

# Abortion, Gay Rights, and the National Gay Federation in Ireland, 1982–1983

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The issue is about a woman's right to choose to control her own body and it's about your right as a gay man to control your body.

—Joni Crone, “Women's Right to Choose: Affiliation?”

IN THE PERIOD BETWEEN 2015 AND 2018, the Republic of Ireland held two seminal referendums: the 2015 same-sex marriage referendum and the 2018 referendum on repealing the Eighth Amendment, which had placed a constitutional ban on abortion in 1983.<sup>1</sup> Both referendums, which passed by large majorities, signaled the dramatic transformation that had taken place in the Republic of Ireland in the preceding years, allowing the country to leave behind the image of a socially conservative society dominated by the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. The 2015 same-sex marriage referendum was all the more remarkable considering that it was only in 1993 that the Republic of Ireland decriminalized sexual activity between males—the last country in the European Economic Community to do so.<sup>2</sup> Speaking after the 2015 referendum, Enda Kenny, then Ireland's taoiseach (prime minister), declared that “today Ireland made history. . . . [W]ith today's Yes vote we have disclosed who we are—a generous, compassionate, bold and joyful people.”<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein following the 2018

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Marriage Equality Referendum, see Gráinne Healy, Brian Sheehan, and Noel Whelan, *Ireland Says Yes: The Inside Story of How the Vote for Marriage Equality Was Won* (Kildare: Merrion Press, 2016); Gráinne Healy, *Crossing the Threshold: The Story of the Marriage Equality Movement* (Kildare: Merrion Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> The history of this decriminalization is discussed in Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland* (London: Profile Books, 2009), 496–507; Patrick James McDonagh, “Homosexuals Are Revolting—Gay & Lesbian Activism in the Republic of Ireland 1970s–1990s,” *Studi irlandesi: A Journal of Irish Studies* 7 (2017): 65–91; Chrystel Hug, *The Politics of Sexual Morality in Ireland* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 201–44; and Kieran Rose, *Diverse Communities: The Evolution of Lesbian and Gay Politics in Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1994), 34–58.

<sup>3</sup> “Speech by An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, T.D. on the Marriage Equality Referendum Dublin Castle 23 May, 2015,” <https://merrionstreet.ie/en/News-Room/Speeches/Speech>

referendum, Leo Varadkar, Ireland's first openly gay taoiseach, emphasized the historic nature of the vote, noting that "a quiet revolution has taken place and a great act of democracy a hundred years since women got the right to vote. Today, we as a people have spoken. And we say that we trust women, and we respect women and their decisions."<sup>4</sup>

Thirty-five years earlier, however, in 1983, the situation was profoundly different. In April 1983 the Irish Supreme Court, in a three-to-two ruling, following a case taken by David Norris, citing the "Christian nature of our state and on the grounds that the deliberate practice of homosexuality is morally wrong," ruled that the laws criminalizing sexual activity between males were not unconstitutional.<sup>5</sup> In September of that same year Ireland's electorate voted overwhelmingly in favor of an amendment to Bunreacht na hÉireann (the Republic of Ireland's constitution). Coming into force on 7 October 1983, this Eighth Amendment meant that the Irish constitution enshrined (until 2018) "the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right."<sup>6</sup>

The decision to hold a referendum had been directly influenced by the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC) and the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign (PLAC), which had formed in 1980 and 1981, respectively. Working together, SPUC and PLAC campaigned for the introduction of a constitutional ban on abortion, fearing that the increasing liberalization of abortion laws in countries like England, the United States, France, and Denmark might also occur in the Republic of Ireland.<sup>7</sup> Within three weeks of PLAC's formation it had secured the support of Charles Haughey, the leader of Fianna Fáil and then taoiseach, and Garrett Fitzgerald, the leader of Fine Gael, the main opposition party at that time, to hold a referendum.<sup>8</sup> The speed with which PLAC was able

\_by\_An\_Taoiseach\_Enda\_Kenny\_T\_D\_on\_the\_Marriage\_Equality\_Referendum\_Dublin\_Castle\_23\_May\_2015.html.

<sup>4</sup> "Taoiseach—'A quiet revolution has taken place, and a great act of democracy,'" speech by An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, following the Declaration on the Referendum of the Eighth Amendment, 26 May 2018, [https://merrionstreet.ie/en/News-Room/News/Spotlights/An\\_Taoiseach\\_following\\_the\\_declaration\\_on\\_the\\_Referendum\\_on\\_the\\_Eighth\\_Amendment.html](https://merrionstreet.ie/en/News-Room/News/Spotlights/An_Taoiseach_following_the_declaration_on_the_Referendum_on_the_Eighth_Amendment.html).

<sup>5</sup> Judgement of the Supreme Court on *David Norris v. the Attorney General*, April 22, 1983, MS 45, 952/4, Irish Queer Archive, National Library of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland (hereafter cited as IQA). David Norris had originally taken a case to the High Court in 1980 challenging the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act and 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, both of which criminalized sexual activity between males. He lost his High Court case in 1980 and subsequently appealed to the Supreme Court in 1983.

<sup>6</sup> Lindsey Earner-Byrne and Diane Urquhart, *The Irish Abortion Journey, 1920–2018* (Cham: Palgrave Pivot, 2019), 78.

<sup>7</sup> Hug, *The Politics*, 146.

<sup>8</sup> Vicky Randel, "The Politics of Abortion: Ireland in Comparative Perspective," in "Women and Irish Politics," ed. Christine St. Peter and Ron Marken, special issue, *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 18, no. 1 (1992): 122.

to secure this support demonstrated the considerable clout it had with the political class.

Tom Hesketh has noted that the 1983 referendum “strained relations between the churches to breaking point whilst posing dilemmas for each church individually; it divided deeply both Fine Gael and [the] Labour [Party] (Fine Gael and the Labour Party had formed a coalition government in December 1982 which lasted until March 1987).”<sup>9</sup> Ireland’s decision contrasted sharply to the laws pertaining to abortion in other Western societies, which, as noted previously, had moved in the direction of liberalizing their abortion laws since the 1960s.<sup>10</sup> In 1967 Ireland’s closest neighbor, England, for example, had not only decriminalized sexual activity between males aged twenty-one and over, as long as it occurred in private, but also legalized abortion.

The tensions Hesketh referred to were not confined to the churches and political parties. In fact, the issue of abortion caused considerable controversy and division within Ireland’s largest gay rights organization, the National Gay Federation (NGF), and its affiliated lesbian organization, Liberation for Irish Lesbians (LIL). LIL, which had formed in 1978, joined with the NGF following its formation in March 1979. Four years later, in May 1983, following a year-long contentious debate, the NGF administrative council decided, against the will of its members, not to join forces with the Women’s Right to Choose Campaign (WRTCC). The WRTCC had launched in 1981 to campaign for abortion rights in the Republic of Ireland. Joni Crone, a founding member of LIL and a leading proponent of the NGF supporting the WRTCC, recalled that “this betrayal of lesbian and heterosexual women who had campaigned previously for gay male law reform resulted in lesbians leaving the NGF. And it was the last time that many of us chose to work in any official capacity in solidarity with gay men.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Tom Hesketh, *The Second Partitioning of Ireland? The Abortion Referendum of 1983* (Dublin: Brandsma Books Ltd., 1993), xi. Protestant Church leaders opposed the holding of a referendum and advocated a no, while the Roman Catholic Church strongly endorsed the holding of it and advocated a yes.

<sup>10</sup> Louise Finer and Johanna B. Fine, “Abortion Law around the World: Progress and Pushback,” *American Journal of Public Health* 103, no. 4 (2013): 585–89; Julia L. Ernst, Laura Katzive, and Erica Smock, “The Global Pattern of U.S. Initiatives Curtailing Women’s Reproductive Rights: A Perspective on the Increasingly Anti-choice Mosaic,” *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Constitutional Law* 6, no. 4 (2004): 752–95.

<sup>11</sup> Joni Crone, “Lesbians: The Lavender Women of Ireland,” in *Lesbian and Gay Visions of Ireland: Towards the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Íde O’Carroll and Eoin Collins (London: Cassell, 1995), 68. A note on terminology: throughout this article I use the terms “homosexual” and “gay” because members of the NGF used these terms interchangeably and to refer both to men who were sexually attracted to other men and women who were sexually attracted to other women. I use “lesbian” to refer to women who chose to adopt this term in an attempt to generate greater awareness and to counteract the common misperception that the terms “homosexual” and “gay” referred only to men.

