

A Cross-Cultural Experience: Women's Roles in Irish Society

Seeing what people live like across the world is quite an experience. Sitting on the plane for the very first time going to Ireland, thoughts were racing through my head: what are people like, what do they do in life, what does society say about them? I arrived to find that much contrary to what I had conjured up in my mind, life was not all so different there than here in America.

During my trip I realized just how important of a role that women played in Irish society. This riled up my curiosity about why women seemed to be valued so highly in this little country. I questioned whether American society had the same respect for the female half of its population. I came home and the wheels were spinning in my head and I seemed to notice more things, things I always took for advantage about women in the United States. We too, have our benefits and strong points just as the Emerald Isle women do. Things are just different, but somehow the same. These details about women's lives in these two countries divided by an ocean intrigued me to further advance my curiosity into research, which is exactly why I returned to Ireland for the summer of 2004; for my cross-cultural experience of women's' roles in society.

Because I had the advantage of already have lived in Ireland for a year and been back for a visit, I myself already had a role in Irish life. I was living with the same family, spending time with many of the same friends I had before, and working two very different jobs with different women. It was very interesting to see through this different perspective rather than just as an outsider tourist. I made some really intense relationships, which helped me a lot when I wanted to research about women's lives in Ireland. Who better to know these things than the Irish women I knew?

The observations I have made and the research I have done is in accordance with those I have spoken to and the online articles that I have read. These may be generalizations to some, but this is what I have encountered as the truth through my resources and observations.

The role of mother is by far the most important for that of Irish women. Families depend on their mothers to help keep structure remaining and functioning. In most families, there is a traditional sense, meaning that the mothers are responsible for cooking, cleaning, laundry, and shopping to provide for the family. Of course this is not true for all families, but is the most obvious arrangement.

Children, including sons, have very strong relationships with their mothers. They depend on them physically and emotionally. I feel that the bond between sons and mothers is much stronger than that in America. This strong bond lasts all throughout life. Even as adults with families of their own, sons feel responsibility to care for their parents. Children live at home for much longer in their lives than children here. There does not seem to be as much of a rush to move out of “the parents’ house” as we see in our Western culture. By the time a daughter or son is eighteen they are considered to be independent thinkers and families tend to respect them as such, even if they are still living at home. This, I believe leads to a healthy relationship without extra parental dominance.

A daughter, however, is a really interesting role. I have found that daughters are companions to their mothers with an even stronger relationship than their brothers. Because they are women though, they are also expected to play a large part in domestic

issues such as cooking dinner, doing dishes, and cleaning. In my experience I have found very few young men who even know how to use dishwashers or washing machines.

On one hand, it is not degrading or thought of as being unsuccessful for a woman to be a “housewife” and in fact, because of the demanding effort required to do this, it is very respectable. On the other hand, women are incredibly involved in the work force and even in politics. Some of the most successful people in Ireland are women.

In the very past of Ireland women were not seen as equals, especially in terms of employment and earnings. The Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) in 1971 wrote a manifest demanding changes for women, especially working class women. These demands included an equal rights law being passed; equal pay requirement; removal of a marriage bar to female workers; justice for widows, single mothers, and deserted wives; equal education opportunities for women; the right to contraception; and women being responsible for one family in one house. Of course these demands did not make things better all of a sudden, and in fact some major trouble was caused making things worse instead of better. But it did bring out attention to women’s rights which was something that had been ignored in the past (Horgan, 2001).

There was uproar over the ideas of having contraception and rights for mothers who were single. This was considered as going against the Catholic Church, which is still running the government for Ireland. Providing even minute benefits to single mothers was thought of as “encouraging immorality”. Because of opposing views of the members, the WLM split a few years after it formed. In 1974 Irish Women United was founded, but mostly supported by socialists. In 1976 there was a group called CAP (Contraception Action Programme) which was made up of both women and men and they illegally sold

methods of birth control. It was not until just 1979 that the Minister of Health in Ireland introduced a bill trying to make contraception legal. He made an outstanding point that this was not just a women's rights issue, but "an Irish solution to an Irish problem." It was finally 1985 before it was legal for people over eighteen years old to buy and use contraception (Horgan, 2001).

