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## “A fine old time”: feminist print journalism in the 1970s

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### ABSTRACT

In 1970’s Ireland, a number of feminist activists became the editors of the women’s pages of the national daily newspapers. Their work radically changed women’s access to the role of journalist as well as fundamentally altering the normative perspective applied to news stories. These women introduced “new journalism” to Ireland, writing about issues in the private rather than the public sphere and doing so from an explicitly feminist point of view. These female editors inhabited a workspace and culture that was heavily masculine, but they negotiated bias and sometimes outright discrimination in order to change the gendered nature of Irish print media. In so doing, these women offered a new social understanding of women’s place in news journalism and in Irish society more broadly.

### KEYWORDS

Journalism; feminism; newspapers; work culture; gender

### Introduction

Writing on the women’s movement in Ireland in the 1970s, Rose observes that “the real revolutionaries in this decade and those who sparked the initial enthusiasm for an end to discrimination against women were journalists ...”<sup>1</sup>. In the late 1960s, a number of feminist women infiltrated the ranks of Irish journalism as editors of the women’s pages of national newspapers. Young women in their twenties, Mary Maher, Mary Kenny and Mary McCutcheon, all future members of the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement (IWLM), ran the women’s pages on the national dailies and for the first time in Irish print media women journalists covered controversial issues such as unmarried mothers, deserted wives, equal pay and contraception, from an explicitly feminist viewpoint. Predictably, the letters of complaint flooded their desks throughout the decade. Nonetheless, the work of these journalists meant that Irish women were given the forum and words with which to begin debates about the nature and extent of their oppression in Irish society.

As these women journalists changed the language of social experience in Ireland, so too they changed understandings of the working world of women in Irish newsrooms. The labour history of female journalists is a dimension of the history of Irish media that has largely been ignored to date by academic studies.<sup>2</sup> Most media historians have failed to centralise or problematise the role that women played in the evolution of Irish media. Moreover, the women’s own accounts of their careers and contributions have not been foregrounded adequately in academic contexts. Equally importantly, media analysts have neglected the case

of Irish women's explicitly feminist involvement in journalism, and so have failed to explore whether or not this influenced participation and engagement of women in media labour. It is to these lacunae in our knowledge of women's role in Irish print media that this article is addressed.

The feminist backdrop in which these women entered journalism was that a number of different women's groups were active in addressing various types of social problems in Ireland in the late 1960s and 1970s. The Irish Countrywomen's Association, founded in 1910, was concerned with standards of living in rural Ireland and adopted an educational approach to achieve improvements in quality of life for women.<sup>3</sup> The Irish Housewives Association, founded in 1942, was a largely middle-class group that was focused on issues of poverty and women's welfare and mainly campaigned by petitioning state authorities for support.<sup>4</sup> Along with the Widow's Association and the Women Graduates' Association, these campaigned for the establishment of the Commission on the Status of Women in 1970.<sup>5</sup> The IWLM, founded in 1970, was relatively less moderate in its demands and less socially "respectable" in its membership and its methods of campaigning. Its approach was different, in that it did not petition the state directly but rather took an intrinsically mediated approach by directing the media from within and by very actively and intentionally using print, radio and television to further their cause. In that regard, the IHA and ICA were wary of the IWLM because they believed that the approach they adopted would generate backlash against other equality campaigns that were taking a more corporatist approach.<sup>6</sup>

All of these groups can be understood as feminist in the broad sense that they campaigned for greater gender equality in Irish society, but they were very diverse in their composition, in their objectives and in their methodologies. No one group can be lionised or presented as the definitive version of Irish feminism. Nor does this article claim to offer an objective account of feminism as a social movement in Ireland.<sup>7</sup> Rather the article looks at the participation of a number of journalists, not in the social change wrought by feminist groups, but in the change that occurred in media work and representation as a result of their lives as journalists in the late 1960s and 1970s. In that activist context, a number of female journalists who were also members of the IWLM recognised women's subordination as an extrinsic feature of a social system and challenged inequality in society, but at the same time they altered the labour trajectory of women in journalism as will be detailed further below.