The controversy over aligning the NGF with a prochoice organization offers an interesting contrast to a general trend that emerged internationally in the 1980s: the increased cooperation between lesbian women and gay men during the HIV/AIDS crisis and the rise of influential Christian Right organizations. As Jill Humphrey argues for the British case, the “advent of HIV/AIDS and the pro-family and anti-gay crusades of a New Right government” produced a spirit of cooperation and understanding.<sup>12</sup> Mary Bernstein, Nella Van Dyke, and Ronda Cress have noted a similar phenomenon in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Van Dyke and Cress argue that “in Columbus and nationwide, the waning of the women’s movement and the rise of the antigay Christian Right shifted the salient identity boundaries for gay men and lesbians. Whereas gender was the salient boundary division in the 1970s, with gay men and lesbians believing they had nothing in common, their common sexual identity transcended these differences in the 1980s.”<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, Amin Ghaziani, in exploring the organization of the 1987 March on Washington, has factored in another important event that he argues helped bring about greater cooperation in the United States, *Bowers v. Hardwick*.<sup>15</sup> Ghaziani notes that this case and the HIV/AIDS crisis were the key driving forces behind the organization of the 1987 March on Washington. In particular, Ghaziani argues that these events led organizers to emphasize the importance of coalition building in the organization of that year’s march. In their call to action to the major gay organizations in the United States, organizers drew comparisons between gay rights and those of people of color and women, arguing that “as the rights of lesbians and gays are threatened, racist attacks increase; the hard-won civil rights of People of Color are dismantled. . . . As lesbians and gay men are denied the right to make love, the right of women to control their own bodies is in jeopardy.”<sup>16</sup> Organizers, therefore, clearly saw a connection between gay rights and the right of women to control their own bodies.

Despite similar conditions in Ireland, namely, the emergence of influential Christian Right organizations in the form of SPUC and PLAC and the aforementioned Supreme Court judgment that had described

<sup>12</sup> Jill C. Humphrey, “Cracks in the Feminist Mirror? Research and Reflections on Lesbians and Gay Men Working Together,” *Feminist Review* 66, no. 1 (2000): 106.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Bernstein, “Identities and Politics: Toward a Historical Understanding of the Lesbian and Gay Movement,” *Social Science History* 26, no. 3 (2002): 531–81; Nella Van Dyke and Ronda Cress, “Political Opportunities and Collective Identity in Ohio’s Gay and Lesbian Movement, 1970 to 2000,” *Sociological Perspectives* 49, no. 4 (2006): 504–26.

<sup>14</sup> Van Dyke and Cress, “Political Opportunities,” 512.

<sup>15</sup> Amin Ghaziani, *The Dividends of Dissent: How Conflict and Culture Work in Lesbian and Gay Marches on Washington* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 90–91, 123. In 1986 the US Supreme Court ruled that gay men did not have a constitutional right to engage in sodomy even in the privacy of their own bedrooms.

<sup>16</sup> Ghaziani, 96.

homosexuality as morally wrong, the NGF were unable to support a connection between gay rights and a woman's right to control her own body, resulting in a breakdown rather than an increase in the cooperation between lesbian women and gay men within the NGF in 1983. Moreover, that it was the issue of abortion that drove a wedge between gay men and lesbian women in the NGF is all the more surprising when one considers that the same law that criminalized abortion, the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, had similarly criminalized sexual activity between males.<sup>17</sup> The 1861 Offences Against the Person Act criminalized a range of different activities; however, sexual activity between women was not criminalized.

To date, however, there has been no detailed analysis as to why the issue of abortion generated so much controversy and fallout for the NGF. This, I would argue, is part of a wider neglect of Irish queer history more generally. While in other Western societies, scholars have been devoting considerable attention to the history of sexuality and queer history since the 1970s, the social, cultural, and political contexts of twentieth-century Ireland, particularly the strong influence of the Roman Catholic Church, have influenced Irish historians to avoid this aspect of the country's history.<sup>18</sup> According to Tom Inglis, "The legacy of the Catholic Church's monopoly of sexual discourse has lingered longest in the halls of academia."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, as Diarmaid Ferriter notes, even into the late 1980s and early 1990s "the focus of [Irish] historians remained narrow—republicanism, violence and the continuing fixation with intransigence in the North."<sup>20</sup> This trend still dominates Irish historiography and Irish history departments today, a fact that has tended to sideline scholarly investigation of sexuality and queer history.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, in Ireland it was not until the late 1970s that groups and individuals of queer activists first emerged to publicly challenge Ireland's strict gender and sexual norms. Like elsewhere, where queer and gender scholarship arose directly from activists who were involved in civil rights, gay

<sup>17</sup> Hug, *The Politics*, 141.

<sup>18</sup> Useful accounts of the Irish Catholic Church's strict sexual and gender mores can be found in Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998); Lindsey Earner-Byrne, *Mother and Child: Maternity and Child Welfare in Dublin, 1922–60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); and Paul Ryan, *Asking Angela MacNamara: An Intimate History of Irish Lives* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Tom Inglis, "Foucault, Bourdieu and the Field of Irish Sexuality," *Irish Journal of Sociology* 7, no. 1 (1997): 7.

<sup>20</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland: 1900–2000* (London: Profile Books, 2004), 749.

<sup>21</sup> The most prominent histories of modern Ireland tend to mention queer history only in the context of the criminalization of sexual activity between males. See, for example, R. F. Foster, *Luck and the Irish: A Brief History of Change 1970–2000* (London: Allen Lane, 2007); Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*; Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922–2002* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004); and Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth-Century Ireland: Nation and State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

rights, and women's rights movements, in Ireland the situation was similar, albeit this began much later, in the mid-1990s. In recent years, however, spurred on by the marriage equality referendum, more attention has been devoted to uncovering Irish queer history, in particular, a vibrant history of queer spaces throughout Ireland and the various forms of gay activism in the 1970s and the gay community's response to AIDS in the 1980s.<sup>22</sup>

Building on this research, therefore, this article provides a case study analysis of controversies within the NGF about cooperating with the WRTCC on abortion reform. Internal NGF conflicts about gay men's role in the abortion debate reveal what the members of this organization perceived gay rights to be, what they thought were the best strategies for achieving these rights, and how their specific understanding of the relationship between gender and sexuality shaped their rhetoric. As we will see, the desire of some influential NGF members to present a respectable image of homosexuals produced a specific definition of what constituted a gay rights issue that isolated the organization from the women's movement, producing a stark contrast with the more cooperative coalition building in other countries during the era of the HIV/AIDS crisis, the rise of influential Christian Right organizations, and high-profile setbacks in court. This case study, therefore, demonstrates that these events did not always necessitate closer cooperation between lesbian and gay men; in fact, they could have the opposite effect, as we will see in the case of the NGF. In 1983 gender emerged rather than disappeared as a salient boundary division within the NGF at a time when one might have expected that conditions were optimum for greater cooperation.

I begin with an overview of the emergence of the Irish Gay Rights Movement (IGRM) in 1974, the forerunner of the NGF, and a brief discussion of the politics of abortion in Ireland. I then move on to discuss the heated debates that emerged on whether or not the NGF should support the WRTCC before then exploring the reasons behind the NGF's eventual decision not to support the WRTCC, emphasizing the extent to which gender and the politics of respectability shaped these debates. Yuvraj Joshi argues that the politics of respectability is built around a "system of hierarchy and domination grounded on distinctions between the respectable and the degenerate."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> The most notable contributions include Páraic Kerrigan, "Projecting a Queer Republic: Mainstreaming Queer Identities on Irish Documentary Film," *Studies in Documentary Film* 13, no. 1 (2019): 1–17; Páraic Kerrigan, "OUT-ing AIDS: The Irish Civil Gay Rights Movement's Responses to the AIDS Crisis, 1984–1988," *Media History* 25, no. 2 (2019): 244–58; Ann Nolan, "The Gay Community Response to the Emergence of AIDS in Ireland: Activism, Covert Policy, and the Significance of an 'Invisible Minority,'" *Journal of Policy History* 30, no. 1 (2018): 105–27; Maurice Casey, "Radical Politics and Gay Activism in the Republic of Ireland, 1974–1990," *Irish Studies Review* 26, no. 2 (2018): 217–36; Orla Egan, *Queer Republic of Cork* (Cork: Onstream Publications, 2016); and Paul Ryan, "The Pursuit of Gay and Lesbian Sexual Citizenship Rights, 1980–2011," in *Sexualities & Irish Society*, ed. Máire Leane and Elizabeth Kiely (Dublin: Orpen Press, 2014), 101–26.

<sup>23</sup> Yuvraj Joshi, "Respectable Queerness," *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 43, no. 2 (2012): 419.

Within the NGF the politics of respectability considerably shaped what was, and crucially what was not, a gay rights issue within that organization.

