

Linking local and global feminist advocacy: Framing women's rights as human rights in the Republic of Ireland[☆]

Niamh Reilly

Transitional Justice Institute, University of Ulster, Magee Campus, BT48 7JL, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom

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Synopsis

This article argues that global-level feminist advocacy in the 1990s has had a significant impact within feminist advocacy in the Republic of Ireland. An important manifestation of this is the growing engagement of groups in Ireland with women's human rights discourses in framing feminist claims in the domestic arena and the emergence of related transnational solidarity links. This article identifies six approaches to women's human rights advocacy in Ireland: human rights facilitating collective action, local–global solidarity and transformation; human rights as modes of (quasi) legal accountability; human rights as a framework for social, economic and gender justice; women's political participation as a human rights issue; human rights as a challenge to gendered racism; and women's bodily integrity as a human rights issue. The author argues that these developments reflect a new, outwardly oriented departure within the Irish women's movement. In addition to interviews with advocates and assessments of related activities, the article is informed by the author's involvement in women's human rights projects in Ireland and internationally.

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Introduction

The United Nations Decade for Women (1975–1985) sparked the proliferation of women's organizations and networks internationally and set the stage for the emergence of a global campaign for women's human rights in the 1990s (Antrobus, 2004). By insisting that international human rights agendas should take account of women's lives and experiences, the campaign precipitated a significant shift in how human rights issues are defined and understood (Antrobus, 2004; Brown Thompson, 2002; Friedman, 1995). This is reflected in the achievement of many new global commitments to women's rights

as human rights, including recognition for the first time that violence against women is a violation of human rights, the adoption of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA)¹, and a significantly strengthened Women's Convention.² A decade on, however, a conservative and fundamentalist anti-feminist backlash is underway throughout UN forums, which is threatening to roll back Platform commitments (Corréa, 2005; Neubold, n.d; Center for Women's Global Leadership/WEDO 2000). This challenge has prompted women's movements in different parts of the world to question the usefulness and relevance of their global-level efforts over the past decade and to examine the extent to which they have contributed to the promotion of gender justice at the local or national level. This article, therefore, aims to contribute to such a wider reflexive discussion by providing a qualitative assessment of the impact of recent transnational feminist advocacy in the 'local' context of the Republic of Ireland, primarily from an advocacy perspective.

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I argue that global-level feminist advocacy has had a significant and positive — albeit uneven — impact within local and national-level feminist organizing in the Republic of Ireland. A significant manifestation of this is the way that women's human rights discourses have permeated feminist activism in Ireland, especially since the 1990s. Specifically, women's human rights approaches have been applied with different levels of effectiveness to the issues of violence against women, reproductive and sexual health, women's poverty, and the gender dimensions of racism and global inequality. It is important to note, however, that the women's human rights advocates interviewed for this project are generally critical of the inadequate implementation of global agreements by successive governments and maintain a skeptical stance around their own engagement in related UN monitoring and review processes. Nonetheless, the same advocates and/or the organizations with which they work have repeatedly opted to (re)engage with these processes over the past decade. This persistent commitment to utilizing UN agreements and mechanisms, despite limited governmental responsiveness, underlines the growing importance and perceived transformative potential of such global standards and related solidarity links in bolstering local claims. Further, it also demonstrates that global-level feminist advocacy in the 1990s and through to the present — especially to focus international attention on the BPfA and strengthen the Women's Convention — has both catalyzed and drawn on elements of feminist activism in Ireland.

The events and perspectives explored in this article also relate to discussions within Irish women's studies on the relative role of international influences in the Irish women's movement. The article does not attempt to be a comprehensive account of the Irish women's movement in the 1990s and early 2000s but offers snapshots of an emerging strand of feminist activism within a wider women's movement during this time. Specifically, I argue that the engagement of women's groups and projects with women's human rights signals important new intersections between local and global feminist advocacy in Ireland which, as yet, have not been addressed within the literature on this subject (Connolly, 2003; Mahon, 1995). Evelyn Mahon, for example, highlights the role that women's movements in Europe and the United States played in shaping the second wave Irish women's movement in the 1970s (Mahon, 1995). At the same time, however, the movement's actions during this period were overwhelmingly nationally-framed; international human rights commitments did not provide a basis for seeking change and links with women's movements outside of Ireland were slight and generally within Europe. Connolly's account, however, plays down international influences altogether and emphasizes continuities between

the Irish women's movement and previous indigenous efforts to advance the status of women. With regard to the 1990s, Connolly identifies 'professionalization', the rise of women's studies initiatives, and the growing role of women's community groups as the most salient features of the contemporary Irish women's movement (Connolly, 2003). She does not mention the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, even though dozens of women's groups were extensively mobilized around the event and its related review processes during the 1990s and more recently. In contrast, I argue that the emerging women's human rights advocacy highlighted here, suggests a new departure. That is, the migration of feminist advocacy into transnational and 'local-global' spaces, characterized by greater links with the global women's movement and increasing reference to human rights standards in the pursuit of gender justice domestically as well as abroad.

The following section addresses a number of methodological issues. It is followed by a brief overview of the transnational women's human rights movement of the last decade as an important example of global-level feminist advocacy that has had a significant impact locally. Following this, I provide some brief organizational profiles and my analysis of interviewees' responses, which illustrate the ways in which advocates and organizations have engaged with women's rights as human rights in Ireland. Finally, I sketch some of the main opportunities and obstacles affecting the prospects for an effective, globally aware, women's human rights movement in the Republic of Ireland.

Methodological discussion

Here, I address a variety of methodological issues including my rationale in selecting interviewees, questions, and the mode of interview. I also comment on decisions around the selective discussion of interviewees' responses and the formulation of the six approaches to women's human rights advocacy that structure my analysis of interviewee responses. It is important too, at this juncture, to flag my dual role as researcher and activist vis-à-vis women's human rights movements at the global level and in Ireland. Generally, I chose interviewees because of their involvement in well-established women's NGOs or projects that are recognized as leading advocacy organizations in their respective areas and have explicitly expressed a commitment to framing women's rights as human rights (see table below). Taken together, these organizations account for the majority of policy oriented, feminist advocacy across a range of issues in Ireland. Further, some are membership organizations or umbrella networks that represent many other individuals and organizations concerned with gender

issues. In addition, most have played significant roles in establishing and sustaining women's human rights initiatives in one form or another over the past decade. (See, for example: Reilly, 1997; Fingleton, 1998; Pro-Beijing NGO Coalition and NWCI, 2000; Women's Human Rights Alliance, 2005.) Consequently, it is reasonable to draw some general conclusions about the state of women's human rights advocacy in Ireland on the basis of interviewees' responses. I did not include women based in traditional human rights organizations (e.g. Amnesty International or the Irish Council for Civil Liberties) because, here, I am primarily interested in considering the ways in which feminist advocates and women's organizations and projects 'outside' of mainstream human rights movements have engaged with human rights discourses. All of the interviews were conducted by email and telephone. I circulated the same set of questions to each interviewee at least one week in advance of the telephone interviews, which lasted approximately 60–90 min. Because all of the interviewees were familiar with my background and/or I had worked closely with most of them on different women's human rights projects, all were satisfied with the telephone interview mode. All interviewees have consented to their names and quotes being used in this article. Details about respondents are set out in the table below:

Questions and organizing themes

The following core questions were posed to each person interviewed:

1. How do you interpret 'women's human rights' in the context of your work?
2. When (approximately) did your organization first use the language of 'human rights' and make connections (conceptual and/or concrete) with women's human rights movements outside of Ireland?
3. Are there specific achievements that your organization has secured where international human rights standards, agreements or mechanisms (UN or EU) have played a key role?
4. Do you make a distinction between an equality/anti-discrimination approach and a human rights approach?
5. Does your organization work regularly/closely with traditional human or civil rights NGOs (e.g. Amnesty International — Irish Section, Irish Council for Civil Liberties, etc)? If yes, to what extent are 'women's human rights' and/or 'anti-racism' explicit/key elements in collaborations?
6. Does your organization work regularly/closely with women's organizations/groups outside of the

