Stand up and be counted!

Suffrage and gender in Ireland during the Decade of Centenaries and beyond

The attainment of female suffrage in Ireland in the 1920s was influenced by a variety of social, economic and political factors, particularly the events of what we call the Decade of Centenaries period, 1912-1922. Influences include:

- Home Rule and the Home Rule Crisis
- Political opinion
- Labour relations and class divisions
- The First World War
- Violence and Partition
- Suffrage and suffragettes

Questions of historical cause and effect regarding the development of the complex and shifting currents of political and cultural life in Irish society during the early 1900s cannot be definitively answered, though we know that it was primarily in this period that the character of social life evolved in the two parts of the island partitioned into separate states after 1922, Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State.

An array of extracts from the archives of PRONI, in the next section, documents some of the nuanced and interwoven narratives, both local and global, which influenced the situation of women in Ireland at this time.

The following information is included to give an overview of some of the key concepts, organisations and events which led to or occurred during the Decade of Centenaries; and which influenced suffrage in Ireland. This should help contextualise the PRONI material included in this resource, and give some background information on some of the characters who created these archives.

Europe and Ireland in the 19th century

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Europe was changing as the old order began to collapse and elites began to lose their power and domination. Movements demanding change had developed, and not all were constitutional. Many of those committed to change were prepared to use physical force if necessary. Ireland's own developments from the nineteenth century onwards, like the rest of Europe, took place in the wake of the French Revolution of 1789. Radical change was inspired by its three watch words: liberty, equality, and fraternity for all. These principles were articulated in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, produced later that year. Yet by July 1793 the Terror had begun, with thousands executed by the revolutionary factions, exemplifying how revolutions often become violent and devour the very people they are meant to liberate.

The French Revolution undoubtedly influenced Ireland and Irish republicanism, with a rising in Ireland taking place in 1798. This was, however, violently put down by the establishment and Ireland's attempt at liberty, equality and fraternity was crushed.

Later in the century, the Irish Revolutionary (later Republican) Brotherhood was founded in Dublin on St. Patrick's Day 1858, with the Fenian Brotherhood founded in New York at the same time. The objective of the movement was a completely independent Ireland - an Irish Republic - achieved by physical force if necessary. Until that was realised, the IRB had a Supreme Council which it regarded as the Provisional Government of Ireland. By the early 20th century the IRB, although small in numbers, had successfully infiltrated larger organisations such as the Gaelic League and the Gaelic Athletic Association.

Alongside the revolutionary elements ran a movement to affect change in Ireland by more democratic means. By the end of the nineteenth century, the

Irish Parliamentary Party had emerged to represent constitutional nationalism. An argument for Home Rule – the suggestion that Ireland would have a form of devolved government (not unlike the arrangement in Scotland since 1997) was gaining momentum.

Home Rule

Home Rule was a proposal that Ireland should have its own parliament, but with powers of taxation, monetary policy and foreign policy remaining at Westminster. It was not complete independence, but rather devolved government within the British Empire. The various attempts to give Ireland Home Rule created a crisis, with resistance from Irish unionists who saw this as the first step towards the separation of Ireland from Great Britain. By the twentieth century, resistance was mainly focused in the province of Ulster. Ulster had a Protestant majority, many of whom feared Home Rule would lead to a Catholic dominated administration.

William Gladstone was a Liberal Party Prime Minister committed to giving Ireland Home Rule. As Prime Minister in 1869, he led the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland which diluted its considerable influence. He was in government again in 1886 when he introduced the first Home Rule Bill. It was defeated in the House of Commons. Gladstone was out of office for a term, but was back in power by 1893 when he introduced a second Bill. This Bill was defeated by the Conservative dominated House of Lords. The Conservatives regained power, which marked the end of Gladstone's political career. He had been determined that Ireland would have Home Rule but did not live to see it in any form.