#### THE RISE OF THE IRISH GAY RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Historian Jeffrey Weeks has noted that the “mid-1960s was the golden age of liberal-humanitarian reforms, and of single-issue campaigns, mostly of long standing, to achieve them: the abolition of capital punishment and abortion-law reform and divorce-law reform as well as homosexual-law reform. And this was a European phenomenon.”<sup>24</sup> Weeks only had to look across to the Republic of Ireland to find an exception to this “European phenomenon.” The Ireland of the 1960s lagged considerably behind its European counterparts in terms of liberal-humanitarian reforms, a situation that has only recently changed. Since the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922 a strict puritanism had been institutionalized, primarily because of the power that the Roman Catholic Church wielded over Irish society and the political class. Divorce was not permitted (and would not be until 1996), nor was the sale of contraception, while existing legislation that criminalized abortion and sexual activity between males was maintained. Chrystel Hug has noted that between 1962 and 1972 455 men were convicted of same-sex sexual activity under the British 1861 Offences Against the Person Act and the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, both of which had been continued by the Irish Free State in 1922.<sup>25</sup>

As was true elsewhere, homosexuals in Ireland were commonly characterized as being criminal, sinful, sick, promiscuous, effeminate, and mentally unwell. The vast majority of Irish citizens, including homosexuals themselves, had grown up in ignorance of homosexuality and regarded homosexuals as deviant outcasts without actually ever knowingly meeting, talking to, or even listening to one. One individual, for example, who contacted the *Sunday Independent* in April 1969 epitomized this ignorance. She asked one of the newspaper’s columnists to “please write about homosexuality in your column next week? What is the cause of it? Lack of love? Or is it caused by TB or Cancer?”<sup>26</sup> Such views are hardly surprising, given that in 1973 one of the country’s leading medical experts, Austin Darragh, director of the University College Dublin Psycho-Endocrine Centre, called on the government to send convicted homosexuals for medical treatment instead of to jail and stated his firm belief that homosexuals could in fact be cured.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain, from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet Books, 1977), 173.

<sup>25</sup> Hug, *The Politics*, 208.

<sup>26</sup> “Your Child and Homosexuality,” *Sunday Independent*, April 13, 1969. The *Sunday Independent* was one of Ireland’s most popular mainstream Sunday nationals.

<sup>27</sup> “Don’t Jail Them, Pleads Doctor,” *Irish Independent*, November 6, 1973.



Gay and lesbian individuals remember the negative images they had grown accustomed to while growing up during this period, as well as the fear, shame, isolation, and loneliness they experienced as a result of this cultural climate. Tonie Walsh (born in 1960 and raised in Clonmel, County Tipperary) recalls that his teenage years “were quite fraught with anxiety—especially as I came face-to-face with dealing with my sexual identity, and, of course, also having to sort of square that up with being Roman Catholic as well . . . being a member of a church that said I was intrinsically evil, that my behaviour was sinful, but intrinsically evil [*sic*].”<sup>28</sup> Theresa Blanche (born in 1957 and raised in Finglas, County Dublin) has similar recollections, recalling that “I was sort of coming out at sixteen, but there was nowhere to come out to. Where did my type go? And there was nowhere to go. And there was no one to talk to. You didn’t discuss it. You didn’t talk. I didn’t talk. I had no one. It was a very lonely time, very isolated time.”<sup>29</sup> Blanche recalled one particular incident when she was made to feel ashamed: “I remember going into a bookstore. . . . I remember I heard about this book called *The Well of Loneliness*, I mean, so aptly named by Radclyffe Hall. . . . And I went in and I asked. And very sternly she said to me, ‘we don’t sell those type of books,’ and I felt like, ‘oh,’ and like, very ashamed. It was very shaming because I had asked for something that was, you know, not to be asked for.”<sup>30</sup>

By the end of the 1960s and beginning of the early 1970s, however, organizations had begun to mobilize to challenge the status quo in both the republic and Northern Ireland, particularly the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association and the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement. Other events, such as antiapartheid demonstrations, the establishment of a Commission on the Status of Women in the Republic of Ireland, the Bloody Sunday massacre in Northern Ireland in 1972, and the republic’s decision to join the European Economic Community in 1973 all signaled the beginnings of a new phase in Irish history.<sup>31</sup> The Irish electorate’s enthusiastic support for joining the EEC symbolized a strong desire for closer alignment with Europe and the hope for an end to years of isolationism.<sup>32</sup>

In the midst of this wider domestic and international discourse on civil rights and sexual liberation, Irish gay and lesbian activists in the Sexual Liberation Movement (SLM) organized the country’s first symposium on homosexuality at Trinity College Dublin in February 1974. The SLM was a broad-based group seeking to influence government policy on issues like

<sup>28</sup> Tonie Walsh, interview with Edmund Lynch, April 6, 2013, Edmund Lynch Irish LGBT Oral History Project. Copy courtesy of Edmund Lynch.

<sup>29</sup> Theresa Blanche, interview with Edmund Lynch, June 14, 2013, Edmund Lynch Irish LGBT Oral History Project. Copy courtesy of Edmund Lynch.

<sup>30</sup> Blanche interview.

<sup>31</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *Ambiguous Republic: Ireland in the 1970s* (London: Profile Books, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> Dennis Kennedy, “Yes to Europe by 5 to 1,” *Irish Times*, May 12, 1972.



contraception, divorce, and homosexuality.<sup>33</sup> Over three hundred individuals attended the symposium, including a number of organizations from Great Britain, such as Rose Robertson of Parents Enquiry, a London-based support group for parents of homosexuals; Babs Todd of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality, also based in England; and Ian Dunn of the Scottish Minorities Group.<sup>34</sup> Writing in the *Irish Times*, one of Ireland's leading mainstream national papers, Christina Murphy reported that Babs Todd in her talk urged Irish homosexuals to come out in the open and be honest about themselves.<sup>35</sup> David Norris later recalled that "the injection of confidence provided by these events confirmed a number of us in the view that it was necessary to emerge from under the comparatively bland umbrella of general liberation and specify an interest in gay liberation as such."<sup>36</sup> In June that same year, Norris, along with Sean Connolly, Clement Clancy, and Edmund Lynch, met at the South County Hotel in Dublin and founded the Irish Gay Rights Movement, the first such organization in Ireland.<sup>37</sup>

The Irish Gay Rights Movement described itself as a "non-party political, non-sectarian homophile grouping" and listed the following objectives in its constitution:

- The improvement in the lifestyle of homosexual men and women
- The achievement of equality under the law with heterosexual congress
- The promotion of better understanding of homosexuality by the community at large by education and example
- The provision of social amenities and events for members
- Befriending<sup>38</sup>
- The provision of religious, legal and medical information relating to homosexuality
- The acquisition of premises for official and social activities<sup>39</sup>

<sup>33</sup> "Gay Rights—History and Emergence of IGRM," clipping of *Gay News*, August 15, 1974, Papers of Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association, D/3762/1/10/1, Public Records Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast, Northern Ireland (hereafter cited as NIGRA).

<sup>34</sup> Jeffrey Dudgeon, "Featurette," *Gay Forum: Seven Essays on Homosexuality* (1974), 8.

<sup>35</sup> Christina Murphy, "Homosexuals Set Up Organisation: Conference in TCD," *Irish Times*, February 18, 1974.

<sup>36</sup> David Norris, "Homosexuals Are Revolting: A History of the Gay Movement in Ireland," *In Touch: Journal of the National Gay Federation*, August/September 1980, 9.

<sup>37</sup> Edmund Lynch to David Norris, April 19, 1975, accession 6672, box 21, David Norris Papers, National Library of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland (hereafter cited as Norris Papers).

<sup>38</sup> Befriending in this context refers to activities or services established by the IGRM and NGF that facilitated individuals to talk about their sexuality and meet other homosexuals for the first time. Tel-A-Friend, for example, was a telephone befriending service for homosexuals, who could ring a designated number and speak to an individual about their sexuality and any concerns or issues they were having. Quite often, Tel-A-Friend was the first point of contact for many Irish homosexuals, particularly from isolated areas where there were no gay or lesbian groups. These activities might also be referred to as a form of self-help activity.

<sup>39</sup> Constitution of the IGRM, September 28, 1975, MS 45, 951/2, IQA.

In its formative years, those running the IGRM enjoyed a good working relationship, and they provided a social space for Dublin's gay community. The organization was central in helping to break the silence surrounding homosexuality and gay rights in Ireland. However, by early 1977 internal tensions, driven primarily by personal animosities rather than strong ideological differences, convinced Norris, Lynch, and others to leave the organization. Within one year the IGRM ceased to exist. Although Clancy and Connolly revived the organization in 1979, the IGRM never regained the popularity it had enjoyed between 1974 and 1977, and it was virtually replaced by the National Gay Federation in March, which Norris, Lynch, and Bernard Keogh founded in 1979 and which remained Ireland's leading gay rights organization into the 1980s, particularly in terms of numbers.

While the NGF was a new organization it was almost indistinguishable from the IGRM in terms of its structure, objectives, and approach. The NGF sought to achieve full equal rights for gay men and women, to abolish all discriminatory sanctions against homosexual behavior, and to promote a greater understanding of homosexuality through education and example.<sup>40</sup> The NGF's administrative council was elected each year at the organization's annual general meeting and was housed in the Hirschfeld Centre on Fownes Street, Temple Bar, Dublin, which had been named after Magnus Hirschfeld, the pioneering German sexologist and gay rights campaigner.<sup>41</sup> The Hirschfeld Centre provided a number of vital services and leisure activities for Dublin's gay community, including a disco four nights a week, an in-house cinema, a café, discussion groups, a gay youth group, a parents support group, and a telephone befriending service called Tel-A-Friend.

