



## **Criacao social de problemas e solucoes ao estilo Irlandês: uma sociedade em transição**

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For Portuguese Journal-

## **A society in transition : Socially created problems and solutions (Irish Style)** **by Pat O'Connor**

### **Introduction**

In Ireland the very idea of reconciling work and family seems extraordinarily obscure. Indeed within the traditional parameters of Irish life they were 'reconciled': the family was women's world and work (paid employment ) was men's world. Even yet such thinking is reflected in the very low levels of State funded child care and in the implicit assumption that the typical employee is male (with a wife/mother who is full time in the home). On the other hand there have been dramatic changes in women's participation in paid employment and in family size. In this context and with an increasingly highly educated cohort of women in paid employment, the substantive issue as to how work and family are to be reconciled is a real one. The 'old dreams' of love and marriage sit uneasily with the gender neutral (but in fact implicitly male) dreams which are 'normal' in the world of education and paid employment.

Hence the focus in this paper on the solutions which are perceived by young men and women (aged 18-30 years) in a changing society. I will briefly look first at the wider Irish social context within which these young people are living; describe the situation and attitudes of this cohort and then will explore some of the themes which emerged from a qualitative analysis of the data which emerged in focus groups as regards their perceived 'solutions' to reconciling work and family.

### **Wider social context**

When one looks at the overall figures (Brannen, 1997) it appears that Irish women's participation in the labour force is low in international terms. Thus in 1996, 41% of Irish women aged 15 years and over were in the labour force as compared with a European average of just over 45%. When one focuses on married women, the Irish percentage is equally low (i.e.41% ). However when

one looks closer ( Table I) it is clear that this overall Irish percentage conceals an age effect. Thus for example 63% of married women aged 25-34 years in Ireland in 1996 were in the labour force as compared with 37% of those aged 45-54 years. At first this appears surprising since it goes in the exact opposite direction to what one expects in terms of the intensity of child care demands: in 1996 61% of the total births were to women aged 25-34 years (C.S.O., 1997C: 38). However, it is not surprising when one recognises that the Marriage Bar was only removed in Ireland in 1973, and this has affected the labour force participation of women in their 40s and upwards. This Marriage Bar obliged women in Civil Service, secondary teaching etc. to resign on marriage; and women in a variety of other occupations were 'encouraged' to do so by social expectations, by the 'marriage gratuity' etc.(O'Connor and Shortall, 1996). When one takes the effect of this out by looking at women aged 20-35 years, it is clear that the picture is very different. Thus in the early 1970s , when the oldest of the young people in this study were born, 7.5% of married women were in the labour force, whereas in 1996 roughly two thirds of married women aged 20-35 years were in the labour force.

The extent and the recentness of the change can also be shown by the fact that even as late as 1986, the most common situation in couples was to have the man only at work (53% of all couples being in this situation: Table 2). By 1996 this was no longer the case- with 39% of couples being in this situation. The proportion of couples who were dual earners also doubled over this period- from 16% to 32%. Indeed this reflects the fact that between 1971 and 1996 90% of the growth in employment was in women's employment- predominantly in fact in married women's employment. Thus as O'Connell (1996) has wittily noted, all the talk about the 'Celtic tiger' has misconstrued the gender of the animal: women's employment increasing by 212,000 between 1971 and 1996 as compared with a growth of 23,000 in male employment ( CSO, 1997A).

The extent and recentness of the change in Irish mother's participation in paid employment can also be illustrated by the fact that whereas in 1991 26% of mothers with dependent children were in the labour force, by 1996 this had increased to 37% ( Table3). Indeed in 1996 43% of Irish mothers with one or two children were in paid employment. Thus over the lifetime of the young people in this project (i.e. those born 1967-1979) we have moved from a situation where married women in a variety of occupations were effectively prohibited from participation in paid employment to one where the majority of married women under 35 years are in paid employment; and 43% of those with one or two dependent children were in this position. Furthermore the increase in mother's participation in the labour force has occurred one might say, despite rather than because of encouragement by the State or the employers. Thus for example as has been noted (Brannen, 1997) Ireland has one of the lowest levels of State funded child care in the EU. Furthermore it has no tradition of part time employment-in 1994 part-time work only made up 11% of the total share of paid employment in Ireland. This was double what it had been ten years before but it is still low by international standards (NESF, 1997).

In Ireland as indeed right across the EU it has been shown that the activity rates of women, and particularly of mothers with dependent children is strongly affected by education (Bulletin on women and employment, 1995, April, 8). Thus for example in 1991 when the activity rate for all Irish mothers was just under 41%, that for mothers with graduate education was just over 68%, and for those with only compulsory education was just under 30% (the comparable EU 12 percentages being 57.8% 76.2% and 48.3% respectively). Furthermore the Bulletin shows that the strength of the effect of education and its relationship to motherhood varied within different Eu countries-although this was not associated in any simple way to the level of child care facilities; the availability of part time paid employment etc.