With Gladstone's death and Conservative ascendancy, the prospect of Home Rule diminished, however, the Liberals were back in power by 1906 and politics in the UK was changing. In 1910, the House of Lords rejected Liberal Chancellor Lloyd George's 'People's Budget' which proposed to increase taxation of the wealthy in order to fund a range of social reforms. As a result, the Liberals focused their attention on parliamentary reform in the run up to the 1910 General election. In 1911 the Lords lost their power of veto, meaning that a Bill could only be delayed for two years after which the Commons could legislate.

The Liberals had returned to power, but in coalition with the Labour Party and the Irish National Party. In this 'hung-parliament', the Irish Nationalist MPs held the balance of power. Prime Minister Herbert Asquith had to give the Irish Home Rule, as he needed their support if he wished to remain in power. The third Bill was introduced in 1912 and became law in 1914.

Because of the outbreak of war, Home Rule was put in 'cold storage' until such time as the war had ended, which everyone thought would be by Christmas 1914. The war actually continued until 1918, changing the face of Europe and the world, but the Irish problem still remained.

Unionism in the early 20th century

The defeat of each Home Rule Bill only served to increase the demand for Home Rule from nationalists, and in consequence the resistance from unionists. Unionist resistance was most heavily concentrated in the northern province of Ulster, where it was documented in a 'Solemn League and Covenant'. Pledging to use 'any means necessary' to defeat Home Rule, the 'Ulster Covenant' was based on earlier Scottish examples and approved by the Protestant churches.

Led by Edward Carson and James Craig, on 28th September 1912 - Ulster Day - a quarter of a million Ulster protestant males signed the Covenant and almost as many women signed the corresponding Women's Declaration.

Unionists had spoken of guns in 1886, but by 1912 the crisis was at its most severe and the resistance greatest. Gun running was being planned from 1910, and a few weapons had already arrived. Various unionist groups began military-style training and in 1913 the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) was formed.

The Ulster unionists had set up a volunteer army, smuggled German guns and ammunition into Larne, Donaghadee and Bangor to arm the UVF and, in 1913, there was a unionist Proclamation of a Provisional Government. Battle plans, field hospitals, and even an Ulster currency were being prepared. The sense of crisis and depth of resistance by Ulster unionists implied this action was not a bluff, but a genuine readiness to fight the British government in order to remain British. As it happened, the war intervened.

Ulster Women's Unionist Council

The Ulster Women's Unionist Council (UWUC) formed on the 23rd January 1911 to support male Unionist opposition to Home Rule for Ireland "using gentleness, tact and quiet influence". In leadership were a number of high profile elite women who used their social standing in socio-political circles throughout Britain and Ireland to garner support for resistance to Home Rule. Women like the 2nd Duchess of Abercorn, whose husband was chief spokesperson for Ulster unionism in the House of Lords from 1895, served as the first president of the UWUC from 1911 to 1913. She was succeeded by Theresa, Lady Londonderry, who was a particularly significant figure in unionist circles. The wife of the 6th Marquess of Londonderry, who was

president of the Ulster Unionist Council and a member of the House of Lords until his death in 1915, Theresa counted unionist leader Sir Edward Carson a personal friend. She also corresponded with Arthur Bigges, personal Secretary to King George V, updating him with events in Ulster so that he might inform the King. Theresa acted as vice-president of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council from 1911 to 1913, and then President from 1913 until her death in 1919. Another supporter was Lillian Spender, whose husband Captain Wilfrid Spender was heavily involved in the organisation of the UVF. Wilfrid Spender went on to become Permanent Secretary to the Northern Ireland Ministry for Finance and Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service from 1925-1944.

The Ulster Women's Unionist Council was the largest women's political association that ever existed in Ireland, other than the short-lived Ladies Land League of 1881. By the end of 1911, thirty-two branches had been formed throughout Ulster. At its peak in 1913, the press was guesstimating UWUC membership figures of between 115,000 to 200,000. Council members were involved in propagandist work and fundraising to support the anti-Home Rule campaign. The UWUC organised the signing of the Women's Declaration on 28th September 1912. They also supported the training of UVF nurses, the driving and signalling corps, and the purchase of medical equipment for UVF units.

