

8 Campaigns against Contraception in 1970s and 1980s Ireland

Writing to the *Irish Independent* in 1976, ‘as parents and members of concerned organisations’, a number of representatives of Irish conservative groups stated that in opposition to the ‘desires expressed’ by politicians such as Garret FitzGerald:

we do not want contraception, abortion, divorce, homosexuality, secular schools or any of the trappings of an uninspiring secular Ireland. Ireland suffered many centuries of persecution before regaining the freedom to express our religious and national ideals. Are we to discard some of our guiding principles so lightly after less than fifty years of being free to be ourselves?

This joint letter from conservative groups, including the League of Decency, Parent Concern, Irish Family League, Nazareth Family Movement, Pro-Fide Movement, Save our Society, and Mná na hÉireann (Irish for ‘Women of Ireland’), highlights their concerns regarding the modernisation of Ireland, but also shows how groups used their authority as parents to justify speaking out on moral issues. The infusion of nationalist rhetoric suggests concerns about Ireland’s changing identity, while the letter also illustrates anxieties around individualism, suggesting that ‘it appears as if institutions of State are helping the attempt to pervert Irish society’.¹

The contraception debate was an extremely polarising one. The previous two chapters have explored activist-led campaigns in favour of the legalisation of contraception. But, simultaneously, from the early 1970s, several groups also formed which actively campaigned against the legalisation of contraception.

The Catholic hierarchy continued to emphasise the Church’s line on contraception in the wake of continuing debates. However, from the 1970s, bishops had encouraged individuals to follow their conscience in relation to matters of personal or sexual morality but ‘reserved the right to voice their opinion on issues of morality, where legislation or constitutional reform had

¹ ‘Efforts to “pervert” Irish society’, *Irish Independent*, Friday, 21 May 1976, p. 10.

implications for the good of society, as they saw it'.² This meant that the policing of sexual morality and active campaigning on issues such as contraception, divorce and abortion were taken up by a number of lay conservative groups. Or, as Chrystal Hug has put it, 'these people had effectively taken over from the Church' and were unafraid to defend Church teachings and 'say loudly and clearly what kind of society they wanted to live in'.³

The foundation of Irish pro-life groups stemmed from the anti-contraception campaigns, in contrast to Britain where, as Olivia Dee has shown, pro-life groups such as Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC) (founded in 1967 to oppose the legalisation of abortion), and LIFE (founded in 1970), were primarily lobbying organisations which were set up to combat abortion.⁴ While scholarship by Tom Hesketh and Cara Delay has illuminated elements of the Irish pro-life campaigns, there has been little research done on the anti-contraception campaigns that preceded them and which were integral to their foundation.⁵ Moreover, as Diarmaid Ferriter has recently suggested 'there is a tendency to regard some of the individuals leading such groups as almost comic', but such views tend to underestimate 'how well connected and determined they were'.⁶ Aidan Beatty has complicated the picture and shown how those who campaigned against contraception presented a vision of Ireland which 'represents a historically discrete modernist phenomenon'. In his view, conservative campaigners 'saw themselves as the defenders of a traditional social order' but these ideas owe their roots to the nineteenth century and 'centred on relatively specific notions about land ownership, gender roles, public respectability, religious belief, attitudes towards "foreign" culture, and the role of the centralized state in enforcing these ideas'.⁷ As Chapters 2 and 3 showed, England was often portrayed as a permissive country in relation to matters of sexuality, and a threat to Irish womanhood.

As this chapter illustrates, it is also crucial to place Irish groups within the wider international context. Activists' rhetoric drew on a complex web of arguments which incorporated scientific evidence (such as the potential health risks of the pill) and sociological and statistical evidence

² Fuller, *Irish Catholicism*, p. 240. ³ Hug, *The Politics of Sexual Morality*, p. 110.

⁴ Olivia Dee, *The Anti-Abortion Campaign in England, 1966–1989* (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 41–4.

⁵ See: Tom Hesketh, *The Second Partitioning of Ireland: The Abortion Referendum of 1983* (Dublin: Brandama Books, 1990); Cara Delay, 'Wrong for womankind and the nation: anti-abortion discourses in Ireland, 1967–1992', *Journal of Modern European History*, 17:3, (2019), 312–325. The IFL is discussed briefly in journalist Emily O'Reilly's *Masterminds of the Right* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1988), p. 30.