It is important to note that there is a long - and surprising- tradition of educating women more highly than men in Ireland. Even before the Marriage Bar was removed, education was seen as an

important cultural resource for women. Thus amongst men and women aged 55-64 years, Ireland was the only country in the OECD where women were more highly educated than men- and amongst those aged 25-34 years the difference was greatest in Ireland.(Rubery et al, 1996). From the inside of the family Irish women have typically been seen as the strong ones- the very absence, until relatively recently, of culturally legitimate arenas outside the family heightening the importance of that arena and their involvement in it (O'Connor, 1998).

Increasingly there is a recognition amongst Irish sociologists that it is illogical to exclude services produced for family consumption from the national economic accounts(Gross National Product and the Gross Domestic Product) since the net effect is that 25-40% of economic output is excluded. Some commentators see such exclusions as a reflection of sexist bias since what is excluded is typically women's unpaid work within the household (Fahey, 1991). Obviously this implicitly raises the whole issue of the public value of women's 'tending' or 'caring for' activities. Lynch and Mc Loughlin have gone further and have suggested that it is useful to think of the activities which occur within the setting of the home and family as 'love labour'. They have suggested that these include not only the physical tasks of looking after children but to 'the very real activities of looking out for, and looking after the other'(1995:259). They see these activities as taking 'energy presence and time'; as producing 'a supportive enhancing and empowering relationship, and as a form of work'(1995:263). This work is overwhelmingly done by women in Irish society- indeed it is what defines them. They suggest that such activities cannot be commodified: 'one cannot pay someone to hug one's children and pretend that it is one's own hug; one cannot pay someone to visit or talk to a friend in hospital and pretend that the visit is from oneself (1995:262).

However the social valuation of such activities within an increasingly materialistic society which is highly gendered (Connell, 1995) is problematic. In Ireland men and male activity are highly valued and men are overwhelmingly represented in positions of authority of what purport to be

meritocratic and gender neutral educational and occupational structures. Women are increasingly occupying what Savage (1992) has called positions of 'expertise' - with 65% of those in the Professional Services being women (C.S.O.1997B:30)- a pattern which also obviously reflects their high levels of education and the tendency for educated mothers to participate in paid employment.

Thus Irish society has seen major changes over the past twenty five years - although many of the major institutional structures continue to attempt to effectively ignore this.

### **The Situation of Young People**

Eurostat (1996) showed that the trends which emerged in Ireland as regards the position of young people was very similar to that which emerged across the EU 15. Thus 36% of Irish young people under 25 years were in paid employment as compared with 37% across the EU 15. In both Ireland and in the EU 15 the majority were in full time employment (86% versus 81% respectively Eurostat, 1996:10). Contracts of limited duration were less likely to exist amongst Irish young people than across EU 15 ( 19% versus 35% respectively :Eurostat, 1996). The EU 15 unemployment rate amongst such young people was 21.3% and the Irish rate amongst them was slightly lower at that time i.e. 19%. By 1996, the EU unemployment rate amongst those 15-24 years was 21.8 % - while the relevant Irish rate was lower (18.1% EU Forum, 1997). Furthermore whereas across the EU the tendency has been for young female unemployment to be slightly above young male unemployment- the trend goes slightly in the opposite direction in Ireland.

Educational participation has increased dramatically in Ireland since the late 1960s. In 1994, 87% of the girls and 78% of the boys in the relevant age cohort completed the Second Cycle i.e. the Leaving Certificate (Lynch and Morgan, 1995). As one might expect educational level is associated negatively with experience of unemployment. (Education is also closely associated with

class background). However achieving a high level of education is by no means a guarantee of employment i.e. 32% of those who finished the Leaving Certificate in 1987 were initially unemployed as compared with 61% of those who started out with no certificates (N.E.S.F. 1997). Educational qualifications even since then have 'shifted upwards at a significant rate' although it does still affect the likelihood of eventually making the transition -with 95% of the best qualified and 40% of the least qualified doing so (N.E.S.F 1997:27).

Young women are less likely than boys to leave school before the Leaving Certificate (constituting only 25% of those who do). Hannan et al (1996) concluded based on an examination of the 1994 Leaving Certificate results that: 'As in the Junior Cycle, girls significantly outperform boys'(1996:147). Girls now also make up roughly half of those at Undergraduate level and at Postgraduate level in the Universities. Furthermore and paradoxically reflecting their higher valuation of 'male' choices - they are increasingly entering what used to be thought of as 'male' areas- women constituting 61% of those entering Medicine; 59% of those entering Law and 52% of those entering Science (Durkan et al, 1995). Thus paradoxically women have endorsed what purport to be gender neutral options in education- but which in fact reflect 'male' priorities and standards. What evidence we have suggests that in the most gender neutral examinations, they outperform boys.

