

The future is female

Illustration: Cessa Saunders / Words: Clara-Rose Thornton

In 2015, amid an online storm surrounding #OscarsSoWhite, I got a call to be on The Ryan Tubridy Show, then titled 'Tubridy' and airing on RTÉ 2fm. The year held the least diverse Academy Award slate in 17 years; not a single person of colour was nominated in a major category. As an African-American radio film critic, I was asked to discuss 'Selma', a Martin Luther King Jr. biopic and the only film about non-white reality to glean a nomination. I was a noteworthy candidate given civil rights activism and association with MLK in my family history.

When I got the call, my partner at the time lay in bed furious, and accusatory. He interrogated me repeatedly about which man at RTÉ — where I'd recently begun freelancing — was likely to have recommended me, and thus wanted to bed me, which he conceived as the only reason I got the call. He is white, Irish, and working class.

Seven months later, while competing for the All-Ireland Poetry Slam at a Dublin pub, I sat talking to an opponent poet. She is a white Irish bisexual woman who identifies as feminist, and who would later organise a poetry event about the Easter Rising focused on women. Calming jitters with small talk, I told her stout is my favourite beer. She said in response, "You've got the right skin colour for it, too."

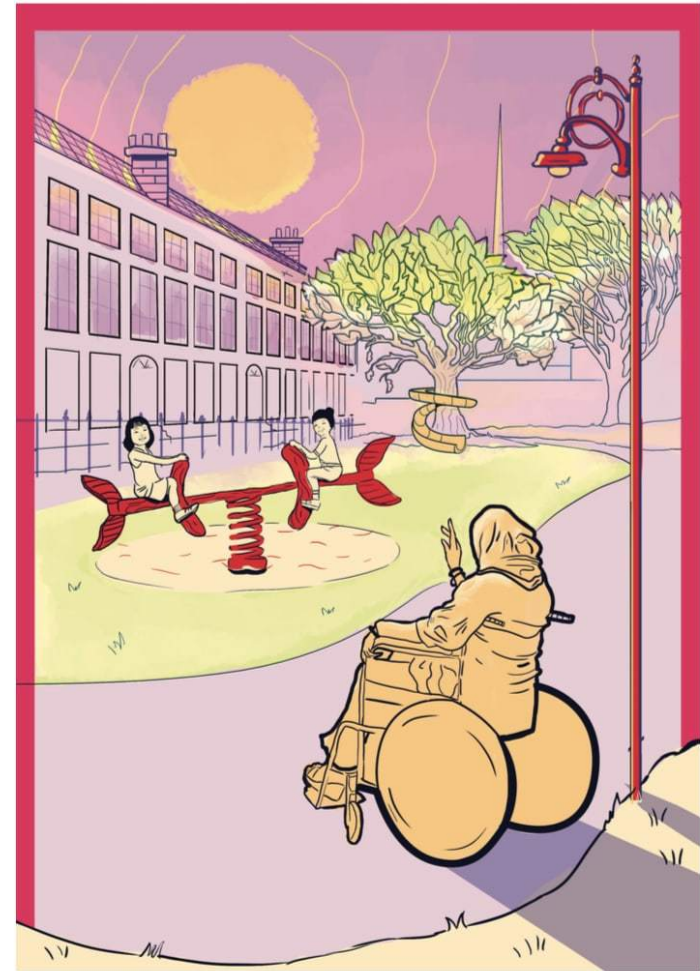
I explained, calmly, how what she said isn't okay, and what "othering" someone is. I explained that made me feel uncomfortable and singled out in an all-white room, as someone constantly in all-white spaces. She responded defensively and argumentatively. She argued for her right to make racial jokes. She cited being bisexual and said she'd experienced discrimination, and knows how it feels. Yet what she said "wasn't offensive at all" and she was simply noticing my blackness. For reference, my skin is a light cinnamon.

These are two of the frothiest of the gender-specific and racially charged comments I receive approximately every other day in Ireland. The interactions might seem innocuous: a jealous boyfriend wanting to feel superior, and "banter" highlighting difference. Yet the slightest look beneath the surface reveals a connected web of thinking and behaviour aimed at preventing the equalising of playing fields, in a new era of power tonalities.

At a crucial moment in a heavily weighted, millenia-long battle, such knee-jerk reactions are a scramble to pick up lumps of stone blown through a separatist wall. The small bits of victory are hurled over, in hopes of injuring someone in the opposing field making headway. Victory is slowed, and these hurlers didn't even realise they want the suppressed and invisible to continue to lose. Or at least they're not supposed to say it outright in 2017.

