

FOUR

EQUALITY AND DIFFERENCE

Held in Mao's Café on International Women's Day,
March 8, 1998.

Main Issues

How do we increase equality while valuing difference?
Is equality a zero-sum game: is women's gain men's loss?

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EQUALITY AND DIFFERENCE

The session opened with two poems read by Ann Clune

The first is by Rita Ann Higgins

Some people know what it is like
to be called a cunt in front of their children
to be short for the rent
to be short for the light
to be short for school books
to wait in Community Welfare waiting rooms full of smoke
to wait two years to have a tooth looked at
to wait another two years to have a tooth out (the same tooth)
to be half strangled by your varicose veins, but you're 198th on the list
to talk into a banana on an S.E.S. scheme
to talk into a banana in an S.E.S. dream
to be out of work
to be out of money
to be out of fashion
to be out of friends
to be in for the Vincent de Paul man
to be in space for the milk man
(sorry, mammy isn't in today she's gone to Mars for the weekend)
to be in Puerto Rico this week for the blanket man
to be in Puerto Rico next week for the blanket man
to be dead for the coal man
(sorry, mammy passed away in her sleep, overdose of coal in the tea-pot)
to be in hospital unconscious for the rent man (St Jude's ward 4th floor)
to be second hand
to be second class

to be no class
to be looked down on
to be walked on
to be pissed on
to be shat on
– and other people don't.

The second poem was
The Two Gretels by Robin Morgan

The two Gretels were exploring the forest.
Hansel was home
sending up flares.

Sometimes one Gretel got afraid.
She said to the other Gretel,
'I think I'm afraid'.
'Of course we are', Gretel replied.

Sometimes the other Gretel whispered
with a shiver,
'You think we should turn back?'
To which her sister Gretel answered,
'We can't, we forgot the breadcrumbs'.

So they went forward
because
they simply couldn't imagine the way back.

And eventually, they found the Gingerbread House,
and the Witch, who was really, they discovered,
the Great Good Mother Goddess,
and they all lived happily ever after.

The Moral of this story is:
Those who would have the whole loaf,
let alone the House,
had better throw away their breadcrumbs.

Four: Equality and Difference

Paper presented by Kathleen Lynch

In this paper I will briefly document the different ways in which equality has been interpreted in intellectual and political thought. The paper will focus especially on liberalism and its influence on the debate about equality, and the left. It will stress the limitations of liberal conceptions of equality and the need to develop a radical egalitarian politics which incorporates a concern for basic equal rights, equality of respect and economic and political equality.

What is meant by Equality?

Before examining the different strands of intellectual thought in relation to equality and where they lead us, the first question one has to address is what type of equality are we talking about. In other words, we must answer the question, Equality of What? As equality is about our relationships with other people, we then must ask, Equality between whom?

There are three basic answers to the first question and many sub-answers. We can focus on:

- 1 Equalising status (respect) for different groups and individuals;
- 2 Equalising power between different groups and individuals;
- 3 Equalising wealth and income between different groups and individuals.

In any one of these fields there are of course enormous differences in perspective. Moreover, certain intellectual traditions focus much more strongly on some rather than others. Socialism has traditionally focused on economic equality (3) and on issues of distribution and production. Many feminists (and ethnic, religious, gay and lesbian and other minorities, including disabled people) have felt however, that the exclusive concern with issues of distribution have resulted in the neglect of differences. The assumption has been that if existing 'goods' (in the generic sense of that term) are distributed equally in society, that is sufficient. There has not been traditionally a questioning of either the politics or the substance of the goods themselves.

Women and minority groups have, however, noted that distribution is not sufficient, not least because often what is distributed is problematic in its very essence. For example, education. The total preoccupation with distributing education equally in society (and this is of course of fundamental importance) has meant that the content of schooling, its curriculum, organisation, hierarchical relations with the system itself, have not been called into question. Yet these are part of the process that produces inequality in the first place. The distributive model does not focus on the internal dynamics of institutions and systems themselves. It does not problematise the substance of the 'good', yet this needs to be problematised. While it is important that women or disabled people are in politics or have equal access to the law, this is not enough: those who argue from a 'difference' and 'equality of respect' perspective in particular would suggest that getting equal participation is not enough if what women and men are participating in is itself problematic. Within the political arena, for example, they would point to the weaknesses of representative democracy in highly stratified hierarchical societies. Within such systems, the very way politics itself operates can be anti-egalitarian as it does not encourage participatory forms of democracy.

While it is clear that power is not an all or nothing phenomenon which some possess and others do not; nonetheless, those who are critical of the distributive model of justice and equality would argue that there has been insufficient attention given to equalising the participation of marginalised groups in power and decision-making. Anne Phillips in her book *The Politics of Presence* (1995) addresses the whole issue of who can speak, and who has a right to name the world, or claim to name it on behalf of others. For too long, marginalised groups have had their problems and concerns named for them by those who are not present to their problems: professionals speaking on behalf of 'disabled people'; 'the poor'; middle-class women claiming to represent all women; even the trade unions claiming the right to name the problems of the unemployed.

What is at issue therefore is not an abandonment of the distributive model of justice for a difference model, but rather the complementing of one with the other.

There are basically three strands of political thought in relation to Equality (Baker, 1998).

Basic equality

First there is the idea of basic equality. This is the view that is widely held in many countries that all people are equal in dignity and worth, the view that everyone is equally deserving of respect as a human persons. The reality is that this view of equality can and does accommodate widely different views of equality, including the

most minimalist views which involve recognition that all human beings have basic needs for food, clothing, shelter and a right to bodily integrity, but which do not go much beyond this. It is basically an ideology prohibiting basic human rights abuses (arguing freedom from rather than freedom to). This is important in and of itself not least in a world order in which torture, rape and genocide are widely practised. Without basic equality it is impossible to justify giving each person an equal right to an equal life with other people. Racist, ethnic, sexual or social supremacy is the opposite to basic equality, that is to say, the belief that certain people are 'superior to others' and deserving of greater respect because of some social, religious, ethnic or other designation.