On the other hand the attraction of 'traditional' choices - even amongst those aged 18-29 years emerged very clearly from the European Values study (Whelan, 1992 and Whelan and Fahey, 1994). Thus for example even amongst the 18-29 year olds, 42% felt that 'a job is all right but 'what most women want is a home and children'. Even more strikingly more than half (55%) thought that 'being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay.' These views were affected by education but their extensiveness is at first glance surprising although it does make sense in terms of a wider cultural context where women are defined in terms of caring; familism etc.(O'Connor, 1998)..On the other hand, reflecting their acceptance of what purport to be

gender neutral ideas, 69% of these Irish young people felt that 'having a job is the best way for a woman to be an independent person'. The majority of them did not see paid employment as affecting a mother's ability to have a good relationship with her children; nor did they see it as having a negative effect on the children. Thus only 23% of those aged 18-29 years felt that 'a working mother could not establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work'. Only 38% felt that 'a pre-school child is likely to suffer if his/her mother works'(Whelan, 1992).

Furthermore, in Ireland as indeed across the rest of Europe; 'the institution of marriage is weakening'(Rapid Reports, 1993:4) in so far as marriage is becoming less popular and age at marriage is rising. In EU terms marriage in Ireland is relatively unpopular -the marriage rate across the EU being 5.4 per 1,000 as compared with an Irish rate of 4.5 per 1,000 (Eurostat, 1995). Marriage in Ireland reached the height of its popularity in 1971-74 inclusive (when the marriage rate was 7.4 per 1000: CSO, 1995)- and the lowest in 1995 (4.4 per 1,000: C.S.O.1997C). Indeed in 1993 it was noted that younger cohorts of women were at least postponing marriage-although it was not clear for how long or to what extent permanently.

Thus in Ireland in the 1990s marriage in European terms is both relatively unpopular and is entered into at a relatively high age. The trends as regards marriage in Ireland have been quite complex since traditionally Ireland was famous for the lateness of its marriages. Thus for example in 1945/46 the average age of brides was 28 years and 33 years for grooms. Age at marriage in Ireland fell steadily until 1979 at which time the average age of brides was 24.3 years and grooms 26.5 years (Clancy, 1991). Thus whereas across the EU age at marriage is higher than it was in 1960, in Ireland although it has been rising it is still lower than it was at that time. Thus in 1992 the average age at first marriage for women across the EU 15 was 25.5 years as compared with 26.3 years in Ireland (Eurostat, 1995).



Furthermore there has been a dramatic decline in fertility amongst Irish women (Table 4:Eurostat, Demographic Statistics, 1995 ). Thus although in 1995 the fertility of Irish women aged less than 35 years (at 2.39) was the highest in Europe -it was dramatically different from what it had been in 1970 (viz. 3.44). Thus quite clearly not only has marriage become more unpopular in Ireland over the past 25-30 years but its reality in terms of children has also dramatically changed. Furthermore whereas even in 1980 births outside marriage made up 5% of all births, by 1996 they made up 25% of all births (and roughly one third of all first births). In addition despite popular assumptions less than one fifth of all births to lone mothers were to women under 20 years - with 62% of them being to lone mothers between 20-29 years ( C.S.O, 1997C).

This is the world which confronts young men and women. Prior to describing the trends which emerged I will briefly indicate the methodology used.

### **Methodology and description of the characteristics of the participants**

This is very much a report on a study which is still in progress. It draws together material mainly from young men and women aged 18-30 years who were involved in specific skills Fas programmes (on courses of 14-36 weeks) within the Limerick Training Centre. These courses are primarily targeted at unemployed clients and jobseekers- with a view to increasing their employability. In 1995 67% of those completing such courses got employment on or shortly after completing the course (Fas Annual Report, 1995:10 ). Eight of the 13 focus groups dealt with them, with the remaining five involving those in paid employment in the hotel industry and post graduate students within the University.

Fas is a National Training and Employment Agency funded both from the Irish Exchequer and from the Community Support Programme through both the European Social Fund and the Regional Development Fund. In 1995, 88,862 people went through a Fas Programme and 34,149 of these were less than 25 years old (44% of these were women: Fas Women in focus 1995-97).

Fas provides a wide range of different kinds of courses including specific skills training directed mainly at those who are 'employment ready' as well as foundation skills for recent school leavers who have not reached the Junior Certificate; return to work courses for women who have been outside the labour force for a number of years etc. (Fas Annual Reports; Fas Women in Focus 1996-97).

It was decided to include men and women aged 18-30 from courses both in the newer and burgeoning areas- such as Computer Network Management and Business Management as well as in the more stereotypically male areas of Welding and Production Assembly and female areas of Retail Sales and Hairdressing. In some cases the minimum level of education was specified (e.g. Leaving Certificate in the case of Retail Sales) whereas in other cases such as Machine Tools or Computer Network Management, the level of participants education reflected the demand for that course. Invitations were issued to a random sample of a total of 56 men and women on these courses. Only 41% of these participated. In some cases this arose because those selected were in fact over 30 years; had left the course; were particularly busy on that day or because they were not interested. A similar approach was used and similar difficulties encountered in getting University students to participate in the focus groups. In the case of the hotel sector all of those men and women who were in the appropriate age range in one local hotel were identified with the help of management and 75% of these participated. However the sample cannot be regarded as a representative one.