Two issues exist at the forefront of Ireland's culturally specific feminism, characteristics that tend to shape policy and attitudes: a casual, Catholic-marked misogyny and sense of ownership of women, their time, and bodies; and — resulting partly from being an ethnically homogeneous state so recently, one which also separates settled from Traveller — the casual and haughty racism and exclusionary practices of white feminists.

Sure, misogyny, racism, and problematic white feminism are issues endemic to any culture. Although in much of the West, diversity and a country's first financial boom were not 21st century shakeups of a largely isolated monoculture. Having lived in six countries, I've noticed a difference. In, for example, Germany, or even the United States where an openly braggart molester is in office,



there are more checks and balances put in place in social decorum and education to at least feign the necessity of equality.

In Ireland, by contrast, many people will vehemently defend use of the slur "knacker", despite it harming an entire population of people. Black Lives Matter is needed for another reason: Direct Provision exists. Hate crime laws do not exist. And a woman may incur a sentence of 14 years in prison for seeking a medical procedure on her own body, which determines the outcome of her livelihood and personal health.

"We were a colonised people and history casts a long shadow," said Niamh Bierne, a Dubliner raised in Wexford and founder of performance collective PETTYCASH. "We're socially and culturally obsessed with our past, but despite that there are gaps in our memory. The formation of an Irish nationalist identity during the struggle for sovereignty was an emergency response to colonialism. Irish cultural identity was dragged back from the brink of extinction at the beginning of the 20th century. That identity, however, was formed around a purist middle-class Irish Catholic ideal that sanitised and repressed anything that did not meet this criteria.

"It's a trend in post-colonial countries, after years of revolutionary zeal, to relapse into deep conservatism. Ireland's treatment of women, queer people, people of colour, Travellers and any religious and/or ethnic minorities that were not white Catholic and middle or upper-class has historically been brutal," Bierne, who identifies as queer, continued. "It's a history of silencing and erasure."

Regarding the sense of urgency in today's feminism, celebrated Irish Times columnist Una Mullaly said, "The absence of legal abortion and therefore bodily autonomy in Ireland has held everything back. I think the current 'moment' is in line with this hugely energetic Third Wave Feminism globally, yet also comes at a time where there's an urgency regarding shaking off the shackles of theocracy. We are existing within a period of massive social change in Ireland."

Thus the question is, with historical sensitivity regarding Irish society's distinctive evolution, how do we place authentic women's issues at the forefront, as a salve for endemic casual misogyny? How do we create visibility and education about female-identifying personhood, threaded through the very fabric of a culture?

"The onus is on us as organisers, who have to think, how do we take different strategic ways of campaigning and gel them into a whole?" said Ailbhe Smyth, an iconic figure from 1970s and '80s Second

Wave Feminism in Ireland, LGBTQIA activist, and founder in 2013 of the Coalition to Repeal the 8th Amendment. Essentially, Smyth said, "You're going to have to talk to people."

Eimear Sparks is a recent Trinity College graduate who found her feminist consciousness and began organising an event series called Choice Box in 2016. She feels, "It is impossible to anticipate what action might ignite a passion for the feminist struggle in each individual. We should never pigeonhole ourselves by self-limiting to one form of activism; by focusing on the arts we may lose the more politically inclined and vice versa."

Taking a different view, Irish Independent columnist and Newstalk broadcaster Barbara Scully said, "Like many Irish women, I imagine, my soul is pagan and I identify far more with the wise woman/witch than the virgin wife and I always have. Strong women in history and folklore such as Queen Meabh, the Warrior Queen of Connaught; Granuaile, the Pirate Queen of Connaught and contemporary of Elizabeth I; and Goddess Brigid [of healing, poetry, fire and fertility, both a warrior and healer]. "In order to move forward we must take inspiration, courage and strength from the women who went before, and from pre-Christian feminine imagery."

Scully continued, "The feminist movement needs to work harder at being inclusive of all women, especially working-class women, women living in poverty, women working in the home and older women. There is a saying in Irish, 'ní neart go cur le chéile', which means 'no strength without unity'. In other words, as Sparks said, the future of feminism must be "the epitome of diversity in unity."

Intersectionality is the foundational concept for framing any discussion and understanding of feminism, specifically relating to the ethnic, racial, sexuality and religious diversity en masse that's the most visible change during Ireland's fecund moment of evolution, but also to the long-entrenched issue of class division.