UWUC membership was divided on the suffrage issue. Theresa, Lady Londonderry felt it distracted from their *raison d'être* as an organisation, whilst her daughter-in-law, Edith, Lady Londonderry, became a supporter of the suffrage movement.

Nationalism and republicanism in the early 20th century

As the crisis escalated in response to the Third Home Rule Bill, Nationalists also formed a volunteer militia and landed guns and ammunition acquired from Germany.

Meanwhile, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) leaders were considering the possibility of an armed revolt. Despite membership of only 1,600 in 1913, by the time the First World War broke out in 1914 a rising was in preparation. England at war provided the opportunity for the 1916 Rising and it was the work of a small group of people at the heart of the IRB. Whilst the rising was unsuccessful in creating an independent Irish republic, it did foster a wider support for republican ideals in the aftermath. This is evidenced by a landslide victory for the recently formed republican political party, Sinn Féin, in the 1918 election.

Cumann na mBan

The Irish Volunteers' manifesto declared there would be tasks for women to perform, and many came out in support. Cumann na mBan, the Irish Women's Council, was founded in November 1913 and created the first quasi-military Irish Nationalist women's organisation, which initially operated as an auxiliary of the Irish Volunteers.

Members of Cumann na mBan, like those in the Ulster Women's Unionist Council, were involved in propaganda and fund raising. Cumann na mBan went on to play an active role during the 1916 Rising, the War of Independence and Irish Civil War. Women worked as couriers delivering messages and parcels between Republican outposts, bringing food and medical supplies, nursing the wounded, protecting arms dumps, and organising safe houses.

During the War of Independence membership has been estimated as between eleven and twelve thousand women.

Europe and the road to World War 1

Pre-war Europe was characterised by large empires, indeed, three emperors - King George V, Kaiser Wilhelm of Prussia-Germany, and Czar Nicholas of Russia - were cousins. The First World War, when it came, began almost as a family feud or civil war, with Imperial expansionism and power struggles the order of the day.

From the later part of the 19th century, the stage was becoming set for a war. Britannia ruled the waves, bur Kaiser Wilhelm was determined to outstrip the British navy. Dreadnought battleships were developed, iron monsters with greater fire power than ever. The arms race was on with the British managing to stay ahead in the dangerous game, however, a war seemed inevitable as the Great powers threatened each other.

Outbreak of War

The War began with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austria-Hungarian throne, during a visit to the Bosnian capital Sarajevo on 28th June 1914. Tensions had been rising in the Balkans for several years and the Archduke's visit coincided with the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo (marking the defeat of the Serbian army by the Ottoman Empire). Despite this, security was surprisingly light. There had already been a number of attempts on his life that morning, before he was finally assassinated by a young man named Gavrilo Princip. Sitting in a corner café, Princip could not believe his luck when the Archduke's car took a wrong turning. He saw the car unable to

reverse and took his chance. Pulling a revolver he shot the Archduke and his pregnant wife, Sophie, at point blank range. A short time later they both died.

The fatal shots fired by Princip started a World War, but the question of who was really to blame has a much more complex and disputed answer.

The Austrian's blamed Serbia for the assignation, and this provided the justification for the Austria-Hungarian Empire to declare war against Serbia on the 28th July 1914. But this was never going to be a war between just these two players . Kaiser Wilhelm and Prussia-Germany had already been encouraging the Austria-Hungarian Empire to act against Serbia. The Serbs were Slavs and so had the support of Russia, and German military leaders feared Russia's growing military power and were keen to halt this expansion. Meanwhile, Russia was arming in support of Serbia and was also in alliance with France.