The Hirschfeld Centre was also home to LIL, which had formed in 1978 to provide a forum for the "discussion of women's issues and lesbians' gay political ideas, [and to offer a] social environment where lesbians can meet and simply be themselves."<sup>42</sup> Reflecting on the cultural climate, the vulnerable position of lesbian women, and LIL's decision to join with the NGF in 1979, Crone explained that "liberation for Irish Lesbians is a political sounding name and it represents our highest aspiration. It sounds as if we'd be out on the streets tomorrow. We're not quite ready for that yet—but the day will come. Now we have something to build from and co-operation with men for the first time ever."<sup>43</sup> LIL's decision to affiliate with the NGF was in many respects simply a practical decision, because LIL did not have the resources to provide the services that were offered at the Hirschfeld

<sup>40</sup> Constitution of the NGF, May 31, 1980, MS 45, 936/3, IQA.

<sup>41</sup> NGF leaflet on Hirschfeld Centre, MS 45, 940/8, IQA.

<sup>42</sup> NGF leaflet on lesbian women, MS 45, 938/2, IQA.

<sup>43</sup> "Irish Lesbians," clipping of *GPU News*, July 1979, 8, Archives of Human Sexuality and Identity, accessed through Gale Cengage Learning on March 8, 2016. On the affiliation of the two groups, see "LIL," *In Touch: Journal of the National Gay Federation*, September 1979, 5.

Centre. By joining with the NGF, LIL remained a distinct organization but was able to avail itself of the benefits of the Hirschfeld Centre. In effect, this was a partnership, albeit one in which the NGF was the more dominant partner. This was reflected in the fact that LIL was commonly referred to as the NGF's women's group. However, as part of this agreement, LIL was permitted to nominate members to the NGF administrative council, thereby giving lesbian women a somewhat greater influence in the running of the Hirschfeld Centre and NGF. This was particularly important at a time when the NGF was an overwhelmingly male-dominated organization. Of the 1,027 members of the NGF registered in 1980, over 95 percent were men.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, the decision of both organizations to join together signaled the clear intention of a gay male-dominated organization and lesbian organization to work more closely together.

Despite its numerical disadvantage, LIL carved out a presence within the Hirschfeld Centre. Beginning in early 1979, one Wednesday a month at the Hirschfeld Centre was reserved for women only to organize events such as discos, discussion groups, and befriending socials. Within a year LIL had secured Wednesday nights on a weekly rather than monthly basis. Moreover, in conjunction with Tel-A-Friend, LIL, which had operated Tel-A-Friend for women every Wednesday night, later rebranded this service in 1983 to Lesbian Line, which operated instead every Thursday evening and provided a dedicated helpline for lesbian women throughout Ireland. This service grew in popularity, with an average of fifteen calls a night by 1984, a marked increase from the first year (1979) LIL began volunteering with Tel-A-Friend, when there were 126 calls from females compared to 972 from male callers.<sup>45</sup>

Up until 1982 the relationship between LIL and the NGF was amicable. While there had been criticism leveled at some within the NGF for being sexist, tension over women's right to women-only spaces, and a perception that the Hirschfeld Centre was too male dominated, there had been no major division or fallout. In fact, LIL and the NGF had cooperated to stage Gay Pride Week celebrations in Ireland and to make the Hirschfeld Centre a hive of activity seven days a week. In July 1982, however, a major turning point in this relationship came when the LIL members of the NGF administrative council, Joni Crone and Majella Breen, proposed that the NGF support the WRTCC.<sup>46</sup> Although the NGF administrative council approved the motion at this meeting, no public statements in support of the WRTCC were ever made. In fact, the motion instigated a heated and

<sup>44</sup> Breakdown of NGF membership from March 17, 1979, to March 31, 1980, MS 45, 936/4, IQA.

<sup>45</sup> Caroline Walsh, "Women Who Love Women," *Irish Times*, October 12, 1984; report on the number of Tel-A-Friend calls for the period beginning April 24, 1979, and ending April 23, 1980, MS 45, 949/4, IQA.

<sup>46</sup> Minutes of NGF meeting, July 9, 1982, accession 6672, box 46, Norris Papers.

fractious debate within the NGF, culminating one year later in the reversal of the decision, much to the resentment of many NGF/LIL members.

THE NATIONAL GAY FEDERATION AND  
THE WOMEN'S RIGHT TO CHOOSE CAMPAIGN

The internal debate within the NGF over supporting the WRTCC was reflective of how fraught the subject of abortion was in Ireland more generally. The majority of feminist organizations in Ireland avoided the issue of abortion and tended to focus instead on access to contraception, divorce, and greater employment rights for women.<sup>47</sup> This was particularly evident within the Anti-Amendment Campaign (AAC), which formed in 1982. The AAC, which included organizations such as the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, the Union of Students in Ireland, the Galway Labour Women's Group, the Trade Union Women's Forum, and the Right to Choose Group, as well as a number of prominent individuals, including Protestant Church leaders and politicians like Senator Mary Robinson (future president of Ireland), formed in response to PLAC and campaigned exclusively to oppose attempts to introduce a constitutional ban on abortion.<sup>48</sup> This varied group of individuals and organizations led Mary Gordon, a journalist with *Gralton: An Irish Socialist Review*, to describe the AAC as "a broad front campaign attempting to hold within its ranks many divergent views. Its minimum platform consisting of five points of opposition to the amendment—that it is unnecessary, wasteful, sectarian, anti-democratic and shows disregard for the needs and rights of women—is intended to keep out nobody and contain everyone. Thus the AAC is composed of some strange allies; Protestant church leaders, feminist right to choose supporters, bourgeois liberals, revolutionary socialists, anti-imperialists and two-nationalists—to name only a few."<sup>49</sup>

The AAC adopted a cautious approach in its efforts to encourage the Irish electorate to vote no. Recognizing the divisiveness of abortion and the lack of support for it in the Republic of Ireland, the AAC, rather than promoting or defending a woman's right to choose, instead focused on dismissing the merits of such an amendment, arguing that the referendum

<sup>47</sup> Evelyn Mahon, "Abortion Debates in Ireland: An Ongoing Issue," in *Abortion Politics, Women's Movements, and the Democratic State: A Comparative Study of State Feminism*, ed. Dorothy McBride Stetson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 158.

<sup>48</sup> A list of individuals and organizations affiliated with the AAC can be found in MS 45, 952/3, IQA. Other notable individuals who joined the AAC included Dr. Noel Browne, a former minister for health, and Dr. Conor Cruise O'Brien, a former minister for posts and telegraph.

<sup>49</sup> Mary Gordon, "The Anti-amendment Campaign," *Gralton*, August/September 1982, 5. Two-nationalists refers to two cohorts of Irish nationalists, those who believed armed force was necessary to achieve a united independent Ireland and those who believed in non-violent approaches to achieving a united independent Ireland.

was unnecessary and a waste of time and resources, as abortion was already illegal in the republic.<sup>50</sup> This rhetoric was deemed strategically more advantageous. Individuals and organizations involved with the AAC often sought to reaffirm that they were not taking a stance on abortion. For example, in its 1982–83 annual report, the Irish Council for Civil Liberties stated that the “Council has no policy either for or against abortion. Members have the right to adopt whatever view they wish, provided they are careful not to represent their own views as Council policy.”<sup>51</sup> Despite this approach, however, the AAC failed to convince Irish society to reject the amendment, which was overwhelmingly passed by 66 percent of voters.<sup>52</sup>

The only group to explicitly campaign for abortion rights was the WRTCC.<sup>53</sup> But this small group was sidelined within the AAC and generated very little public support from the Irish population or political class. The unyielding support of WRTCC members for abortion rights set them apart from other activist organizations in the country and complicated their relationship to the NGF. While the NGF had sent a letter to the AAC in 1982 offering its support for its campaign, even enclosing a check to assist with financing the AAC’s activities, no such letter was sent to the WRTCC, despite the support of the administrative council for Crone and Breen’s motion to affiliate in July 1982.<sup>54</sup>

At the July 1982 NGF meeting, in response to comments from Tony O’Shea, who had cautioned against supporting the WRTCC, Breen argued that “aside from the fact that the WRTCC concerned itself with the basic right of the individual to control over their own body, the campaign was quite directly associated to gay liberation in that many lesbians were mothers of children and the issue affected them dearly.”<sup>55</sup> Breen clearly sought to claim that gay liberation included lesbian women and the right to access abortion rights. Both Bernard Keogh and David Norris, however, sought to have Crone and Breen’s motion overturned at a meeting in September 1982. On this occasion Norris and Keogh focused not on the merits of Crone and Breen’s motion but instead on procedural issues relating to how the motion had been adopted. Keogh and Norris requested that attendees of the upcoming annual general meeting of the NGF be informed that “the council meeting at which the decision to affiliate [with the WRTCC] was taken was poorly attended. The proposal to affiliate was introduced during the course of the meeting and it did not appear on the agenda.”<sup>56</sup> The minutes of this meeting describe Crone as “quite angry” and note her objection

<sup>50</sup> Randel, “The Politics of Abortion,” 126.

