

Investigating the ‘Irish’ Family

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“The family” has occupied a core position in policy and public debates about the common good and national identity formation in Ireland since the foundation of the State. The family, for instance, was afforded privileged mention and protection in the Irish Constitution of 1937. Under Article 41.1 the State promises to “protect the Family” and recognises it as having “inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law”. Women were accorded a very specific familial role in the State’s legal framework and the Constitution still states that “woman by her life within the home gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved”.

Given the pivotal role of the family in the social structure and religious ethos of the State historically, it is not surprising that it is still at the centre of social and political debate in the twenty-first century. Various individuals and interest groups in Irish society frequently argue for the preservation of what they view as the ideal form of marriage and family while others welcome and promote the emergence of more diverse and alternative family forms. Conflicting interest groups such as the Catholic Church, the women’s movement, the gay and lesbian movement, new right campaigns and institutes, media commentators and political actors continue to stimulate a vibrant traditional family values versus family diversity/libertarian discourse.

The passing of the Child and Family Relationships Bill (2014), a referendum on same sex marriage in May 2015 and continued controversies surrounding reproduction and childbirth (including in relation to abortions and maternal deaths, redress for symphysiotomy victims and ongoing issues concerning mother and baby homes) will undoubtedly unleash further robust debate in this arena in the coming years.

Irish society was considered to be a demographic outlier for much of the twentieth century and to have embraced more secular, European-wide values in personal and intimate life at a late stage. Divorce, for instance, was not legalised until a referendum on its prohibition was narrowly passed in 1995 and reproductive rights remains a contentious issue in Ireland in the aftermath of a clause inserted in the constitution in 1983 to protect the right to life of “the unborn”. At the same time, by the twenty-first century Ireland had a relatively high non-marital birth rate compared with a number of other European countries, women with young children were participating in the labour force in rapidly increasing numbers, homosexuality was decriminalised, cohabitation was in evidence alongside conventional marriage, contraception was legalised and accessible, and marital separation legislation had been introduced. At face value, it appeared that the family was undergoing a process of delayed but rapid transformation and modernisation and was gradually aligning with more secular European values and trends.

Ireland represents an interesting and challenging case study in the context of twenty-first century family life. A key contention in *The ‘Irish’ Family* is that Irish family patterns today are clearly converging closely to European trends in some arenas (for instance, the rate of non-marital births and the crude marriage rate, which was traditionally lower in Ireland for much of the twentieth century has recently converged towards the EU average) but maintaining a distinctive trend in others (the divorce rate remains low and the overall fertility rate is comparatively higher, for instance). There is therefore a complex tension between traditional values and modernity in Irish family life and in intimate relationships more generally understood.

The middle decades of the twentieth century have been described as a “golden age” for marriage and the nuclear family in Europe and the developed world. More people were married and married at a younger age than at any other time in the modern era. However, by the 1960s, previously accepted definitions of family, kinship, marriage and reproduction through the lens of the nuclear family were fundamentally challenged by the proliferation of more diverse expressions of family and personal life in western societies and the weakening of marriage as the primary route into family formation, sexual activity and procreation. The steep rise in the European divorce and re-marriage rates set in motion from the 1960s on have produced complex new sets of kinship relationships in the twenty-first century, such as one-parent families (which are mostly headed by women) and “reconstituted” or “blended” families. Official statistics show that increasing numbers of children in the West now adapt to and live with step-parents who may, for instance, also have previous children of their own, and post-divorce childhood has been coined an intrinsic feature of twenty-first century western families. Likewise, recent decades have witnessed a greater acceptance of gay partnerships and same sex families, evident in Ireland in the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993 and in the passing of the Civil Partnership and Obligations of Cohabitants Act 2010. New reproductive technologies, involving donor sperm and egg or surrogacy for example are also fundamentally challenging and changing the accepted relationship between family, biology and reproduction. Heterosexual marriage and biological reproduction no longer have a monopoly on family formation therefore and increasing numbers of children are born outside of marriage or live with non-biological stepparents. In some Northern European societies, cohabitation is an established alternative to marriage and more children are born outside than inside marriage. A further key trend is that, in general, the overall fertility rate in Europe has declined steeply in recent decades resulting in an ageing population and insufficient population replacement rate. Childlessness and one-person households also feature increasingly in European data. A search for new ideas and perspectives on twenty-first century families has accordingly emerged.

Where does Ireland fit in in relation to these trends? *The ‘Irish’ Family* draws on new empirical data and research to analyse a range of trends and issues. What has changed over time in Ireland and how does Ireland compare with other European societies in relation to key, recent trends in family life? For much of the twentieth century, Ireland was considered a demographic outlier in Europe and

the situation was quite distinctive. The key features of Ireland's social structure up to the 1960s were a class structure dominated by a large agricultural population, with the majority employed on "the land"; a rural profile and ethos; economic protectionism in the mid-century; high levels of emigration and overall population decline; and distinctive patterns in family and demography that broadly encompassed a late age of marriage, a high rate of non-marriage and a high marital fertility rate resulting in distinctly large families. A climate of censorship regarding sexual and intimate matters and social control, resulting in harsh treatment for women who had children outside of marriage and for children born into categories categorised as "deviant" was a further dominant feature of twentieth century Ireland.