The media industry of the 1960s–1970s experienced other systemic changes, in addition to gender reform. As Morash notes "a tectonic plate shifted in the Irish public sphere" with the advent of television in the early 1960s, he proposes that "If there is a single quality that characterises Irish media culture in this period, it is expansion".<sup>8</sup> Horgan also notes that "old-fashioned and complacent ownership and management systems ... (were) reformed or broken up as a more aggressive and modern form of capitalism took shape. New titles were appearing; the influence of the UK media was becoming a subject of debate ...".<sup>9</sup> Into that crucible of wider social and media industry change, a number of women workers made significant impacts to the gender regime of media industries as will be outlined in detail below. However, the article does not claim to examine all Irish media forms. Women journalists did also participate in the production of feminist radio and television programmes such as *Women Today* and *The Women's Programme*. However, the former was broadcast in 1979 and the latter during the 1980s and so a thorough examination of gender dynamics across all media is beyond the scope of this analysis, which focuses specifically on women print journalists in the late 1960s and 1970s.

To that end, the article examines first, how the women engaged with the normatively masculine work processes, practices and culture of print production in order to gain entry into and sustain careers as journalists. Secondly, it does this by privileging the voices of the women journalists themselves, articulating their views on the contribution they made to Irish media and examining how they perceived themselves. These views are sourced through published memoirs, biographies and letters, newspaper articles, interviews and other personal communications. Thirdly, a key argument is that it was an explicitly feminist perspective, shared by a number of female writers, reporters and editors that motivated them to create greater gender equality in Irish newspaper content throughout the 1970s but the article also questions whether the women did manage ultimately to shift the gendered structural work context of print production to create a more “feminist” media or were they simply co-opted into an industry that remained male dominated.

### Getting in and getting on – women journalists

Gendered production processes are created in media industries through allocation of different types of roles to women and men, where they receive differential rewards and promotion opportunities. Gender also affects the routines of newspaper production, because it shapes the perspective applied to media content and expectations about the behaviour of staff. These production processes and role expectations over time form a gendered culture within newspapers that privileges men while excluding women. In the 1970s, a number of women journalists challenged the status quo of role allocations, the routines of production and the culture of newspaper production, and caused a number of shifts in the gendered assumptions that underlay newspaper work in 1970s Ireland.

Gendered identity is usually intrinsically linked to labour practices through the allocation of roles within a production process.<sup>10</sup> In the late 1960s, women were excluded from most of the roles required to produce newspapers. The printing staff was exclusively male as was the sub-editing and backroom staff. Only copy-taking, which involved typing reports read by journalists over the phone, was predominantly done by women. Moreover, the allocation of the role of journalist to a woman was rare.<sup>11</sup> To even get into journalism women had to overcome the first obstacle, which was a recruitment process that relied on male networks to suggest candidates and which usually occurred in the almost exclusively male setting of the pub. Milne notes that “Most Independent Newspaper employees were recruited until as recently as the 1980s through family and friendship networks”.<sup>12</sup> As most Independent employees were male it was less likely women would be suggested as possible candidates for journalism work.<sup>13</sup> Although the Independent was a more conservative workplace than the other newspapers, the pub was very central both to recruitment and to the networks that sustained everyday journalistic work such as accessing sources and stories. “The Oval was the main haunt of not only the newspapers’ staff but also those who wanted to network with them including people from the worlds of advertising, public relations and business”.<sup>14</sup> At *The Irish Times*, recruitment was also conducted in the pub “as was Donal Foley’s preference” (see note 37). The problem for women with this “recruitment practice” was that their access to pubs was constrained by gender. Women generally were expected to frequent the lounge rather than the bar and were expected to behave in a “ladylike manner” but journalists were “expected to go to the same pubs as their male colleagues ... and talk and drink with journalists from other papers”.<sup>15</sup> With regard to their presence in the pub, as Stopper

documents “Being in the newspaper business, especially if you were a woman, was a bit risqué at the time”.<sup>16</sup> Women journalists had to be willing to overcome the social barrier of gender expectations in order to even begin to access situations in which they might get work. Kenny notes her own career began “by hanging around the pubs that newspapermen frequented in an attempt to pick up a bit of freelance work”.<sup>17</sup>

Once in the role, women were conscious that they were again breaking social gender norms by working in print media. As Mary Kenny puts it “Journalism certainly would not have been mentioned at my convent school as a career choice”.<sup>18</sup> In the late 1960s, women were largely absent from newsrooms. As Geraldine Kennedy observes

I went to the Irish Times as a junior reporter, and I was the only woman in the newsroom at the time. The only other woman doing news full time was Renagh Holohan in the Belfast office. All the famous women were around like Mary Maher, Nell McCafferty, Maeve Binchy ... but they were in the Features area all the time, and I didn't want to do that.<sup>19</sup>

