columnist Angela MacNamara discussed sexual issues – including homosexuality – that up to then had been ignored by national media. Though, as Ryan notes, MacNamara's advice to readers 'was strongly influenced by the Catholic discourse governing sexuality that emanated from the Vatican', what is significant is that the issues were at least being given public ventilation.<sup>28</sup> A more radical intervention was the reorientation, in the late-1960s, by women's pages away from household issues to those related to reproductive rights and bodily autonomy. Although all three national titles made this switch the move was initiated and was most maintained by the Irish Times, which had form in this area. In the wake of the controversy surrounding the Mother and Child crisis of 1951, wherein the government, at the behest of the Catholic hierarchy and the medical profession abandoned plans for universal healthcare for new mothers and their children, the Irish Times women's editor, Mary Francis Keating, had sharply criticised the medical profession for its opposition to the scheme and described the public health system as 'something to be shuddered over as a searing experience'. Following complaints from the medical profession, Keating was let go from the paper.<sup>29</sup> Throughout the 1960s, the Irish Times re-positioned itself as a non-aligned paper concerned with impartial coverage of serious issues. Its news editor, Donal Foley, recruited Mary Maher, who had arrived in Ireland having previously worked for the Chicago Tribune, to edit a 'women's page with serious articles, scathing social attacks and biting satire'.<sup>30</sup> Maher, having read Betty Friedan's The Feminist Mystique (1963) – 'with its painstaking and painful analysis of how women's journalism had re-inforced the kitchens and nursery subjugation of American women' – had no interest in perpetuating such staid journalism.<sup>31</sup> Thus in May 1968, when 'Women First' appeared, it drew on feminist discourses to cast a cold eye on the patriarchal nature of Irish society and how this impacted on the day-to-day lives of women. In its early days it examined such issues as the prohibition on divorce, the ban on contraception, marital celibacy, equal pay, and how Dublin's housing crisis was affecting public health.<sup>32</sup> Maher edited the page for eighteen months before being succeeded by Maeve Binchy, who continued the page's pioneering focus on serious issues.

In relation to the issue of contraception, it foregrounded the direct experience of women in a frank manner. One such contribution was based on the life experience of Maire Mullarney, a mother of eleven children who noted that 'when you read the more doctrinaire theologians you'd think that . . . people who are not satisfied with rhythmic marriage are obsessed with sex'. She also called on the church to recognise the negative physical and mental effects of marital celibacy amongst 'very numerous couples who already have about two more children than they have room or means to bring up in any sort of decency'. Noting that Humanae Vitae had declared periodic continence from sex 'brings to family life rich fruits of serenity and peace' Mullarney wondered whether its writers had consulted 'even one ordinary couple who had tried say, fifteen years of rhythm, and then a few with the pill, to learn which were more serene?'<sup>33</sup> 'Women First' also exposed the ambiguities in the law by

<sup>28</sup> Paul Ryan, 'Asking Angela: discourses about sexuality in an Irish problem page, 1963–80' in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 19:2 (2010), 317–39 at 317 & 319.

<sup>29</sup> Irish Times, 14 April 1951; see Mark O'Brien, The Irish Times: A History (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008), 140–41.

<sup>30</sup> Maher, 'Introduction' in Gillespie (ed.), Changing the Times, 11–12.

<sup>31</sup> Irish Times, 26 October 1974.

<sup>32</sup> Irish Times, 11 June 1968; 13 June 1969; 14 March 1968; 1 August 1968; 12 September 1968; 9 June 1970; 18 & 19 September 1969.