However, by the 1960s new trends that coincided with economic modernisation policies and radicalising social movements were emerging in Irish society, including younger age of marriage, longer formal schooling of marriage partners and greater educational opportunities for women, and the increased involvement of the welfare state and the state in the family. In particular, an active and radical women's movement had mobilised extensively by the 1970s and questioned traditional family values as well as women's constitutionally defined primary role in society as mothers in the home. The right of women to access contraception and to engage in productive work outside as well as inside the home was vigorously campaigned for. For some commentators, the family itself was considered the core site of women's oppression in society, with marriage invariably considered a form of domestic and sexual slavery, in light of the resistance to legal contraceptives and lack of opportunities for women outside the home. "The Irish family" was about to enter into a period of significant social change and radical questioning, and analysts started to assess whether or not Irish family patterns were radically departing from tradition and converging closer to European norms or continuing to follow a distinctive path?

A detailed overview of changing trends in marriage, divorce, cohabitation, reproduction, sexualities, lone parenthood, gender, generations, migration and technology in Ireland is provided in *The 'Irish' Family*. Finola Kennedy has aptly stated that: "the story of family change in Ireland is both unique, and at the same time, similar to that of many other countries." The available data on Irish family life continues to present a mixed picture. In some arenas, current trends are corresponding more closely with European averages but in other areas the trends in Ireland continue to be distinct. In relation to divorce, cohabitation, the number of children living in one-parent households and the overall fertility rate, statistical trends in Ireland are not fully in line with European averages. Marital separation has undoubtedly increased in recent decades but Ireland still has one of the lowest divorce rates in Europe. Alternatives to traditional marriage (such as cohabitation and civil partnership) have increased among the younger generations especially but they are not even remotely close to replacing marriage as a basis for family formation, as has been the established trend in some other Northern European countries in particular.

The fertility rate in Ireland does, however, remain the highest in the EU but by Irish standards it represents a historical low. Irish women are on average now having two children (in the 1970s the average was four) but the fact that Irish mothers are currently the oldest in Europe suggests that the upper range fertility rate in evidence is more a reflection of the postponing of having children to later in the life cycle than being due to a greater propensity among Irish women to have large numbers of children in common with previous generations. In other areas, such as non-marital births and the crude marriage rate, the figures in Ireland are approximating very closely to European averages. The marriage rate in Ireland is not particularly high but marriage has not diminished either or been replaced by cohabitation. In the case of non-marital births, the rate in Ireland (34 per cent of all births occur outside marriage; however, the figure approximates to around 50 per cent in the main cities of Dublin, Cork and Limerick) is much higher than in several other countries with very low rates (such as Greece where the 2011 figure is 7.4 per cent). But, it is not exceeding the European average (38 per cent) or approximating close to the upper ranges in this category (in the region of 60 per cent of all children are now born outside marriage in total in Iceland, 55 per cent is the figure in France and 54 per cent in Sweden, for example).

In the case of single parents who are not cohabiting or in a relationship, the current situation in Ireland is noteworthy. In the past, illegitimacy was utterly frowned upon and stigmatised and the UK became a refuge for Irish unmarried mothers to the extent that they were afforded the label "PFIs" (Pregnant from Ireland) by social services. Adoption rates were high as a consequence of unmarried mothers concealing their pregnancies, often with the assistance of the Catholic Church and mother and baby homes. In Ireland, however, while the largest proportion of households today is made up of couple households with children, with single adults with no children second, Ireland at the same time has a much higher percentage of children living in lone parent households than in much of the rest of Europe. Given the fact that the vast majority of lone parents in Ireland are women, this distinct trend and available data suggests that women (particularly women of low educational attainment) are putting motherhood before marriage to a much greater extent than their European counterparts and are cohabiting less – which is a trend that requires further investigation.

The idea of postmodernism implies that we can no longer deal with a single entity called "the family". Yet the findings presented in this book suggest that the situation is more complex in the Irish case. Traditional forms of family life (such as, the lifelong, nuclear family based on heterosexual marriage and the persistence of an unequal gender-based division of labour in the home that is continually reiterated in social research) continue and sustain alongside new, more diverse family forms and households emerging in contemporary Ireland (such as one-parent families, "reconstituted" families post-separation/divorce, cohabitees and same sex couples). Taken together the new forms of family and intimate life that are now evident in Ireland fundamentally challenge the notion that there is only one way to be married, intimate and committed to another person in the Irish context. At the same time, these developments have not even remotely replaced the predominance of conventional family forms and trends.