Name/Title	Organization	Date of interview	Additional information
Ursula Barry, College Lecturer	Women's Education, Research and Resource Centre (WERRC). http://www.ucd.ie/werrc/	Nov 2004	WERRC supports the development of multi-disciplinary feminist research, teaching and scholarship at University College Dublin.
Noirin Clancy, Project Coordinator	Women's Human Rights Alliance (WHRA) http://www.whra.ie/	Jul 2004	WHRA was established in 2001 to articulate and promote feminist visions of women's human rights (formerly Women's Human Rights Project and Pro-Beijing NGO Coalition).
Ronnie Fay, Director	Pavee Point Travellers Centre	May 2004	Pavee Point Travellers Centre promotes the human rights of Irish Travellers — a minority ethnic group that experience high levels of discrimination. Programmes for Traveller women have been a core part of its work since established in 1984.
Catherine Mannion, Coordinator	National Traveller Women's Forum (NTWF) http://www.ntwf.net/	May 2004	NTWF is an alliance of Traveller women and Traveller organizations throughout Ireland established in 1995.
Joanna McMinn, Director	National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI) http://www.nwci.ie/	Jun 2004	NWCI is the long established national representative organization for women and women's groups in Ireland.
Goretti Mudzongo, Manager	Southside Traveller Action Group (STAG)	Dec 2004	STAG is a community group working to support Travellers in south Dublin. (Mudzongo previously worked as a trainer/advocate with Human Rights Trust of Southern Africa (Zimbabwe).
Maeve Taylor, Project Leader	Banúlacht http://www.banulacht.ie/	May 2004	Established in 1990, Banúlacht is a women's network engaging in awareness raising, capacity building, campaigning, and local–global networking to promote analysis of local and global development issues among women in Ireland.
Niamh Wilson, Coordinator	WAVES	Jul 2004	WAVES is a recently formed coalition of organizations addressing violence against women in the Northwest of Ireland. (Previously, Wilson was Education and Awareness Coordinator at Women's Aid — a national organization supporting women and children who are subject to domestic abuse. http://www.womensaid.ie/

Women's Human Rights Alliance? If yes, to what extent are 'women's human rights' and/or 'anti-racism' explicit/key elements in collaborations?

7. Do you believe that the women that your organization represents have benefited from international level commitments/agreement such as CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, etc? If yes, in what ways? If no, why do you think that is the case and what is needed to ensure that they do benefit?

How interviewees interpret 'women's human rights' is the question of primary concern here; it was posed first in an open-ended way and generally prompted the most in-depth responses that often encompassed answers to subsequent questions, especially 2, 3 and 7. For this reason, I structure my discussion mainly around answers to question 1, while also incorporating the most salient comments made in responses to other questions. Question 4, on the distinction that interviewees would make between 'human rights' versus 'equality and non-discrimination' approaches, aimed to reveal more about the perceived 'value added' of human rights from an advocacy perspective, especially in a context like Ireland where a comparatively strong equality regime is in place. While the question prompted a range of interesting and sometimes divergent assessments, because of the complexity of the conceptual and practical debates touched upon, I have not included a full discussion of the responses here and plan to address the theme more closely in a subsequent project. Questions 5 and 6 were posed in an effort to prompt some thoughts on the extent to which 'women's human rights' advocacy is linked to or isolated from mainstream human rights and other movements, for example, Amnesty International campaigns and/or anti-racism initiatives. Recognizing that increased racial and ethnic diversity is a relatively new development in the Republic of Ireland, I wanted to give interlocutors an opportunity to explicitly address this dimension of emerging approaches to women's human rights. More generally, while most of the discussion primarily builds on interviewees' responses to the questions posed, I also draw on my own experience working with respondents' organizations in the context of women's human rights projects, as well as on related organizational statements and press articles.

In identifying the six approaches to women's human rights advocacy that structure my discussion, I revisited an earlier scheme of four practical 'approaches to linking women's rights to human rights' observed by Charlotte Bunch (Bunch, 1990: 493). These are: 1) Women's Rights as Political and Civil Rights; 2) Women's Rights as Socioeconomic Rights; 3) Women's Rights and the Law; and 4) Feminist Transformation of Human Rights.

The first seeks to highlight gender-specific dimensions of violations of 'first generation' civil and political rights vis-à-vis the state, for example, when rape is used in police or military detention as a form of torture. The second approach is influenced by socialist/labour and third world justice movements. It is concerned with the inclusion of women's experiences and gender perspectives in securing 'second generation' rights such as the right to food, housing, health, education and so on, as well as the 'right to development'. Bunch's third category of women's human rights advocacy emphasizes the importance of new or strengthened legal mechanisms at national and international levels to counter sex based discrimination. While Bunch argues that each of the foregoing approaches contains elements of what is required to realize women's human rights, she uses the term 'feminist transformation of human rights' to capture a fourth burgeoning approach — one that is more radical and ultimately more contested. It entails placing issues such as violence against women, reproductive rights, compulsory heterosexuality, and female genital mutilation at the center of human rights agendas and, importantly, not waiting 'for permission from some authority to determine what is or is not a human rights issue' (Bunch, 1990: p. 497). However, Bunch also cautions against the danger of 'pursuing only this [transformative feminist] approach' and 'becoming isolated from, and competitive with, other human rights groups' because 'most women experience abuse on the grounds of sex, race, class, nation, age, sexual preference, and politics as interrelated and little benefit comes from separating them as competing claims' (Bunch, 1990: 497). In addition to using Bunch's four approaches to filter respondents' comments, I also considered the main themes that had emerged out of two global tribunals on violations of women's human rights (Bunch & Reilly, 1994; Reilly, 1996). These were: abuses in the family, political persecution and discrimination, denials of socio-economic rights, violations of bodily integrity, and war crimes against women. I was interested in discovering which of these also emerged as important in the context of the Republic of Ireland.

The dominant themes that I discerned in interviewees' responses have clear resonances with Bunch's four approaches and with some of the tribunal themes (especially socio-economic and bodily integrity rights). In addition, however, they reflect new dimensions and priorities that are specific to the Irish context and which capture wider developments that have emerged since 1990, including the actual impact of the 'feminist transformation of human rights' that Bunch had anticipated at that time. Some are *process-oriented* and reflect modes of action associated with the emerging approaches

to women's human rights advocacy (especially 1–2 below). Others pertain more to *substantive* questions around what counts as a human rights issue and how differently-situated women experience the enjoyment or denial of these rights (especially 3–6 below). In sum, I argue that there are six, sometimes interconnected, approaches to women's human rights advocacy at work in the Ireland that are captured by the following themes: 1) Human rights facilitating collective action, local–global solidarity and transformation; 2) Human rights as modes of (quasi) legal accountability; 3) Women's political participation as a human right issue 4) Human rights as social, economic and gender justice; 5) Human rights as a challenge to gendered racism; and 6) Women's bodily integrity as a human rights issue.

Overview of transnational women's human rights movement

Before proceeding to a fuller discussion of how these six approaches to women's human rights advocacy play out locally, first I want to provide a brief account of feminist advocacy in global perspective, with a focus on the transnational women's human rights movement. Women's concerns and issues have been present in evolving international human rights discourse and practice since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. This is evidenced by articles in the Declaration and subsequent treaties that stipulate non-discrimination on the basis of sex as a core human rights principle. Until the adoption of the UN Women's Convention (CEDAW) in 1979, which deepens the definition and scope of sex-based discrimination as a human rights issue, women's rights were viewed very narrowly in terms of legal equality and were generally invisible or marginalized within the wider human rights machinery (for an overview, see Charlesworth & Chinkin, 2000). In explaining the neglect of women's human rights in international human rights discourse, feminists have challenged the gendered ways in which it has privileged certain aspects of civil and political rights in situations where violations are carried out by the state. This focus includes, for example, denials of freedom of expression, arbitrary arrest, torture in detention, and the death penalty. While not discounting the importance of these issues, Hilary Charlesworth argues that this constitutes a profound gender bias wherein human rights are primarily defined according to the criterion of 'what men fear will happen to them.' She goes on to say:

The primacy traditionally given to civil and political rights by western international lawyers and philoso-

phers is directed toward protection for men within public life — their relationship with government. But these are not the harms from which women most need protection... [For example], the protection from arbitrary deprivation of life or liberty through public action...does not address how being a woman is in itself life-threatening...and the special ways in which women need legal protection to be able to enjoy their right to life. (Charlesworth, 1994, p.71)

In the late 1980s, there was a growing recognition within and across women's movements that violence against women was a universal phenomenon that affected women in every region, even though the form it took differed from place to place (Carrillo, 1991; Heise, Pitanguy, & Germain, 1994). This was a pivotal element in the emergence of a renewed and far reaching feminist challenge to mainstream human rights concepts and practice (Engle Merry, 2002; Roth, 1994). When plans for a UN world conference on human rights were underway in the early 1990s, many questioned the failure of the international human rights community to date to address women's experiences, especially in relation to violence against women. This meant asking why abuses primarily affecting women, such as domestic violence, trafficking, female genital mutilation, sexual exploitation, dowry violence, female infanticide, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization, forced abortion, and so on, had not been taken seriously as violations of human rights (Bunch, 1990).