Germany declared war on Russia and France on the 1st and 2nd of August respectively. To weaken the Russian –French alliance, Germany's first strike would be against France, and to get at France, Germany would have to move its army through neutral Belgium. In addition to an alliance with France and Russia, Britain was also committed to defending Belgium's neutrality through an earlier 19th century agreement. But for Britain it was not just about 'little' Belgium and honour, it was about the threat to British imperial power. If Germany destroyed France it would threaten Britain's global supremacy and possibly even bring it to an end. The Belgium argument was used to bring Britain into the war on 4th August 1914.

A month on from Sarajevo and there was a World War involving all the major imperial powers of Europe. The scale of killing and serious injury, psychological and physical, was unparallel up to this point. In total some 15 million human beings died during the First World War.

Legacy of War

The old order had collapsed and finding a new one would be difficult. After the First World War the world would never be the same again and War itself would never be the same again either. The 'Great War' was not the war to end all wars, rather it industrialised warfare and weapons technology. Subsequently, when the Second World War of 1939 to 1945 concluded, 66 million human beings were dead, two thirds of whom were civilians. Conflict carried on into the Cold War, and didn't end for Eastern and Central European countries until 1989.

Impact of the First World War on Ireland

By 1914, nearly a quarter of a million men were enlisted in either the Ulster or Irish volunteer forces, with considerable arms available. Ireland was on the brink of a civil war, which was only averted by the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914. Now thousands of Irishmen joined the same British army, and in their thousands died together.

Some 200,000 Irishmen went off to fight in a global conflict and around 30, 000 died together, with the Somme, Guillmont, Ginchy and Gallipoli being the main battle fronts and military theatres for Irishmen. Despite this, after 1918 memory of the war was monopolised by the Unionists, with the Somme becoming a Protestant – Unionist blood sacrifice and a narrative created to provide foundational status for what would become Northern Ireland. Meanwhile, thousands of Irish Nationalists dead were airbrushed from memory and history because they did not fit into the created Irish narrative. Both Unionists and Nationalists used memory ideologically, but in recent years a more inclusive and authentic account is being explored.

Partition of Ireland

After the First World War ended, the world had changed but the Irish problem and quarrel still remained. The militarisation which had begun earlier now became active again. Sinn Féin, the main beneficiaries of the Easter Rising, won a landslide victory in the 1918 General Election, whilst the Irish Parliamentary Party was totally eclipsed. It has been argued that the use of force was legitimised by this political mandate.

Sinn Féin called for the first Dáil Éireann to meet in January 1919. On the same day, without any official mandate or authorisation from the first Dáil, Irish Volunteers, later to become the Irish Republican Army (IRA), shot dead two Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) officers in County Tipperary. It was the beginning of the War of Independence or Anglo-Irish war. It was largely about guerrilla warfare, involving flying columns, characterised by ambushes, assassinations and raids on RIC barracks. From the IRA side it was carried out with ruthless efficiency. The British responded with equal brutality, much of it executed by the Black and Tans and Auxiliaries. The violence was also not confined solely to the political sphere, with evidence of sectarian attacks on civilians.

The partition of Ireland had been talked about in the late 19th century and in the decade 1912-1922 different models, permanent or temporary, were explored. One model proposed the exclusion of the nine county province of Ulster, but Unionists realised that religio-political demographics would leave them vulnerable. Unionists, who had originally resisted Home Rule, came to accept a form of Home Rule on a six county basis. Sinn Féin's abstention from Westminster left the floor of parliament open to the Unionists, who put their political voice to good use. The 1916 Rising, meanwhile, had become the most successful failure in Irish history, the tide having turned when the British

military executed sixteen of its leaders. The failure of Constitutional nationalism and the Rising ensured that partition would be an inevitable outcome.

After negotiations, the Westminster parliament passed the Government of Ireland Act on 23rd December 1920. It became operative in May 1921. The Act partitioned Ireland on the basis of a six county Northern Ireland and a twenty-six county Irish Free State. Both states remained within the British Empire, which had been part of the Home Rule proposal in 1886, 1893 and 1912. In reality, no side got what it wanted. Partition fell far short of a completely independent Ireland, and also fell far short of the Irish unionist objective that no part of Ireland would ever have Home Rule. Everyone lost, and Carson was bitterly disappointed by partition, resigning as Unionist leader.