In the early 1970s, journalism was not thought of as a likely career for women, if they did enter news production it was typically as a copytaker or feature writer and only very exceptionally as a news journalist. Nell McCafferty, commenting on a job offer from *The Irish Times* observed “I was dazed. Now I had a guaranteed job for life. I had never conceived of such a thing ... Women got married, or became teachers or both ...”<sup>20</sup>. She further recounts that on her first day at the office the deputy news editor “clearly did not know what to do with me. So he brought me across to what he called the ‘Women’s Page’ desk ... I sat there doing nothing and the clattering of typewriters, by dozens of people, the majority of them men, made things worse ...”<sup>21</sup>. Being confident and assertive, and willing to challenge power in the 1970s, as journalists are required to do, was incompatible with what it meant to be a woman in Ireland in a decade when 96% of women worked unpaid in the home.<sup>22</sup> As McCafferty notes “Wives who had paid work constituted a mere 9 per cent of the female labour force. In that regard, most of our little group were freaks – married, with children, and with jobs to boot.”<sup>23</sup>

The women understood the reason for their general exclusion from journalism to lie with a sexist prejudice against women that was very normative in Irish society at the time. Kenny observes that “All kinds of excuses are made; the sub-editors say that a woman would ‘upset’ proceedings (though it’s not at all clear quite how)” (*The Irish Press*, December 4, 1971). Kenny notes that these “rules” of male dominance were not “written into either management agreements or union rules – it is just an accepted convention – a barrier of male prejudice which is maintained on the vaguest and yet most unyielding grounds” (*The Irish Press*, December 4, 1971). Kennedy concurs with the vagueness of the rationale for barriers to women doing the work of a journalist. She notes that as the *Time*’s only female news journalist she was prevented from participating fully in the role, which was justified by vague reference to legislation that was unrelated to media work. She explains,

I wanted to do night-town, which meant you were on duty from 10 pm until 3 or 4 in the morning and it meant that you made all the calls, the decisions ... But under some industrial relations legislation they wouldn't let me do it. Women couldn't work past 11 pm. I was sort of surprised at that. I think it was aimed at women working in factories, rather than journalists ...<sup>24</sup>

Kennedy explains how women nonetheless managed to work their way more fully into the role of the journalist by seizing opportunities as they arose and by defying gendered expectations. She elaborates that chances to expand her role sometimes arose from practical necessity.

There was the siege in Moasterevin, a Dutch industrialist Tiede Herrema (was kidnapped by the IRA in 1975) ... So I asked if I could go down there and they said it was too dangerous and not suitable for women, but then the thing went on for so long that they ran out of reporters and I had to go down ...<sup>25</sup>

Oftentimes, the opportunity to more fully engage in the role of journalist came from Kennedy's own willingness to take on a risk rather than being allocated hard stories by editors.

The other thing that they didn't want me to do was at the time of the Dublin bombings in 1973, I heard the first bombing and I said to the news editor – can I go out? And he said "Don't it's too dangerous". But when the second bomb went off I just went myself, without any authorisation. So in a way if you wanted to do things you could do them eventually but you had to make your way and be opportunistic.<sup>26</sup>

Kennedy must be credited with having pushed for more responsibility as a journalist but was not always successful. Kennedy recounts

I applied in the mid 70s for a job as industrial correspondent I had been standing into the job unofficially but Douglas Gageby took the view at that time that Trade Unions wouldn't deal with a woman and that you wouldn't get the stories, I was very disappointed about that.<sup>27</sup>

*The Irish Times* was undoubtedly a conducive work setting for women, as will be elaborated further below, but it was far from uncompromisingly liberal in its treatment of its female journalists.

A further significant challenge for women journalists in sustaining their roles was that doing the job created gendered role-dissonance for women. In the 1970s, women were faced with accommodating the sometimes-conflicting demands of their roles as women and their roles as journalists. Then as now, people expected women to "be communal, manifesting traits such as kindness, concern for others, warmth, and gentleness (while) men (were) agentic, manifesting traits such as confidence, aggressiveness, and self-direction".<sup>28</sup> Because men dominated in the newspaper industry in the 1960s and 1970s, stereotypes about journalists generally resembled stereotypes of men more than of women. Women had to try to resolve these tensions. Kenny speaks to the tightrope that women walked between acceptability as workers and their condemnation as women.

It is so easy to dismiss a woman on the grounds that she is "hysterical" or "truculent" if she gets into the hair of any of the people she works with. Anything she does which is out of the ordinary can be condemned on the grounds that she is that unreasonable creature, a woman. She'll be called "unstable", "frustrated" or even "menopausal" on the slightest whim (*The Irish Press*, December 4, 1971).

Kennedy similarly speaks of this challenge of juggling gender and journalism and her concern with acceptability amongst her male peers.