The concept of basic equality is presupposed by other models of equality.

Liberal views of equality

Liberal thinking presupposes basic equality and is centrally concerned with distribution: it is focused on distributing burdens and benefits, including inequalities, fairly in society.

What comprises the liberal view of equality is not simple. There are strong (radical) forms of liberalism, which espouse legislative and other policy provisions to promote equality of participation, and even equality of outcome in certain cases. There are also weaker forms of liberalism which do not go far beyond equal formal rights. One of the defining features of liberalism is the assumption that major inequalities in terms of income and wealth especially, but also in terms of power and status, will always exist.

For me the great weakness of liberal views of equality is that they do not challenge the great hierarchies (and inevitably therefore the patriarchies) of power and wealth in society. The reason they do not challenge these is because liberalism, particularly in the European context, is historically grounded in the problems of the bourgeoisie. Freedom is prioritised over economic equality especially, and hierarchies are allowed to persist in the name of freedom. As Rawls (1971, p28) says: "Justice denies that the loss of freedom of some is made right by a greater good shared by others".

To understand liberalism, one needs to understand where it has come from historically. It emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth century in opposition to the old feudal order and aligned with the emerging bourgeois order (Halls, 1986, p39). The antagonism which led to the emergence of liberalism was essentially one within the elites of society; an antagonism between the old feudal lords and the champions of free trade, the merchant classes. Up to the eighteenth century, privileges and powers had been legally defined in the interests of the feudal estates.

"The roturier was not merely a social inferior, but the victim of economic disabilities imposed by law. The noble by inheritance or purchase did not merely possess a title he was the owner of profitable immunities. The special characteristic of the class system in France and Germany had been, in fact, that inequality was not primarily economic, but juristic, and that, in spite of gross disparities of wealth, it rested on difference, not merely of income, but of legal status" (Tawney, 1964, pp92-93).

Since the major inequalities which the bourgeoisie experienced were legal rather than economic the focus of their interest was juristic rather than economic.

"A distinction was drawn between *égalité de droit* and *égalité de fait*, between formal or legal equality and practical or economic equality. The primary aim of reformers was the achievement of the first, since, once the first was established, the second, in so far as it was desirable, would, it was thought, establish itself" (as above, pp94-95).

Focus on Juristic Forms of Equality

The primary focus is on ensuring equal formal rights and equality of access to basic goods and services in education, employment, health, etc, by removing all formal and informal barriers to entry and participation. Liberal egalitarians are fundamentally concerned with basic civic and political rights, including equality before the law, protection from arbitrary arrest and detention, right to a fair trial, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion etc. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights is a fundamentally liberal document, as is the Declaration of Human Rights.

Liberal reformers have been centrally concerned, therefore, with ensuring that people are equal in both legal and quasi-legal terms. The interest is in formal, legalistic equality rather than substantive, economic equality. Liberalism is primarily concerned with protecting equal formal rights and ensuring equality of access: "once the rules governing admissions to places of education, appointments to jobs and promotions are fair, a society is an equal opportunity society", (O'Neill, 1977, p179). Unequal results are justified if everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.

Liberals also believe that equal opportunity is to be achieved by maximising the economic and political liberty of the citizen. They have espoused the cause of an open meritocratic society where those with intelligence and ambition (IQ+Effort) can rise to the top. Liberty is defined therefore in a negative way – it is defined as freedom from constraint so that one can be free to compete. The law is there to regulate between competing contenders "without questioning or interfering with the basic dispositions of wealth and power in society" (Hall, 1986, p42).

And the logic of liberalism was correct. If legal barriers were removed between those elites in society who had similar resources in terms of wealth and power, then equal opportunities was realisable for the disadvantaged group (the new bourgeoisie). Both groups could then compete equally as they had access to equal resources. The problem is however, that the conditions which operated for the bourgeoisie vis-à-vis the feudal lords do not operate in the relations between most dominant and subordinate groups in contemporary European society. Juristic inequalities are generally of far less significance than economic inequalities or power inequalities. While recognising that there are groups for whom formal equality before the law is still a problem, groups such as the unemployed, women or disabled people are often more disadvantaged in Western European societies by their lack of resources rather than by the legal barriers to their advancement.

Liberals have, however, moved beyond a simple preoccupation with equality of access and equal formal rights (with increasing pressure from marginalised groups such as women, disabled people and ethnic and racial minorities) and supported fair equal opportunities policies as opposed to just formal equal opportunities. The principle of fair equality of opportunity refers to when positions are to be not only open in a formal sense, but that all should have a fair chance to attain them (Rawls, 1971, p73). Thus liberal educationalists have supported policies which enable and encourage equal participation in education for marginalised groups. With equal participation, the aim is to ensure that marginalised groups will be able to participate on equal terms with other groups once they enter the system. However, while this facilitates success it does not guarantee it. Equality of outcome, which would ensure equal rates of success for marginalised groups within the different systems of education, via such procedures as quotas or preferential appointments, is less likely to be part of the liberal agenda. Equality of condition which would be concerned with ensuring that there was equality in the economic and political living conditions of all members of society is clearly not part of the liberal agenda.

Both the weak and the strong versions of liberal equal opportunities policies fit in comfortably with the interests of the dominant educational, economic and social order. In many respects they legitimate existing structured inequality while offering selective mobility into elite positions for those who are selected out. The fact remains that in a highly unequal society, someone has to occupy the subordinate positions even if the identity of those occupying them may change from white to black, from male to female or from citizen to migrant worker.