Overall then, 32 young people have participated in these focus groups. These groups lasted approximately one hour and the despite the evaluations at the end were very positive. The average age of those who participated was 22.6 years (N= 18 women; and N=13 men )- and it was exactly the same when one looked at the men and women separately. Overall their level of education was high with 61% of the having a Degree or some kind of third level qualification. The women were more highly educated than the men with one third of the women but 46% of the men having at best a Leaving Certificate. It has been noted that in Ireland because educational

levels are rising, the level of education required even for relatively low skilled jobs is also rising (e.g. Leaving Certificate is now required to work as a sales assistant). The participants in the focus groups were asked for their most recent employment - and these are revealing. Thus amongst the men the occupations listed included factory workers; mail clerk; sales assistant, a computer operative; a front of house hotel manager; an accountant; a self employed sound engineer; a part time waiter and those who had no previous employment. Amongst the women the most recent occupations were similarly modest-including cleaning; casual manual labour; factory work; part time shop assistant; waitress; bar work; hotel receptionist ; sales representative; administrative assistant; part-time computer teacher; hotel manager- and those who had no previous employment.

## **Solutions**

In this paper attention will be focused particularly on what these young men and women saw as the 'solutions' to combining work and family. Data from the men and the women will be presented separately. Amongst the women the most popular 'solutions' were to defer children- or even to consider not having them at all; to advocate state support - particularly some kind of payment by the state to enable mothers who wanted to stay at home to do so and to anticipate 'juggling' their responsibilities themselves. Amongst the men the most popular solutions revolved around their role as breadwinners and deferring children -although some reference was also made to the State. Little was expected of employers or unions by the men or the women.

However although these solutions appear similar, it will be shown that men and women were in fact coming from different directions. Thus although both stressed deferring children, the women stressed the importance of child care and of trying to find a way of accessing financial support to enable them to do it full time; the men although more enthusiastic about having children wanted to defer it until their status as a breadwinner was more established. It is to a more detailed exploration of the main themes emerging from the qualitative analysis that we now turn

## *WOMEN*

As described in Brannen's paper the women in the Irish study want to care for their children themselves; and feel that this is best for the children. Thus overwhelmingly these women who are well educated and who are for the most part actively trying to increase their own occupational skills think that it is important for their own sake that they care for them themselves. Some of them recognise that this will not be financially possible, and others were ambivalent about it for other reasons. Many of these women had difficulty even imagining a situation where a husband would have a sufficiently good job that they would not need to be in paid employment. Role reversal was only mentioned once and in this case it was rejected. Thus a young Post Graduate student said that 'I don't think I would be happy with a husband or a partner who gave up his job to look after the children.' 'We are still victims of our upbringing. I couldn't possibly I don't think have respect..... my friend she worked, and her boyfriend stayed at home to look after the children and the general view -and I think in his case it is true - was that he couldn't get a job (he's an eejit). And I agree, he was so useless he had to stay at home. I know its terrible and I'm not a nineties woman.' As they saw it reverting to the dream of the male breadwinner seemed unrealistic- but abandoning it seemed equally impossible.

Some of the women wanted and hoped for a sharing of parental responsibility but there were considerable limits to the extent to which they saw this as being possible because of men's 'pride' and 'vulnerability'. Thus as one of the retail sales trainees said ' they have also got the need to be the main bread winner .... or this is what I am being told - .... the man has to work or they don't feel right about themselves anyway.' This protectiveness towards men was also adverted to by the trainee production assembly workers (aged 19-21 years, with Leaving Certificates) who noted that 'I think it would be fair to say that some men might see themselves as being the role model and needing to earn money .....there is that little bit more vulnerability to a man than there is to a woman'. The young postgraduates also referred to 'the whole kind of pride thing;' while the

hotel managers said that: 'I suppose men really feel that they are the breadwinners of the family and therefore they can't afford not to take promotion or whatever'. The women were afraid of 'being left' and these fears increased the attractiveness of those solutions (outlined below) which did not involve the men in their lives.