<sup>33</sup> Irish Times, 1 August 1968.

noting that while it was illegal to import contraceptives for sale or personal use, the latter offence was not punishable. It also noted that the presence of the contraceptive pill ‘has made a pretence of the law in that it is permitted here as a medication, and sold and used widely as a contraceptive’. Bearing these facts in mind it launched a survey of readers to determine where they stood on legalisation.<sup>34</sup> A total of 429 readers responded to the survey – all but five of whom supported legalisation.<sup>35</sup> Significantly, it published an assertion by an anonymous Catholic priest that Dublin’s Catholic Archbishop John Charles McQuaid was theologically incorrect in his assertion that the use of any contraception in any circumstance was morally wrong. The priest urged his ecclesiastical colleagues to accept that ‘there are circumstances, in cases of birth control, as in all other spheres of morality, which can lessen, and at times even remove, the guilt of those who break the law’. Such an understanding, was, he concluded, ‘not a denial of the law, nor a refusal to inform one’s conscience as to what that objective moral law is, but simply a realisation that there is no such thing as an immoral act which is always morally sinful for everyone’.<sup>36</sup> ‘Women First’ also tacked the reluctance of political parties to engage with the issue: it flatly rejected the erroneous assertion by Taoiseach (Premier) Jack Lynch of Fianna Fáil that ‘contraception was a matter of conscience in which the state did not interfere’.<sup>37</sup> Reporting on the Fine Gael national conference Nell McCafferty observed on how, during a debate on contraception, one delegate declared that ‘the family was the unit and life-blood of society and a couple who couldn’t face up to their responsibilities should not look to the state to relieve their difficulties’. As McCafferty noted, the delegate did not address related issues such as ‘over-crowding in slum rooms, inadequate wages, deserted wives, non-Catholics, or freedom of conscience’.<sup>38</sup> It also published readers’ letters – including one which noted how the correspondent was ‘sick and tired of all those bachelor clergymen telling us how many children to have, how to educate them . . . It’s high time they got married and really earned the name of father; maybe then they might agree to contraception and stop begging for millions for bigger and more expensive churches’.<sup>39</sup> Such coverage and frank language would have been unthinking only a few years previously. ‘Women First’ also highlighted developments in relation to family planning in other jurisdictions such as Britain, which in 1973 introduced a free family planning service administered by its National Health Service, and France, which legalised contraception in 1967.<sup>40</sup>

In a modernising Ireland, other newspapers scrambled to emulate ‘Women First’. At the Irish Press, editor Tim Pat Coogan appointed Mary Kenny as its women’s editor in 1969. Remembering this time, Kenny recalled that she felt it ‘outrageous that the state should police the bedrooms of private citizens . . . My animus was directed more against the state than against the church – though of course I was against the church, in this matter, as well. I was a young woman rebelling at full throttle against most of the established order’.<sup>41</sup> Describing Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique* (1963) as ‘an influential text in Ireland’ Kenny also noted how Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970), Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1970) and Eva Figes’s *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970) were instrumental ‘in winning converts to what was then called women’s liberation’.<sup>42</sup> In his memoir, Tim Pat Coogan recalled that Kenny ‘arrived in Burgh Quay like a comet exuding in its wake a shower of

<sup>34</sup> *Irish Times*, 15 December 1970.

<sup>35</sup> *Irish Times*, 22 December 1970.

<sup>36</sup> *Irish Times*, 15 December 1970.

<sup>37</sup> *Irish Times*, 15 December 1970.

<sup>38</sup> *Irish Times*, 18 May 1971.

<sup>39</sup> *Irish Times*, 5 March 1973.

<sup>40</sup> *Irish Times*, 27 November 1973; 3 April 1974.

<sup>41</sup> Mary Kenny, *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland* (Dublin: New Island, 2000), 237.