<sup>51</sup> Irish Council for Civil Liberties annual report, 1982–83, MS 45, 949/9, IQA.

<sup>52</sup> Hug, *The Politics*, 156.

<sup>53</sup> Goretti Horgan, “The Backlash Has Arrived,” *Gralton*, June/July 1982, 12.

<sup>54</sup> Tonie Walsh letter to Anti-amendment Campaign, November 1, 1982, MS 45, 952/3, IQA.

<sup>55</sup> Minutes of NGF meeting, July 9, 1982.

<sup>56</sup> Minutes of NGF meeting, September 17, 1982, accession 6672, box 45, Norris Papers.

to the “meeting’s indulgence to Bernard’s motion.” She had insisted that the “Council appeared to be a closeted one and that it was about time it woke up to reality and faced certain issues. Women’s sexuality, which was one of the issues at stake here, . . . very closely linked to gay sexuality. It was all one issue.”<sup>57</sup> This skirmish describes the extent to which the relationship between a woman’s right to choose and the strategies of mostly male gay rights campaigners within the NGF administrative council had come into conflict within a short space of time following Crone and Breen’s motion.

This was not a debate that the NGF was able to confine within the administrative council, however. In fact, from September 1982 debates about supporting the WRTCC spread to the organization’s wider membership. This was particularly evident in the letter to the editor section of the NGF’s newsletter, *NGF News*. In September 1982 *NGF News* published a letter from Bill Foley that set out his reasons why the NGF should support the WRTCC. In a strong show of solidarity with women, who he argued were still treated as second-class citizens, Foley rebuked “some gays” who tried to “separate themselves from the abortion issue and deal only with the repressive attitudes that directly affect them.” These same repressive attitudes, which branded women seeking abortion rights as “murderers,” Foley maintained, similarly branded gays as “perverted criminals.” Those who sought to distance themselves from abortion rights failed, according to Foley, to recognize that “we are all repressed by archaic laws and we are seeking the same thing, i.e. complete control of our own bodies.”<sup>58</sup> For Foley, the criminalization of sexual activity between males and the criminalization of abortion were bound up together in that both were a denial of bodily autonomy.

Foley was not alone in arguing this point. In a letter to *NGF News*, Sean McGowran, who was not a member of the NGF, nevertheless felt compelled to get involved in the debate. McGowran had sent his letter in response to a previous letter from Anthony Redmond that had appeared in *NGF News* in October 1982—Redmond was adamantly against the NGF affiliating with the WRTCC. In his response to Redmond, McGowran maintained that “to the extent that the gay movement and presumably Mr. Redmond himself demand the right of gay women and gay men to so dispose of their bodies then it and he are morally obliged to support in general the movement to give all women the same right. One does not have to be in favour of abortion to be in favour of women having the option of abortion should the individual woman’s conscience so direct her.”<sup>59</sup>

On the surface, these interventions displayed support for the WRTCC’s campaign within the NGF. Yet even these arguments about the affinity

<sup>57</sup> Minutes of NGF meeting, September 17, 1982.

<sup>58</sup> Bill Foley, “Private View,” clipping of *NGF News*, September 1982, 5, MS 45, 964/4, IQA.

<sup>59</sup> Sean McGowran, letter to the editor, *NGF News*, June 1983, 5, accession 6672, box 25, Norris Papers.

between the fight for a woman's right to choose and the goals of gay men tended to reaffirm the male dominance and orientation of the NGF at that time. In other words, arguments that linked the denial of bodily autonomy for gay men through the criminalization of sexual activity between males with the criminalization of abortion was a way of subordinating a woman's rights issue to the demands of a campaign for the rights of gay men.

A minority of influential and outspoken individuals within the NGF explicitly rejected any connection between a woman's right to choose and the goals of the NGF. One such individual was the aforementioned Anthony Redmond, who had been a vocal member of the NGF for several years and had been given ample opportunity to express his views within NGF publications. In a strongly worded letter to the *NGF News* in October 1982 in response to Bill Foley's September 1982 letter, Redmond objected "in the strongest possible terms to NGF allowing itself to be used as a recruiting centre for the Women's Right to Choose Campaign and putting out propaganda for abortion." While Redmond clearly abhorred abortion, describing it as "one of the greatest evils of the twentieth century," his biggest concern appears to have been the reputational damage the NGF would suffer through association with the WRTCC. He maintained that this association would give the "clear impression that all gay people in this country are in favour of abortion and, in fact, this is the greatest obstacle to the acceptance of homosexuality in this country." Implying that abortion rights campaigns were immoral by definition, Redmond went on to say that "gay people are human beings, not mindless robots. Our homosexuality does not render us irrational, insensitive or amoral. Heterosexual society has constantly made this accusation against us. Let us not prove them right."<sup>60</sup>

In the same month that Redmond's letter was published, Jim McCarthy, an NGF member, had written to the NGF requesting that a speaker from SPUC be allowed to address NGF members at their upcoming reconvened annual general meeting in October 1982. McCarthy expressed his hope that this request would be accepted, stating that he felt "very strongly about this and hope that you will see fit to allow this person to speak. The person will not be speaking about the admenment [*sic*]. Just about anti-abortion."<sup>61</sup> It is not known whether McCarthy's request was met. What is known, however, is that the complexity over supporting the WRTCC led the NGF administrative council, at this reconvened annual general meeting, to postpone a decision about affiliation and to instead hold a workshop and conduct a membership ballot on the matter.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Anthony Redmond, letter to the editor, *NGF News*, October/November 1982, 6, MS 45, 964/5, IQA.

<sup>61</sup> Jim McCarthy, letter to NGF, October 15, 1982, MS 45, 943/1, IQA.

<sup>62</sup> Tonic Walsh, "General Secretary's Report," *NGF News*, January/February 1983, 5, copy obtained from Irish Queer Archive Facebook page (hereafter cited as IQAF), <https://www.facebook.com/IrishQueerArchive/photos/a.1212840455436036/1212840515436030/?type=3&theater>.



The workshop, which posed the question “Should the NGF affiliate to the WRTCC?,” took place in January 1983 and was attended by thirty-six individuals, 40 percent of whom were women.<sup>63</sup> John Grundy, a former NGF administrative council member who attended the workshop, described the meeting as a “very bizarre affair indeed. It was quite obviously packed with feminists, for whom we have some admiration, and what we can only describe as the sackcloth and ashes brigade of NGF honorary male feminists. These latter people bleated on about the putative link between gay men’s position and that of the women in flight from their own physiology.”<sup>64</sup> While Grundy supported the NGF’s decision to affiliate with the AAC, he argued, without elaboration, that affiliation with the WRTCC would be “plain bonkers.”<sup>65</sup>

The workshop provided a basis for individuals to air their concerns over supporting or not supporting the WRTCC. In a comprehensive report on the workshop in *NGF News*, Crone recounted the arguments put forward on both sides. For example, one unnamed woman spoke in favor of supporting the WRTCC on the basis that NGF members included “women, lesbians, lesbian mothers, lesbians who have been raped, who have had abortions, who have needed the right to choose. . . . And again, this doesn’t just concern lesbians. We’ve gone over and over this. You have to shift your thinking away from ‘abortion’ as an isolated act and on to people, adults, who should be given the basic human right of control over their bodies.”<sup>66</sup> Crone had earlier sought to drive home this point during the workshop, arguing that “the issue is about a woman’s right to choose to control her own body and it’s about your right as a gay man to control your body,” but she had been immediately challenged by an unnamed man who objected to her speaking “personally” about the issue. While noting that he respected the women’s position, he nevertheless was against abortion and did not think that the NGF should affiliate with the WRTCC.<sup>67</sup> This was a view shared by another unnamed individual who, while noting that they too respected the women’s position, did not want the NGF to be associated with the WRTCC because “I care about other people’s opinion about me. My friends and family for instance, I wouldn’t want them to think I supported this.”<sup>68</sup> Despite the arguments of opponents to affiliating with the WRTCC, the workshop voted overwhelmingly to support the WRTCC. The results were twenty-four in favor and one abstention (a number of individuals had

<sup>63</sup> Joni Crone, “Women’s Right to Choose: Affiliation?,” *NGF News*, January/February 1983, 9, IQAF.

<sup>64</sup> John Grundy, report on NGF workshop on affiliating to WRTCC, *Gaysock*, January/February 1983, 4, accession 6672, box 25, Norris Papers.

<sup>65</sup> Grundy report, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Crone, “Women’s Right to Choose,” 10.

<sup>67</sup> Crone, 8.

<sup>68</sup> Crone, 10.

left before the workshop voted).<sup>69</sup> The workshop, nevertheless, failed to bring the matter to a close.