Throughout the 1990s, the global campaign for women's human rights responded to this failure by targeting a series of high profile UN conferences where it lobbied for the recognition of women's rights as human rights and for government action to redress gender-based abuses (Bunch & Reilly, 1994; Reilly, 1996). These conferences included the World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna 1993), the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD 1994), and the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995). In addition to the BPfA, several significant gains were achieved during this period. For example, violence against women was recognized as a violation of human rights in the 1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action and in the UN General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. This recognition was made more concrete in 1992 when VAW was defined as a form of gender-based discrimination under the Women's Convention and a UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women (UNSRVAW) was appointed in 1994 to investigate the causes and consequences of VAW and to encourage effective action

to tackle the problem. Further, in 1999 an optional protocol³ was established that greatly strengthened the Women's Convention as an avenue of redress.

Above all else, however, the 'women's rights as human rights' movement is primarily associated with achieving recognition of violence against women as a global, human rights issue. While this achievement has been a very important one, there is increasing concern that women's human rights analysis and action must be deepened and extended across a wider range of issues within a global perspective, especially global inequalities, rising fundamentalisms, growing militarism, and all forms of racism (see for example, [Antrobus, 2002](#); [Bunch, 2004](#); [Mohanty, 2003](#)). The need to do so has been brought into focus by events such as the annual World Social Forum (Porto Allegre), the UN World Conference against Racism (Durban, 2002), wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the 'war on terror'. I would argue, however, that it is also very important for the 'women's rights as human rights' movement to take stock of its impact at the local level. In significant ways, what occurs at the local level around the world shapes the priorities of the global movement in the future.

Framing women's rights as human rights: The experience of women's organizations and projects in Ireland

Turning to the terrain of local feminist organizing, I now consider the ways in which the kinds of global-level feminist critique and advocacy outlined above have resonated within local and national-level feminist advocacy. In order to better understand how feminist activists in Ireland interpret the idea of women's human rights and whether UN agreements on women's human rights have made or could make a difference at the local level, I interviewed eight feminist advocates who are linked to women's organizations or programmes, where international human rights principles or standards expressly inform mission statements or specific activities. To help contextualize my account of their responses, I first want to highlight some organizational encounters with human rights thinking and practice in recent years. Clearly, the organizational background of each interviewee is equally valuable in affording insights into different pieces of the overall picture of how the women's human rights paradigm is being constituted and negotiated. However, in the interest of brevity, here I highlight just four: Women's Human Rights Alliance (WHRA), Women's Aid (WA), Pavee Point, and Banúlacht.

The Women's Human Rights Alliance is perhaps the most obvious example of women's human rights

advocacy at work in Ireland currently. Established in 2002, the WHRA is the successor of a series of initiatives and coalitions that have emerged since 1997 explicitly to promote Irish governmental compliance with international agreements on women's human rights, as well as the use of human rights standards more widely in feminist advocacy at the local and national level. To different degrees and at different times, all of the respondents, and/or the organizations with which they are linked, have played a role in shaping the WHRA (or its precursors).⁴ Because the Irish government's compliance with the Women's Convention was under review by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 2004/2005, the WHRA made this the focus of its awareness raising, capacity building, and advocacy activities. Among other things, this involved a series of CEDAW training sessions and the coordination of an NGO Shadow Report. In addition, members of the WHRA attended the 33rd session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (July 2005) during which the Irish Government was required to report on its progress and account for its deficiencies in implementing the Women's Convention in Ireland. Throughout the preparatory period and the review, the WHRA maintained contact with members of the Committee to provide them with information on shortcomings in the Government's compliance and to suggest specific questions that they wanted the Government to answer. In this context, the WHRA also used the process to build and extend links with women's NGOs from other countries and regions, particularly through participation in mentoring programmes run by the International Women's Rights Action Watch — Asia Pacific. These activities are a particularly strong example of growing local–global NGO solidarity links that aim to strengthen the capacity of local women's movements to use international human rights standards in seeking gender justice domestically.

While the WHRA was set up expressly to foster women's human rights advocacy, the experiences of Women's Aid, Banúlacht and Pavee Point provide examples of how NGOs 'outside' of the established human rights community have engaged with and contributed to the development of the women's human rights paradigm in Ireland. Women's Aid was involved in the global campaign for women's human rights from its earliest stage. In 1991, a member of the organization, Monica O'Connor, was a key participant in the international meeting of activists (convened by the Center for Women's Global Leadership, Rutgers University) where the idea for an annual campaign of '16 Days of Action against Gender Violence' was first mooted. Participants chose the dates, November 25,

International Day against Violence against Women and December 10, International Human Rights Day, in order to symbolically link violence against women and human rights and to emphasize that such violence violates human rights. The '16 Days' became a major locus of broad-based mobilization around issues of violence against women throughout the 1990s and continues to be a vital global campaign to the present, involving thousands of women's organizations in over one hundred countries around the world (see www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/16days/home.html). WA went on to play a pivotal role in Ireland raising awareness about the campaign and its core message at the community and national level. Since 1991, the '16 Days' has been a major component of WA's education and awareness and advocacy strategies. The continued importance of the campaign within the organization is clear from the WA website, which provides information on past campaign actions, highlights opportunities to get involved, and encourages participants to make connections between what is happening in Ireland and other countries and regions (Women's Aid, 2005). This sustained level of engagement by WA with the '16 Days' campaign for more than a decade signals an organizational commitment to global solidarity with women's movements in other countries and regions, articulated through the language of women's human rights. In addition, WA continues to be an active participant in WHRA and regularly makes submissions to international forums, including, most recently, as part of the 'Beijing Plus Ten' review at the Commission on the Status of Women (March 2005) and the 33rd session of CEDAW (July 2005).

Banúlacht was founded in 1990 by a group of women working in mainstream development organizations and projects in Ireland. Initially concerned with highlighting the role and experience of women in development and making connections between women in marginalized communities in Ireland and in the 'developing' world, Banúlacht did not at first frame its mission in terms of women's human rights. The organization seeks to fuse development education principles, which promote collective empowerment for social change, an awareness of local–global interconnectedness, and a critical feminist analysis, most notably in the area of women's reproductive rights (Banúlacht, 2006a,b). According to Maeve Taylor, Banúlacht's turn to a women's human rights approach, was sparked by the involvement of its members in the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo 1994). For the first time at a major UN forum, women's reproductive health was framed in terms of women's human rights. This signaled a major departure within the international development community; until then, women's reproductive roles were viewed entirely instrumentally as the means to particular popula-

tion policy ends. Because some of Banúlacht's founders worked in organizations that are expressly Catholic in ethos, in the context of the ICPD, a decision was taken to make Banúlacht an autonomous membership network in order to be able to take an independent stance on reproductive health issues. Further encouraged by the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), Banúlacht began to integrate a women's human rights perspective more fully into its work. The organization demonstrated an impressive commitment to using the BPfA as the basis for much of its community based-training and education programmes in the late 1990s. Their work in this area is a good example of how global commitments for women's human rights can be brought to life at the local level, even if the realization of their more radical promise remains an ongoing challenge. Banúlacht's continued commitment to a women's human rights approach, is evident in its website content, which repeatedly highlights the pursuit of human rights as a key tenet and campaign focus, and more specifically its commitment to 'strengthen feminist analysis of human rights'. (Banúlacht, 2006a,b).

In contrast to Banúlacht's experience, Pavee Point explicitly framed its mission in terms of human rights from its inception in the early 1980s. The organization regularly makes submissions to, and participates in, regional and global forums where Travellers' human rights might be advanced. More recently, for example, Pavee Point was involved in NGO efforts feeding into UN reviews of governmental implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and the Women's Convention. Prior to its foundation, the Traveller 'problem' was widely understood to be the result of a 'subculture of poverty' with charity-based responses and assimilation policies forming large parts of the 'solution'. Importantly, taking a human rights approach meant making Travellers visible as a minority ethnic group who are contesting racism and demanding equality and human rights on par with other internationally recognized civil and human rights movements. (see generally Helleiner, 2003; Lentin & McVeigh, 2006). Pavee Point's vision of human rights is also one in which economic, social and cultural rights are emphasized. This encompasses seeking recognition of the collective right of Travellers to a cultural identity as a nomadic ethnic group and of concomitant rights not to be marginalized and discriminated against by the state, or by non-state actors who privilege the ethos and priorities of the majority settled population to the detriment of Travellers. The view that Travellers are a minority ethnic community with specific collective and individual human rights was and continues to be a widely contested notion (Reilly, 2005). Indeed, according to Fay, even the human rights NGO community in Ireland did not initially

support Travellers' claims to human rights. The fact that groups like Amnesty International now readily recognize and support Travellers' concerns as human rights issues testifies to the effectiveness of Pavee Point's efforts in this area. Furthermore, Pavee Point has always kept Traveller women's issues and a clear commitment to gender equality at the centre of its programmes. In this regard, its approach offers important insights in the development of an intersectional and inclusive approach to women's human rights advocacy in Ireland.