I was anxious at the time that if I was doing news that I'd be doing it on the same terms as the men, in other words the long hours and at night, that sort of thing. I fought for that so that the men wouldn't resent me.<sup>29</sup>

Much as Eagly notes with regard to men and women in leadership roles, so too with journalism in the 1970s, women are presented as somewhat "unnatural" in the journalist role, while men are more readily accepted in it.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the barrier to entry created by informally masculine recruitment networks, prejudice, the dearth of women in the newsroom and the challenges of role dissonance for women journalists, nonetheless women did thrive as journalists at the Times and the Press.

This was in part due to the arbitration of male editors who created a conducive workplace in which the women flourished. Donal Foley, news editor of *The Irish Times*, had “a particular penchant for identifying female talent so the paper had significantly more women journalists than was the case in any of the other newspaper groups”.<sup>31</sup> In 1967, it was the male editor who suggested a dedicated “women’s page with serious articles, scathing social attacks and biting satire” to a staff reporter, Mary Maher, who was eventually persuaded and *Women First* began.<sup>32</sup> The objective of the women’s pages was to create a new section that highlighted news affecting women, but which would also broaden the market for the newspaper by attracting an explicitly younger and female reader by engaging with the feminist movement and by challenging conventional mores and airing controversial opinions.<sup>33</sup> Maher describes this appointment as “an incitement to insurrection ... Donal Foley and Douglas Gageby (the editor) were a pair of adventurous souls merely doing what they did best, innovating like fury, shaking up complacent journalism”.<sup>34</sup> The other national dailies, *The Irish Press* with Mary Kenny as Women’s Editor and the *Irish Independent*, with Mary McCutcheon, followed suit within months “creating new women’s pages staffed by restless young women yearning to startle the world ...”<sup>35</sup>

The main reason for the change to greater participation of women in journalism was not entirely derived from the editor’s support for gender equality, it was also based on a business model. Decision-making editors such as Foley knew that women’s liberation and feminism would sell papers and having young feminist women editing the women’s pages was an obvious asset. Nonetheless the editors were supportive of women journalists. Foley observes that “Women reporters were appointed on an equality basis with men and at one period their numbers were exactly half and half”.<sup>36</sup> The role of editors such as Foley as sponsors of a new feminist journalism is vital and clearly acknowledged by the women he recruited. Gillespie notes that the Times writers had “absolute press freedom with Douglas Gageby and Donal Foely’s support”.<sup>37</sup> Maeve Binchy, *The Irish Times Women First* editor from 1968–1972 comments

*The Irish Times* I joined in 1968 was a very fine place where women were already highly regarded ... every one of us felt that we were there by right ... and not because there was some niche that a woman could fill.<sup>38</sup>

Maher contextualises that freedom somewhat more realistically, noting that the news editor Donal Foley still retained seniority and oversight over her as editor of the women’s page. He did “supervise and, let us be honest, direct the first editor, myself”.

At the *Independent*, Mary Kenny also acknowledges the sponsorship she received from her editor, Tim Pat Coogan who gave the notoriously unpredictable Kenny freedom to print what she wished. As Stopper documents

There was a period where no senior editors scanned her pages before they went to print, so that they read her page for the first time along with the public. That seems like a huge amount of trust for the editors to place in someone whom they had reason to be so wary of ...<sup>39</sup>

The endeavours of the women journalists were explicitly supported by male editors who were of a journalistic sensibility that believed that “No cows were sacred and reporters and writers were given their heads to express the more unorthodox views”.<sup>40</sup>

Elgy Gillespey describes the effect of the recruitment of so many women to Irish journalism. “Gageby had unleashed an unpredictable, intuitive and wholly original intelligence inside the newsroom that resulted in a feminist army of sorts”.<sup>41</sup> Commenting on Mary



Maher's editorship, Levine credits her with beginning a gender "revolution".<sup>42</sup> The sum effect was that "Irish women journalists came to change the seventies".<sup>43</sup>

However, despite their increased numbers in the ranks of journalists, there was still much less chance in the 1970s of women feeding through the "pipeline" to senior decision-making roles in news organisations. "Editorial jobs that offered the chance of overtime tended to be in areas where women journalists did not work ... The appointment of women to executive positions within the staff was slow, to say the least".<sup>44</sup> As Eagly notes with regard to leadership roles, which applies here to the case of the editor's role in news production, tension arises between communal qualities that are expected of women and agentic qualities expected in leaders. "They often experience disapproval for their more masculine behaviours, such as asserting clear-cut authority over others, as well as for their more feminine behaviours, such as being especially supportive of others".<sup>45</sup> As Kenny opines