Tonie Walsh, in his general secretary's report for *NGF News* in January 1983, had noted that during the workshop arguments against affiliation "boiled down basically to issues of 'tactics' and 'respectability' questioning how the organisation would be regarded generally by affiliating."<sup>70</sup> Bernard Keogh focused his attention on these particular issues in a lengthy letter to the *NGF News* criticizing the workshop and support for the WRTCC. The fear about reinforcing heteronormative views about homosexuals, something that harked back to Redmond's October 1982 letter, was clearly evident in Keogh's letter, in which he emphasized that affiliating with the WRTCC was simply a bad political strategy because abortion had nothing to do with gay rights. Keogh argued that "some people have been led to believe that since women can become pregnant, and that abortion is therefore an issue they may well have to come to terms with, and that some women are lesbian, then abortion is a gay issue. Such reasoning is absurd and the same logic if applied to almost any other issue would show how stupid it was."<sup>71</sup> Keogh concluded that since abortion was denied to women whether they were heterosexual or homosexual, specifically lesbian "discrimination was not demonstrable; lesbian women have the same rights as all women in this matter."<sup>72</sup> This was not an issue of direct concern to the NGF, he continued, because the law had not been decided on the basis of the sexual orientation of the woman. Keogh was essentially arguing that gay rights were only concerned with sexual orientation and that gender was irrelevant; in other words, he was implying that lesbian women and gay men faced the exact same challenges and were subjected to the same discrimination, ignoring the ways in which this discrimination might *also* be gendered for each group.

It is strikingly clear that Keogh's primary concern was with protecting the reputation and public image of the NGF. His letter forewarned the NGF that affiliating with the WRTCC would bring about "repercussions [that] would be enormously damaging both for NGF and for gay rights." Resting on his credibility as a long-time campaigner for gay rights and refuting both the claims that "abortion, contraception, divorce and homosexuality represented a conspiracy to advance immorality *and* that these issues were inextricably linked," he warned his fellow NGF members that they were risking their public reputation by conflating abortion rights with gay rights. To do so, he argued, would mean to never "again enjoy the same credibility within the media as commentators on gay affairs" and to risk damaging "the

<sup>69</sup> Tonie Walsh, "General Secretary's Report," January/February 1983, 5.

<sup>70</sup> Walsh, 5.

<sup>71</sup> Bernard Keogh, letter to the editor, *NGF News*, March/April 1983, 6, accession 6672, box 22, Norris Papers.

<sup>72</sup> Keogh letter, 6.

public's willingness to give a fair hearing to the gay rights cause. . . . [W]e will have thrown away advantages in these areas that we have earned only through long years of hard, patient work."<sup>73</sup> Keogh was implicitly arguing that placating the wider society should be uppermost among the NGF's concerns, whether or not specific arguments found unanimous acceptance within the membership of the NGF.

The debates over supporting the WRTCC led Tonie Walsh to remark that "undoubtedly the 'hot topic' in the air over the past several months has been the issue of affiliation to the Women's Right to Choose Campaign."<sup>74</sup> This, however, was an understated description of the divisive debate. In fact, the animosity and annoyance apparent in the letters and statements I have described make it clear that both proponents and opponents of affiliation held extremely entrenched views. The extent of the conflict over the relationship between gender and gay rights was particularly evident in Joni Crone's response to Keogh's previous letter. Directly questioning the argument that affiliation between the two organizations would not help to achieve "equal rights for gay people," Crone asked:

Which gay people are you talking about Bernard? That allegation implies that you only think in terms of gay men. Lesbian members of NGF have been raped, have had unwanted pregnancies, have had abortions and continue to need and demand Women's Right to Choose. The issues of rape, unwanted pregnancies, lesbian mothers, lesbians who do want children, divorce, contraception, are central to our lives. . . . Contrary to your view I feel that these issues are inextricably linked because they each concern not only the right to control over one's body but women's autonomy. NGF's constitution aims to encourage the growth of a spirit of community among gay women and men in all parts of Ireland. Are you now going to decide for women just how that spirit of community is to be fostered or are you prepared to listen to gay women's voices, to our clearly stated needs? Are you open to change in this regard or is it a matter of deciding in a patriarchal fashion that you know what our women members needs are and what's best for us.<sup>75</sup>

Just as Majella Breen had previously, Crone too explicitly claimed the word "gay" to also refer to lesbians. These arguments, however, failed to convince some within the NGF that a woman's right to choose was a gay rights issue. In fact, some NGF members even notified the NGF that they would withdraw their NGF membership if the organization affiliated, so strong was their objection to the NGF supporting abortion. Joseph Donnelly, for

<sup>73</sup> Keogh letter, 6.

<sup>74</sup> Walsh, "General Secretary's Report," 5.

<sup>75</sup> Joni Crone, letter to the editor, *NGF News*, May 1983, 4, accession 6672, box 25, Norris Papers.

example, wrote that he would be very bitter if he “were forced to consider leaving the NGF because a group within it had, by pressing for affiliation, brought about a conflict which need not have arisen.”<sup>76</sup> This was a view shared by Máire Ní Bheaglaoich, who maintained in a letter to the NGF that “as the NGF is a lifeline to me and a valuable link with the rest of the gay community, I should hate to be forced to terminate my membership for the sake of a non-related issue and a very sensitive one at that.”<sup>77</sup>

Such sentiments, which were in essence a belief that the NGF should be a single-issue organization, had been expressed at the NGF annual general meeting previously in September 1982. David Norris, then NGF political coordinator, when addressing NGF members maintained that the NGF was “by nature, constitution and historical evolution a single issue organisation fighting for the social, civil and human rights of gay people.” In his speech Norris took the opportunity to warn against those who “from time to time . . . seek to redirect our energies into these diffuse issues.” While Norris did not directly mention the WRTCC in his speech, there can be little doubt that he was alluding to the attempts by some to affiliate the NGF with the WRTCC, arguing that “there is to my mind no practical justification for the opening up of a second front on issues other than those directly affecting gay people because they are gay.” Norris argued that “a public commitment to active support of other organisations in other areas however laudable such as abortion, contraception, prisoners’ rights, national unity, capital punishment or the like could in my judgement be a serious tactical error on our part.”<sup>78</sup> The irony of his argument about contraception would become evident only a few short years later, when the NGF demanded greater access to condoms in order to protect their members from HIV/AIDS. The fact that condoms are not only a form of contraception but also a life-saving form of prophylaxis came as a realization that might have changed the debate about the relationship between abortion rights and the rights of gay men if it had come sooner. Moreover, Norris’s comments about the NGF being a single-issue organization were belied by its affiliation with the AAC and the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, neither of which was a gay rights organization. Both organizations had, however, previously come out in support of the decriminalization of sexual activity between males, the goal that Norris, Keogh, and Redmond all viewed as the NGF’s primary objective.

Norris had revealed this focus on decriminalization, not to mention his ignorance about the experiences of lesbian women, in a 1975 television

<sup>76</sup> Joseph Donnelly, letter to the editor, *NGF News*, May 1983, 5, accession 6672, box 25, Norris Papers.

<sup>77</sup> Máire Ní Bheaglaoich, letter to the editor, *NGF News*, June 1983, 6, accession 6672, box 25, Norris Papers.

<sup>78</sup> Report of the political coordinator, David Norris, to the third annual general meeting of NGF, September 18, 1982, MS 45, 936/10, IQA.

interview with Aine O'Connor on Radió Telefís Éireann, the state broadcaster. When asked about the situation of lesbian women, he remarked that

lesbians in Ireland are in a difficult situation of course as we all are but they don't suffer as the men do from the very severe penalties that the law can but I am glad to say does not at the moment inflict on homosexual people. Some of the women regard this as a grievance; they feel that at least we men have something very dramatic to fight about, a very grave, very serious injustice, that is very difficult to understand being tolerated in Europe of the 1970s. The women don't have this axe to grind and I think they would rather like to.<sup>79</sup>

Such arguments would persist beyond the debates over supporting the WRTCC. In a December 1983 article in *Identity*, a gay magazine produced by the NGF, Eamon Somers, then NGF president, described the fight against the 1861 and 1885 laws as the NGF's "most important function" and similarly emphasized that "lesbians have no such clear-cut issue to fight."<sup>80</sup>

These examples demonstrate the hierarchy of objectives within the NGF, in particular the supremacy of the campaign to decriminalize sexual activity between males, and the subordination of issues affecting women within the NGF, irrespective of whether this contradicted the NGF's own definition of gay rights. For example, in 1980 the NGF authored an article in the *USI News* (a magazine of the Union of Students in Ireland) in which it listed a number of rights, claiming that if a person believed in these rights, then that person believed in gay rights. This list included the "right to privacy" and the "right of control over her/his body (providing it does not interfere with the rights of others)."<sup>81</sup> On the surface, this articulation of rights did not appear to be contingent on gender, yet gender seems to have been critical to the NGF's decisions about how these rights should be fought for. While proponents of affiliation argued that the issue of a woman's right to choose was critical to any campaign to support the right to privacy and bodily autonomy, opponents strongly disagreed. The evidence I have presented about the views of the NGF leadership support Joni Crone's assertion that opponents were primarily only concerned with ensuring that gay men gained access to these rights.