Six approaches to women's human rights advocacy in Ireland

The brief organizational profiles above suggest significant levels of engagement with human rights thinking and practice in efforts to advance a range of feminist agendas in Ireland. With this context in mind, I now turn to interviewees' responses. My discussion is organized according to the six broad approaches to women's human rights advocacy that I have identified in respondents' comments. As noted, these expand upon Bunch's four approaches to linking 'women's rights' to 'human rights', but they also capture wider global developments over the past decade and reflect particular concerns, obstacles and opportunities around promoting women's human rights in the Irish context.

Human rights: Facilitating collective action, local–global solidarity and transformative politics

In contrast to more traditional views of human rights as primarily concerned with the application of international treaties and standards, most respondents highlight the dynamic, transformative potential of women's human rights discourse and its role in facilitating collective action and local–global solidarity. This perspective is clearly informed by an awareness of successful feminist interventions in mainstream human rights thinking and practice since the early 1990s and, in this sense, reflects the impact of the 'feminist transformation of human rights' anticipated by Bunch (1990). Furthermore, respondents' recognition of local–global solidarity opportunities as key features of a women's human rights approach, foreground the 'global feminist' tenets implicit in Bunch's transformative approach (Bunch, 1987). Niamh Wilson (Women's Aid and WAVES), for example, underlines the role of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) and its regional and national preparatory meetings, in providing 'important opportunities for women [in Ireland] to work within a human rights framework.' In addition, Wilson notes that the annual

campaign of '16 Days of Action against Violence Against Women' had provided 'a very good framework' and 'great focus for activism around women's human rights in Ireland.' Joanna McMinn (NWCI) makes the point that a 'women's human rights approach facilitates solidarity within Ireland and allows for larger connections to be made internationally, especially since 1995.' She observes that the current Women's Human Rights Alliance (WHRA), and similar projects before it, served as important vehicles in building 'local solidarity' and 'coalitions and strategic alliances' among a range of women's and other NGOs in Ireland. Goretti Mudzongo of the Southside Traveller Action Group (STAG) also emphasizes the importance of making such local–global connections by referring to international standards in local contexts. Specifically, she initiated an ongoing dialogue with local government representative where STAG operates focusing on their role as 'duty-bearers' to safeguard the human rights of Travellers by ensuring the provision of adequate, culturally appropriate accommodation. She notes that the county councilors react with 'surprise' at the idea that they could be seen as complicit in denying important human rights and, especially in the area of accommodation provision, the state might have a record that is worse than some countries in the developing world.

Maeve Taylor (Banúlacht), points to links with regional and global networks and their methodologies — including Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN); Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA); Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO); and Women in Development Europe (WIDE) — as integral to Banúlacht's understanding of what it means to engage with a women's human rights framework. According to Taylor, this entails women 'as agents of change and actors in promoting transformative politics' and actively challenging the North–South divide by bringing into focus the connections between 'the experiences, struggles and situations of women in Ireland and those of women in the South.' Similarly, Ursula Barry of the Women's Education Research and Resource Centre (WERRC) emphasizes that 'taking women's rights as human rights' approach allows us to situate issues affecting women in Ireland in a wider global context.' At a time when trafficking into Ireland is growing, for example, she argues that it is essential for 'women's rights organizations in Ireland to establish effective solidarity links with similar organizations in the countries of origin of trafficked women' in order to work together against trafficking. The increasing numbers of women migrant workers in Ireland, especially in healthcare and service sectors, is another

example where Barry sees ‘enormous potential to build solidarity with other situations globally and to act in solidarity around individual cases through a feminist human rights framework.’ Niamh Wilson (Women’s Aid/WAVES) also notes that traditionally domestically-focused organizations like ‘Women’s Aid, rape crisis centres and women’s refuges, and women’s community groups, are increasingly looking at issues of prostitution and trafficking in relation to their work.’ She argues that, around these issues, ‘human rights language and concepts are more likely to be used than a traditional feminist or equality approach because they are more readily seen as having an international dimension.’

These perspectives suggest a growing awareness of the need to take account of the global context in developing analyses and strategies on ‘local–global’ issues like trafficking and women’s global migration. More generally they also reflect a conceptual engagement with a feminist human rights framework that is producing fresh ways of looking at local issues. This is characterized by a more outwardly orientation, greater reflexivity around Ireland’s location in a context of globalization, and a recognition of the transformative potential of fostering global solidarities with women across countries and regions.

Human rights as modes of (quasi) legal accountability: UN agreements, treaties and avenues of redress

The idea of human rights as modes accountability extends Bunch’s ‘legal approach’, which primarily covers efforts by feminist legal activists to put in place equality and anti-discrimination legal frameworks at the international and national level. Here, however, most of the respondents offer an advocacy-oriented perspective on the question of accountability as distinct from a legal one. Hence, when they talk about the potential of international human rights standards as modes of accountability, in addition to being interested in learning more about international mechanisms and agreements as (quasi) legal tools that hold the Government to account, they are also interested in these processes as participative, transformative political strategies. This entails a growing appreciation of the new opportunities such mechanisms offer for mobilization, raising awareness, and seeking accountability around failures to implement women’s human rights in Ireland. Participation in the UN Fourth World Conference on Women (1995) and subsequent engagement with the Beijing Platform for Action were particularly highlighted and all respondents noted positive experiences as a result. These include greater solidarity among groups, increased resources to women’s organiza-

tions, the creation of new women’s projects, and a growing feminist global consciousness. For example, despite a government-sponsored consultation process that was fraught with difficulties (Reilly, 2005) the UN ‘Beijing Plus Five’ review in 2000 created a public space in which women’s community groups were mobilized to reflect on the government’s progress (or lack thereof) in implementing the Platform and to call for more effective action (Pro-Beijing NGO Coalition/NWCI, 2000). Similarly, a subsequent process to generate the Government’s ‘National Plan for Women’, while also the target of much NGO criticism, nonetheless provided funding that supported the participation of hundreds of women’s groups and networks in the process, thereby, at least, sustaining a globally-oriented dialogue among women activists (Reilly, 2005). At the same time, there is a consensus among interviewees that the Government’s steps around implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action have been extremely unsatisfactory. Ursula Barry (WERRC) noted that while the Government is clearly at fault for presiding over a superficial consultation and monitoring process, some of the responsibility also rests with NGOs themselves. Regarding the Beijing Platform, Barry remarked:

We let the government off the hook in a big way. In repeated reports to the UN since 1995, the government simply described current policy and called it ‘a national plan’ and in this way met their requirements at the UN. And they effectively got away with that. The result is a ‘national plan’ that hasn’t amounted to anything.

Since 2000, Irish women’s groups have begun to look more closely at the Women’s Convention (CEDAW) and its monitoring process as a potentially more effective avenue to further the women’s rights as human rights agenda in Ireland. This is particularly evident in the work of the WHRA. Noirin Clancy (WHRA) asserts that ‘the language of rights strengthens claims and provides a more powerful argument, *especially when we can refer to rights in treaties*’ (my emphasis). Linked to the efforts of WHRA to encourage greater use of CEDAW, Cathryn Mannion of the National Traveller Women’s Forum (NTWF) notes that the Forum has recently started to use specific articles in the UN Women’s Convention (CEDAW) to support the claims of Traveller women. According to Mannion, CEDAW has been useful in strengthening the Forum’s education work, especially around the rights to ‘employment and education.’ The NWCI is also ‘interested in looking at the different options that CEDAW offers to investigate particular issues in Ireland, such as women’s property rights or health issues.’

Joanna McMinn (NWCI) believes that the treaty's Inquiry Procedure, enabling the CEDAW committee to conduct investigations within states that have ratified CEDAW, is 'very promising' as a potential method of holding the government to account and pressing for targeted policy changes.