⁶ Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin*, p. 465.

⁷ Beatty, 'Irish modernity and the politics of contraception', on p. 101.

in relation to the impact of ‘the permissive society’ in other contexts. As Jennifer Crane has argued in relation to child protection in 1970s Britain, emotional and experiential expertise (in particular motherhood) came to be more valued in public debates around the issue.⁸ In the Irish context, anti-contraception campaigners also drew on their expertise as parents in order to give weight to their arguments. The chapter also shows how international networks, particularly links with conservative groups in the United States and the United Kingdom, assisted activists in developing their campaigns but also provided ideas which helped to set the foundation for the anti-abortion campaign in Ireland in the 1980s. Through the use of oral histories, archival material, newspapers and the publications of conservative groups, this chapter reveals campaigners’ concerns about the modernisation of the country and legislative change.⁹ The chapter more broadly highlights the value of exploring the history of conservative groups, which to date, have received little historical attention, in contrast with surveys of social movements which tend to focus on environmental or feminist activism.¹⁰

8.1 Early Activism: The Nazareth Family Movement and Mná na hÉireann

As Jeffrey Weeks has argued, the dramatic social changes and events of the late 1960s and early 1970s in Britain, such as the student revolts, economic crisis, industrial militancy, and the rise of the women’s movement and gay liberation movements, came to be seen by more conservative members of society as being ‘signs of breakdown or transformation in the old order’.¹¹ In Britain in this period there was a growing sense of social crisis and moral authoritarianism was perceived to be a solution to these crises. One of the leaders of this movement was Mary Whitehouse, who succeeded in mobilising significant cross-class support for her Clean Up TV Campaign and National Viewers’ and Listeners’ Association.¹²

⁸ Jennifer Crane, *Child Protection in England, 1960–2000: Expertise, Experience and Emotion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2018).

⁹ Unfortunately, the majority of campaigners involved in Irish anti-contraception campaigns have passed away. This chapter draws on oral histories with surviving campaigners, John O’Reilly and Bernadette Bonar.

¹⁰ Lawrence Black, ‘There was something about Mary: The National Viewers’ and Listeners’ Association and Social Movement History’ in Nick Crowson, Matthew Hilton, and James McKay (eds.), *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-state Actors in Society and Politics since 1945* (Palgrave, 2009), pp. 182–200, on p. 182.

¹¹ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800*, 4th edition (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 312.

¹² See Black, ‘There was something about Mary’.

In Ireland, similarly, a number of conservative groups emerged in the early 1970s which were concerned with changes in Irish society, in particular, the potential advent of the legalisation of contraception and the impact that this might have on the traditional family. The earliest of these appears to have been the Nazareth Family Movement which was formed in response to Pope Paul's 'call for a family apostolate' in *Humanae Vitae*. During the months that followed the publication of the encyclical in 1968, two of the founder members met to attempt to have the Rosary on television 'as a means of renewing and strengthening traditional family prayer' and out of this grew the Weekly Public Rosary Movement.¹³ Writing to the *Evening Herald* in October 1970, founder member Marie Dunleavy MacSharry expressed her desire 'to establish a movement similar to the one initiated by Mrs. Mary Whitehouse' arising out of concerns from parents 'about the permissiveness in our midst', who were 'anxious that something be done about it'. She requested that interested parties contact her so that she could arrange a meeting.¹⁴ The subsequent meeting was attended by twenty-two people and a committee was elected with Donal J. Cullinan as chairman and MacSharry as secretary.¹⁵ In a small card which survives in the Dublin Diocesan Archives, the group listed their objectives as 'to voice lay support for the Church's teaching on marriage and the family; to combat the attacks on marriage and the dignity of man such as artificial contraception, abortion, divorce and euthanasia; to work to encourage and restore family prayers especially the Rosary; to express lay support for the magisterium of the Church and to help to restore all things in Christ'. The group was described as 'lay inspired and promoted' and membership was open to those who could actively participate in the work of the organisation, with all members asked to recite the Rosary, if possible with their family, at least once a week for the intentions of the movement.¹⁶

The group appears to have piqued Archbishop John Charles McQuaid's interest, or concern. His secretary wrote to Donal Cullinan, in June 1971, stating that he needed 'fairly urgently an account of the origins of the Nazareth Family Movement' and further detail of its activities.¹⁷ Cullinan responded promptly the next day with an account

¹³ Nazareth Family Movement: report to Rev J.A. McMahon [DDA: Nazareth Family Movement, XXI/94/4/3].