Anna Cosgrave is a middle-class Dubliner who in early summer 2016 created the now-iconic 'REPEAL' jumpers and tote bags, called the Repeal Project. Yet she's also an assistant to Senator Lynn Ruane, whom she describes as defying "the dominative narrative of modern politics".

"As a working-class single mother [Ruane's] influence has undoubtedly radicalised my way of thinking, in terms of who I want to help and how. I've begun work on a programme for secondary school girls in working-class areas, which will take time. This work is glacial in pace and deeper, but hopefully leads to a wider systemic change."

Consider enterprises such as the SAFE Ireland summit, a forum speaking to the strategy and policy implementation of eradicating

domestic violence. Though its aim is wonderful, its participation fee of €395, for two days during the traditional work week, speaks to an elite expectation of feminist changemaker privilege.

White supremacy is an ideological parallel to the phantom of class supremacy. Colour and culture exacerbate instances of personhood dismissal, or an assumption of someone's lesser, fundamental "value", through speech, action or policy. Take working-class women, frequently immigrants, generally being those in caretaker positions; they are often treated squarely as "the help", even by self-identified feminists.

Many American suffragettes in the 1840s touted that if women (meaning white women) were granted the vote, they could bind with Southern men in keeping slavery legal. People granted voting privilege at the time were white male landowners. Only men could own property, so if suffrage was successful, the only female voting counterparts would be the wives of moneyed men.

Susan B. Anthony once said, "I will cut off this right arm of mine before I ask for the ballot for the Negro and not for the woman". Such remains the delusion of mainstream feminism: As with other global frameworks, it's defined by racism and classism. Ellie Kisiyombe is a mother of boy-girl twins hailing from Lilongwe, Malawi. She came to Ireland as an asylum seeker, where she was forced to live under Direct Provision for five and a half years. Under Direct Provision, families live together in a small, motel-size room in a DP centre, and single residents in a hostel-style room with several other adults, with no cooking facilities, prohibited to find work, allotted €19.10 per adult and €9.60 per child to live on weekly, and often not granted documentation to travel. Bathrooms are shared.

Direct Provision was set up on April 10 2000 to process and house asylum seekers, when immigration — as opposed to Irish emigration — was a new phenomenon in a freshly financially viable Ireland. The system was designed as temporary, though it still exists 17 years later, and many people in Direct Provision are kept for up to ten years. Currently 4,696 humans live in Direct Provision, and nearly 2,000 are under the age of 18. Hundreds of children have been born into the system. Conditions have been described as an "open prison".

"The system has control over your mind," said Kisiyombe. "There is nothing. You can't function. It's a crisis for a woman in Direct Provision: We have poverty issues, we have physical health issues, we have mental health issues."

"Women are affected in many ways. I know that men and women, we all look after our children, we love our kids. But really, so much of hands-on child-raising is done by women. Trying to make extra

money at the same time (in DP) is hard. Life in DP is a routine, and with many issues in the mind, the increased pressure of imposed routine doesn't allow functioning mindstates."

The fact that voices such as Kisiyombe's are considered fringe is telling; if feminism is a movement to eradicate second-class citizenship, such voices should be at its forefront. A lack of progress on Direct Provision and community inclusion proves ironic in a country with the highest percentage of citizens living abroad of any nation in the world [one in six citizens], and in a society that clangs a proverbial bell about famine refugees. Yet asylum seekers in Ireland come from "third world" — brown-skinned — countries.

The future of feminism, and thereby the future of Ireland, calls for unequivocally laying down, the silencing, the othering, the miseducation and "out of sight, out of mind" mentality that allows the former, such that there's no excuse for men nor any feminist to be unaware of exclusionary, supremacy-upholding behaviour.

As Adiba Jaigirdar said, an English as a Second Language teacher who moved 13 years ago from Bangladesh, "As a brown, Muslim woman living in a country that is predominantly white and Christian, being surrounded by people in society can be alienating. For marginalised folk like myself, voicing our thoughts and experiences is difficult. We're often expected to fight for issues that don't directly affect us, and I believe we should fight for these issues regardless. But when issues that do affect us crop up, we do not garner the same support, or the issues get overshadowed and ignored. Personally, I do not identify with the traditional imagery of Irish femininity. Neither do most of the women I know."

With new narratives, come new storytellers. What is needed are open ears.