That the NGF leadership's views on supporting the WRTCC did not wholly align with the wider membership could be discerned from the results of the ballot that were announced in March 1983. Of the 400 ballots that were sent out, 110 were returned, with 58 members voting for and 52 voting against affiliation.<sup>82</sup> Although this was by no means a large majority,

<sup>79</sup> Radió Telefís Éireann, audience research service, July 1975, MS 45, 951/1, IQA.

<sup>80</sup> Eamon Somers, "National Gay Federation," *Identity*, December 1983, 30.

<sup>81</sup> "Gay Rights Case for Europe?," *USI News*, November 1980, 6.

<sup>82</sup> Tonie Walsh, "Women's Right to Choose Ballot," *NGF News*, March/April 1983, 4, accession 6672, box 22, Norris Papers.

the mechanisms for deciding on affiliation had been decided at the NGF's reconvened annual general meeting in October 1982. This was the first time that a decision on affiliation had been workshopped and put to a ballot in the organization. These extra measures highlighted the administrative council's unease about associations between the NGF and the issue of abortion. It should also be noted that 75 percent of the membership failed to vote on this issue. This led Joseph Donnelly, in his aforementioned letter, to write that "it may be argued that a (small) majority of those who voted, favored affiliation, but that simply raises the question to what extent may a majority be used to control a minority? I leave aside the question of whether or not the ballot paper was fairly worded, and the fact that in describing the aims of the WRTCC everything was mentioned except abortion."<sup>83</sup> Donnelly clearly sought to question the legitimacy of the ballot, implying that it was worded more favorably in support of the WRTCC.

After the results of the poll had been announced, Tonie Walsh and Claire Treacy, an LIL member sitting on the NGF administrative council, drew on the authority of the vote to propose that the NGF support the WRTCC at a March 1983 NGF administrative council meeting. Only eight of the eighteen members of the NGF administrative council were present; two voted in favor, while five voted against, and one abstained.<sup>84</sup> In a small corner of the May 1983 edition of the *NGF News*, NGF members were informed, with no further explanation, that the council had "declined to affiliate NGF to the [WRTCC] campaign."<sup>85</sup> However, this decision was subsequently reported in the *Irish Times* on 30 May 1983, bringing to the attention of the wider Irish society the fact that the NGF did not support the WRTCC.<sup>86</sup>

Proponents of affiliation sought to overturn this decision at the subsequent NGF annual general meeting in May 1983, proposing one motion to censure the NGF administrative council and another calling on the council to ratify the "democratic decision of its membership." These efforts were in vain.<sup>87</sup> The NGF administrative council refused to overturn its previous decision, leading LIL to describe this as a "disappointing defeat," one that, as noted in the introduction, led many lesbian women to end their involvement with the NGF.<sup>88</sup> There can be no doubt that the NGF's administrative council decision considerably weakened the relationship between LIL and the NGF. At an NGF meeting in August 1983 concerns were raised

<sup>83</sup> Donnelly, letter to the editor.

<sup>84</sup> Minutes of NGF meeting, March 27, 1983, accession 6672, box 45, Norris Papers.

<sup>85</sup> Tonie Walsh, "Women's Right to Choose Campaign," *NGF News*, May 1983, 15, accession 6672, box 25, Norris Papers.

<sup>86</sup> "Repeal of Anti-homosexual Laws Urged," *Irish Times*, May 30, 1983.

<sup>87</sup> Motions proposed at NGF annual general meeting, May 28, 1983, MS 45, 936/10, IQA.

<sup>88</sup> Minutes of NGF meeting, June 26, 1983, accession 6672, box 45, Norris Papers; Crone, "Lesbians," 68.

about the activities of LIL. Brian Ward, for example, queried the use of Tel-A-Friend on Thursday for women and calling it Lesbian Line, while Willie McConkey accused LIL of using the line for political purposes. In particular, McConkey accused LIL of using the Lesbian Line “to promote [a] Women’s Right to Choose.”<sup>89</sup> That the WRTCC remained an issue into August 1983, despite nearly three months passing since the NGF decided not to support the campaign, demonstrated just how sensitive and controversial an issue it was within the NGF. The NGF’s decision not to support the WRTCC led Páraic O’Flaithimh of *Outrage!*, a London-based radical magazine for lesbians and gay men, to ask, “Were gay male organisations any less sexist or bureaucratic than their straight counterparts?”<sup>90</sup>

#### THE NGF’S DESIRE TO UPHOLD A RESPECTABLE IMAGE

While there can be no doubt that many who opposed affiliation did so because they strongly objected to abortion (“one of the greatest evils of the twentieth century,” in Redmond’s view), this was not the overriding factor for declining to support the WRTCC. The main issue was not whether or not abortion could be morally justified but what the benefits of affiliating with a prochoice campaign might be for the NGF. The NGF administrative council decided that there was more to lose through affiliation, but why? The answer to this question requires us to investigate a number of different but related issues.

In the period that the affiliation debate was taking place, a number of incidents highlighted the vulnerable position of gay individuals, particularly gay men, in Ireland. As noted previously in this article, the Irish Supreme Court had ruled in April 1983 that the laws criminalizing sexual activity between males were not unconstitutional. In the course of delivering his judgement, and particularly important in the context of the WRTCC debate, Chief Justice O’Higgins grouped homosexuality together with abortion as acts that were morally wrong and harmful to life. O’Higgins ruled:

I regard the State as having an interest in the general moral well-being of the community and as being entitled, where it is practicable to do so, to discourage conduct which is morally wrong and harmful to a way of life and to values which the State wishes to protect. A right of privacy or, as it has been put, a right “to be let alone” can never be absolute. There are many acts done in private which the State is entitled to condemn, whether such be done by an individual on his own or with another. The law has always condemned abortion, incest, suicide attempts, suicide pacts, euthanasia or mercy killing. These are

<sup>89</sup> Minutes of NGF meeting, August 26, 1983, accession 6672, box 45, Norris Papers.

<sup>90</sup> Páraic O’Flaithimh, “All-Ireland Gay Conference,” *Outrage!*, July/August 1983, 18, MS 45, 999/4, IQA.



prohibited simply because they are morally wrong. . . . It cannot be said of [homosexuality], however, as the plaintiff seeks to say, that no harm is done if it is conducted in private by consenting males. Very serious harm may in fact be involved.<sup>91</sup>

This association of homosexuality with abortion most likely caused considerable concern within some segments of the NGF, which, as noted earlier, believed such an association would severely harm its public reputation.

This Supreme Court ruling had come after another controversial court ruling in March 1983, which again had considerable negative implications for gay men. In the year prior to the Supreme Court judgment there were two high-profile killings of two gay men, Charles Self and Declan Flynn, in January and September 1982, respectively. While those responsible for Flynn's murder were arrested and put on trial in March 1983, they were found guilty only of manslaughter, despite having admitted to being involved in a campaign of "queer-bashing" the night Declan Flynn was killed. The judge, however, ruled that this "could never have been a case of murder" and handed down a five-year suspended sentence.<sup>92</sup>

While no trial has ever taken place over the killing of Charles Self (his killer still remains at large today), the police investigation into his killing caused considerable stress and anguish for many gay men. According to Maurice Casey, the police investigation resulted in several hundred individuals from Dublin's gay community being interviewed.<sup>93</sup> Una Mullally, in a feature piece on Charles Self in the *Irish Times* in 2017, noted that the "pursuit of gay men as witnesses or suspects became one of the most controversial aspects of the case," resulting in considerable upset and fear for many gay men whose sexuality had become known to family and friends as a result of the police's actions.<sup>94</sup> To add insult to injury, the general secretary of the Garda (Irish for police) Representative Association, Jack Marrinan, took aim at the gay rights movement in Ireland in April 1982, arguing that the "values of society had taken a plunge in recent years with people like homosexuals and pro-abortionists demanding rights."<sup>95</sup>

That such publicly stated denunciations and events had an impact on the NGF was evident in a number of pronouncements from NGF leaders. For example, during his presidential address at the NGF's annual general meeting in September 1982, Eamon Somers warned:

<sup>91</sup> Judgment of the Supreme Court on *David Norris v. the Attorney General*, April 22, 1983.

<sup>92</sup> Hugh Leonard, "I'll Not Be Moved from Mr. Dukes' Ireland," *Sunday Independent*, March 13, 1983; and "Suspended Sentences for Killing Man in Park," *Irish Independent*, March 9, 1983.

<sup>93</sup> Casey, "Radical Politics," 5.

<sup>94</sup> Una Mullally, "Murder in Monkstown: The Brutal Killing of Charles Self," *Irish Times*, June 24, 2017.

<sup>95</sup> Peter Murtagh, "Claim for Gay Rights Attacked," *Irish Times*, April 3, 1982.

