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Title	Women in Irish society: Introduction
Author(s)	Byrne, Anne; Leonard, Madeleine
Publication Date	1997
Publication Information	Byrne, Anne, & Leonard, Madeleine. (1997). Women in Irish Society: introduction In Anne Byrne & Madeleine Leonard (Eds.), Women and Irish society: a sociological reader. Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications.
Publisher	Beyond the Pale Publications
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/16127

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Introduction

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The growing importance of gender in sociology and the growth of Women's Studies courses and scholarship in community, third-level and continuing education in Ireland prompted us to bring together gender-based social science research in a single text. Examining gender relations enhances our knowledge of the social. Using this knowledge, we are aware that inequality is not a natural state, but a social product. Feminists have described and theorised about social relations and practices which dominate, shape and constrain women's lives. Gender relations are based on the understanding that men have greater economic, social and productive power than women. The male gender is considered dominant, the female gender subordinate and oppressive gender relations are both recreated and maintained when we continue to observe these forms. Feminist theorising and the facts of gender inequality continue to be documented in the social sciences and this text is part of that endeavour. Gender is a key concept for feminist social scientists; and in this text we examine the gendered character of social relations, institutions, structures, practices and discourses. Moreover, gender is considered to be problematic; particularly as inequality can be one of the consequences of gender relations. However, as gender is considered to be a social product by many theorists, it is believed that oppressive gender relations can be altered.

Women and Irish Society

The contributors in this text use gender as an organising category in their analyses; theorise on the basis of women's experiences of oppressive social relations; seek to examine the relationship between the researcher, the research participants and the research process; make visible hidden aspects of women's lives and identify alternative strategies which empower women to act as agents of social reform. These practices are considered to be part of the process of doing feminist research. A standard criticism of social science research is that

in the main it has been concerned with those areas of life which men have found problematic. Research topics and questions have tended to be based on only those aspects of social life which are apparent or important to men. It has also been assumed that women's concerns about and interests in social relations are similar to men's. Feminist social scientists reject this assumption and stress the importance of identifying those questions which emerge from women's often problematic and difficult experiences of the world. Trying to explain and understand the human condition only from the viewpoint of a male experience leads to an incomplete and even 'perverse understanding of social life' (Harding, 1987). Feminist research methodologies have now moved on from simply 'adding in' women to the research topic. It can be argued that a new sociological paradigm has been created and feminist methodologies have contributed to changing the practice and process of doing research. Feminist sociologists have criticised existing sociological theories and methodologies, discovered new research areas, emphasised interdisciplinary approaches in research and writing, and politicised the research process (see Harding, 1987, Wallace, 1989). Feminist social science research is research for the emancipation of women rather than merely research on women.

The text reflects a combination of research methodologies, both qualitative and quantitative. The range of methods include ethnography, in-depth interviews, participant observation, large scale surveys and longitudinal studies. Census and statistical data, archival material, case study material, published and unpublished documents, recorded interviews, and existing research publications are all used in innovative and creative ways to explore aspects of women's lives heretofore little known and unacknowledged. Women's support and activist groups contributed to the research, both as participants and researchers, as well as many individual women committed to making visible the paucity of scholarship on women's lives in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. Contributors draw on feminist theorising to make sense of their data; for example authors make use of feminist poststructuralist critiques to understand the regulation of sexuality among young women or feminist structural arguments to examine the impact of modernisation on equality issues. Feminist critiques of Irish society, North and South, of the prevalence of patriarchal practices in the welfare state, in the Catholic Church and in the family are recurrent elements of many of the analyses. However, the enduring and persistent character of inequality permeates all of the research findings. Differences between women are revealed, showing up the heterogeneity of the category 'woman'. The research in this text also exposes, not only inequality and differences connected to gender, but those also associated with sexual orientation, intellectual and physical abilities, ethnic group membership and economic class. Bringing

together the evidence of inequality in Irish society and making visible the hidden aspects of women's lives are significant elements of this text.

The development and expansion of Women's Studies programmes in Ireland also prompted us to bring together social science research on women's lives. As teachers of Women's Studies, we realised the need for a text based on Irish society which would add a comparative dimension to courses which use UK, European or US source material. We are also aware of the exponential growth of feminist scholarship in Ireland, particularly within social science and we felt a text drawing this scholarship together was required. In addition, bringing together research from both parts of Ireland, North and South, allowed us to view the effects of gender in two very different societies. The text is based on a call for papers, to which we received an immense response — much more than we first anticipated. The sections represent current areas of Irish social science scholarship in Women's Studies; education, work, citizenship and the welfare state, mental health, reproduction, motherhood, violence, rurality, power and politics. Disability, sexuality and the negotiation of power within households are also treated in the section on 'hidden lives'. But while these contributions continue to advance our explorations of inequality and place feminist research firmly on the Irish sociological agenda, there are of course absences — absences which we hope will be filled in the future by another volume.

Irish sociology began to pay attention to 'the social differences between men and women' with the publication of *Gender in Irish Society* (Curtin, C, Jackson, P, O'Connor, B. (eds.), 1987). This was preceded by two Women's Studies publications in 1986 — *Women in Ireland: Voices of Change*, (Beale, J.) and *Personally Speaking: Women's Thoughts on Women's Issues* (Steiner-Scott, L. (ed.)) — both of which explore changes in Irish society through the eyes and voices of women. These and other publications have helped to mark and push out the boundaries of gender-based research so that additional dimensions of inequality can be unravelled and vital connections made between scholarship and activism (see for example Smyth, A. (ed.), 1993 *Irish Women's Studies Reader*; contributions to Clancy, P, Drudy, S, Lynch, K, O'Dowd, L. (eds.) 1995 *Irish Society: Sociological Perspectives*, UCG *Women's Studies Centre Review*, Vol. 1-4, 1992-1996, Lentin, R. (ed.) 1995-1996 *In from the Shadows: UL Women's Studies Collection* Vol. 1-2, *Irish Journal of Feminist Studies*, 1996). In a survey of feminist research in Ireland, Lentin (1993) however, laments the lack of a feminist perspective in most gender-based sociological research as well as the dearth of 'empirical data to make visible the material realities of Irish women's lives'. It is the editors' aspiration that this challenge has been at least partially met with the publication of this text. Aspects of Irish social, political and cultural systems are revealed in the volume and we hope that *Women and Irish Society: A Sociological Reader* will be useful to students

in higher and adult education as well as the those interested in understanding women's lives in Irish society at the end of the twentieth century. The research contained within this volume is inspired by the women's movement and constructed from feminist perspectives. In exposing social, economic and political inequalities, it promotes the liberation and emancipation of women.

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