Partition was a compromise to an unsolvable problem. It not only partitioned Ireland, but also partitioned the province of Ulster. Again no side got what it wanted. Within a year the Free State was engulfed by a civil war, the killing and brutality exceeding anything that had gone before in the last five years. Belfast, Derry, Lisburn and other areas of the north witnessed their share of violence. The legacy of this sectarian violence has endured throughout the twentieth century to the present.

Labour Relations and Class Divisions

A popular television series, Downton Abbey, has made many aware of the deep class divisions at the beginning of the 20th century. Earlier television had described this as 'Upstairs Downstairs'. Those upstairs were the minority, while downstairs represented the majority who were subservient within a sharply divided class system. The 'big houses' had the wealth and power, and it was the landed class who dominated the House of Lords, and to a large extent the Commons. Ireland, too, had its landowners and its servant class. Politics had always been dominated by the educated, upper class; however the unionist leadership in the Home Rule crisis came from the professional and business class. Labour relations were changing, and there was ferment across Europe and elsewhere.

There were Labour movements in Ireland in the late 19th century and in 1896 James Connolly was invited to Dublin to establish the Irish Socialist Republican Party. In 1903, while in the United States, he became involved with the International Workers of the World. Irish socialism was on the rise, despite opposition from all the mainstream churches who tended to link socialism with atheism.

Because it was the most industrialised area of Ireland, Belfast seemed a likely centre for Irish socialism and Trade Unionism. The bulk of industrial businesses were owned by protestants and unionists. The remainder of the city's working population, Catholic and protestant, were employed in relatively low-wage industrial jobs.

By 1910 Connolly was back in Ireland, and was appointed the Belfast organiser of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU), which had been founded by James Larkin in 1909. A Labour Party was formed in Belfast. But

the march of Trade Unions was curtailed by sectarianism, which would prevent the growth of socialism and the unity of workers.

Labour reform came from a surprising source. Thomas Sloan was an evangelical lay-preacher, particularly well-liked in protestant Sandy Row with his attacks on bad housing, unemployment and lack of pensions. Sloan was elected MP for South Belfast in 1902. On expulsion from the Orange Order he formed the Independent Orange Order, which in 1905 produced the Magheramorne Manifesto. This argued for a broadly democratic and inclusive working class movement, opposing clericalism and sectarianism and suggesting a common Irish nationality as a means of uniting people from all religious traditions.

In 1907 James Larkin arrived in Belfast, hoping to organise protestant workers. A strike broke out in the Sirocco Works, which spread to the dock workers, and at one point even the police went on strike. In Belfast, 100,000 Trade Union supporters marched, but within three months the strike was over, with no Trade Union recognition, no increased wages, and militant workers blacklisted. The Independent Orange Order and the Labour movement as a whole had been undermined. Political unionism and the mainly unionist industry owners had succeeded in dividing protestant and catholic workers.

If sectarianism prevented a broad-based labour movement in the north, it was Home Rule that eclipsed unionisation in Dublin. Unionisation was met with severe opposition from employers, along with a lack of wider political and church support. In Dublin, opposition to trade union activity brought about a strike, or lock-out, in 1913. Dublin industrialists tried to force workers to leave

the ITGWU and threatened dismissal if they refused. The strike grew, and in a short time around 22,000 workers were locked out.

The lock-out was not supported by the Catholic church, and Arthur Griffith, founder of Sinn Féin, was also opposed and the party was totally silent about the issue. The employers were led by William Martin Murphy, hotel and store owner and proprietor of the Irish Independent newspaper and the Dublin Tramways Company. They maintained the lock-out. Hardship increased and hunger was widespread. In a city which already had some of the worst living conditions and the highest death rate in Europe.

By January 1914 the lock-out was over. Murphy claimed victory and the tide had turned against Larkin and Larkinism. The lock-out left a bitter legacy between workers and employers.