So it's the old, old story. Women can get into journalism all right. But to get ahead ... they just have to be much, much better. But that's nothing remarkable. Women know perfectly well that only five per cent of the whole sex can succeed at anything in their own right and that's how it is (*The Irish Press*, December 4, 1971)

When they did get ahead into editorial roles, the women demonstrated a clear capacity for leadership. At *The Irish Press* many of Kenny's journalists found her great to work for. "She inspired confidence, knew exactly what was wanted and was delighted when it arrived. She seemed to draw female talent out of the woodwork ..."<sup>46</sup> It is all the more remarkable that Kenny worked specifically for the conservative *Irish Press* "unofficial organ of the government".<sup>47</sup> Interestingly when Kenny moved to the *London Evening Standard* she did not fare so well or confidently in a leadership role "since many of her staff were older men and didn't seem to know what she was about" which accents the relatively liberal context for women of the Irish newspapers at this time.<sup>48</sup>

Fascinatingly, few of the radical feminist journalists seem to have been conscious or overtly concerned with any form of bias or discrimination in their own employment and did not often see that they were in fact blocked from progressing into senior roles. They generally expressed enthusiasm about participating in an industry where they believed they were treated equally to men. Sweetman who worked for Mary Kenny at *The Irish Press*, covering many of the same stories as the men, stated "I didn't feel discriminated against ... I felt I was running the world. I guess I felt really privileged".<sup>49</sup> Mary Maher "found that she was treated more equally to the men at the *Times* than she had been at the (Chicago) *Tribune*".<sup>50</sup> Kennedy notes that gender was a non-issue in her promotion to Political Correspondent at the Sunday Tribune in 1980.

It was fine, absolutely grand, nobody stood in my way. I was the first woman Political Correspondent and I was in the lobby of Dáil Eireann and all that and I was the only woman, all my colleagues were men, and it was grand.<sup>51</sup>

However, the fact remains that no women worked on the back desk of any newspapers, they still did not work as sub-editors and no senior decision-making roles in Irish journalism were held by women until decades later. On the issue of gender equality at work, the women seemed to suffer a failure of feminist analysis and were generally unaware that they themselves were experiencing any kind of gendered disadvantage. Even when Mary Maher had to end her tenure as editor of *Women First* because she got married she thought this cultural practice of discrimination seemed "perfectly reasonable at the time".<sup>52</sup> In fact Maher claims "I was delighted that I could go on working despite my changed status – many women



couldn't ..."<sup>53</sup>. Gratitude for a conditional inclusion into the boys club, that was relatively rare for Irish working women at the time, seems to have superseded the feminists own radical analysis of their working lives.

Maher's delight at getting to keep her job after marriage seems like a counter-intuitive position for a radical feminist to adopt, but in the context of women's very marginal position in the world of work in Irish society it is at least logical. In 1970, in Ireland, 96 per cent of married women worked unpaid within the home.<sup>54</sup> Until 1974, women in public service, semi-state and banking jobs were required to resign their posts when they married. "The nurses, teachers, bank employees and such who resigned were often immediately rehired in a permanent-temporary capacity, with consequent reduction in wages, opportunities for promotion, and pension rights."<sup>55</sup> As McCafferty observes, this principle was cultural and was followed even where it was not legally imposed.<sup>56</sup> The politics underlying women's labour conditions were discussed in 1973 in policy documents such as the *Report of the Commission on the Status of Women*.<sup>57</sup> The subsection *A Proper Place* even received a submission on women's participation in work from the Irish Women's Liberation Group, of which all of the women's pages editors were founding members. Moreover the women's pages reported a "call to arms" on the Commissions findings on women and work.<sup>58</sup> But there is very little evidence, apart from an article from Kenny (*The Irish Press*, December 4, 1971), that the radical feminist journalists resisted or objected to either formal or normative discriminatory practices that regulated and limited their own working lives as journalists, either in terms of promotions for women into sub-editing or on women leaving work on marriage. Their gaze regarding work and inequality was largely outward rather than examining their own house in that regard.