<sup>42</sup> Kenny, *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland*, 238.

flaming particles from burning bras [and] surrounded herself with a coterie of talented young women, like Anne Harris, Nell McCafferty, Rosita Sweetman, June Levine, and Máirín de Burca'.<sup>43</sup> Another regular contributor was Nuala Fennell, who later established the first refuge for women in Dublin and was elected to the Irish parliament in 1981 before being appointed junior minister for women's affairs in 1982. Kenny's 'Woman's Press' page published articles such as a three-piece series of testimonies written by deserted wives, a feature based on an interview with two female prostitutes, a provocative (for the time) quiz so that its readers could establish whether they were an 'emancipated woman or sheltered lady', and a frank interview with the feminist Eva Fíges in which she discussed female self-pleasure.<sup>44</sup> In April 1970 'Woman's Press' page profiled Senator Mary Robinson who declared that 'for many people divorce and contraception are part of their civil rights'.<sup>45</sup> The following September, Kenny and her Irish Times counterpart, Maeve Binchy, addressed clerical students at the national seminary in Maynooth: Binchy boldly told them that the day was gone when women were 'going to take advice from celibate priests', while Kenny condemned the legislation 'which makes you a criminal if you want to plan your family'.<sup>46</sup> In October 1970 'Woman's Press' published a full page on 'The case for and against contraception' in which she interviewed two campaigners on the issue – Monica McEnroy who advocated legalisation and Mena Cribben who favoured the ban's retention. According to McEnroy, the ban was 'wrong medically' as it criminalised 'people who want to use medical means of avoiding random impregnation'. Offering an alternative perspective, Cribben observed that as the Catholic church 'which most of the people in Ireland believe, has forbidden contraception and that in my opinion is enough for the people of Ireland'. Cribben also described contraception as 'murder by anticipation' and, referring to those who advocated change, declared that 'nobody's forcing them to live in Ireland'. In response, McEnroy observed that she disagreed with 'a law which goes into a maternity hospital and says to a young woman with a bad heart "I demand that you live a celibate marriage or accept random pregnancy"'. Such polarised viewpoints would continue to characterise debates on sexual matters – contraction, divorce, abortion and homosexuality – in Ireland for decades to come.<sup>47</sup> In a later article Kenny tacked the myths surrounding law reform in relation to contraction, declaring that it did not 'infringe upon Catholic morality' and 'does NOT instantly pave the way for divorce, abortion, euthanasia, mass prostitution of 11-year-old children and epidemic VD'. Catholicism in Ireland, she concluded, 'is in a pretty flabby condition if its rulings have to be enforce by coercive legislation by the state'.<sup>48</sup> As Tim Pat Coogan, recalled, Irish Press Group chairman, Vivion de Valera, did not think much of this new departure in women's journalism and referred to Kenny and her contributors as 'wild women'.<sup>49</sup>

The other national daily, the Irish Independent, also sought to re-invent its women's page, though as the socially conservative paper of middle-Ireland, there was a limit as to how far boundaries could be pushed. 'Independent Woman' first appeared in 1970, was edited by Mary McCutchan and had regular contributions from Mary Anderson, Nuala Fennell, and Janet Martin. Its first appearance featured a 'peace plan for the sex war' and an article on 'the lethal side of electric blankets'.<sup>50</sup> In many ways, 'Independent Women' was caught in a bind:

<sup>43</sup> Tim Pat Coogan, A Memoir (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), 145.

<sup>44</sup> Irish Press, 30 September, 1 & 2 October 1969; 6 July 1970; 29 October 1970.

<sup>45</sup> Irish Press, 30 April 1970.

<sup>46</sup> Irish Press, 26 September 1970.

<sup>47</sup> Irish Press, 3 November 1970. For an overview of these issues see Chrystel Hug, The Politics of Sexuality Morality in Ireland (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999).

<sup>48</sup> Irish Press, 22 March 1971.

<sup>49</sup> Coogan, Memoir, 148–9.