Women and Liberalism

Liberal views of equality have dominated political thought. Getting women into the same positions as men and getting them represented within senior levels of the

hierarchy at the same rate as men, is often the ultimate measure of liberal achievement. The aim is to distribute inequalities fairly across the gender groups.

The inevitable outcome of greater liberal equality policies - focused on equal access, participation, and even outcome - is that only the relatively advantaged can succeed from the disadvantaged groups. If society remains stratified and hierarchical, only a handful of those from subordinate groups can become socially mobile; limited spaces and resistance of existing elites is a core issue here.

What is happening to women is no different to what has happened within the class structure for a number of years: the secure working class, relatively better off, have become more socially mobile. The more marginalised working class, the unskilled workers, have not altered their educational opportunities to any great extent. Liberal equality policies have had the same outcome in class terms and in gender terms. There has been a tiny trickle of social mobility - and the trickle is seen as a flood!

The same has happened in the disability movement, albeit to a very limited degree, and in the black movements in the US. Within the disability movement here, it is also relatively advantaged disabled people who are most visible, advantaged in terms of their education, or even by the nature of their impairment, or by their gender.

One of my contentions here today is that what passes for left-wing politics, both in socialist and in feminist terms, in Ireland, is often a form of liberalism. Getting women into the same positions as men, getting equal to men in terms of their rates of participation in senior positions in politics, in the labour market, in education etc, are valuable goals in themselves. However the history of these types of policies in terms of other social groups (most especially low income working class groups) shows that they do not result in a landslide shift in terms of opportunity for the target group over time. Moreover, they also benefit the relatively advantaged within the working class. For example, Clancy's studies (1982, 1988 and 1995) on social class differences in rates of participation in higher education shows that it is the skilled working class who have advanced most. The children of unskilled and semi-skilled workers (and the unemployed) have remained very marginalised within education.

There is also an international study of the outcome of equal opportunities policies in education for working class groups in 13 different countries (over a 40 year period) which shows that liberal equal opportunities in education have not altered the social class-related advantages in society (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993). The middle classes have maintained their relative advantages in most countries. The only two countries in which the pattern of class disadvantage in education declined significantly and consistently over the last 40-odd years are Sweden and, but to a lesser degree, the Netherlands.

The success of these countries in breaking the cycle of disadvantage has been attributed to the fact that both countries, but especially Sweden, enacted social and economic policies which equalised the life chances of different social strata (Jonsson, 1993; De Graaf and Ganzeboom, 1993). There was in effect a move towards equality of condition which made equality of access and participation possible. "In sum, these two deviant cases suggest that long-term commitments to socio-economic equality may lead to an equalisation of educational opportunities between classes and socio-economic strata" (Blossfeld and Shavit, 1993, p19).

My argument here is that one cannot have substantive forms of gender equality for all classes of women (or for all disabled people, ethnic minorities, etc) without greater economic equality and political equality, and equality of respect for difference. I am particularly concerned about economic equality at present, simply because I think it is extremely difficult for many marginalised groups to name their differences, to get their voices heard in the public arena or to get a place at the negotiation table without equality of resources.

We know from the limited research available that a relatively small number of people in Ireland control and own most of the productive wealth. Yet, there has been no serious debate for example, about wealth differentials, or the gendered as well as the classed character of these. One reason undoubtedly is because there has been no proper study of wealth. Brian Nolan's analysis of *The Wealth of Irish Households in 1991* noted that much of the wealth held by upper income groups is not reported in surveys such as the ESRI one on income distribution (1987). He does report however, that only 5% of the population own unincorporated businesses (owned and run by the self-employed) and 1% of the population own 60% of this type of business wealth (Nolan, 1991, p52). Farm land is more widely dispersed in terms of ownership, although it is becoming increasingly concentrated in the last two decades. In all 25% of people in Ireland own some farm land, however, the top 5% of farm owners own two-thirds of all farm land (Nolan, 1991, p46).

Of course we know that 95% of farm holders are men: unfortunately it is not clear from the data what proportion of business holders are men, but given the evidence from the Labour Force Survey (1997: Table 20) that 82% of employers are men, then it is highly likely that most business wealth is disproportionately owned by men.

We cannot get away therefore from the gendered nature of capital ownership, nor from the gendered nature of the low wage and the no wage economies.

Tables/...

**Part-time workers: Labour Force Surveys, 1990, 1993, 1995, 1997
(persons over 15 years)**

Year	1990	1993	1995	1997
Total paid labour force				
Number part-time	92,500	127,500	153,900	169,900
% part-time	7.0	9.1	10.5	11.0
Number of Women part-time	—	91,300	110,500	124,600
% of part-time workers who are women	—	65.1	71.8	73.3

Source: Labour Force Surveys 1995 (Table 28) and 1997 (Table 27a & c)

In 1997, there were 512,800 women in employment (and 825,600 men). Of the women who were working, over half (271,800) were employed in three of the lowest paying sectors of the economy, services, shop and bar work and clerical work (Labour Force Survey (LFS), 1997: Table 20).

There were 588,000 women working full-time at home in 1997 (a 5% drop from 1995) but they still represent 98% of home workers (Labour Force Survey, 1995: Table 11 and Labour Force Survey, 1997: Table 10).