## 1. Defer children

By far the most common solution was to defer children until they 'had their life'. or even not to have them at all. Thus for example when the four women who were Business Management trainees aged 21-24 years and whose education ranged from Leaving Certificate to Post Graduate

were asked whether having children was important to them their replies were revealing:

*'No I think I would prefer a dog.*

*It wouldn't be no, I would never think about it at all, maybe in another ten years.*

*I would like to at some stage down the road, when I am comfortable and when I am set up. When I have my career and I have an income and then I would like to, I would definitely like to have a family.*

*I don't know if I would even like to, I tend to put off even thinking about it.*

*I would like to go out and do everything first.*

*I would like to look after myself.*

*I would like to do everything, go around the world and travel and just try anything I want to do.....*

*.... if I turned around and got married and had a family this year I think it would be wrong. I am .....still naive as the world goes and what goes on in it. I don't think now that I would be able to give them my best.*

*You don't want to become bitter either do you, you don't want to feel that if you go off and get married and had a family when you are young that you will regret it later, that you have missed out and you know that you didn't live your life.'*

Similar patterns emerged both amongst the less educated young women aged 19-23 who were retail sales trainees; the 19-21 year old train production assembly workers; the 22 year old young women who were in full time Post Graduate education and amongst the older women (27-30 years) who were currently Hotel Managers with a Degree or other Third Level Qualification.

To varying degree they wanted children-with one of the Post graduates saying that 'For me it is important to have a child It is for me yes, definitely - eventually. I think, its probably a horrible thing to say but I wouldn't feel like really that I would be a whole person if I hadn't had children at

some stage in my life. Most of them saw children as simply inevitable. Yet as the older women who were currently hotel managers saw it children 'are going to be a long way off- in five years time, even in ten years 'we will be lucky if we have any'; 'I would like to have children at about 35 at the latest'. As they saw it: 'with children, it just takes up too much time, you are tied down. You have to organise baby-sitters for everything. They (children) become priority.' They wondered whether they really would ever prioritise family: 'deep down I know I wouldn't.' They noted that 'there are still a lot of women that might not end up in relationships because of their ambitions' but reflected that 'I think a woman has to get married at some stage because people say oh, look at that old one without a man'.

The young Postgraduate women saw their ideas about love and men as being in tension with the 'nineties' idea that they should be prioritising work over family. As in the other focus groups with women, there is the fear of not marrying 'I dont want to be in my late fifties and on my own and all my friends married and gone away. That's very important even though I try not to think about it too much but it is a big issue'; 'I dont like presuming I'm going to be married and have loads of children but I would hate .... like now say if I'm in my mid thirties and my friends are all married with children.....because you feel like I should not be here and everyone else gone'. The women in their late 20s working in routine white collar work in the hotel industry similarly referred to the fact that women are 'expected to be married, expected to have children' while men can get away with it until they are forty or fifty but once women are thirty four or thirty five -like everyone laughs at you'. As they see it there is no socially acceptable life style for a single woman: they are a residual- left; rejected. Similarly the business management trainees say that 'at the end of the day I will be looking for a partner .....there is going to be a slight bit of anxiety ...because at the back of my mind would be that I would still be working there when I am forty and with my own house and a great pay packet and I am on my own.' Thus as they saw it, they dare not defer the inevitable route for too long.

## **2. Payment by the State to enable women to stay at home full time etc.**

Implicit in this is the idea that the work undertaken by women in the home is valuable, and that if the State sees it as such it should pay for it- whether or not the woman is married or not. This idea was frequently mentioned. Thus the retail sales trainees felt that the financial support the State was giving to single women should be extended: 'They should be given money, if they are giving it to a single mother, if they [married women] are getting a wage then a lot of them would stay at home and look after the child.' They recognised that work in the home was not seen as work, but reflected that: 'I think she [their own mother] does an enormous amount of work, often more than some people would do when they were out working. I think they should be getting paid for that.' Similarly the computer network trainees in their early twenties with Degree and those in Postgraduate education stressed that mothers who were working in the home full time 'deserve some kind of income for the work they are doing at home'; 'they are doing a job of some sort'; 'You know if they were at work, somebody would have to do their job'.

For the computer network trainees the key issue was: 'because children need to be brought up properly and if they are just going to be moved from one childminder to another they will get confused and they won't know what a proper family life is'. The women who were business management trainees saw it 'as a kind of job you know'; 'they are working twenty four hours a day roughly you know'. Similar views were expressed by the women who were in routine non manual work in the hotel industry. As the trainee production assembly workers aged 19-21 saw it 'most people wouldn't consider it as a job, but it is a job to take care of children regardless whether you go out and work eight hours'; 'It is the same as being in any other job, the only difference is you have a skill in your job whereas taking care of children is natural'. Similar kinds of assessments of 'female' skills are evident within the arena of paid employment.

The women hotel managers felt that the state had a responsibility not only to provide financial help for those who were staying at home but if they were not they felt there should be financial

arrangements to facilitate paid employment; ‘ ‘there should be some sort of allowance there for them so that their children are able to attend nursery crèches.....after all it is about £70-£80 a week and there is no assistance at all given; ’ while others said that ‘ There should be better facilities for child care and things like that.’