¹⁴ 'Move to organise parents', *Evening Herald*, 29 October 1970, p. 10.

¹⁵ Nazareth Family Movement: report to Rev J. A. McMahon.

¹⁶ Nazareth Family Movement card listing objectives. [DDA: Nazareth Family Movement, XXI/94/1/2].

¹⁷ Letter from Rev. McMahon, secretary, to D. J. Cullinan, 22 June 1971. [xxi/94/4/1].

of the origins of the group. In this he stated that the Nazareth Family Movement had been concerned with 'the wave of pornography sweeping the country'; but their efforts were soon focused on the contraception issue, particularly from 1971 when it became apparent that a bill would be introduced by Mary Robinson.¹⁸ In March 1971, the group had defended the archbishop's statements in relation to *Humanae Vitae* against claims by IFPRA that these teachings were unorthodox.¹⁹ The group also engaged in exchanges of letters with the Chairman of the IFPRA, were interviewed by printed media as well as the BBC and NBC, and printed and distributed a 'Prayer in Defence of Human Life'.²⁰

The group then decided that it was 'inappropriate to act in a manner which would identify the Nazareth Movement as nothing but an anti-contraceptive pressure group' and instead decided to form the Association for the Protection of Irish Family Life at the end of March 1971. The aim of this organisation was to address youth and adult groups and ask them to voice their opposition to any change in the law on contraception.²¹ The group claimed to take a non-militant approach, stating that 'we do not see the fight in terms of emotive debate, demonstrations or similar activities but in a call to our fellow lay-folk to bear witness in a practical manner to their Catholic life which is the only road to true happiness'. As such, the group was most concerned with the organisation of prayer vigils, the establishment of a perpetual novena of prayers in defence of human life, and visits to shrines, as well as the publication of a private newsletter.²² McQuaid's secretary used the information provided by Cullinan to devise a report and also privately enquired with MacSharry and Cullinan's priest in Walkinstown. He wrote in his report to McQuaid that the parish priest had affirmed that MacSharry was 'a zealous, enthusiastic Catholic, a housewife with several children', and that the Curate in charge of the district where Cullinan lived stated that he was 'a fine Catholic. He is a Salesman, married, with several children'.²³

In a 1971 statement, the Nazareth Family Movement argued that legalisation of contraception would lead to the introduction of divorce and abortion, quoting the example of Italy: 'Just before Christmas they got divorce, now contraception and they are now considering abortion'. In response to these comments, Senator John Horgan, who was one of

¹⁸ Nazareth Family Movement: report to Rev J. A. McMahan.

¹⁹ 'Contraception argument challenged', *Irish Press*, 18 March 1971, p. 3.

²⁰ Nazareth Family Movement: report to Rev J. A. McMahan. ²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Nazareth Family Movement: report to Rev J. A. McMahan.

²³ Report on the Nazareth Family Movement, 25 June 1971. [DDA, XXI/94/4/4].

the senators backing Mary Robinson's bill, argued 'This vision of Irish society exists nowhere but in the heads of the people who think it is true. We already have a permissive society and people are exploited in other ways. This whole business of the floodgates opening is utterly ludicrous'.²⁴

Marie Dunleavy MacSharry and Donal Cullinan were active in writing to the press in the early 1970s. For example, in March 1971, a letter by MacSharry published in the *Evening Press* argued that 'the responsible planning of children is an essential part of Catholic teaching which involves a man's being a man, and proving he is, by self-control, true love and consideration'.²⁵ These ideas were not always well-received by members of the public. In response to a letter by MacSharry, a woman called Anne Doyle wrote a letter in favour of the legalisation of contraception to the *Evening Press* in March 1971, and sent copies of the same letter to a range of politicians, Church hierarchy, journalists and RTÉ staff. In a postscript to the letter, she addressed MacSharry directly, stating:

It is very easy for you to talk from the comfort of your home in Limekiln Drive but how would you like to live in one or two rooms in our city slums with 10 or 12 children. You are entitled to have as many children as you wish but you should not be stuffing your views down other people's throats. Every woman should have the right to plan her family as she likes without people like you telling her what, in your opinion, is the right way to go to Heaven. It is pretty obvious that you have not got a large family because, if you had, you would not have so much time for writing to the papers and telling us what you consider is right, but of course you may have a daily who does your extra work.²⁶

MacSharry, writing to Taoiseach Jack Lynch in March 1971, explained that she had received a copy of this letter and wanted to inform him that she was 'the mother of 12 children, 6 surviving and of schooling age. One of these is an autistic child. I do all my own housework together with some other charitable works. I am active member of a few committees and have other interests. I have never had the luxury of a daily help'.²⁷ MacSharry's need to defend herself in this way against Doyle's allegations suggests that she viewed her role as a mother of several children as an important marker of her authority to speak on the family planning issue. Cullinan and MacSharry wrote to Lynch again in June 1971 to state that they were strongly opposed to any change in the legislation

²⁴ 'Family protection V Family planning', *Irish Independent*, 30 March 1971, p. 10.

²⁵ 'The dignity of motherhood', *The Irish Catholic*, 18 March 1971. [NAI, 2002/8/459].

²⁶ Letter from Anne Doyle, March 1971. [NAI, 2002/8/459].

²⁷ Letter to Jack Lynch, 30 March 1971. [NAI, 2002/8/459].

relating to contraception, because they felt that it was contrary to 'Natural Moral Law' and that its introduction would lead to a 'lowering of moral standards'.²⁸ The group seems to have declined in activity from late 1971 onwards, however, they later appear to have emerged again as part of the umbrella group Council of Social Concern which was a member of the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign founded in 1981.

There were also conservative groups established outside of Dublin. *Mná na hÉireann* was a small but active group originally based in Cork, founded by Úna Mhic Mhathúna (chairman) and Áine Ní Mhurchú (vice-chairman) in 1971. Like the Nazareth Family Movement, they were strongly opposed to the legalisation of contraception. In 1977, the Irish feminist magazine *Wicca* characterised *Mná na hÉireann*'s beliefs as 'reactionary and hysterical ravings', suggesting that what united conservative groups was their 'common denial of a human right to choose', placing them in opposition to the women's movement, which was united with 'pro-contraception forces' through 'our absolute defence of the right of women in particular to control our fertility and obviously our lives'.²⁹ *Mná na hÉireann*, conversely, were critical of the movement in favour of contraception, in one letter stating 'So much for "Women's Rights" and nothing at all for their dignity'.³⁰ In an interview with Mary Leland of the *Irish Times* in 1973, they stated that 'There is a handful of women in Dublin who claim to be speaking for the majority of women in Ireland and we believe that it's not a majority opinion at all. The same number of women are always involved and some of them, the most vociferous, are foreigners'.³¹ Leland described the members of *Mná na hÉireann* as 'young women with young families. The familiarity of a shared Cork background indicates that they are idealistic and nationalistic, and they believe that the majority of Irish women are in their homes, rearing families, wanting family life to remain as it is'. In the interview, the group expressed the view that 'We don't believe that any person makes a conscious decision to use artificial contraceptives: they do it under pressure from propaganda', and argued that there was no distinction between contraception and abortion because 'they have the same aim, that of destroying new life'. There were also moral undertones to the statements made by the group. Leland reported that they 'spoke nostalgically of the Irish way of life "when Ireland was truly Ireland,

²⁸ Letter from Nazareth Family Movement, 1 June 1971. [NAI, 2002/8/459].

²⁹ 'Contraception: a four-page pull-out', *Wicca* (1977), p. 7. [RCAPA, UCC, BL/F/AP/1398/3].

³⁰ 'Family planning', *Irish Press*, 18 February 1974, p. 8.