In summary, the gendering of the role of journalist is a subtle structural principle enacted in the labour practices and culture of a community of workers, both men and women, which reproduces traditional ideas about gender and work and about women's possible place and position in that work. In the mid-1960s, the entry of a number of women into Irish newspapers began to break the mould of how journalism could be inhabited by women. They moved from a marginal role in features production to one that was more normatively journalistic. By the late 1960s, women had gone from being a rarity in the newsroom to holding editorships on controversial sections, the women's pages, and so had somewhat shifted public understandings of women and journalism. However, there are some contradictions with defining their actions as entirely feminist. While the women created new precedents by assuming roles as journalists, they did this in the context of becoming "one of the boys" in the newsroom or adapting to a masculine work culture rather than causing any radical shift in the gendering of the newsroom. The women did not demand that they be included in decision-making roles such as subediting or on the back-desk and they did not seek to retain their editorships after marriage. In many ways, their feminist "revolutionary" ambitions were limited to some inclusions in news production but none that would disturb the overall organisational power structures of the newspapers. Despite these shortcomings, there is no doubt that the women did manage to foster a golden era of female journalism when they changed what it meant to be a woman journalist. Moreover, it can be argued that through their writing and specifically its feminist point of view, they also changed what it meant to be a woman in 1970s Ireland.

## New points of view: a feminist journalism

In the 1960s, the dominant point of view in Irish print media was still male. Later in the decade, the advent of women writers, examining social issues from a radically new point of view, emphatically changed the subject matter and content of Irish journalism. The practice of journalism – in the forms of the allocation of assignments, the angles or perspective that is applied to stories and the dynamics of teamwork – are all experienced differently by men and women journalists, with masculine perspectives and emphases usually dominant. This normative male point of view “refers especially to a vision of life (therefore, also of information) where public and private spheres are completely separated and the relevant things are the ones that take place in the public arena”.<sup>59</sup> What was normal for Irish journalism in terms of stories, angles and the perspective applied to news content changed significantly in the late 1960s with the inclusion of explicitly feminist women on the staff of the dailies. For the first time, the private lives and experiences of women effectively became the issues of mainstream news. As Gillespie puts it, the writers of the various women’s pages “penned the ripping reads of the day- first-person entertainments exposing shame, scandal, fear, misery, and abuse. The New Journalism had arrived, and we put ourselves in every story”.<sup>60</sup> Not only did women’s issues become news content but the women’s subjective analysis and lived experience of those issues came to the fore in Ireland’s daily newspapers. As Mary Maher puts it “On the features pages, with a byline, you were allowed to hold forth. Advocacy journalism. And we held forth”.<sup>61</sup>

The kinds of subject matter that the new women’s journalism in the *Times* documented revolved around the unequal and marginal position of women in Irish society. As McCafferty summarises

The Constitution reinforced the concept that women’s rightful place was at the kitchen sink ... The situation for unmarried women with children, or widows with children, or deserted wives with children was bleak. There was no welfare payment for an unmarried mother ... The stay-at-home married mother was totally dependent on her husband. The children’s allowance was officially paid to the father ...<sup>62</sup>

McCafferty wrote regularly about all of these issues many of which were publicly discussed for the first time. June Levine similarly testifies to the beginning of a “new type of journalism for women, which was the reportage of subjective reality rather than the external happenings of the day”.<sup>63</sup> Maher comments on how the women’s pages changed journalism in terms of content that explicitly mapped the social context of discrimination and exclusion that affected women. “We wrote about the issues that worried and angered women privately: the miserable treatment of widows and deserted wives, educational and job barriers, unequal pay, and constantly and indignantly, the ban on contraception”.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, their stories did not go unnoticed. The result of this shift in journalistic perspective, content matter and emphasis impacted at a national level. The Women’s page at the *Irish Times* “became so controversial and downright readable that it was often the biggest event of a day”.<sup>65</sup>

Crucially, the women’s pages did not just document sociological issues and the journalists subjective responses to them, their writing was also distinct and unique in terms of constituting a form of media campaigning for social change that was demanded in explicitly feminist terms. Christina Murphy comments on the change observed in Irish newspapers in the 1970s: “Women’s pressure groups and lobbies have made women’s affairs such a focus of public and political attention that it has become legitimate news in its own right”.<sup>66</sup>

Effectively, the women writers used their positions as journalists to very intentionally further the cause of the IWLM, which coincided with and cross pollinated the women's feminist campaign to change the nature of journalistic output. The women used their own and other's personal stories not as an end in themselves but as a mechanism to connect social problems to specific gendered social systems that needed to change. A major contribution of women journalists in Ireland in the 1970s in the national paper's women's pages was that they made women's liberation explicitly a subject of public discourse. In terms of the subject matter covered, the writers were feminist but more importantly through their campaign for social justice and change for women in Ireland they generated a form of explicitly feminist journalism in an overtly political sense.