### **3. Just Juggling .....**

Faced with the inevitability of children, a State which appears uninterested in funding married women as well as an unhelpful industry and problematic help from a partner, the women assumed that the bulk of child care will fall on them and that somehow they will have to ‘reconcile’ the two. The young women managers in the Hotel industry pinned their hopes on self employment in their own hotel. Some of the women were aware of the possibilities implicit in job sharing or part time work ‘and things like that’ but then ‘I dont know how that would fit in with the really full on job, really demanding job’. They were aware of the possibilities implicit in technology ‘With technology as well it is much easier- people can work from home more and everything. I know it is difficult to look after your children and work from home but at least you have got it in your house.’

The retail sales trainees anticipated trying to work 9-3 ‘so that the childminder doesn’t have to care for the children’, but they also anticipated that ‘if the child was sick I dont think you would be able to concentrate on your work, so I think it would affect your workload’. The young University Post graduates said that ‘-I think I probably wouldn't work in a demanding career because I would want to be able to give it all to my family..... I don't think I would be able to handle a really heavy career in a responsible position and family at all.’ *Why are you saying it in that voice?* ‘Because I'm cynical about it, .....its a terrible thing, we’re all women of the nineties now and we should be strong and that. Everyone is still looking for that but I just don't think that we are all going to get it..... The kind of career I'm going for I think it would be easier, maybe that's why I'm choosing my career because I think maybe in a few years or whatever I will have to give up full time work and just do bits here and there.’



As the women who are trainee production assembly workers see it 'It is difficult but you can do it, it is just that you will be tired and it would be probably that you don't give as much attention as you should. I do think you can do it, but I don't think it will be easy.' Quite simply those who were currently in this situation get on with it: 'Because you are used to it now; you have to do it; you want to do it'

The young women in this study hoped to postpone this arduous life style for as long as possible- and in the meantime hoped that the State would extend the financial support which it provided to single mothers.

### *MEN*

Amongst the men there was a strong desire to have children. Implicitly or explicitly they referred to the fact that it was expected that women would be the ones mainly involved in child care- although it was also accepted that their participation in paid employment was necessary. The main solution for men continued to be the breadwinner role and deferring children - both of these solutions involving issues related to money. The family was important to men- but more for themselves than for the children: 'absolutely vital, I would end up committing suicide if I was living on my own, there is no way I could do it. The pressure and the solitude and everything.' Some of them such as the computerised accounts trainees felt threatened by a situation where girls got pregnant and continued living at home with their parents. They presented it as being 'more confusing for the baby than anyone else' 'it needs to know who its immediate family are.' Indeed care by the grandparents was viewed negatively by some of the men who felt that in this situation children would 'develop emotionally towards its grandparents and not its parents.' There was some awareness of the potential importance of state support- although this was seen in terms of encouraging women to have children rather than having abortions, as well as in the provision of crèches etc.

It is clear that although these men implicitly saw fatherhood as involving more than simply providing financial support, they saw the mother as being the person who was most important in the child's development. It was generally felt that it was more difficult for women than men to combine work and family: 'there is a difference for women, I suppose you will find the age old thing that they should be at home rather than instead of out working;' 'Society I think would say "Look at her children". And I think that they would say "Where is the mother" more so than "Where is the father", so I think it is more difficult for women.... and much easier for men.' 'I think it is more difficult on mothers really, they will have much more contact with the child, and the child relies on them the most.' This situation was nevertheless generally accepted. One of the male managers who does have a very young baby noted of his partner that 'there is a certain extent of her falling into the female role, because she tries to do everything. That's her problem you know.' Only one of the male retail sales trainees even suggested that: 'Men well I suppose then I don't know, it would be nice to see someday the men bringing the children to the crèche and picking them up in the evening you know.'.....

### **1. Male Breadwinner**

The taken for granted nature of the male provider role and the very effective way in which it was seen by young men as implicitly solving the whole problem of reconciling work and family was very striking. Thus as young hotel managers in their early 20s saw it: 'I need money to do my bit and to feed my wife .number one way ahead is taking care of my family but that said the job priorities are becoming larger again.....the priorities are saving and thinking of getting a mortgage and supporting the child..' The career whether or not it is seen in relation to the family 'is the big thing at the moment' for these middle class men. As they saw it they 'have no-one else to fall back on'- even where their partners were in paid employment: 'no matter how well Anna is doing we couldn't just live off her.'

Similarly as the retail sales trainees (aged 18-19 and with Leaving Certificates) saw it: 'The male in the family is usually looked on as the provider'. Amongst the computerised accounts trainees there is also the implicit equation of manhood /taking care of a family/earning power: 'If you want

to take care of a family you would want to be earning reasonable money. You would want to be earning about £200.' I wouldn't want to see myself in five or ten years time knowing myself that I wasn't supporting my own child.'