Earnings 1993

£7.07 - male hourly rate in industry - manufacturing

£4.94 - female hourly rate in industry - manufacturing

Women are 30% below male hourly rate

Women's average industrial earnings as a % of men's

1971 - 56.0%

1980 - 68.4%

1993 - 69.0%

1995 - 69.8%

Source: National Women's Council of Ireland

What needs to be challenged is the myth of the meritocratic ideology; that is, that those who get to the top in terms of wealth, power and incomes are necessarily more able and talented than others, and/or that they deserve to be highly paid. I know that the idea of eliminating the growing income differentials which exist in our society is not a popular idea, but it is one which is essential for the promotion of any substantive form of equality. As long as income differentials continue, then relatively well-organised workers, politically powerful and/or well-resourced workers can command incomes which are more related to their power than to their contribution to society. Wages are not just determined by the 'market'; certain workers are highly rewarded because of their power and influence and/or because of monopolies which they exercise over particular forms of work. We must challenge the idea of highly differentiated incomes as without it, those at the lowest end of the wage ladder, no matter what their gender, are socially excluded from equal participation in society.

I am in favour of women being equally represented in senior posts in the trade union movement, in politics and in the economy. Reserving places may in fact be the only realistic way to overcome historical discriminations (I have supported this principle for example within higher education for low-income working class students who simply cannot compete for places with students who are significantly more advantaged than themselves through grinds, private schooling, etc). However, there is a serious danger with this mode of thinking in the long term. It distracts from the fact that the labour force is class stratified, that there are people who are carers at home who are not paid at all or are paid very little; and that many women and men will have to occupy low paid, part-time and casual positions in any stratified system. Changes in the gender faces of those on top of the hierarchies does not eliminate the hierarchies. In fact, it may indeed solidify them as these new faces are used to legitimate the status quo. It will be claimed that the job of equality is complete if women are reasonably well represented at the top of the hierarchies. Certainly, the fact that there has been a trickle of social mobility for working class students into higher education and on to professional occupations, has been used in education circles to suggest that the 'able and the motivated' have made it and will continue to make it if they want to. There are many in education who regard the belief that the problem of class inequality has been solved. The problem is subsequently defined as one of 'motivation' (choice), not structural inequality.

The argument many people rightly make is that by having more women (and other minorities) in positions of power and decision-making does change the culture at the top, which can in turn make the organisation more women-friendly. This is true up to a point. What is forgotten sometimes is the fact that women may have adopted patriarchal values on the way to the top. Not all women are feminists unfortunately, nor will they fight for changes in the culture of the organisations in which they

work. There is much work to be done to change the culture of work organisations and having women in senior positions is but one step in that direction.

The way in which work is organised, in so far as it is antagonistic to personal and care relationships outside of work especially, has to be challenged. I do not think there is any simple answer to this.

While child care is essential, the nature of what that care is cannot be simply assumed. There needs to be many different types of care and assistance options open to people, including crèches and tax credits - not just one system.

Moreover, there is a need to dialogue with children themselves about care. While no-one would have the nerve now to organise a conference or a meeting, or set up a committee about women's rights (or the rights of disabled people, or gays and lesbians, or older people, or Travellers, I hope) without involving the women themselves, we have to ask why we do not listen also to what children have to say. We must not be afraid to hear and to listen. We may have much to learn about care from those who are cared for, at all ages. One of the reasons for our confusion around caring is because we have a patronising view of the person who is being cared for; the lack of a rights discourse about children in Ireland is palpable. We speak of the person who is being cared for in their presence as if they were not there - this does not just happen with children, it happens with dependent disabled people and older people too - the 'does she take sugar?' syndrome.

Men need to change and they also need to change in their attitudes to caring in particular. How and where such change can happen is a huge challenge to society. For people to value caring, it must be remunerated either directly or indirectly. What message does our tax provision for dependent spouses give to carers when it actually makes the allowance given to men, (mostly) for women, the property of their husbands? Those who are dependent have no independent entitlement to this allowance. Without economic independence for carers or homeworkers, it is impossible to see how the work of caring can be valued. Without economic reward, few can either afford to do it, nor will they want to do it.

Caring is now presented as a burden, so caring and learning about it is not seen as a positive value in anyone's life. It is hard to encourage men to become equal carers when all the institutions of society are defining (and treating) the activity of caring as a chore unworthy of financial support.

Much of the analysis of care actually defines those in need of care in an almost commodified light. This view has been challenged vehemently from within the disability movement but it is still dominant. The positive emotional benefits of caring, the reciprocal dimensions of care and love relationships need to be identified

and emphasised. School and the media have a role to play, as have education programmes within such bodies as trade unions and work organisations.

Do Radical Egalitarians have Answers?

Radical egalitarian thought has its origins in Marxism. It challenges the view that inequality is inevitable, believing it to be the outcome of collective decisions, made at State, corporate, political and other levels. In this century, R H Tawney launched a scathing attack on liberal views of equality. The core part of this critique focused on the failure of liberals to address economic and political inequalities. What he termed equality of condition, ie equality in the distribution of wealth, income and power, were central to any truly egalitarian society. He regarded equality of opportunity as a distraction from the more substantive issues of equality of condition. The radical theorists tend to be structuralists, although they hold a critical rather than a deterministic view of structures (Nielsen, 1995; Young, 1990; Baker, 1987; Cohen, 1995). They believe that political and economic structures are socially constructed and can be socially dismantled.

While radicals argue for economic equality, defined in terms of equalising the distribution of wealth and incomes in society, they are not all of one mind as to how to achieve this. Cohen (1989, 1995) argues for the position which challenges the whole idea of self-ownership of external goods. For Cohen (1995) the key to the development of equality of condition is an abandonment of the concept of self-ownership which, he claims, is not only central to liberal egalitarian theory, but also to Marxism, notably in the theory of exploitation through the accumulation of surplus value. He argues that if the principle of self-ownership of external goods is rejected, then it is possible to have voluntary equality in a society "which is abundant enough so that, although conflicts of interest persist, they can be resolved without the exercise of coercion" (as above, p131). The rejection of capitalism, is, in his view, conditional on rejecting the principle of self-ownership. If one accepts that workers own what they produce, and that it is robbed from them by the capitalist to produce surplus value, then by the same logic, there is no reason for distributing goods in society according to the principle of need to those who do not produce (which is also a central tenet of communist theory). What Cohen calls for instead is joint world ownership of external resources irrespective of productivity. He defines equality in terms of access to advantage: what is at stake, he says, is eliminating "involuntary disadvantage, by which I mean disadvantage for which the sufferer cannot be held responsible". (Cohen, 1989, p916).