Women and Labour Relations

In the 1911 census, 430,000 women were recorded as being in paid employment in Ireland – a marked decline from the 815,000 figure recorded in the 1881 census. This can be accounted for in a number of ways. There was a general decline in the population. There were losses of job opportunities for women in agriculture, with a shift from tillage to livestock and the gradual development of creameries reducing opportunities for women who traditionally had primary responsibility for milking on farms. Factories also replaced home based domestic textile industries, and while sewing work was often outsourced to women in the home, factory owners determined the rate of pay, which was a pittance. With the decline of the large estates, there were also fewer vacancies in domestic service.

Women unable to secure employment and who had no other means of support for themselves and their families were often faced with an impossible choice of the workhouse or prostitution. One of the first British women to draw a link between prostitution and poverty was the suffragist Josephine Butler. Butler is known for her efforts to repeal the three Contagious Diseases Acts (1864, 1866, 1869), which attempted to contain the spread of venereal disease among the armed forces by targeting women suspected of prostitution. These women were subject to enforced medical inspections and, if infected, were detained against their will for treatment in Lock-Hospitals until cured. Butler and those who followed her lead, including Isabella Tod in Belfast, were incensed at the double standard underpinning these Acts. Infected women were incarcerated, whilst infected men were free to transmit contagious diseases to other women. The Acts were not repealed until 1886.

Those women who were fortunate enough to gain employment in the industries were generally classified as unskilled, that is their work was viewed as an extension of activities carried out in the household. As such, women were paid between a half and two-thirds of the unmarried male wage; and much less than married men. Married men benefitted from being given a family wage, with the presumption being that married women, therefore, did not need to work. This convention ignored the female only households, where widowed or single mothers, or even grandmothers, struggled to provide for dependents.

Women employees also faced opposition from male-only unions, which refused to represent them in disputes with employers and often saw them as a threat to men's employability. The first union established for women was the Textile Operatives Society of Ireland in 1893. By 1897 Mary Galway had been appointed its first female Organising Secretary and she worked hard to recruit members, negotiate with employers regarding wages and working conditions,

and represent women on the Belfast Trades Council. She lobbied for twelve years in the Irish Trade Union Congress for the appointment of a female factory inspector before she met with success. Her tenacity, experience and capability was eventually recognised when she was appointed the first female vice president of the Irish Trade Union Congress in 1910.

Another woman who played a significant role in unionising women in the mills and factories of Belfast was Winifred Carney. She was one of the first women in Belfast to qualify as a secretary and shorthand typist. She used her skills in the Irish Textile Workers' Union (ITWU), the women's section of the ITGWU, a division of which had been opened in Belfast by James Connolly. Those who joined women's unions learnt how to organise and lobby for change, although it was really only in the 1920s when women had the vote that they began to be taken more seriously within the Labour movement. While there have been significant moves towards gender equality in the last hundred years women have still some distance to travel to gain an equal footing with men in the workplace.

The Development of Suffrage

A century ago, women supporting suffrage in Ireland were part of a growing international movement, insisting that women had a right to vote on the same basis as men and should not be discriminated against on gender grounds. There had been some socio-political gains for women since the passing of the Great Reform Act in 1832, which limited voting only to men who met the property qualifications. As a result of successful lobbying by women like Isabella Tod, Anne Jellicoe and Anna Haslam, girls benefitted from the late 19th century Educational Acts that had originally sought to improve standards and opportunities for boys only. Labour unions had also been established, which sought to improve the working conditions and wages of female employees. Irish women had also been granted the right to become Poor Law Guardians, and vote and be elected onto District and County Councils. Suffragists argued that while these gains had raised the profile of women in the public arena, until they had suffrage on the same basis as men they would not have the same influence and impact on social policy.

Upper class female suffrage advocates like Constance Markievicz, Maud Gonne McBride, and Charlotte Despard, were committed to socialism as a means of bridging the class and economic gaps in Irish society.