<sup>50</sup> Irish Independent, 1 September 1970.



with its competitors blazing a trail on substantive women's issues, it needed to make itself relevant. But, as the organ of conservative, Catholic Ireland, its readers objected when it tackled contentious issues, as when, in October 1970, Janet Martin criticised the government's 'downright refusal to look at the question of contraception [and] this country's insular approach to abortion, unwanted babies and unmarried motherhood'.<sup>51</sup> This prompted a 'regular reader' to write to the paper to ask whether Martin was advocating that Ireland 'follow England's example [and] allow the sale of contraceptives and legalise abortion, despite the fact we would be breaking God's law by doing so?'.<sup>52</sup> When a subsequent 'Independent Woman' page reported the foundation of the Irish Family Planning Rights Association the paper was inundated with protests.<sup>53</sup> One reader advised the page to 'stop trying to putrefy the women of this country, lest God takes a direct hand against you' while another claimed that 'the Catholic Irishwoman is appalled by such publicity to subjects which are against our Church's teaching'.<sup>54</sup> Thereafter, mentions of contraception in 'Independent Woman' disappeared – apart from another article by Janet Martin in 1972 in which she took 'a lighthearted look at ancient methods of family planning, from swallowing live tadpoles to a young bride sitting on her fingers in the wedding coach'.<sup>55</sup>

But not all reaction was negative. Addressing the Irish Housewives' Association in March 1970, Senator Neville Keery described the new generation of women journalists as 'the real radicals of journalism' and observed that 'the days of the woman's page or magazine programme devoted exclusively to knitting patterns and recipes have gone [and] problems of sex and marriage, politics and education are now the dominant themes'. He also declared that the 'reports of the women's page reporters and the comments of the women's page editors have often an accuracy and depth which is lacking in the report and comment in general newspaper or broadcasting coverage'.<sup>56</sup> As 1970 progressed, the new women's pages continued their coverage of the contraception issue. In October 1970 Mary Maher, June Levine, and Mary Kenny appeared on RTE television's 'The Late Late Show' and called for the establishment of 'a liberation movement for women'.<sup>57</sup> Over the course of the following week, the *Irish Times*' 'Women First' page ran a series on 'Women's Lib' that examined the origins of the women's liberation movement in America, its emergence in Britain, the Irish experience and case studies of what different Irish women thought of it, the journalists' personal views on it, and how advertisers targeted women as consumers.<sup>58</sup> It also published a page of readers' responses that were supportive and critical of the series.<sup>59</sup>

### **Journalism and social campaigning**

By early 1971 the contributors to the new women's pages had, along with others, established the Irish Women's Liberation Movement (IWLM) – an entity that arose from informal gatherings of women that met to discuss the position of women in Irish society. As noted by Anne Stopper, the majority of the founding members of the IWLM were journalists whose 'influence in the media is what made all the difference in terms of the IWLM's impact on society . . . If the founders had not been able to use the media as effectively as they did, it is unlikely that Irish women outside of Dublin would have known much of their existence and

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<sup>51</sup> *Irish Independent*, 15 October 1970.

<sup>52</sup> *Irish Independent*, 24 October 1970.

<sup>53</sup> *Irish Independent*, 27 October 1970.

<sup>54</sup> *Irish Independent*, 4 November 1970.

<sup>55</sup> *Irish Independent*, 12 January 1972.

<sup>56</sup> *Irish Press*, 2 March 1970.

<sup>57</sup> *Irish Press*, 13 October 1970.

<sup>58</sup> *Irish Times*, 4–10 October 1970.

<sup>59</sup> *Irish Times*, 15 October 1970.

their aims'.<sup>60</sup> Whereas previously, the journalists had simply advocated for legislative reform in relation to contraception in their respective women's pages, the foundation of the IWLM marked their entry into the political arena, which was very much a male preserve. The movement's manifesto 'Irish Women: Chains or Change' led, in March 1971, to an invitation to discuss its demands – equal pay; equality before the law; equal education; an end to the ban on contraception; rights for deserted wives, unmarried mothers and widows; and housing rights – on RTÉ television's 'The Late Late Show'. The all-women show featured a panel consisting of Senator Mary Robinson, historian Mary Cullen, television producer Lelia Doolin, activist Máirín Johnson, and journalist Nell McCafferty. The all-woman audience included other IWLM activists and journalists Mary Kenny, June Levine, Mary Maher and Nuala Fennell. A declaration by Mary Kenny that male politicians did not understand women's issues prompted a male parliamentarian, Garret FitzGerald, to drive to the television station and insist on being allowed to rebut Kenny's statement. However well intended, the actions of a male politician demanding to be allowed partake in an all-woman television debate ensured that the programme descended into, as Brian Devenney, the Irish Independent's television critic, described it, 'an ebullient shout-in'.<sup>61</sup>