Each of us should be aware that what we have gained can be taken just as quickly unless we have the backing of the law and the acceptance of society. . . . One of the roads we seem to be going down is one in which we pursue a broader-based human rights program in exchange for support from a broader base of organisations. This is a precarious road which should be discussed and examined before any real commitment is made. One of the roads Irish society in general is on is the road of increasing violence. In scientific terms much of this violence can be explained in terms of the economic situation and the alienation of large minorities but once more it is the vulnerable sections, women, old people, and the gay community that have suffered most. . . . We must be careful (while not aggravating society which already has enough misconceptions about us) to defend our gay brothers' rights and also to insist and expect the full protection of the law.<sup>96</sup>

We cannot know whether Somers meant the term "gay brothers" to also apply to lesbians, but we might discern from the NGF's decision not to support the WRTCC that the concerns of lesbian women were not uppermost in the minds of the NGF leadership. Particularly noteworthy, however, is Somers's call not to aggravate "society which already has enough misconceptions about us." Somers did not elaborate on what these misconceptions might have been, but he was not the only high-profile NGF member to fear a backlash at this time, and it is likely that he was also alluding to the possible threat that those who campaigned for the Eighth Amendment might pose for the NGF in the future. Mary Maher, quoting comments from David Norris, offers an insight into these concerns. Norris, according to Maher, described those promoting the amendment as an "unscrupulous, unrepresentative group" who he feared "would move on to other issues, possibly including homosexuality and that it was time the gay community mobilized and used the political system."<sup>97</sup> This concern was also shared by some outside the gay community. Speaking to the *Irish Times*, for example, Senator Shane Ross stated that "it was fair to assume that SPUC and PLAC would bring pressure to bear again on weak politicians—first on contraceptive law, then on the question of divorce and on legislation relating to homosexuality. They are a dangerous group and should have been stood up to in the first place."<sup>98</sup> Norris's and Ross's comments clearly demonstrated the influence they deemed SPUC and PLAC to have and how they might have a negative influence on the gay rights campaign in Ireland. It is evident, therefore, that some members of the NGF administrative council feared that SPUC and PLAC might turn their attention to homosexuality and that this fear, along with their assumption that abortion

<sup>96</sup> Speech by NGF president Eamon Somers to the third annual general meeting of NGF, September 18, 1982, MS 45, 936/10, IQA.

<sup>97</sup> Mary Maher, "Meeting Launches Gay Campaign," *Irish Times*, May 5, 1983.

<sup>98</sup> "McGuinness Urges FG to Break Ranks on Amendment," *Irish Times*, May 11, 1983.

rights were politically unpopular, made them think that it was politically prudent to avoid being seen as actively supporting abortion. They were trying to avoid alienating important stakeholders, namely, the political parties who Norris deemed crucial to the gay rights campaign, and they were trying to avoid opening the NGF up to attacks, particularly from those who argued that the legalization of homosexuality was the thin end of the wedge. The fact that both Marrinan and the text of the Supreme Court judgment had described homosexuality and abortion as part of a continuum of threats to social values bore witness to these fears. As I discussed earlier, Redmond and Keogh deemed it imperative that the NGF not align the organization with abortion. To do otherwise, they maintained, threatened the goals of the gay rights movement. What is particularly striking about this Irish case is that while in the United States and England gay organizations turned to other progressive organizations for support as part of coalition building, it was to the political class, which, on the whole, supported a constitutional ban on abortion, that the NGF turned to while simultaneously turning its back on the WRTCC.

The NGF's decision to turn its back on the WRTCC formed part of a strategy it adopted to counter previous prejudices that homosexual men are not respectable citizens. There can be no doubt that the NGF was highly conscious of its public image. This was clearly evident in Keogh's arguments against affiliation with the WRTCC and in Somers's similar emphasis on the importance of securing acceptance from Irish society, among other examples I have provided. The efforts of the NGF to protect its public image and credibility can therefore be summarized as an effort to present a respectable image of homosexuals to Irish society, a strategy first instigated by the IGRM in the mid-1970s. This strategy came under critique within the gay rights movement itself. In January 1982 the *Irish Gay News* argued that "in their quest for respectability the established gay groups, NGF, IGRM, and NIGRA [Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association] refused to get involved in the struggles of other oppressed groups in society."<sup>99</sup> As we have seen, Páraic O'Flaithimh articulated a similar view in *Outrage!*, arguing that the NGF goal to "pursue a respectable image" had led its members to think that "the subject of abortion was too contentious."<sup>100</sup> This strategy of respectability was not unique to the Irish case and resembled that of the Mattachine Society in the United States, Arcadie in France, and the Association of 1948 in Denmark.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>99</sup> "Gay Liberation Workshop—A Report," *Irish Gay News*, January 1982, 1, MS 45, 969/3, IQA. According to its first issue, *Irish Gay News* was put together by a group of people interested in informing gays throughout the country of the sorts of things that gay people were involved in.

<sup>100</sup> O'Flaithimh, "All-Ireland Gay Conference," 15.

<sup>101</sup> Examples of how the politics of respectability also played a role in gay rights movements elsewhere can be found in Simon Hall, "The American Gay Rights Movement and Patriotic Protest," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no. 3 (2010): 536–62; Martin

We can conclude that it was the fear of attracting negative attention that drove the NGF administrative council to vote against the wishes of its membership. The decision to avoid supporting the WRTCC arose from the divisiveness of the abortion issue in Ireland and was motivated by fears about how connections to such a group might weaken the NGF's public image by providing opponents of homosexuality with a weapon with which they might attack homosexuals in the republic. Those arguing that supporting an abortion rights group would be tactically unwise won out over those who saw clear affinities between debates over women's reproductive choices and gay rights. In essence, Somer and others feared aggravating society more than they feared ostracizing the NGF's lesbian members, and many justified the choice with the argument that lesbians faced a less dramatic fight than gay men. In taking the decision to refuse supporting the WRTCC, the NGF administrative council sent a clear message that a woman's right to choose was not a gay rights issue and that support for the rights to privacy and bodily autonomy were relative rather than unquestioned principles of the NGF's larger campaign.

The internal debate about affiliation clearly demonstrated the extent to which NGF members held at least two opposing views of what constituted a gay rights issue. While those in favor of affiliation saw a direct link between a woman's right to choose and gay rights, emphasizing the interconnectedness of gender and sexuality, the more influential contingent within the NGF administrative council clearly disagreed. The rhetoric and actions of the NGF resembled those of the American homophile movement of the 1950s and early 1960s more than the post-Stonewall strategies of gay liberation movements in other countries. Rather than fighting to revolutionize society, liberate homosexuals from patriarchal structures, or overhaul restrictive gender and sexual norms, the NGF sought ways of integrating into the existing society.

The fallout from the debate over affiliating with the WRTCC provides an interesting contrast to the coalition-building efforts in the United States and England in the early 1980s, a period, as noted in the introduction, that

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Meeker, "Behind the Mask of Respectability: Reconsidering the Mattachine Society and Male Homophile Practice, 1950s and 1960s," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10, no. 1 (2001): 78–116; Scott Eric Gunther, "Building a More Stately Closet: Gay Movements Since the Early 1980s," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 13, no. 3 (2004): 326–47; Brigitte Soland, "Queer Nation? The Passage of the Gay and Lesbian Partnership Legislation in Denmark, 1989," *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 5, no. 1 (1998): 48–69; Kent W. Peacock, "Race, the Homosexual, and the Mattachine Society of Washington, 1961–1970," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 25, no. 2 (2016): 267–96; and Kittiwut Jod Taywaditep, "Marginalization among the Marginalized," *Journal of Homosexuality* 42, no. 1 (2002): 1–28. See also George L. Mosse, "Nationalism and Respectability: Normal and Abnormal Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Contemporary History* 17 (1982): 221–46; Karel Plessini, "The Nazi as the 'Ideal Bourgeois': Respectability and Nazism in the Work of George L. Mosse," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 5, no. 2 (2004): 226–42.

saw increased cooperation between gay men and lesbian women in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, Christian Right organizations, and defeats in the courts. This case study, however, demonstrates that these conditions did not always result in greater cooperation but could also hinder it, depending on what the priorities of the movement were.

Within the NGF the preoccupation with decriminalizing sexual activity between males took precedence over any other issue. While I noted in the introduction that sexual activity between women was not a criminal offense, this case study nevertheless highlights how lesbian women were indirectly, at least, affected by the laws—their aims and objectives were seen as secondary to that of decriminalizing sexual activity between males. As Ireland's largest gay rights organization, the NGF sent a clear message that it was imperative to present an image of respectability at all costs and to avoid rocking the boat, even if this meant alienating a considerable portion of its membership. We might say that the end justified the means. This case study, which has focused on the issue of abortion, sexuality, and gender, emphasizes the importance of further exploring what constituted “gay rights,” whom they applied to, and the fruits of adopting an intersectional approach.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PATRICK McDONAGH received his PhD in 2019 from the European University Institute. His dissertation was titled “Homosexuals Are Revolting: A History of Gay and Lesbian Activism in the Republic of Ireland, 1973–1993.” Patrick has published articles on the history of gay and lesbian activism in Ireland in *Studi Irlandesi*, *Irish Economic and Social History*, *GCN*, and *RTE Brainstorm*, among others. He is currently working on transforming his dissertation into a monograph.