Although born in England, Charlotte Despard had family connections in County Roscommon and her brother, Lord French, was Lord Lieutenant of Ireland during the War of Independence. While in England, Despard had been active in Emmeline Pankhurst's militant suffrage organisation, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). She left it, however, in 1907 finding Pankhurst's style of leadership autocratic. Despard helped establish the socialist and suffragist Women's Freedom League (WFL), of which she became the first president.

Branches of WFL were established in Ireland and Despard visited Dublin at the invitation of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, who had herself co-founded the militant Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL) in 1908. During the 1913 Dublin lock-out, Despard, like Markievicz and MacBride, supported the workers and helped finance food kitchens. Despard also favoured Home Rule for Ireland and opposed British colonialism, especially in India, after visiting the country with her husband.

When the War of Independence broke out in Ireland, Despard supported Sinn Féin, leading to a serious rift with her brother, Lord French. She also acted as president of the Women Prisoners Defence League set up by MacBride to support Republican prisoners during the Civil War in Ireland. In 1930, as secretary of the Friends of Russia, she, along with Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, toured Russia for six weeks to experience first-hand the socialist experience with a view to taking ideas back to Ireland.

By 1915 the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) and Ulster Unionist Council (UUC) had alienated the pro-suffrage lobby. The former blocked a Westminster Conciliation Bill (1912) that favoured women's suffrage, fearing it would halt the progress of the Third Home Rule Bill. The IPP encouraged women to wait until Home Rule had been guaranteed before lobbying for the vote.

The resistance of Irish politicians to the rights of women created divisions within the suffrage movement itself, with groups dividing over whether to continue down the constitutional route, or choose a more militant path. Members of the Dublin based Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL), under the leadership of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and Margaret Cousins, were among the first women in Ireland to be jailed for damaging government property.

The establishment of a branch of Emmeline Pankhurst's English based Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in Belfast in 1913 was the

prelude to a WSPU sustained attack on property and places of recreation in Ulster.

The infamous 'Cat and Mouse' Act of 1913 was the British Government's response to the hunger and thirst strike adopted by suffragettes jailed for damaging property and possessing explosives. Disturbances inside and outside courts by suffragettes who opposed the male dominated Criminal Justice system became regular occurrences. In a six month period from March 1914, thirteen suffragettes were arrested in Ulster. As the cost of damage to property escalated, with £92,000 worth of damage calculated in Country Antrim alone, the Malicious Injuries (Ireland) Act was applied. This facilitated an increase in rates to cover the costs incurred. A three penny in the pound levy was applied to the country's rates, increasing public hostility toward the suffrage cause and its supporters.

Underlying sectarian divisions also created tensions in the suffrage movement, and limited the networking and contacts between suffrage groups in Ulster and those in the rest of Ireland. This became even more pronounced with the outbreak of the First World War. The cessation of activity by the WSPU while Britain was at war angered some suffrage groups, who believed that women should insist on the vote as a bargaining tool for supporting the war effort. The fact that the WSPU was the largest suffrage group in Ulster at the time, with branches established throughout the province, meant suffrage activity virtually ceased, with just a few independent groups continuing the struggle.

The opposition of suffrage groups with Republican sympathies to the imposition of conscription in Ireland was viewed as an indication of pro-German sympathy by Unionist dominated suffrage groups. The later were also using their networks to fund raise for medical and other supplies to support soldiers on the front lines.

Political issues during the war years served to further side-line the suffrage agenda. It was not until after the partitioning of Ireland, that universal suffrage for women was achieved, first in Irish Free State in 1922, but not until 1928 in Northern Ireland.

Political concerns continued to dominate the public agenda and every vote counted. Consequently, it could be argued that the achievement of women's suffrage was as much the result of a political priority to maximise the electorate as it was about addressing of the gender equality issue.

One hundred years on and those supporting gender equality in civil society are still struggling to ensure real equality for women with their male counterparts in socio-political and economic terms. The glass ceiling is cracked but not broken!