Although Cohen's interpretation of Marxist theory is open to question (Marx's lengthy treatises on the issue of public ownership and control of the means of production seems remarkably similar to Cohen's own claim for 'joint ownership')

nonetheless he does provide a valuable normative framework for the analysis of ownership in any type of society. The institutional, legal, political and social implications of equality of condition defined as 'joint world ownership' are not explored however, except where he espouses a view of the ideal society as one which embraces the market for allocative purposes while rejecting the normative presuppositions and the distributive consequences of unbridled capitalism (1995, pp263-4).

In effect, Cohen seems to favour some kind of market socialism as a mechanism for realizing equality of condition. How much inequality (economic or otherwise) he believes would exist in such a society, is unclear. Certainly his assumption that there is such a phenomenon as 'clean capitalism' (as above, p161) - wherein equally materially endowed people end up with greatly different amounts of capital due to their "greater frugality and/or talent" rather than through force or fraud suggests that he does not object to capitalism per se but only to what he defines as 'dirty capitalism'. His definition of equality as 'equal access to advantage' also leaves questions open as to how he defines the ideal social order. If there is advantage, then clearly there must be disadvantage.

Nielsen, on the other hand, comes closest to Marx in asserting that equality of condition is not possible without the abolition of capitalism. Nielsen (1985, p93) claims that "Given the way that political and economic phenomena interact, liberty and moral autonomy cannot but suffer when there are substantial differences in wealth". The way to achieve reductions in wealth disparities is to have "co-operative, democratically controlled workers' social ownership and control of the means of production".

Nielsen does not regard equality of wealth as the only measure of equality of condition however. His radical egalitarianism involves an *equal distribution of* benefits and burdens, as well as equal respect irrespective of desert, and a *structuring* of social institutions so that "each person can to the fullest extent compatible with all other people doing likewise, satisfy her/his genuine needs" (as above, pp46-7).

Baker also regards capitalist societies as fundamentally unequal and he holds that a democratically-organised socialist economy would produce the most robust form of equality. While he accepts that it is "Theoretically...possible to separate the issue of equality from the issue of socialism by defining socialism as a democratically planned economy in which the means of production are under social ownership, and leaving open the question of whether such an economy is necessary for equality", he regards socialism and equality as sharing the same platform in political terms. (1987, p7). Like Nielsen, he also emphasizes the importance of equality of respect and meeting basic needs in an egalitarian society (as above, pp14-32).

Roemer's (1994) view is that capitalism can be challenged by developing forms of market socialism. In particular he proposes the development of a publicly-controlled system of share ownership in capital (a coupon stock market) for all members of a given society, an entitlement which would be given at birth and could not be bought out. Others argue for the equalisation of wages so that no one person is allowed to earn anything beyond two or four times what the lowest paid worker earns. This is the model of the Mondragon experiment in Spain.

Unlike mainstream egalitarian theory, radical egalitarian theory defines economic equality as a central component of equality of condition. It also focuses on the issue of production in a way that liberal egalitarians do not. It specifies the type of ownership of the means of production which is necessary to promote equality in society – for Cohen it is joint world ownership of external goods; for Nielsen it is 'co-operative, democratically-controlled workers' social ownership and control of the means of production'; Baker also emphasizes the importance of democratic forms of social ownership, while Tawney stresses the importance of a 'widely diffuse' ownership system of land and capital.

The former proposals assume a fundamentally socialist state in which public control of the means of production in some form is a reality.

Radical economic egalitarians have, in the past at least, assumed homogeneity within a given class. Working class people were assumed to be de-gendered, de-raced, etc. Marxists often ignored the reality of economic inequalities within households. They ignored the gendered and raced character of particular segments of the labour market. Indeed in more recent times, they ignored the fact that not only were the working class not a homogenous group in terms of gender, race, ability, etc, they were only part of the proletariat. Those who were without the paid labour market, but who laboured long hours in unpaid caring work, were also a proletariat – albeit one created within the patriarchal structures of the family, rather than the hierarchical structures of a capitalist-dominated market. Women are in fact the mostly lowly-paid workers within our society, not least because some of them get no pay, but also because they are increasingly dominating the rapidly expanding (low paid, part-time and temporary) sectors of the labour market.

Difference

It was only in relatively recent times that radical egalitarians began to recognise the issue of difference, and even so, this is not true of all theorists. Iris Young (1990) has been especially critical of the failure to address differences and the preoccupation with issues of 'distribution' alone. The 'difference' debate was seen as a liberal agenda.

In terms of their handling of difference, liberals argue for tolerance. You allow people to be, but everyone knows who is in charge. It is only dominant groups who can 'tolerate' subordinate ones. Radical egalitarians on the other hand argue for the celebration of difference, while recognising that subordinate cultures can have oppressive practices as well as superordinate ones. In a very real sense, difference is not a liberal agenda when it is interpreted in a radical sense of equality of respect, rather in the sense of toleration by the dominant groups of less powerful groups.

I think we have to focus on both production, distribution and difference if we are to address the problems of all types of women and men. If we focus solely on distribution we may ignore important gender and other differences; if we focus solely on differences, then we may ignore fundamental economic and political inequalities which will persist and which ultimately undermine any formal status recognition which are given to differences. Equal rights of access and participation are crucial, but they may be meaningless when one finds one is allowed to participate or succeed only in the lower paid ends of the labour market, or in the political work that more powerful people will not do. Hierarchies and patriarchies of wealth and power must be addressed to give substantive meaning to respect for differences.