Maher's involvement with *The Irish Times* women's pages was not only aimed at changing people's perceptions of what constituted women's stories, it was also explicitly engaged as a form of feminist activism. From cookery and crafts, Maher, Kenny and Cummins shifted attention to social and crucially feminist issues covering previously forbidden topics such as sexuality, contraception, domestic violence, abortion and frequently discussing women's liberation itself. Her journalism was, as Foley commented, a form of "placard waving".<sup>67</sup> In their writing, McCafferty notes the intersections between journalism and feminism. Within a month of the first meeting of the IWLM, "we had turned over all the women's pages in the national newspapers to the cause of liberation".<sup>68</sup> Maher comments "the women's pages were an open forum for the campaign ... it was certainly helpful to the cause that those of us organising the crusade had such prominent platforms".<sup>69</sup> The women breached another convention of journalism, that the writer remain detached and objective about the content of stories and instead they issued polemic and campaigned for change. All of this was done openly and "without guile". Maher moreover acknowledges the importance of the male editors and employers in the context of facilitating a form of journalism that breached the conventions of the day in terms of subject matter, perspective and politicised practice. Commenting on the women's pages editors involvement in the infamous contraceptive train to Belfast in May 1971 Maher notes "we broke the journalists' code of loyalty and not one of us tipped off an editor beforehand" after the fact however she points out that "we never had a word of reproach from our various editors".<sup>70</sup> While the women claimed that they were loyal to their employers, undoubtedly the organisational context of the Times and Press were fundamentally supportive of the women and vital to sustaining the campaign.<sup>71</sup>

October of 1970 saw *The Irish Times* devoting the entire week to women's liberation and the *Irish Independent* likewise covered the nascent movement. Mary Kenny observed the changed nature of Irish journalism at that juncture and it's centrality to a new form of feminism. "The days of the women's page or magazine programme devoted exclusively to knitting patterns and recipes have gone. Problems of sex and marriage, politics and education, religion and social reform are now the dominant themes" (*The Irish Press*, March 2, 1970). Maher similarly comments on the synergy that was generated for the women's liberation movement by the creation of women's pages across a number of national newspapers.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, a coherence emerged across the titles in terms of the style, organisation and objective of the women's new style of journalism. The women's journalism and feminist campaigning shared a connective tissue that worked to the benefit of both. The papers frequently published on the same women's liberation topic or campaign at a similar time, a direct result of the interactions, networks, co-operation and concerted effort of the three editors of the women's pages a collaborative approach that again breached the normative

protocol of newspaper production at the time. The media context for newspaper production in the 1960s was an important factor in allowing this type of cross-title interaction. There was a dearth of competition for readership in Irish newspapers in the 1960s and 1970s. Readers tended to devote themselves to a given publication rather than shift consumption patterns with changing content. This fact facilitated the three women's pages editors in co-operating and publishing what was in effect the culmination of their shared meetings, deliberations and arguments and it facilitated their editors in allowing them to do so, secure in the knowledge that the mainstay of their readership would remain loyal to their preferred title.<sup>73</sup>

In addition to changing the content and organisation of news production within the main Irish titles, the women's participation in journalism also changed their own career trajectories as they eventually infiltrated previously male dominated roles and became if not subeditors or editors at least they became more "mainstream" as journalists. The women became successful and in demand for news writing outside of the women's pages. They generated change in the gendering of workers across coverage of politics, economics and education through their participation as reporters and features writers and through their presence in editorial meetings. Many of the journalists writing for the women's pages went on to cover politics, arts, economics and foreign beats.<sup>74</sup> Stopper comments that Mary Maher "covered the North, politics, health and the arts, the same topics to which the male journalists were also assigned and all areas in which she was interested".<sup>75</sup> Levine concurs "She was one of the first with whom the late Donal Foley, news-editor of *The Irish Times* broke the stereotype of women's journalism in Ireland. She was doing the same work as a male journalist".<sup>76</sup> Similarly describing what was unique in Nell McCafferty's work for *The Irish Times*, Levine asks "How many journalists before Nell had sat in the Districts Court or the Children's Courts reporting the process of law as it applied to the poor, the helpless and the hapless, as if it made sense?"<sup>77</sup>

## Conclusion: changing times

In summing up the impact of the new feminist journalism, Maher is circumspect and modest in her assessment of the impact wrought. "Whether what they've said has been totally worthwhile may be debated; but at least it was controversial, and that was a women's page first".<sup>78</sup> Christina Murphy comments that women's liberation grew from a "frowned-upon, suspect fringe" into an important "multi-pronged lobby" and in the process "pushed women's affairs out of the cosy confines of the women's page and onto the front pages of the newspapers where it belongs".<sup>79</sup> This comment is revealing in so far as it clearly confirms the hybridity of the women's journalistic and feminist objectives and practices but it also reveals a sense of ownership and authority regarding both their media work and feminist activism.