Goretti Mudzongo (STAG), however, observes that in comparison to the extensive mobilization of NGOs in Africa around human rights claims, relatively little has been done in Ireland to take advantage of the opportunities that human rights standards and mechanisms present in seeking change locally. Unlike many African countries, she argues, as yet, there is 'no systematic conceptualization of the human rights concept of advocacy' at the domestic level. As a result, she asserts that 'the Irish Government has signed treaties and agreements, but there is no accountability' because NGOs are not yet playing an effective monitoring role. Mudzongo's observations of the less developed role of NGO in Ireland raise interesting questions about why this might be the case. It is partly explained by some of the well-entrenched biases in how human rights are conceptualized. In addition to gender and state-centric biases already mentioned, Western-centric biases also privilege recognition of some human rights in certain contexts and ignore or deny the existence of others. This means, for example, that countries in the developing world, especially where the 'rule of law' and liberal democratic institutions are not fully established, are assumed to be sites of human rights abuse. Hence, NGO movements in the global South, to the extent that they are able to survive and function, are more likely to employ human rights discourses, especially in their claims against the state, and to have those claims recognized by the international community. NGOs operating in Western, economically developed, democracies (such as the Republic of Ireland) face considerable resistance to the idea that they are defenders of human rights, because the contexts in which they operate are nearly always assumed to be sites of compliance with human rights norms. Therefore, in addition to the challenge of 'engendering' human rights, contesting the national–international binary that pervades human rights policy implementation (wherein Western governments address human rights as aspects of foreign and/or international development programmes) constitutes a particular challenge for NGOs seeking to apply human rights standards to 'domestic' affairs.

Mudzongo's comments do not necessarily contradict the more optimistic views expressed by Wilson, McMinn and others, which generally address future possibilities, as well as modest gains to date. Rather, her point highlights untapped advocacy potential: when states sign up to human

rights standards and agreements, a range of opportunities is opened up that offer new ways of underpinning NGO efforts to seek justice in political, social and economic spheres. From this perspective, human rights mechanisms are vital elements in building a transformative human rights movement — one that is capable of holding governments accountable for the national local implementation of human rights standards. For example, in addition to the possibilities of bringing individual or group complaints under some treaties, all conventions require governments to participate in periodic reviews of their observance of the convention. These reviews create local–global spaces for citizen action wherein NGOs and individual activists can engage with their own governments and with UN bodies. Further, they offer opportunities to legitimate NGO claims and to secure benchmarks that can be repeatedly invoked and revisited. Arguably, NGOs need to take greater advantage of these opportunities, and feminist NGOs in particular need to ensure that the exclusion of women and gender analyses from the traditional nationally-bound public sphere is not replicated in emerging local–global public spaces that are opened up by human rights standards and agreements. Among other things, this underlines the need for women's local and national groups to keep some focus on local–global developments so that opportunities for policy intervention are not lost. Furthermore, it highlights the potential role of greater South–North links in strengthening human rights approaches to advocacy in the global North.

In summary, despite the limited progress to date in engaging with and utilizing UN monitoring processes and human rights mechanisms as modes of accountability in Ireland, it is clear that significant developments are in train. Women's groups, especially national and policy oriented organizations, are building skills and knowledge in relation to global commitments to women's human rights and their national/local applications. Further, these skills and knowledge are facilitating new forms of dialogue and political engagement with the state both in Ireland and in relation to transnational forums, including the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

Women's political participation as a human rights issue

Joanna McMinn of the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI) is the only respondent who noted women's participation in political decision making as an important women's human rights issue in Ireland. Nonetheless, the representative role of the Council vis-à-vis the women's movement in Ireland and the importance of its longtime 'women in politics' campaign justify its inclusion as a

distinct thread of women's human rights advocacy. This focus on women's political participation rights in Ireland is related to the 'political and civil rights' approach identified by Bunch in that both are concerned with women's rights vis-à-vis the state in the public sphere. While the latter highlights gender-specific aspects of direct, state-sponsored violations such as torture, the NWCI is concerned with the ways in which gendered social and political practices shut women out of decision making processes, even in supposedly democratic regimes where equality laws are in place. Since 1995, the NWCI has consistently participated in and supported various collaborative women's human initiatives, including the WHRA, that seek to promote recognition and implementation of international commitments to women's human rights. At the same time, however, the Council has been slow to apply international human rights standards in framing its demands across its core campaigns, including childcare policy and social welfare reform, for example. Further, in the NWCI's strategic plan, human rights language is used explicitly only in relation to women's political equality. Campaigning for gender equality in political representation and decision making is undoubtedly a key women's human rights issue. However, the fact that until recently this was the only core campaign area where NWCI articulated its claims in human rights terms is indicative of the strength of the 'political and civil rights' bias in mainstream human rights discourse. Increasingly, however, the Council is taking steps to apply a more comprehensive model of women's human rights advocacy to its own campaigns. For example, a lengthy Council report on childcare (NWCI, 2005) includes several references to CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Rights of the Child in building the Council's rationale for a comprehensive childcare policy. Further, in May 2006, the Council convened a conference to explore the prospects for rights-based social welfare reform, including possible applications of international human rights standards. Both examples illustrate further integration of human rights thinking into important NWCI campaign areas and a tentative move away from an exclusively, nationally-framed approach. The NWCI is well-positioned to move further in this direction. This would include, for example, a more comprehensive and sustained engagement, from a feminist perspective, with processes to ensure government compliance with UN treaties such as the international covenants on civil and political and economic, social and cultural rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Convention Against Torture, in addition to the Women's Convention and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Human rights as a framework for social, economic and gender justice

The notion expressed by several respondents of human rights as a framework of social, economic and gender justice, contains Bunch's 'socio-economic rights' approach but also incorporates an emphasis on the indivisibility of human rights made popular at the World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993). That is, in contrast to a hierarchical understanding of 'first' and 'second' generation rights, political, civil, social, economic and cultural rights are viewed as interrelated and of equal importance in the realization of 'all human rights for all.' From this perspective, Ronnie Fay (Pavee Point) argues that Traveller women's human rights are 'the same thing as Travellers' rights,' that is, 'the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to health, and the right to accommodation.' At the same time, Fay notes that Pavee Point has always operated on the understanding that there are 'no Travellers' rights without Traveller women's rights.' An important illustration of Traveller women's gender-specific experience of social and economic human rights abuse is in relation to evictions. When Traveller families are evicted, Fay points out that it is generally in the early hours of the morning when the impact will be most disturbing for children. This creates particular hardship for women who continue to have primary responsibility for the wellbeing of children and domestic work. More generally, in attempting to access a range of basic services, from accommodation, to education and healthcare, Traveller women, as primary carers, tend to be at the forefront of their community's encounters with state agencies, non-state service providers and individual members of the majority settled population. Because of the 'intersectional' location of many Traveller women — in traditional family structures, within a marginalized ethnic community — Traveller women frequently bear the brunt of racism and wider societal opposition to Travellers' claims to social, economic and cultural human rights. As a result, looking at human rights from the perspective of Traveller women's day-to-day experiences affords important insights into how the enjoyment of civil and political rights is inextricable from the enjoyment of social, economic and cultural rights (Reilly, 2005).

The idea of human rights as a route to social, economic and gender justice in global perspective is also reflected in Banúlacht's 'Feminist Principles', which state:

Banúlacht is committed to a critical holistic human rights perspective as a framework for analysis and action. This is a global vision of interconnectedness

which recognizes the indivisibility of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights....

Moreover, Banúlacht aims to link this understanding of human rights to its original mission of integrating 'development education' and 'community development' from a feminist perspective. However, putting this integrated vision into practice on the ground presents numerous challenges. The community development paradigm, promoted by Banúlacht and Pavee Point, encompasses a commitment to transformative, participatory democracy with an emphasis on the local level, as well as the empowerment of marginalized communities toward social transformation. While such an approach has strong affinities with the idea of universal and indivisible human rights, and partly explains the relative ease with which both organizations have embraced critical human rights discourses, the same vision does not necessarily inform the majority of community development initiatives around the country. Noirin Clancy, who came from a community development background prior to working with the WHRA, notes that she had been more accustomed to the language of 'needs' and its mode of 'begging' for government assistance. In contrast, she believes that human rights language 'allows people to frame their needs in terms of denials of human rights and entitlements to better conditions.' However, while Clancy emphasizes the potential of human rights as a framework for seeking greater social and economic justice at the local level, she also recognizes that there is a 'steep learning curve' that must be taken into account when introducing human rights concepts and strategies at the community level. This point also concurs with comments made by Mudzongo who expresses surprise at the absence of a rights-based orientation in community level projects in Ireland. Niamh Wilson (Women's Aid/WAVES), who also has extensive community development experience, notes that the community development sector in Ireland is 'very diverse' and lacks a 'cohesive approach' to advocacy. She observes that claims tend to be framed in terms of 'anti-poverty', 'social inclusion', and sometimes 'equality', but not 'human rights.' More recently, Wilson notes, disability activists have used rights-based language to underpin their claims and this has been met with strong resistance by the government (Beesley, 2003; Coulter, 2003). Overall, however, according to Wilson, there is little awareness of, or reference to, human rights standards or UN agreements across mainstream community based activism. This highlights the need for extensive capacity building and awareness-raising at the community and local level vis-à-vis existing human rights commitments of the Irish Government. Furthermore, if a deeper commit-

ment to human rights culture is to take root in Ireland, there must be greater recognition of and support for the role of NGOs and local groups in monitoring governmental compliance with international human rights standards and defining what it means in practice to promote and protect human rights at the local and national level.