Related events in parliament also caused tensions. When, in early March 1971, Senator Mary Robinson sought to introduce a private members' bill to lift the ban on contraception and contraception information she was refused leave to publish or distribute the bill and was, as Robinson herself recalled, 'denounced from Catholic pulpits all around the country'.<sup>62</sup> Though not a journalist, Robinson was well-known to the women journalists and her reform agenda chimed with theirs. Others, however, felt the need to muddy the waters and sought to falsely equate the demand for the legalisation of contraception with the legalisation of abortion – an issue that neither Robinson nor the IWLM, nor the women's pages ever discussed. As news of Robinson's proposed private members' bill leaked the Catholic hierarchy expressed its concern that 'pressures being exerted on public opinion on questions concerning the civil law on divorce, contraception, and abortion'.<sup>63</sup> This concerted effort to mislead the public about the campaign of the IWLM and the women journalists prompted Mary Kenny of the Irish Press to declare that the legalisation of contraception would not 'instantly pave the way for divorce, abortion, euthanasia, mass prostitution of 11-year-old children and epidemic VD' and to observe that people were 'running around the place in a state of fevered hysteria as though the whole thing was a mandate for the statutory introduction of the Permissive society'.<sup>64</sup> The tit-for-tat recriminations continued the following week: when Dublin's Catholic archbishop John Charles McQuaid issued a pastoral letter describing the possible legalisation of contraception as 'an insult to our faith' and 'a curse upon our country' many members of the IWLM walked out of the masses at which it was read and held a protest outside the archbishop's palace in Drumcondra.<sup>65</sup> McQuaid's pastoral also prompted the normally staid 'Independent Woman' page to examine the issue of contraception from a medical perspective, outline the law in relation to contraception, and report on the formation of the Association for the Protection of Irish Family Life.<sup>66</sup>

There followed more action on behalf of the women journalists and counter-action from religious leaders and politicians who decried their activities. In April 1971, the IWLM

<sup>60</sup> Anne Stopper, Mondays at Gaj's: The Story of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>61</sup> Irish Independent, 10 March 1971.

<sup>62</sup> Mary Robinson, 'Denounced from Catholic pulpits all around the country' in Kevin Rafter & Mark O'Brien (eds) The State in Transition: Essays in Honour of John Horgan (Dublin: New Island, 2015), 191–96 at 193.

<sup>63</sup> Irish Times, 12 March 1971.

<sup>64</sup> Irish Press, 22 March 1971.

<sup>65</sup> Irish Press, 29 March 1971.

<sup>66</sup> Irish Independent, 30 March 1971.

held its first public meeting at Dublin's Mansion House at which over 1,000 people attended to hear views that ranged 'from extremely personal to the intensely political'.<sup>67</sup> The following month, IWLM members, including three journalists – Mary Kenny, June Levine and Nell McCafferty – travelled by train to Belfast to purchase contraceptives: on their return to Dublin there occurred a well-recorded stand-off between the women and customs officers at Dublin's Connolly Train Station. Thereafter, the group marched to a nearby police station where McCafferty read a statement declaring the law against contraception as obsolete.<sup>68</sup> The Irish Times was the only newspaper that editorialised in favour of the protest and legalisation by noting that 'a loud and persistent campaign, whichever way it ends, could be more disruptive than a speedy passing of the necessary legislation'.<sup>69</sup> For its part, the Irish Independent quoted a Belfast priest as condemning the protest as 'undignified and unworthy of a woman', while the editor of the Irish Press, Tim Pat Coogan noted that while he defended the right of the women to so protest, their actions might give Ulster unionists the idea that the southern state was 'a clerically dominated society'.<sup>70</sup> Religious figures also reacted: Bishop Thomas Ryan of Clonfert declared that 'probably never before, certainly not since the penal days was the Catholic heritage of our country subjected to so many insidious onslaughts on the pretext of conscience, civil rights, and women's liberation'.<sup>71</sup>