Family life in Ireland most certainly experienced rapid change in the period between the McGee judgment on contraception handed down by the Supreme Court in 1973 and the divorce referendum held in 1995, but subsequently entered into a more stable period. From the mid-1990s on, it is argued, it is possible to talk of a post-revolutionary settling down of family patterns and what was new and unsettling in the 1980s became “normal” in the 2000s. Fundamentally, expectations that the structure and convention of the past would give way to endless diversity and fluidity in family life have not been fulfilled in the Irish case. Statistically speaking, most individuals are still socialised within traditional nuclear family units and develop their identities, sense of self and understanding of the meaning of life primarily in terms of what happened within their family. The ontological sense of self in the majority of individuals, the way they see and understand themselves, is developed and maintained in terms of relations with parents and siblings. Most Irish people are still bound to family. The family is still considered the centre of intimate, personal relations through which people create and sustain meaning on a daily basis. In addition, gender remains an unrecognised but crucially important framework in shaping young people’s lives in particular.

The relationship between generations is subject to both continuity and change. In contemporary Ireland, the decline of co-residence between children and their grandparents is associated with growing economic independence of parents. However, a considerable proportion of Irish parents rely on grandparents to provide childcare, particularly as mothers increasingly participate in the labour force. Continuity in the warm relationships that develop between children and their grandparents is evident across different birth cohorts. However, significant transformations in household and family contexts and in childhood have given rise to changes in the texture of the relationship between grandchildren and their grandparents. Firstly, as grandchildren are less likely to spend extended periods of time with a grandparent, parents have greater power to act as gatekeepers between the generations. Secondly, changes in the nature of childhood mean that the time children spend with their grandparents has become more domesticated. Contemporary children’s experiences of being cared for in the private space of a grandparent’s home contrast with adult memories of exploring the wider world in the company of grandparents; in the past children “tagged along” as their grandparent went about the daily activities of working and visiting.

Migration is a key dynamic in Irish society. Return migrants and their children accounted for the vast majority of immigrants during the Celtic Tiger era. Family connectedness facilitated belonging to local and national/ethnic collectivities for some return migrants, but conversely, worked to exclude those who did not have access to such connections. Children play a central role in shaping and re-shaping social and familial networks, actively involved in the everyday doing and re-doing of family and kinship. As they negotiate belongings and identities from complex positions in Irish society as simultaneously children, migrants and returnees, return-migrant children’s unique perspectives highlight the complex relationships between family, power, locality and belonging that exist in Ireland.

With 10 per cent of the current Irish population now not born in Ireland, the number of mixed Irish/non-Irish households is also on the rise. While there is an increasing number of mixed international families in Ireland where one partner is Irish and the other is not, legal, social and political acceptance of these newer Irish citizens is slower to change. This could be seen as part of the growing global stratification of citizenship and belonging where the formal status of citizenship does not ensure acceptance or belonging to the nation. On the other hand, continued assertions by mixed Irish/non-Irish families of their “right” to be Irish continues to challenge the notion that in order to be considered truly Irish one must be “WHISC” – white, heterosexual, Irish-born, settled, and Catholic.

Researchers commonly understand lesbian and gay kinship to be distinctive and argue that alienation from families of origin led many lesbians and gay men to form new relational networks, or “families we choose”. However, research into the experience of lesbian mothers in Ireland and London further suggests that Irish lesbian and gay people can often remain committed to families of origin and go to considerable lengths to maintain connections with them after coming out. In contrast to research that emphasises alienation, dominant discourses of “the family” underline its importance for those Irish lesbian and gay people who carry out considerable emotional labour with their families. Having a child often reinvigorates relationships with parents and siblings and emigration underlined the importance of maintaining ties “back home”.

At one level new technologies have facilitated the micro-co-ordination and communication on which significant aspects of contemporary family life depends. At another level, however, issues of surveillance and privacy arise. Certain forms of new technologies (such as mobile phones) facilitate increased parental supervision but others (Facebook, for example) allow the creation of a private realm secure from parental oversight, evident in the growth of a mobile youth culture and the intensification of what media researchers have labeled “bedroom culture”. *The ‘Irish’ Family* concludes by raising very challenging questions about the impact of online communication on the very fabric of our existence and fabric of life as intimate citizens and as family members in twenty-first century Ireland.

Linda Connolly is author and editor of *The ‘Irish’ Family* (Routledge, 2015). Her other books include *The Irish Women’s Movement: From Revolution to Devolution* (Lilliput, 2003 and Palgrave, 2003), *Documenting Irish Feminisms* (Woodfield, 2005) (co-authored with Tina O’Toole) and *Social Movements and Ireland* (Manchester University Press, 2007).