In addition to the relatively low level of engagement with transformative human rights discourses at the community level, arguably, the potential of such a framework in pursuing economic and social justice issues in Ireland has also been limited by the comparative strength of the equality regime in national arena.⁵ It is beyond the scope of this article to address in detail the relationship between equality and human rights approaches. However, while the comprehensive equality legislation is very welcome, and weaker international provisions should not displace stronger national provisions if they exist, there are limits to the transformative potential of equality approaches if they are divorced from a wider commitment to implementing international human rights. Equality discourse in Ireland tends to be inwardly focused and framed in terms of national legislative, policy, and redress mechanisms. As such, it closes off some of the possibilities of transformative action and transnational accountability offered by critical human rights discourses. Further, it can overlook local-global connections and related benefits of global solidarity in relation to social and economic justice issues. (For example, efforts by groups like Pavee Point to seek recognition of Irish Travellers as a nomadic ethnic minority group that experiences racism in similar ways that gypsy and Roma populations do throughout Europe and worldwide). Finally, in addressing this dilemma, Goretti Mudzongo (STAG) notes, NGOs have a role to play in ensuring that 'equality/anti-discrimination' and 'human rights' approaches are mutually reinforcing rather than in competition. Instead of being the primary focus of advocacy, she argues that 'equality' should be seen as 'a principle of human rights', which offers a 'cross-cutting' and more 'holistic package'.

Human rights as a challenge to (gendered) racism

A number of respondents emphasized the need to address the gendered impacts of racism as an integral part of what it means to advance women's human rights. This resonates with recent feminist theorizing on 'intersectionality' (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997) and related calls in the global women's movements for an intersectional approach to women's human rights advocacy (Bunch, 2001). It is noteworthy, however, that only interlocutors who work directly with Travellers

explicitly named racism as an obstacle to promoting women's human rights. While others from the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWC), Women's Human Rights Alliance (WHRA), Banúlacht, and Women's Aid pointed to important organizational initiatives to consider how to address emerging issues of 'race' and 'racism' and/or to incorporate the concerns of women in 'new communities' (asylum seekers, migrant workers, etc.) into their programmes, this was in response to follow-up questions. While it is beyond the scope of this article to account for the relative invisibility of 'race' or 'racism' as primary concerns in the women's human rights initiatives explored here, a few factors can be noted. I am conscious of the inherent ontological and epistemological difficulties surrounding the use of terms like 'race' and 'racism', and that these may also be factors in the relative silence on related issues. Nonetheless, I use the terms in quotes to draw attention to what I see as significant gaps in 'mainstream' women's organizing in Ireland. The invisibility of 'race' partly reflects the fact that, until quite recently, the population in Ireland has been perceived to be overwhelmingly homogenous and 'white'. While a shift — in reality and perception — is underway, this has limited the recognition and articulation of women's issues from perspectives other than that of a supposed 'white majority'. Arguably, the lack of emphasis on 'race' issues also reflects a lag in the emergence of advocacy organizations working with new minority groups and the fact that women's issues are not always articulated in mixed-sex groups in the first instance. Nonetheless, inclusive organizing is a well-established feminist principle internationally and it is generally assumed that women's organizations seek to ensure that their priorities and agendas reflect the diversity of women's experiences and identities. The fact that most respondents do not note intersectional discrimination and related issues as *primary* women's human rights concerns, therefore, underlines the need for more established women's organizations to prioritize networking and collaborative activities with existing and emerging minority women's projects and initiatives.

Pavee Point's work is a significant example of women's human rights advocacy where the interplay of sexism and racism in Ireland is emphasized. Ronnie Fay highlights the 'triple discrimination' that Traveller women face 'as Travellers, as women, and as Traveller women' where discrimination against Travellers is clearly named as a form of racism. She explains:

Traveller women experience patriarchy in the ways that all women do, for example, in the form of violence

against women. But they also experience particular forms of abuse as Traveller women, when they are brutalised by descriptions in the media or by the courts.

One response to this situation is a collaborative project between Pavee Point and Women's Aid to develop culturally sensitive service programmes that address Traveller women's experience of domestic abuse (Pavee Point, n.d.). This work represents a crucial link between the wider feminist movement to end violence against women and the Travellers' rights movement. As such it is a good local example of the integration of women's human rights advocacy with an awareness of intersectionality. Also building on this perspective, the National Traveller Women's Forum (NTWF) was established in 1995 to advance 'Traveller women's rights, human rights, equality, cultural recognition, solidarity, liberation, collective action, anti-sexism, anti-racism [and] self-determination' (National Traveller Women's Forum, n.d.). Founded in the same year as the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995), the Forum's mission also reflects an ongoing connection with the global women's human rights movement. The NTWF is one of a few women's organizations that have consistently participated at every stage of the Beijing conference process — including preparatory and review processes. Significantly, for example, out of nine pre-conference women's NGO submissions to the government, the NTWF was one of two that framed their inputs in terms of human rights. Specifically, it referred to the 'crucial importance for Traveller women' of remedying Ireland's failure to ratify the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), which was adopted by the UN in 1966. More generally, by insisting that human rights standards apply in the national context, by emphasizing economic, social and cultural rights, and by highlighting the ways in which sexism and racism work together to deny Traveller women's human rights, groups like Pavee Point and the National Traveller Women's Forum, offer important examples of a transformative, feminist approach to human rights advocacy that is conscious of intersectionality in women's lives.

Women's bodily integrity as a human right: Violence against women and reproductive and sexual health and rights

Radical feminism is generally associated with naming and contesting the ways in which patriarchal power is exercised over women's bodies. In particular,

radical feminist agendas have focused on countering sexual exploitation and violence against women, challenging heterosexist norms and institutions and insisting on women's autonomy in relation to reproduction. In this sense, Charlotte Bunch's call for a 'feminist transformation of human rights' is also a call to import radical feminist analyses into international law and policy arenas. As already noted, so far this has been achieved most effectively at the international level around the issue of violence against women. A similar pattern is evident at the national level in Ireland; the fact that feminist advocates in Ireland recognize violence against women as a human rights concern is directly linked to successful transnational women's human rights advocacy in 1990s. At the same time, however, efforts to promote women's reproductive and sexual rights as human rights, while present, have been less evident as a focus of women's human rights advocacy and have not been the subject of broad-based, mobilization campaigns in the same way that violence against women has been.

Niamh Wilson notes that 'women's rights as human rights was not a concept that [she] worked with initially' at Women's Aid (WA). It was introduced into the organization in the early 1990s because it was seen as 'complementary to a feminist approach and analysis.' Wilson recalled that using human rights language and concepts to explain violence against women helped to 'break down barriers' and allowed WA to 'reach people' because they more readily 'understand and agree with the human right to be free from violence and to be safe.' In particular, through its promotion of the '16 Days', WA has played a key role in Ireland in popularizing the notion that 'violence against women violates human rights.' While Wilson notes there is still 'unevenness' in the extent to which women's groups engage with the '16 Days' at the community level, these developments are nonetheless part of the 'success story' of the wider global campaign for women's human rights. Beyond the '16 Days' campaign, however, respondents had difficulty naming specific positive changes locally or nationally that are a direct or primary result of the UN recognition of violence against women as a violation of human rights. But it is possible to point to instances where the global context has been important in local and/or national policy making forums. Wilson gives an example of recent debates within the government's Task Force on Violence against Women:

Recently members of the Task Force were fighting against a feminist analysis of violence against women — that is, as a symptom of male power and control. They were arguing instead for a 'gender neutral' definition

that assumes that men and women are equally likely to inflict violence on other family members. By using definitions of violence against women contained in the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, CEDAW, and the Beijing Platform for Action we were able to retain a feminist understanding of violence against women in the work of the Task Force. While this is a defensive move, it is still very important as the Report of the Task Force is the 'bible' on violence against women for all the health boards and directly affects practice.

This example of global standards shaping local discourse and policy debate around violence against women is a valuable illustration of how global feminist advocacy can strengthen and draw on national/local advocacy. Further, given that mobilization around the '16 Days' continues to flourish internationally, there is still much potential to deepen the reach of the campaign as a community-level human rights education and capacity building strategy in Ireland. Furthermore, the '16 Days' is being used as a strategic annual timeframe in Amnesty International's ongoing six-year campaign (2004–2010) to 'stop violence against women'. This offers additional opportunities to ensure that the message 'violence against women violates human rights' permeates local women's organizing.