Response to Kathleen Lynch's paper by Orlagh O'Farrell

I would like to concentrate on two main points. The first one is that the response of men to women's fight for equality needs to be looked at, as you really can't get past a certain point in terms of arguing for equality without looking for a response from men. That point has now come.

Secondly, we need to work on how to take into account the needs and the situations of different groups of women. How can they be recognised and accommodated in the same political movement?

Some thoughts on the response of men

I think this is becoming an issue at this present stage and it is a question that could be put in terms of 'is my equality at the expense of your equality?' We hear quite vehement, if occasional, protests these days on talk radio and in the press about how things are 'going too far', how men are 'losing out to women' in terms of competition for jobs or access to or custody of children of a failed marriage; and how men are psychologically in danger of feeling useless or without a role, because of women's insistence on a higher profile and on a better share-out.

It is important to separate out the issues here and to distinguish between backlash protests – ones that are purely of perception – and certain other points which may be legitimate. In relation to the issue of custody of children, where decisions have often tended to favour women, this is often portrayed as evidence that men do not enjoy equality in family law, and that this is in some way due to feminism 'going too far'.

Now of course decisions taken on custody of children are taken by a judiciary that is mostly male and they reflect, I think, the same kind of stereotypical ideas of men and women as the women's movement is trying to combat generally.

So I think it would be misplaced if people were to argue that it is due to the feminist movement that men may not be getting a fair look in, as regards custody of children

in matrimonial breakdown situations. I think that the issue is more properly part of a common struggle to revise outdated thinking in which men and women should join together.

What we are really talking about is a kind of a transition to power sharing between women and men. However, transition to power-sharing (whether in Northern Ireland or South Africa or in any other political context) is never accomplished without some discomfort and the need for a great deal of self questioning. The wish of women to share responsibility and power – economic, legal and political power – with men in society, is no exception.

At a recent conference on the role of families in society and European policy in the European Foundation for Living and Working Conditions in Loughlinstown, Professor Anthony Clare maintained that developments in gender relationships are likely to dominate the start of the next millennium, and that a male reply is now needed. I agree with that. According to Professor Clare, the world of work has been seen as primarily a masculine domain and the world of the home has been seen as that of women. In the coming back together of these separated worlds, he hoped that the result would not be the dominance of one or the other. I don't see why equality between men and women should be an unattainable goal.

The achievement of equality has nothing to do with notions of dominance. Other historical developments such as the abolition of slavery or the ending of apartheid probably seemed at the time like the end of the world, and looked as if there was going to be a complete reversal where the group that had previously been on the bottom was going to then dominate the other.

That is not the way it has to be. I do not believe that human relationships are automatically predicated on patterns of dominance and subservience. It cannot be denied that the gender divide goes very deep in history and it goes very deep in religion as well. But the uniqueness of human individuals and the richness and complexity of their interrelationships go far beyond notions of dominance or subservience.

It is time for men to look at the implications for them of women's insistence on sharing work and sharing responsibilities in private life and that many men may feel threatened by having to share economic power and status. But they also stand to gain in various ways – from more variety in their own work and life patterns, being more available to their children and to enjoy a personal life, and less condemned to a kind of a treadmill concept of life which goes hand in hand with the traditional breadwinner role.

In working life, I think that women can bring innovations to the work place which stand to benefit men as well as women: Such as the greater variety in working

patterns which arise from work sharing or part time work. These developments will trigger changes in the culture of work as well.

Of course, part-time work and jobsharing create risks as well as opportunities, particularly the risks of low pay and poor working conditions. But I think that there are advantages to be gained from new ways of working which women bring with them: less emphasis on cut throat rivalry between colleagues, the syndrome where you must appear indispensable at work, that you have all the knowledge, that you don't share any knowledge because knowledge is power, the syndrome whereby long hours at work are the only proof of commitment - that kind of thing generally goes out the window when women come in, because women tend to put more emphasis on sharing information, team working and in effect making yourself dispensable at work - organising your work so that it can cater for your absence as well as for your presence. Those kinds of practices constitute a way of working which is advantageous and is definitely an improvement on other ways of working. And there are practices which come hand in hand with women's advent, into the workplace.

Inbuilt change

What we are dealing with is a kind of quiet revolution, where a lot of changes have taken place in the last decade. But it's not a completed revolution. We have seen periods of time in this country and in other countries where women have asserted themselves and have made significant progress over short periods towards independence and economic autonomy. Then it died away again. I'm thinking of periods such as World Wars One and Two, where women came out to work in times of war and national labour shortages, but then faded away again in peace time in the face of social pressure, once the incentive to use women's effort was gone.

The same was true in the Irish Free State. Women's severely restricted role was unaffected in the longer term, because they had taken on new tasks at a time of temporary change in attitudes, but these no longer applied once the emergency was over. Women did not, in the past, insist on building in structural changes which would reflect on a lasting basis their aspirations and wishes to play a full role in society.

We are all in no doubt, these days, that you have to have structural changes which positively establish women's presence in politics and in other areas of public life on a permanent basis. We cannot depend on personalities, or good will, or historical circumstances which may change.

Kathleen mentioned Sweden; and Sweden is a very interesting country to look at. There is no reason to think that Swedish people are generally more committed than anyone else to equality as such. However, they are deeply committed to a society based on participation, and Swedish women have been determined that their voices

should be heard. Those two objectives - a fully participative democracy and the wish of Swedish women to be heard - have gone hand in hand to make Sweden a more equal society.