In the work force women are now and have been since the liberation working many jobs that had once been reserved for just working men. However, there is still a battle over wage earning in Ireland much as there is in America presently. The most recent information regarding the topic I could find online described that on the average women made approximately 73% of men's wages on average. In 1997, weekly earnings for industrial women were about equal to 65% of men's earnings; women with white collar jobs made only about 72% of what their male counterparts were making; and women with senior management positions averaged at about 83% of what men were making with their same jobs. It is thought that a major reason behind this is because women had an average of many less hours worked outside the home. The hours they spent working inside the house and the number of dependent children was never really taken into account (Horgan, 2001).

As similar in America, a situation has arisen for women in Ireland. They are no longer solely responsible for the upkeep of the home, family, and children. They are also expected to in the work force if possible. There is continual stress on women to find their places in society. This struggle also exists in America where the ideals of women are as varied as the people living here.

The Irish Constitution defines that women and men are different beings with different roles in society. It has a concept of separated sex roles. There is “special recognition” towards women who are mothers and wives. But those women who are neither married or have children also a “social function that is not such as to deprive them of rights enjoyed by men or to exempt them from duties imposed on men” (Kay, 2002).

Article 41 in the Irish Constitution is very important to the women of Ireland. Ireland recognizes that the family is “the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society” and that they ensure that above all Ireland will “protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State” (“Bunreacht Na hÉireann”, 1999). In easy terms this means that Ireland sees the family’s construction as an essential part of the structure of the society.

The Article also explains that “the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved” and that they will “ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home” (“Bunreacht Na hÉireann”, 1999). This implies that women are responsible for the family and that by being in the household mothers provide a service of which common good could not exist without. It also states that mothers will never be required to work merely because of financial constraints because this could lead to the neglect of the family. Women are provided with grants of money to ensure that they are able to provide for their families.

This is definitely much different than American society. There are different ways to look at this legislation. Some may see it as a discrimination against women and

assigning the role of motherhood to a woman is unfair and unjust. However, the majority of women in Ireland are in favor of this type of legislation. It really proves just how important women are to society. The Constitution even says that society would basically fall apart if it did not have the support of the mothers in the country. I found this very interesting to think about.

Things for women have definitely changed within the last years. While there is always room for improvement, women have made much progress towards equal rights. As Mary Robinson, past Ireland president and current Irish political leader said in reference towards Irish society, “A culture is not an abstract thing. It is a living, evolving process. The aim is to push beyond standard-setting and asserting human rights to make those standards a living reality for people everywhere” (“Creative quotations”, 2004).

Mary Robinson was the first woman president in Ireland. She was in office from 1990 to 1997 and is still very politically active. She was replaced by another woman president Mary McAleese who is still the current president and has recently gone uncontested in the presidential race. Mary Robinson did so much for Irish women. Her main cause was for women’s rights to equality and was involved with issues such as liberalizing divorce laws (“Biographical sketch, 2003). She also discussed the possibility of legalizing abortion in Ireland and promoted the use of contraceptives.

If not impressive enough for a country to have a woman president, Mary Robinson has been one of the very most popular and successful political leaders in Ireland. This is considered true by women and men alike. She was responsible for bringing into light women’s issues as important political concepts. She exclaimed in her

inaugural address, “I was elected by the women of Ireland, who instead of rocking the cradle, rocked the system” (“Creative quotations”, 2004).

In 2000 the Equal Status Act was passed which banned gender discrimination in the provision of goods and services. Also through the Northern Ireland Peace Agreement in the mid 1990s gave equal opportunity “in all social and economic activity, regardless of...gender and...the right of women to full and equal political participation” (Kay, 2002).

In 2002, the EU (European Union) which includes Ireland, extended the provisions of the 1976 Directive on workplace equality. This new Directive will take force in 2005. This newly amended Directive defines direct and indirect discrimination of women in the workplace. It contains a new article that states that harassment because of sex as well as sexual harassment are both classified as discrimination. There are new rules ensuring the enforcement of this and removing any upper limits on compensation or reparation. This Directive also gave Ireland as well as the other member countries the responsibility of making equal opportunity agencies. It gave provisional direction to employers how to create “equality plans” and it also made more job safeguards for new parents (both women and men) looking for time off to care for a newborn (EU, 2002).