In addition to seeking recognition of VAW as a violation of human rights, the global campaign for women's human rights also sought to assert wider rights to bodily integrity, especially in relation to reproductive health. There is no 'right to abortion' in international human rights law. Rather, emerging efforts to frame reproductive rights as human rights treat reproductive rights as clusters of rights — civil, political, economic, social and cultural — that underpin a core claim that all women and men have a right to the 'highest standard of sexual and reproductive health.' This is expressed in ICPD Programme of Action:

[R]eproductive rights embrace...human rights that are already recognized in national laws, international human rights documents and other consensus documents. [They] rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so... It also includes their right to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence...

While these rights do not amount to an unlimited 'right to abortion', it is clear that access to abortion services

under some circumstances is an integral part of what it means to talk about reproductive rights in this way. Such efforts to shape reproductive health and policy discourses from a women's human rights perspective, have been the subject of intense, religiously-motivated backlash and contestation in UN forums, with the current US administration playing a leading role (Friedman, 2003; Petchesky, 2000). This backlash has also been evident in Ireland in the re-emergence of traditionalist and Christian opposition to the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW within Ireland (Neart, 2000). Given a global policy environment that is hostile to women's reproductive and sexual rights, and a local context that still bears the imprint of a strong Catholic church, it is perhaps not surprising, that efforts to seek reproductive rights as human rights in Ireland have been sporadic and low key. Despite the indisputable hardship caused to thousands of women each year by Ireland's highly restrictive laws on abortion⁶ and the lack of clarity around the limited situations where abortion is permissible, a climate of taboo and censure continues to limit debate and advocacy on the issue. Arguably, however, framing women's reproductive rights as human rights offers new opportunities to address the myriad obstacles to women's reproductive health in Ireland, arising from a prohibitionist stance on abortion, which cannot surface in the context of more traditional polarized debates. Despite a clear need to do so, however, this has not happened yet to a significant extent. Ursula Barry notes that:

If there was any other health service where travel abroad was the only way to avail of that service there would be public outcry. But because it's women, and because it's abortion, it's let go. This is a huge failure. Since the 'X' case there hasn't been any progress.

Barry, a longtime reproductive rights activist, describes the lack of sustained advocacy around 'reproductive rights as human rights' as a particularly disappointing example of a 'missed opportunity' in applying a feminist human rights framework in Ireland. She notes, 'like the issue of violence against women, women's claims to reproductive rights cannot be adequately addressed within the existing national equality framework'. Instead, she argues, approaching these issues through a human rights lens offers 'the potential to recast the debate and look at the various ways that the current situation denies different women their human rights.' For example, in 1999, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women independently questioned the Government about the discriminatory implications of Ireland's restrictive abortion laws (CEDAW, 1999). Specifically,

the Committee raised concerns about the ongoing influence of the Catholic Church vis-à-vis reproductive health policies, the requirement to travel on women who wish to obtain abortions and the particular vulnerability of women asylum seekers in this regard. However, there was insufficient capacity among relevant NGOs at the local/national level to take advantage of the moment to pressure the Government for an adequate response and to stimulate a wider national dialogue. Some steps have been taken since, by the WHRA and its participating groups, to more actively frame reproductive rights as human rights in ways that eschew a reductionist pro-abortion/anti-abortion dichotomy. For example, Banúlacht states in its 'Feminist Principles' that it:

...considers the recognition, protection and promotion of women's reproductive rights to be a fundamental condition for the achievement of social justice. We therefore recognize every woman's right to autonomy over the management of her own pregnancy, and also the right not to have children. This includes the right to choose abortion.

This rights-based stance on women's reproductive health builds directly on the ICPD Programme of Action. As such, it is a good example of the local impact of the convergence of 'women's human rights' and 'gender and development' threads in the global women's movement. Another recent example of an effort to frame reproductive rights as human rights is found in the CEDAW Shadow Report 2004 produced by the WHRA. The report calls for the legalization of 'abortion in Ireland in circumstances like those in the X case...' (WHRA, 2004). This inclusion of reproductive health and rights in the report was partially prompted by concluding comments issued by CEDAW in 1999. Subsequently, informed by inputs from the WHRA and others, the Committee's concluding comments following its 2005 review of Ireland's compliance with CEDAW restate its concerns in this area. In particular, it urges the Irish Government 'to continue to facilitate a national dialogue on women's right to reproductive health, including on the very restrictive abortion laws.' This is an instructive example of how UN standards and pressure from the international human rights community can encourage renewed engagement and dialogue on the part of local NGOs and government around issues that are otherwise stalled within nationally-framed contexts.

More recently, the Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) has emerged as the lead service and advocacy organization seeking safe and legal abortion in Ireland. Further, it increasingly couches its arguments to allow

abortion in terms of international human rights commitments in the area of health. The first line of the IFPA mission statement, for example, declares its commitment to ‘promote and protect individual basic human rights in reproductive and sexual health’ (IFPA n.d.). In addition, the IFPA is currently supporting a new ‘D’ case before the European Court of Human Rights that challenges the denial of abortion services in Ireland in cases of serious foetal abnormality (IFPA, 2005). With roots in international development and social justice movements, the IFPA is not strictly a product of the women’s movement and does not claim to be ‘feminist’ in ethos. (This is not to say that individual feminists have not helped to shape IFPA agendas and policies). Yet, at present, the IFPA openly articulates a more ‘radical feminist’ position on reproductive rights than established women’s organizations. While the reasons for this situation are complex, there are a couple of possible explanations that I would note here. First, women’s organizations are often very dependent on public funds and/or engaged in delivering various health and social services in partnership with the state, which can put serious restrictions on their ability to take positions on reproductive health that directly contest current provisions. Second, women’s organizations, especially those that are membership or community based, generally decide priorities through consultative processes with relevant constituencies. When the membership base is very broad (as is the case for the NWCI, for example), and the issue very divisive (such as abortion), this fosters adherence to minimal consensus positions in order to avoid conflict and privileges local over global influences. In contrast, the IFPA is not a membership organization, it is strongly oriented to the international arena, and has extensive links with similar organizations globally. For example, the international, US-based, NGO — the Center for Reproductive Rights — is also supporting the ‘D’ case. Furthermore, Ursula Barry notes, the IFPA’s leadership on the issue is also ‘driven by its frontline experience as a service organization that deals with the repercussions of very restrictive abortion laws.’ Like Banúlacht, therefore, the fact that the IFPA increasingly frames reproductive rights as human rights reflects the influence of the global reproductive rights movement that emerged out of the ICPD. This highlights again the significant role that transnational feminist advocacy, international standards, and local–global solidarity links can play in shaping and supporting local advocacy agendas. However, it also underlines Ursula Barry’s point about ‘missed opportunities’ within the women’s movement and suggests that there is considerable scope for women’s organizations to be more comprehensive, nuanced and radical in their pursuit of women’s reproductive rights as human rights.

A human rights framework also offers much potential for challenging abuses on the basis of sexual orientation. In the period after the Fourth UN World Conference on Women (1995), there were limited efforts in Ireland to frame lesbian rights as human rights. The project, LEA/NOW (Lesbian Education and Awareness), for example, was active in planning a 1997 all-Ireland conference on ‘women’s rights as human rights’ where sexual rights were highlighted (Reilly, 1997). In the words of Ailbhe Smyth who delivered a plenary presentation at that event:

There is no liberty and often no safety and security, for a...woman who is not free to determine and express her sexual identity, and specifically, in a heterosexist world system, to say, without fear of repercussions of any kind, ‘I am lesbian’... (Smyth, 1997)

Subsequently, the Women’s Human Rights 1998 Campaign Ireland held a popular tribunal on women’s human rights, which featured a testimony on human rights abuses experienced by lesbians in Ireland (Ward, 1998). Overall, however, the small literature on lesbian organizing in Ireland situates the movement primarily in terms of self-help and community development initiatives, struggles for cultural recognition and social inclusion, and efforts to contest discrimination within the national context (for example, Egan, 2004; Moane, 1997). More recently, further progress in this area has taken place primarily within an equality and anti-discrimination framework under the auspices of the Equality Authority (Mee & Ronayne, 2000). The inclusion in national equality legislation of sexual orientation as one of the nine prohibited discrimination grounds is a major breakthrough. However, there are many outstanding issues around the equal rights of partners in same-sex unions, as compared to people in heterosexual marriages, in relation to parenting, taxation, inheritance, and so on. This has been underlined by the case of Catherine Zappone and Ann Louise Gilligan who secured a High Court ruling allowing them to seek legal recognition in Ireland for their same-sex marriage, which took place in Canada in 2003. Importantly, their claim, which is being contested by the state, highlights Ireland’s obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights and other human rights standards and calls for recognition of a range of family types in addition those based on heterosexual marriage. Such a high profile individual case, which pulls human rights standards into national discourse and potentially prompts further legislative and policy transformation, is an important aspect of what it means to use a human rights framework domestically.⁷ However, while mechanisms to redress discrimination in employment, social policy, and access

to services and amenities are vital, it is also necessary to address the deeply entrenched homophobia and culturally mediated oppression that continues to affect lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender people in Ireland. Arguably, human rights ideas and standards have an important role to play in catalyzing more fundamental social and cultural change so that, in Niamh Wilson's words, 'a whole group in society [is no longer] invisible, discriminated against, and denied rights' because of their sexual orientation.