The real Swedish achievement is to build mechanisms for gender equality in society which won't fade away, which can be monitored and reinforced over time. There was recently a good example of that where two national elections ago the percentage of women in the Swedish parliament fell from around 49% to 37% - and of course 37% is really to die for, as far as Irish women are concerned - but in Sweden this drop was the trigger for what was almost a riot by their very broad-based women's movement. Women in Sweden were appalled that their percentage in parliament had fallen to 37%. They had thought that what they had gained up to then was permanent.

That was a moment of truth for Swedish women. They realised that eternal vigilance was necessary. And their response was to threaten to form their own party for the next election and fight it as a broad-based women's coalition. That was enough to galvanise the political parties to say 'please don't do that, we don't want our parties split, we don't wish to compete for the women's votes'.

Instead, therefore, they built in mechanisms for greatly increasing the number of nominations of women and, as a result, the percentage of women in parliament came right back up again to a current 49-50%. I mention this as an example of the value of building in structural changes. Otherwise, things may look very good over a period of years and then fall right back again. We need in Ireland to look at mechanisms to really ground equality properly in society.

Reactive change

Another issue that comes to mind there is that there is a tendency within society to react to troublesome behaviour rather than to acknowledge people who contribute quietly. I think this is something that is facing the women's movement at the moment. It is also an issue for women in Northern Ireland where the danger in the peace process is that support and resources are given preponderantly to people who will otherwise cause trouble in a society trying to re-establish itself after a long period of political unrest.

Obviously there must be incentives for those formerly involved to wean them off terrorism. But it is also essential, if the peace is to be built, that resources be given to women's groups and community groups which have not been making trouble in society but have been trying to patch up the fabric of society, to build a civil society in the face of every difficulty.

I make this observation because I think we are beginning to see that juxtaposition in a more general social and economic context as well, in terms of press reports and a policy process that focuses on the problem of male unemployment and portrays women's advances as one of the causes of this. It is a problem - all unemployment is a problem - but you also see it mentioned in terms that if the level of male unemployment grows beyond a certain level that is a really big problem because of social unrest and rises in crime rates.

Social unrest and crime must indeed be addressed. But not at the expense of women's quite legitimate desire to participate in employment on equal terms with men. It is as fundamental as that.

I was struck an opinion piece in the Financial Times not too long ago called 'More jobs for the boys'. It was an analysis of the growing threat of crime and the need to help young disadvantaged men to find worthwhile jobs in the United Kingdom. The commentator was daring and honest enough to pose a solution of reducing competition in the market for unskilled labour by curtailing the participation of "women, who are relatively unlikely to become dangerous criminals".

That was putting very bluntly a view of women's secondary status as citizens that has not gone away. It was a forthright expression of the fact that male unemployment is still seen as a bigger problem than female unemployment, a view still current and operational in government policy.

As far as crime goes, it is of course International Women's Day, and crimes such as domestic violence are at least as prevalent and at least as much of a social evil as economic crimes by unemployed people. However, it certainly gets a lot less attention and is a lot less acted upon.

Can the movement for equality accommodate the needs of different groups of women? I don't see why it can't. Even keeping the focus on a broad based women's movement, or on a political equality platform which I think is needed, I don't see why specific policies cannot be designed within the broad umbrella - for unemployed women, for women in rural areas, for disabled women, for women travelers, lesbian women, for migrant women, and for older women.

This is where are we now in terms of equality policies. We have all kinds of formal laws - juristic equality, in Kathleen's words. We have formal laws on equal pay, on equal treatment. We have laws on social security and we've had most of these for the last twenty years. But we still have a pay gap of 30% between women and men and we still have a lack of childcare. We still have a lack of any decent parental leave schemes. We have less access for women to training and upskilling, so in terms of outcome we aren't really making very fast progress by any objective standards.

I think that we are at the moment at a stage of meticulous painstaking incremental change where you have to systematically look at all policies and programmes and demand that they are proofed for equality and proofed for gender equality for all the different groups and checking it against every benchmark. As a passport to economic independence for women, work is the key and work, I mean work in the formal economy, has been improving for women over the last number of years. It is no secret however that many of these new jobs are precarious low-paid jobs.

EU Directives

I think that certain opportunities are being lost in terms of implementing EU policy in Ireland. There are new EU Directives on part-time work and on parental leave, but these directives are being implemented, as ever, in a very minimalist way here. The directives themselves tend to be fairly general, stipulating that there must be equal rights proportionately for part-time workers to full-time workers, but leaving open all the big questions like the level of pay, whether you should get social security to bring your income up to a reasonable level, and all the other hard questions.

My impression is that those questions are being tackled in a very unimaginative and minimalistic way in Ireland over the last number of years. The parental leave situation is a case in point. The EU directive only requires a minimum amount of parental leave of three months per person, so you can have three months off work if you have a child aged up to eight years. Your partner can have three months too, so the family will get six months leave in all. It's better than nothing, but it is very very low. In most European countries, you tend to get a period of a year's leave or perhaps more, and I think that that is much more the way to look at it because three months or even six months leave is of limited use to a parent. It only postpones the decision of whether you can cope with working and looking after family responsibilities.

Equally for an employer it's pretty well useless; you can't easily replace somebody for three months - it's just too short. If you have a longer period of leave and a more imaginative way of looking at it, I don't see why a government could not devise a scheme which gave parents a year off work, gave employers some help with replacing them, (probably with people on training courses, or looking for training experience at work) and balancing out the main financial costs such as social security or salaries. None of this is impossible to implement, but it is most disappointing that we look like implementing it none-the-less in a very minimalistic fashion - three months leave and certainly no pay during the three months leave and whether you get social security benefits or not, it's not too optimistic in terms of what you are going to get. I don't know whether people are going to be able to afford to use parental leave at all and I certainly think that as an equality measure it's not likely to appeal to very many male parents to take it up.