Just recently on the 19th of January this year, 2004, there was a Presentation of Irish Presidency Programme to Women’s Rights and Equal Opportunities Committee of the European Parliament in Brussels, Belgium, the headquarters for the EU. At this program, there was a meeting of ministers in the European Parliament Policy areas of employment, social policy, and health and consumer affairs. At this event new guidelines and existing provisions were discussed and extended to further equalize women in the

European Union. There was special attention in the areas of women in the workplace and in social life. The details of this event are still incoming but it is hopeful that the results will be bringing about more equality towards women (“Latest News”, 2004).

Women have a great deal of respect in Ireland. As seen, they are considered to be very important in the upkeep of society as a whole. This may be a result of the liberal attitude of this European island. Europeans tend to be much more liberal than Americans who are considered to be very conservative. The media is very liberal and very accessible to everyone. It is nearly a daily commonality to see women’s naked bodies in the newspapers. These images are usually in newspapers known as tabloids, but are read by nearly everyone I have ever met there. There does not seem to be discomfort with Irish women when they see their husbands, sons, boyfriends, brothers, etc. seeing naked female figures. This is definitely something I as an American have a hard time coming to terms with. But somehow this is not seen as disrespectful in society. Women still are treated with a great deal of respect. This seems to be a minute detail in the large scheme of things.

After spending so much time with people in Ireland one can tell by the actions and looks of the people that self confidence is very important to individuals. There is much less stress on body image and style than in America. However, things are not perfect. People are influenced greatly by American media which throws out images of beauty quicker than anything. While these images are dominant in some people’s lives, in general, especially with women there is less stress to be thin and “model beautiful” than there is in many other societies.

Women seem to be more comfortable with their bodies in Ireland, which is common in Europe. In my experience a woman is looked at equally, if not more, for her intelligence and personality than her looks and appearance. I have never felt so confident or comfortable with myself than when I am in Ireland. I do not notice or think of things like weight loss or make-up application. Granted, those are not major concerns of mine in America, but I know that I am not nearly as conscious of petty details as I would be in America. This has to do with image and also life in general. I thought maybe this was just a personal experience for me, but I have heard the very same thoughts from many Americans who have visited and lived in Ireland. It is easy to be influenced by the laid back attitude of people in Ireland.

As the Irish like to say instead of basing their social lives around their work lives they base their work lives around their family and social lives. Family is of prime importance. Friends are also very important. People, especially younger generations spend a great deal of their time socializing with friends and new acquaintances. The social scene usually consists of a pub or a friend's house. Pubs are interesting because as many women come to them as men, which does not seem to fit with the stereotype many people connect with Ireland. Pubs are a gathering place, whether drinking or not. It is a place where many men and women can be themselves and enjoy life with their friends.

Ireland is a beautiful place. It is the home to really amazing people. In many aspects, Ireland is much like America. However, there are many different attitudes and beliefs about women and their roles in society, as discussed in this research project. There is a lot that Americans can learn from Irish society and I could not be more grateful than I am to be able to have had the opportunity to really immerse myself in another country's

culture and learn about the people in first-hand experience. The most important thing that I have learned from traveling to Ireland is that the world is a small place. All people are really the same deep down just with different perspectives and ideas. We need to break down cultural barriers and learn from those all around us.

Works Cited

“Biographical sketch: Mary Robinson.” (2003). Retrieved October 16, 2004, from World

Wide Web site http://www.rmwc.edu/buck/robinson_2003.asp

“Bunreacht Na hÉireann: Constitution of Ireland.” (posted copy 1999, original copy

1937). Retrieved October 16, 2004, from World Wide Web site

<http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/upload/publications/297.htm>

“Creative quotations.” (2004). Retrieved October 16, 2004, from World Wide Web site

<http://www.creativequotations.com>

“Latest News.” (2004). Retrieved October 20, 2004, from World Wide Web site

<http://www.eu2004.ie>

EU Politix. (2002). Retrieved October 20, 2004, from World Wide Web site

<http://www.eupolitix.com>

Horgan, G. (2001). Changing women’s lives in Ireland. *International Socialism Journal*

(91). Retrieved October 17, 2004, from World Wide Web site

<http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/isj91/horgan.htm>

Kay, J. (2002). Ireland. Retrieved October 13, 2004, from World Wide Web site

http://womenslinkworldwide.org/co_eur_ireland.html