Politicians also lined up to condemn the actions of the IWLM, with their focus very much on the outspoken Mary Kenny of the Irish Press. Addressing his party's annual conference, Taoiseach (prime minister) Liam Cosgrave declared he could match the IWLM's penchant for publicity if he sent his deputies out in 'hot pants'. The conference also heard one delegate call on the party to resist the 'sex-tyranny' represented by Kenny and her IWLM colleagues.<sup>72</sup> Opposition politicians also refuted Kenny's claim that male politicians were out of touch with the real life experiences of women. They did not, David Andrews observed, 'need an organisation led by her [Kenny] to tell us about our obligations to deserted wives, to the unmarried mother, or to the position of the illegitimate child in our society'.<sup>73</sup> There followed a somewhat heated interview of Andrews by Kenny in the Irish Press, in which he stated that he favoured incremental change: while he empathised with the objectives of the IWLM, he wanted 'a proper social security structure brought about in an evolutionary fashion rather than in a revolutionary fashion'. By what he referred to as 'stunting on The Late Late Show' Andrews claimed that Kenny had 'abused [her] position in this country as woman editor of one of our national newspapers and as a member of Women's Lib'. In response, Kenny described Andrews as 'a classical example of the threatened male'.<sup>74</sup>

But, just as quickly as it had appeared, the IWLM disappeared, with a split developing on social class lines in relation to how the movement should respond to Forcible Entry and Occupation Act 1971, which criminalised squatting and exposed a right-left political divide in the movement. As recalled by Nell McCafferty, faced with such division and 'with no hierarchy and no structure, the movement began to collapse under its own weight'.<sup>75</sup> In a similar vein, the new women's pages were coming to an end. It lost one of its most vocal advocates, when, in July 1971, Mary Kenny left the Irish Press to join the London Evening Standard. Tired of Irish Press Group chairman 'harping on' about Kenny, editor Tim Pat Coogan appointed a man, Liam Nolan, as the paper's woman's editor. Nolan, a broadcaster

<sup>67</sup> Irish Times, 15 April 1971.

<sup>68</sup> Nell McCafferty, *Nell* (London: Penguin, 2004), 226.

<sup>69</sup> Irish Times, 24 May 1971.

<sup>70</sup> Irish Independent, 24 May 1971; Irish Press, 24 May 1971.

<sup>71</sup> Irish Times, 24 May 1971.

<sup>72</sup> Irish Times, 18 May, 1971.

<sup>73</sup> Irish Parliamentary Debates (Dáil Éireann), vol. 254 (col. 85–86), 25 May 1971.

<sup>74</sup> Irish Press, 31 May 1971.

<sup>75</sup> McCafferty, Nell, 228–31.

with RTÉ, was, according to Coogan, ‘alert to what was happening in society, but compared with Mary he could justly be termed a conservative [and] his sojourn put an end to Vivion’s fixation with the women’s page’.<sup>76</sup> Over at the Irish Independent, ‘Independent Woman’ continued on its relatively non-offensive way. And, as Brian Girvin has pointed out, opposition to the legalisation of contraception was becoming more organised with entities such as the Irish Family League, Mná na hEireann, and the League of Decency campaigning for the retention of the status quo and utilising organs such as the Irish Catholic newspaper to supply text to readers to enable them to write to politicians to oppose any change in the law.<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless, the Irish Times continued to highlight gender inequality. Prior to the 1973 general election it published an open letter to politicians calling for the introduction of legislation on child maintenance payments and profiled all sixteen female electoral candidates.<sup>78</sup> It also published a questionnaire on social issues and women’s rights that it had distributed to all political parties and subsequently devoted two days of its space to outlining the various parties’ views on equal pay, discrimination in the workplace, the legalisation of contraception and divorce, and the right of women to sit on juries.<sup>79</sup>