Sharing power

We do have this problem of sharing power. This is not a question of power for its own sake. It's really a question that the alternative to painstakingly gender proofing everything that moves is to achieve a certain critical mass where decisions are taken. That is not an aspiration for one part of the women's movement, but for all its parts, because it's easier to put issues like child care and other topics like that on the agenda if the people who are making the decisions have a certain self interest in this.

It is a question of critical mass of women at all sorts of critical levels. In politics are we to accept that it is to be three women ministers for 51% of the population forever? It doesn't seem to me to be enough, frankly. In the civil service and in the public sector the level of women in positions of any kind of responsibility is really appalling, at about 10%, less in terms of medium to senior managers.

In private business also it is quite correct that there are very few women employers. There are an increasing number of self employed women who are saying structures at work are not accommodating me so I'll create my own business; but the ability of women to make the transition from a self employed - person to an employer isn't at all as obvious that brings in questions such as whether supports for business are equally favorable to women as to men. I don't think so!

Really what we are talking about is that formal laws are inching along and producing minor improvements, but calculations are often made about how long, at the present rate of progress, will it be before you achieve equality in pay or equality according to other measurements? At this rate of progress, about another couple of hundred years! That means we must look at some form or other of positive action. This need not necessarily be in terms of quotas: I myself would settle for legal obligations on public sector organisations and large companies. This involves obligations to implement equal opportunities and programmes no matter what their targets; to define targets in recruitment and in promotion; and in flexible working practices. It also involves the company or public sector organisation reporting over time, and then letting shareholders, or the public, or women judge what the results are. This is not just a voluntary thing relying on legal obligations to secure equal opportunities. Even if the targets are not imposed but are chosen, it would be a distinct improvement on what we have which at the moment is voluntary and not very effective.

One last point about EU policy is that a lot of the progress in Ireland and other member-states has come from the European Court of Justice and from Europe generally, going back to the 1970s when equal pay received a definite helping hand from European policy. At that time, basically the EU moved to fill a space which governments were leaving open. While I agree that the juristic process is not enough

in its own right, I think we should continue to use anti-discrimination laws and EU policy to their fullest extent. Finally, this gathering here today will understand me drawing attention to equality and social welfare over the last couple of years. The persistence of two Cork women, Mrs McDermott and Mrs Cotter was crucial to their success. They went off to the European Court of Justice twice and on their third outing finally achieved the full implementation of social security equalisation in Ireland, (thanks also to people present in the room obviously).

That was something that was well worth doing. The Amsterdam Treaty is going to be up for a referendum in a month or two. It doesn't get very much talked about (what is in it, besides neutrality and various other things?), but it does in fact have principles which outlaw discrimination across the board for the first time in an EU treaty - not only for women, but discrimination on grounds of race, sexual orientation and disabilities that really ought to be recognised.

The Amsterdam Treaty also contains the ability to carry out positive action measures in EU law. For the first time it is now unambiguously possible to conduct positive action measures in EU law. So in weighing up the Amsterdam Treaty I think perhaps that too should be more clearly acknowledged.

Summary of Discussion

by Deirdre O'Connell

The discussion covered paid and unpaid work, equality and international issues.

Work

On work, it was stressed that women should be properly remunerated for the work that they do: this means recognising unpaid work, through the language we use as well as economically. The whole issue of women's unpaid work is now a global campaign. Also women in paid work suffer from structural inequalities and attitudes that persist in spite of legal obligations - as witness academic women, who in spite of being among the most privileged of working women, still have major difficulties securing equal treatment.

Equality - the word

One speaker felt that equality as a word had become so much part of the ideology of paternalism that it had to be replaced. Education promotes a middle class ideology. There were seen to be problems with the strategic implementations of difference and the question was posed as to how you deal with fragmentation and organise solidarity among different groups. Class and economics seem central to the debate.

It was recognised that there are problems with intergender relationships and that we are dealing with attitudes and values. At present there seems to be some rolling back in this area. Gender equality has to be seen by men as a male issue as well as a women's issue. We have to define a new kind of society where men and women communicate with each other.

International issues

As was appropriate to International Women's Day, a number of speakers mentioned the need to support women's rights internationally. Religious fundamentalism represents a major threat to women across the world. Algeria was given as an example of a country where in 1985 women lost all the rights they had won in the

independence struggle and where now the women's movement has to support the government that took away these rights for fear of even worse attacks on their rights by fundamentalists.

Internationally, the inequality of women is being compounded by war. In building an international response to gross injustice, we must campaign for the rights of refugees in Ireland. Reproductive rights for all women are also a fundamental ingredient in the fight for equality.

Summing up

Orlagh agreed that the recognition of formal and informal work was very important, as was the issue of reproductive rights. Migrant women have also become an important issue in Irish society.

There is a problem, when implementing formal equality policies, as to what pressure you can use and what system of penalties and rewards you use. Attitudinal changes cannot be forced through by law, but, for example, the key thing in parental leave is that it be paid so that men will feel they can afford to take it. In Sweden the allocation of six months parental leave per parent can be taken as the couple decide, but the man must take at least one month. Take up among men can be promoted in the workplace through cultural change.

Kathleen noted that judicial rights have been defined in terms of civil and political rights; we should stress the centrality of economic rights. There were no working class women here today; the women's movement was completely middle class, and this was a great problem in Ireland.

Difference must be recognised and respected. The Equality Studies Centre in UCD was told their programme was too diverse, but this has proved not to be the case. The Centre is setting up a council of disadvantaged women to run the centre; structures with real partnership have to be set up. If you don't institutionalise your ideology or infiltrate the institutions you have no future.

Other issues discussed and were the mainstreaming of rights issues. Media major institution of ideology. Political resonance of language and other general issues of the question of democracy and equality. Relative advantage was also mentioned – to date, liberal policies have advantaged the advantaged, eg in relation to public transport.

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