Conclusion

In mapping the different threads of women's human rights advocacy in Ireland, six approaches are evident. Two relate to the ethos and processes associated with a feminist approach to human rights. The first is human rights facilitating collective action, local–global solidarity and transformative politics. This is illustrated, for example, by participation in the '16 Days' campaign, or in efforts to seek implementation of the BPfA, both of which express a new global consciousness in local organizing. Indeed, the degree to which a transformative account of human rights is expressed among women's human rights advocates reflects a significant departure from traditional understandings of human rights, which generally equate the human rights project with human rights laws and standards. While the second approach captures an emerging appreciation of human rights as modes of quasi-legal accountability, the fact that this is not *the* point of departure suggests a significantly different take on the role of human rights within a wider transformative project.

The remaining four approaches address specific issues and/or the normative tenets that shape how advocacy on these issues is framed. This includes, thirdly, advocacy that foregrounds human rights as a framework for social, economic and gender justice. The emphasis placed by groups like Banúlacht and Pavee Point on the 'indivisibility' of human rights, for example, underlines this dimension of women's human rights advocacy in Ireland. It is also evident in newer calls to apply a feminist human rights framework to emerging 'local–global' issues such as trafficking or the situation of migrant women workers. A fourth strand sees human rights as a challenge to (gendered) racism. This is articulated most explicitly by advocates in Travellers' rights groups, although similar analyses apply to the situation of women in different minority ethnic and racial groups in Ireland. Significantly, organizations such as the Immigrant Council of Ireland and the National Network of Refugee, Asylum and Immigrant Support Groups (Integrating Ireland) readily use human rights to frame claims on behalf of their

constituencies. The greater challenge in this regard is to ensure that the human rights of women in these groups are made visible and explicitly addressed. A fifth approach, most evident in the work of the National Women's Council of Ireland, addresses the persistent exclusion of women from political participation and decision making. As such, this tack sits most comfortably with the traditional civil/political rights bias in human rights discourse. Finally, the sixth and perhaps most visible approach to women's human rights advocacy, highlights women's bodily integrity as a human rights issue. The impetus provided by the global campaign for women's human rights, and the work of Women's Aid in particular, have ensured that the issue of violence against women features prominently as a strong thread of women's human rights advocacy. At the same time, however, efforts to frame reproductive rights and sexual rights as human rights until very recently have been less in evidence.

While the activist experiences explored in this article demonstrate deepening links between local and global feminist advocacy, a more dramatic move into a global feminist politics — shaped by critical human rights principles and a proactive engagement with a wide range of human rights forums and processes — is far from realized. For example, much more could be done to challenge the current impasse on the abortion question by highlighting how current restrictive practices translate into serious violations of established human rights, especially for vulnerable groups of women including minors, asylum seekers, poor women, women with disabilities, and so on. Furthermore, there is a particular onus on women's human rights initiatives, like the Women's Human Rights Alliance, to extend and deepen recent efforts to establish greater links and build solidarity with women in refugee, asylum seeking, migrant and other minority organizations. A special CEDAW training session was organized by the Women's Human Rights Alliance with women from minority and ethnic groups in November 2003; there is a need for more similarly targeted initiatives.

More generally, the slow progress in establishing comprehensive and sustainable women's human rights advocacy is partly explained by the usual constraints of scarce resources that affect all NGOs and feminist activists. In addition, it must be acknowledged that the processes involved in human rights advocacy are often difficult to negotiate — both in terms of political and ideological resistance on the part of the government and traditionalist forces, as well as in terms of conceptual and bureaucratic complexities. For example, deepening globalization has gone hand-in-hand with the rising hegemony of freemarket economics and a worldwide drive toward privatization. This has fostered a global ideological climate that is very

resistant to social, economic and cultural rights claims, which might impede the current mode of economic globalization. The present Government in Ireland is squarely within this neo-liberal current and as such carefully resists ‘rights-speak’ (Beesley, 2003). This is compounded by the national–international binary that pervades human rights discourse and discourages the local application of human rights standards, especially in Western liberal democracies. At the same time, women’s human rights initiatives are often targeted by fundamentalist actors who use various methods to obstruct open meetings or events. These factors, along with the sheer complexity of human rights processes and procedures, constitute very real obstacles to the development of human rights based advocacy in Ireland at present.

In addition, arguably, the relative strength and success of the equality regime in Ireland has limited engagement with international human rights norms, standards and forums. This is problematic because a human rights approach offers important advantages over a nationally-framed equality approach. It fosters local–global connections, both analytically and concretely in the form of solidarity links, and offers important opportunities to hold governments to account in the international domain. These features of human rights based advocacy are particularly important in an era of globalization when issues and concerns at the local level are increasingly linked to global forces and developments. At the same time, in situations where advocates seek to challenge deeply entrenched oppressive patterns, recourse to human rights — both in the form of legal cases and the mobilization of local–global solidarity alliances — can play a significant role in contributing to fundamental shifts in public policy and opinion in ways that nationally-framed equality provisions cannot. This is perhaps most evident in the role that European Court of Human Rights judgments have played in Ireland in relation to the decriminalization of homosexuality and freedom of information on abortion. In addition to an unhelpful competition between human rights and equality based advocacy, however, the absence of a critical, transformative rights-based approach in community level organizing also needs to be addressed if (women’s) human rights advocacy is to take root at this level in tandem with national, policy oriented initiatives.

Overall, however, the accounts explored in this article demonstrate a high degree of interconnection between global women’s human rights movements and local activism in Ireland, especially through activities related to the UN world conferences of the 1990s, the Beijing Platform for Action and, more recently, the Women’s Convention (CEDAW). This interconnection can be

viewed as both a result and a constitutive moment of the wider global movement for women’s rights as human rights. These local–global interconnections are particularly evident around the issue of violence against women and, more recently, in the area of reproductive rights. While there are many obstacles to the application and full implementation of global agreements in Ireland, there can be no doubt that their existence, and the recurring opportunities that monitoring their implementation present, have yielded positive gains for feminist projects locally. They have afforded opportunities to extend women’s organizational and networking infrastructures, strengthen collaboration among groups locally and globally, and sustain an emerging global feminist consciousness and analysis. I would argue that these meeting places between local and global advocacy efforts signal a new departure within the women’s movement in Ireland, one that warrants further investigation in the context of Irish feminist and women’s studies. Despite current setbacks posed by a global backlash against women’s human rights gains in the 1990s, in an era of globalization, local feminist engagement with global feminist politics is unlikely to recede. Furthermore, a ‘women’s human rights’ framework promises to play an increasingly critical role in forging new intersections between local and global feminist advocacy in Ireland.

Endnotes

¹ The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is the comprehensive intergovernmental agreements on women’s equality and human rights resulting from the UN Fourth World Conference on Women (1995).

² The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the UN in 1979 and ratified by the Irish state in December 1985.

³ A supplemental treaty to the Women’s Convention, which allows the treaty monitoring committee to receive complaints from individuals or groups in states that are party to the Convention and the Optional Protocol.

⁴ Currently, for example, organizations involved in the advisory group of the WHRA include: AkiDWA support network for African women, Amnesty International Irish Section, Banúlacht, Irish Council for Civil Liberties, National Women’s Council of Ireland, Ruhama (service and advocacy organization that aims to assist women in prostitution), Women’s Aid, and WERRC.

⁵ The Employment Equality Act (1999), Equal Status Act (2000), and Equality Act (2004).

⁶ The current legal status of abortion in Ireland is as follows: A 1992 Supreme Court ruling on the X case — involving a 14 year old rape victim who sought an abortion in the UK — concluded that abortion in Ireland was permissible where there was a substantial risk to the life of the pregnant woman, including a threat of suicide. In a 2002 referendum, a proposal to reverse the X-case judgment was rejected. People further voted to end a ban on abortion information and to endorse the right of women to travel abroad for an abortion. As

yet, however, legislation has not been put in place to reflect the 1992 ruling.

⁷ Two previous European Court of Human Rights judgments – on the Norris case (1988) and on abortion information (1992), which brought about decriminalization of homosexuality and ensured the legality of information on abortion in Ireland, are prime examples of the potential effectiveness of human rights legal avenues in driving wider social change.

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