## Discussion and conclusion

By the early 1970s other factors than the re-invented women’s pages were keeping the ban on contraception on the political and news agenda. A legal challenge to the ban occurred in the High and Supreme Courts, with the latter finding in December 1973 that while that the ban on the importation and sale contraception was not unconstitutional there existed a constitutional right to marital privacy which also allowed for the use of contraception.<sup>80</sup> Thus began torturous political manoeuvres to give effect to this ruling. In July 1974 the government introduced legislation to legalise contraception for married couples only but then voted the legislation down in parliament. With the imperative to legislate so as to give effect to the Supreme Court ruling still alive, the Irish Times ‘Women First’ page bowed out of existence in October 1974, with its editor, Christina Murphy, observing that women’s affairs had become ‘such a focus of public and political attention’ that they had moved ‘the cosy confines of the women’s page and onto the front page of the newspapers where it belongs’.<sup>81</sup> When, five years later, a new government moved responsibility for resolving the contraception issue from the department of justice to the department of health, the resulting legislation allowed for the availability of contraception for ‘family planning or for adequate medical reasons’ provided the purchaser had a doctor’s prescription.<sup>82</sup> It also removed the ban on the publication and distribution of birth control information. With limited availability of contraception becoming the law of the land, those who opposed birth control denounced the legislation. Addressing parliament, the conservative parliamentarian Oliver J. Flanagan pointed the finger of blame for the liberalisation of the ban directly at the journalists who had re-invented the women’s pages and made contraception and bodily autonomy a central journalistic concern:

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<sup>76</sup> Coogan, Memoir, 148–9.

<sup>77</sup> Brian Girvan (2008), ‘Contraception, moral panic and social change in Ireland, 1969–79’ in Irish Political Studies, 23 (4), 555–76 at 569. Girvin provides a detailed outline of the political response to the demands for legal change.

<sup>78</sup> Irish Times, 29 January 1973; 14 & 26 February 1973.

<sup>79</sup> Irish Times, 7, 27 & 28 February 1973.

<sup>80</sup> The case was taken by Mary McGee who had been advised not to have any more children on health grounds. Having ordered contraceptive products from Britain, the products were seized by the Irish Customs Service who monitored the postal service for same.

<sup>81</sup> Irish Times, 26 October 1974.

<sup>82</sup> Health (Family Planning Act) 1979, section 4.

There has not been any widespread demand for legislation of this kind but it has been the subject of agitation by certain liberal-minded people, certain liberal-minded journalists in the Press, on radio and television, all anxious to help to establish a completely materialistic State without any regard for the need to maintain some reasonable degree of moral standards. When wildcat, crazy, daft journalists put their pens to paper it is to advocate a society in which marriage would be pushed into the background, in which abortion is not to be decried, in which countries are described where economic progress and abortion are portrayed side by side. These liberal-minded journalists think it is part of their modern obligation to pen articles which are evilly designed, an attack on family life and on the family as we have known it.

Haughey's legislation was, according to Flanagan, 'dangerous, ill-conceived, and evilly disposed'. Flanagan also rejected the necessity for the legislation that arose from the Supreme Court judgment and declared that a referendum was the most appropriate mechanism for deciding the issue.<sup>83</sup>