Amongst some of them there is an acceptance that they will not be the sole breadwinner: 'Financially very few young males could support anyone;' 'I would feel that myself and my wife if I had one, would feel responsible for supporting them rather than leaving someone else do it'. Some felt that 'leaving the wife at home to mind the kids and going off to work and coming home and having your dinner ready-I think those days are almost gone. You wouldn't be able to support them on your own.' As they see it 'you need two incomes coming in today;' As the highly educated computer network trainees (with a Degree or other kind of third level qualification saw it) the cost of living was such that 'both would need to be working even if one is only working part-time.'

The 19-20 young male welding and production trainees also suggest that 'You would need to have two incomes coming in to-day'. They have a very direct and uncomplicated philosophy-money=job= life (Self respect/ a woman/child/marriage/ etc.). Quite simply as they see it there are no real problems that it cant solve.....Similarly the 18 and 19 year old young men (with Leaving Cert.) who were retail sales trainees also saw a job as 'fundamental' 'not being cynical but relationships come and go but you need a job for life'.

Just one of the older self employed men in the computer network trainee group said that: 'if you got married to someone who is working and had enough money to support the family I cant see any problem if you weren't working- once you have some sort of an interest....doing a consultancy role...some sort of work so that you weren't at home all day doing nothing.' He was the only man to make such a comment.

## **2. Defer Children (and/or marriage)**

For both the highly educated and less educated men children are 'very important, eventually yes. I mean I won't get married for years, I wouldn't like kids for a couple of years but eventually I would definitely, it would be a major priority definitely'. As one of the highly educated computerised network trainees sees it see having children is important: 'part of what we are-having babies'. When they are asked what things might/might not happen because they are a man they think solely in terms of their inability to have children: 'one major difference is children-we won't be physically able to- that's the only difference'. This same sort of reply was also made in other groups. As the computerised accounts trainees saw it: 'Maybe if you weren't infatuated with children.... maybe you wouldn't miss anything, you mightn't think about having children. But I definitely would like to have kids some day, I would like showing them what to do, how to swim, how to go fishing and all those kind of things'. 'I think life is more enjoyable sharing it with kids you know. Not now but definitely in a couple of years down the road;' 'I don't want to end up like an old bachelor on my own going down to Lisdoonvarna.;;' 'I definitely think in a couple of years down the road I would like children, but in a good few years time.'

Money came into the decision about when to marry: 'before I get married I would want to have a really good nest egg set up.... that would be completely and utterly stupid to get married without some bit of security. .... some sort of financial backing behind you.' The approach to of the male welding and production trainees to marriage is very practical. 'As they see it :if you have no job you got no money so how could you get married and buy a house'. There is issue of money for a marriage: 'A wedding is around £6,000 and all that carry on- you are talking about getting a good job to get that kind of money together.' Indeed one of them goes a step further and says: 'With some women, without me having a job it would probably be a one night stand thing anyway'.

Money comes into the decision to have children to an even greater extent: 'if you have kids you have to give them everything. Well not give them everything but you know give them the best chances available so I think you need money for that, of course money is not everything but it is a hell of a lot'. They see having children without having a job as 'crazy'. As the retail sales trainees see it:'You would want to be able to, I don't know, if you are having a couple of kids, you would

want to be able to bring them on a holiday or whatever, you would want to be able to not just provide the bare essentials.’ There would ‘have to be a good time for having children because the responsibility of having a child means that it is for life.....your son or daughter is for life and you have to take care of them for the rest of your life.’ Interestingly they define a secure job as where ‘you have a contract every few years rather than every six month (Lewis and Smithson, 1997). The computerised network trainees felt that the time to have children was in the mid to late 20s ‘because you have had time, you are on your career path you know and you have that sorted out and you are probably married and that. ‘. Others stressed stability: ‘You wouldn’t want to have kids anyway until you are settled down and you have a house and maybe you have bought it or are renting it and intend to stay there.’

As the young men who were hotel managers saw it children ‘did not fit in with the plans for the overall picture at the moment’: a good time to have children was ‘around thirty when you are kind of settled and your career is stable. I would say thirtyish myself’. As they see it a fairly newly married couple who aren’t in fairly solid jobs shouldn’t have kids.’ Like the male computerised accounts trainees, the hotel managers see it the best thing is to defer having children until you are a bit up the career ladder first. One of the hotel managers noted that: ‘I just dont think the two go together , to be honest a high flying executive doesn’t go well with family life’. As they see it ‘We can choose to work the long hours, get up the career ladder, earn lots of money and live that lifestyle if we want or we can chose to take a different job and have a comfortable lifestyle and relax a bit more and have a good time’. There was no reference to this lifestyle facilitating increased participation in child care. As they saw it they ‘would have a choice- you dont have to work the long hours if you dont want to work’. Implicitly they saw no need for the system to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family.