While the women did not manage to radically alter the still male-dominated organisational structures of newspapers, it is clear that they made huge gains in incorporating women into journalism and went some way towards making women as journalists and women's writing on women's issues more normative by the end of the 1970s. Far from being content with their singular, peripheral or "novel" status as journalists, as the women's pages became established and important, the women recognised that their writing mattered and their work as journalists could bring change by reaching a wide (and male) audience. For Maher this position was revealed on discovering that men too were reading *Women First* – "it was

clear we'd broken out of the ghetto".<sup>80</sup> Women's feminist journalism went mainstream as a result of the organisational context created by Irish titles in which female journalists thrived, as a result of individual women's willingness to breach social taboos to get into and stay in journalism and finally by the collaborative and cohesive context that was generated for campaigning and feminist journalism by the women's cross-title engagements with "women's lib". The final word goes to Maher who captures the uniqueness of what turned out to be a not since repeated golden era for women's journalism "The women's movement and the women's pages had lifted the lid on a lot of hidden Ireland ... We'd done our bit, and didn't we have a fine old time while we were at it?" (*The Irish Times*, March 27, 2009).

## Notes

1. Rose, *The Female Experience*, 8.
2. Morash, *History of the Media*; Horgan, *Irish Media: A History*.
3. Ferriter, *Mothers, Maidens and Myth*.
4. Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement*, 71–8.
5. Stopper, *Irish Women's Liberation Movement*, 128.
6. *Ibid.*, 128.
7. For same see Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement*.
8. Morash, *History of the Media*, 180.
9. Horgan, *Irish Media: A History*, 104.
10. Mayer, *Below the Line*; O'Brien, "Producing Television Reproducing Gender".
11. Kenny, *Something of Myself*, 15.
12. Whittaker, *Bright, Brilliant Days*.
13. O'Brien & Rafter, *Independent Newspapers: A History*, 147–153.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Stopper, *Mondays at Gaj's*, 40.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Kenny, *Something of Myself*, 16.
18. *Ibid.*, 15.
19. Kennedy, personal communication.
20. McCafferty, *Nell*, 190.
21. *Ibid.*, 131.
22. *Ibid.*, 201.
23. *Ibid.*, 202.
24. Kennedy, personal communication.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. Eagly, "Female Leadership Advantage", 4.
29. Kennedy, personal communication.
30. Eagly, "Female Leadership Advantage", 4.
31. James, *From the Margins*, 170.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Maher, personal communication.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*
36. Foley, *Three Villages: An Autobiography*, 96.
37. Gillespie, *Changing the Times*, 10.
38. Whittaker, *Bright, Brilliant Days*, 16.
39. Stopper, *Mondays at Gaj's*, 95.
40. Foley, *Three Villages: An Autobiography*, 96.

41. Gillespie, *Changing the Times*, 9.
42. O'Brien & Rafter, *Independent Newspapers: A History*, 148.
43. Gillespie, *Changing the Times*, 10.
44. O'Brien & Rafter, *Independent Newspapers: A History*, 152–3.
45. Eagly, "Female Leadership Advantage", 4.
46. Levine, *Sisters*, 117.
47. *Ibid.*, 119.
48. *Ibid.*, 125.
49. Stopper, *Mondays at Gaj's*, 161.
50. *Ibid.*, 34.
51. Kennedy, personal communication.
52. Maher, personal communication.
53. *Ibid.*
54. McCafferty, *Nell*, 201.
55. *Ibid.*, 202.
56. *Ibid.*
57. Stopper, 128.
58. *Ibid.*, 130.
59. Byerly & Ross, *Woman & Media*, 53.
60. Gillespie, *Changing the Times*, 9.
61. Stopper, *Mondays at Gaj's*, 44.
62. McCafferty, *Nell*, 203.
63. Levine, *Sisters*, 116.
64. Maher, personal communication.
65. Levine, *Sisters*, 116.
66. Gillespie, *Changing the Times*.
67. Whittaker, *Bright, Brilliant Days*, 94.
68. McCafferty, *Nell*, 203.
69. Maher, personal communication.
70. *Ibid.*
71. *Ibid.*
72. Stopper, *Mondays at Gaj's*, 36.
73. *Ibid.*, 43.
74. Gillespie, *Changing the Times*.
75. Stopper *Mondays at Gaj's*, 35.
76. Levine, *Sisters*, 137.
77. *Ibid.*, 204.
78. Gillespie, *Changing the Times*, 12.
79. *Ibid.*, 249.
80. Maher, personal communication.

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