How much the re-invented women's pages or the IWLM contributed to the liberalisation of the law is difficult to quantify. The campaigning of the re-invented women's pages / IWLM and the McGee legal action cannot be viewed in isolation from each other: the former raised and kept the issue of bodily autonomy visible in the public domain as a political and legislative issue while the latter (which may have happened regardless of the new women's pages / IWLM) forced the government to rescind the ban. While, as Mary Kenny noted, the IWLM 'raised awareness among men that women needed to be included in public life' it is important to note that, as Linda Connolly has observed, the IWLM was not particularly coherent in its campaigning; its rise and collapse was partly due to how it emerged in an 'erratic, disorganised and chaotic fashion in 1970-2'.<sup>84</sup> Connolly also noted how the Irish women's movement neither began nor ended with the IWLM. There were antecedent (such as the Irish Housewives Association) and successor entities (such as the Women's Political Association).<sup>85</sup> But what made the IWLM different was its media centrality: as noted by Anne Stopper, its short-lived campaigning power derived from its ease of access to national media outlets, courtesy of the journalists responsible for the women's pages who were instrumental in its formation.<sup>86</sup> It was also extremely vocal and engaged in the first protests that publicly and physically challenged the authority of the political and ecclesiastical power brokers on the issue of bodily autonomy.

In terms of the re-invented women's pages, Mary Maher, founding editor of the *Irish Times*' 'Women First' page, has observed that 'the women's pages were an open forum for the [equality] campaign . . . it was certainly helpful to the cause that those of us organising the crusade had such prominent platforms'.<sup>87</sup> In contrast, prominent contributor to the 'Women First' page, Nell McCafferty, noted that 'outside the women's pages, the media did not take us seriously'.<sup>88</sup> Reviewing the contribution of the women's pages, Olivia O'Leary declared that 'some of the most influential, far-seeing and truthful examples of journalism at its best appeared under women's page headings' and that such journalism represented 'a

<sup>83</sup> Irish Parliamentary Debates (Dáil Éireann), vol. 313 (cols. 1258-70), 5 April 1979.

<sup>84</sup> Mary Kenny, *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland*, 240; Linda Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement: From Revolution to Devolution* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 129.

<sup>85</sup> Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement*, 71-72.

<sup>86</sup> Stopper, *Mondays at Gaj's*, 2.

<sup>87</sup> *Irish Times*, 27 March 2009.

<sup>88</sup> McCafferty, *Nell*, 228.

brave and unapologetic onslaught on social shibboleths of all kinds'.<sup>89</sup> Perhaps the key impact of the re-invented women's pages was their role in making and keeping the issues of bodily autonomy and the bans on contraception and birth control information visible in public discourse and in offering new, feminist, ways of thinking about these issues – all of which was in stark contrast to that which previously pertained. The pages provided a platform for debate and discussion on the existing law; a mechanism for establishing social attitudes (through readers' surveys) towards legalisation; and allowed for the articulation of personal experience in terms of how the ban on contraception impacted on marital life, economic wellbeing, housing conditions, and physical and mental health. They also challenged political inertia on the issue and highlighted that the ecclesiastical ban was not as theologically watertight as some conservative forces would have the public believe. The pages forcibly placed these issues and the new way of analysing them at the heart of the media and political agenda with a stubborn refusal to let the issue drop into the obscurity it had previously enjoyed when the issue of contraception was discussed only in the context of Catholic Church teaching, literary censorship or population debates.

Ultimately, this coverage of contraception as a legislative, political and health issue rather than as an unquestionable moral issue had real impact. Such arguments were crucial components of the successful legal action against the ban in 1973 and it is arguable that the reframing of the issue in the media-sphere (and thus public consciousness) facilitated the migration of governmental responsibility for contraception from the department of justice to the department of health which in turn allowed the government flexibility in resolving the issue, albeit in a limited manner. More broadly, the pages altered the form and structure of women's journalism. In 1979 the national broadcaster belatedly initiated a radio show, 'Women Today' that continued the coverage of issues pioneered by the women's pages.<sup>90</sup> But the ethos of the re-invented women's pages also lived on in print. With abortion and divorce dominating the social affairs agenda from the early 1980s onward, journalists such as Nell McCafferty, Mary Holland, Pat Brennan, Mary Cummins, and Nuala O'Faolain continued to examine the lived experiences rather than the idealised existence of Irish women, though this time in their publications' news pages.

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<sup>89</sup> *Irish Times*, 30 September 1974.

<sup>90</sup> See Betty Purcell, *Inside RTE: A Memoir* (Dublin: New Island, 2014).