One of them noted that the time to have children did not depend on them and hinted at the female power within the family: ‘I dont think it depends on your own situation. I think it more or less depends on your wife’s situation as well’. ‘It doesn’t matter what you want . It is when she wants to have them- when she wants to have a job and she doesn’t want kids then that is it’. ‘

### **3. Payment by the State to enable women to stay at home full time; crèches etc.**

As the young hotel managers saw it the State has a responsibility to single women with children because: 'It goes back to the whole family thing. The stable environment; the raising of children.....The State pays the wife in the absence of the father'. They were ambivalent about what they saw as the consequences of this: 'their outlook on life is different. Thirty years ago their mothers would have got married at seventeen or eighteen and had kids and that would have been their lives. Their husband would have supported them and that was it. But nowadays if they have a family or get pregnant the State is supporting them not the husband and that is the problem.'

The computer network trainees thought that: 'They should get support from the State. Just working at home means that they don't get the chance to make money for themselves .....they do all the work'. One of the older computer network trainees suggested that: 'if they were working at home ... say if they paid such and such an amount that is really great, then you can go off and spend that rather than a child's allowance, you have to spend it on their books and stuff like that. They should provide something ... rather than just giving you a family allowance. You might feel a bit guilty in spending something like that on yourself.'

Some favoured 'Getting the state to provide more services rather than cash'... I do think that they do actually pay them too much I think if they were given a government crèche at a reduced rate'. Others noted that: 'If you look at countries like France they have excellent crèche facilities provided by the State whereas in Ireland they don't'; 'I think a crèche to help bring them out and for people who can't actually come out of the home they should be paid an allowance and made feel that they are doing a job as well.' The retail sales trainees saw the State as having a role to play -especially where they are the only parent looking after the children: 'they can't exist unless the state does something;' 'they are taking an excellent responsibility, they really are trying to raise a family on their own, it is a very hard thing to do, so I think that they do definitely deserve something- Particularly if they are working at the same time, they do need an incentive then.'

A young male Post graduate student also suggested that there should 'preferably' be financial support for mothers who decide that they don't want to work: 'preferably yes-....You encourage more family values by encouraging women to go back to their traditional roles'. However he concluded that 'financially there is not a hope I would say. That would break the government'. The male welding and production trainees also thought that: 'The state should give something - but we are only kidding ourselves even thinking of it'.

## **Summary**

What emerges from the focus groups with women is that they by and large and to varying degrees see caring for children as a very important job and one which requires a great deal of time and effort from the mother. They would like more help from men but as they see it this is incompatible with men's pride and sensitivity as regards being the breadwinner. Indeed there is a suggestion that they themselves would not feel comfortable with a house husband - partly because they have implicitly adopted the male perspective on it. For the most part they do not seem to positively embrace motherhood - but see it as inevitable and as something to be deferred. They dream of the State supporting them while they look after their children full time. Realistically however they brace themselves for what they can see will be an exhausting life style.

The trends which emerged in the focus groups involving the men were in some ways very different. They strongly affirmed a need to be breadwinners, although some of them suggested that it was no longer possible or realistic to think in terms of being the sole breadwinner. Amongst many of these men there was a very strong desire to have children in the future- and there was a suggestion that they were keener to do so than the women. They were very much less enthusiastic than the women about the State providing support for women who chose to work full time in the home- although some saw it as a way of encouraging women to return to the home. Yet they were ambivalent about it - the implicit suggestion being that it effectively replaced them as breadwinners.

Thus it is clear that both the young men and the young women are very much remaining the existing social and cultural parameters and are seeking individualised solutions to the problem of reconciling work and family. In this situation change in the employment structure is unlikely. Rather, since what is really a structural problem is defined as an individual problem- there are inevitable implications as regards divorce (now available in Ireland); personal stress - and of course continuing falls in family size. Only if and when these 'adjustments' appear to be unacceptable will structural attempts be made to resolve what is a structural problem.

**Table 1 Women's Labour Force Participation rates classified by age and marital status (ILO Definitions)**

Age	Total	Married	Single
15-19	18%	26%	18%
<b>20-24</b>	67%	57%	68%
<b>25-34</b>	71%	63%	85%
35-44	56%	52%	80%
45-54	42%	37%	73%
55-59	29%	25%	55%
60-64	17%	14%	36%
65 and over	3%	3%	6%
Overall	41%	41%	50%

CSO (1997B ) :55



**Table 2 Couples classified by work situation 1986-96 ( 000s- )**

<b>Work Situation</b>	<b>1986 %(N)</b>	<b>1991 %(N)</b>	<b>1996 %(N)</b>
Both at work	16%(108)	22%(148)	32%(227)
Only the man at work	53%(355)	47%(320)	39%(277)
Only the woman at work	3%(22)	4%(26)	4%(31.5)
Neither at work	27%(182)	27%(180)	24.5%(174)
Total	99%(667)	100%(674)	99.5%(710)

CSO (1997A)Table 7

**Table 3 Labour force Participation of mothers by number of dependent children**

	1991	1996
	%	%
Number of Dependent children		
One	33%	43%
Two	30%	43%
Three or more	22%	33%
All Mothers	26%	37%

CSO (1997A):8

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