³¹ 'Women of Ireland', *Irish Times*, 24 November 1973, p. 6.

when we had our own language and culture and religion”; then, they said “we were a moral nation”.³²

Mná na hÉireann’s key forms of action were letter writing to newspapers, the collection of signatures on petitions and the production of circulars outlining their aims and beliefs. The group claimed in 1973 that there was not public support for the legalisation of contraception. They alluded to influences from Britain, arguing that ‘if the Government believes that it is the Government of a sovereign state it should legislate for the good of the people and without regard to the wishes or standards of a foreign state’.³³ A letter in the *Irish Examiner* praising the efforts of the group from Micheal Ua Maignneir, based in Leeds, commended the two women for ‘making such stout and able defence of the Holy Father’s teaching on this subject [...] May you yet win the day against the strangely voluble Slummi of anti-Catholicism and shoneenism’.³⁴ Writing to Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave in February 1974, Úna Mhic Mhathúna and Áine Uí Mhurchú set out their key arguments against Mary Robinson’s bill on contraception. They referred to the fact that Senator Robinson was a Trinity College nominee to the Seanad and not an elected representative of the people, and therefore ‘should not be allowed to impose her views on the people in a matter of such national importance’.³⁵ The group was concerned that the legalisation of contraception would lead to a ‘promiscuous society’ and would resent having to pay ‘for abortifacient contraceptives’ through rates and taxes when ‘the whole anti-life idea runs contrary to our religious beliefs’. The letter also drew attention to biases in the media which they felt were pressuring women to use artificial contraceptives while also stating the potential physical and psychological ill-effects of these contraceptives on women.³⁶

In 1974, Mná na hÉireann wrote to the *Irish Press* to express their concerns that the legalisation of contraception would lead to depopulation and ‘a campaign for compulsory artificial contraception and sterilisation’. The group was concerned with the side effects of the pill and the actions of the IUD, arguing that women were being used ‘as guinea pigs and guinea pigs are always in a very dangerous position’.³⁷ In April, 1974, the group collected over 250 signatures outside churches in Tralee, and claimed to have collected almost 10,000 signatures in Cork county and city alone.³⁸ Petitions were a common strategy by anti-contraception

³² ‘Women of Ireland’, *Irish Times*, 24 November 1973, p. 6.

³³ ‘Contraception less “trendy”’, *Irish Independent*, 26 November 1973, p. 10.

³⁴ *Irish Examiner*, 5 December 1973, p. 8.

³⁵ Letter from Mna na hÉireann to Liam Cosgrave, 13 February 1974. ³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ ‘Family planning’, *Irish Press*, 18 February 1974, p. 8.

³⁸ ‘Mna na hÉireann canvass support’, *Kerryman*, 12 April 1974, p. 4.

campaigners and helped to illustrate that others agreed with their beliefs. Mná na hÉireann was also concerned with the role that the IPPF had with regard to the workings of the IFPA clinics and raised concerns that there would be a push towards compulsory sex education in schools and that children would begin using contraceptives.³⁹ A circular produced by Mná na hÉireann and distributed to TDs and senators in Ireland alleged that the IPPF was ‘spreading disease and destruction to millions’ and suggested that the spread of contraceptives in Ireland had resulted in an increase in venereal disease.⁴⁰

Mena Bean Uí Chribín (1928–2012) (often spelt Mena Cribben), an Irish conservative campaigner, joined the group as publicity officer in 1974.⁴¹ Cribben had also written to the Taoiseach in 1973 with her husband Gus, to express her concerns about Mary Robinson’s reintroduced bill on contraception, arguing that the truth about contraceptives was being concealed and that the ‘dangers to health, spiritual and physical’ should be explained to the general public. In their view, the introduction of ‘uncontrolled drugs and devices’ would ‘reduce people to below the level of animals’ and she felt that the pro-contraception lobby was ‘not representative of the decent Catholic men and women of Ireland’.⁴² In an interview with Emer O’Kelly for her 1974 book *The Permissive Society in Ireland?* the Cribbens argued that the media was biased in favour of contraception and ‘foreign, anti-Irish influences’. Moreover, their views highlight the tensions between old traditions of Irish family life and new societal changes. They explained ‘We think that it’s the Irish standards which were always accepted which have made us happy. We’re fighting to give our children the same chance of happiness’.⁴³ Illegitimacy was also deemed to be the result of foreign influences. Mena explained: ‘Illegitimacy is not part of our Irish heritage. If you look at the Aran Islands, where Irish culture in its true sense is still alive, there’s no illegitimacy problem. Foreign influences create the problems, which is why we’ve set our faces against things like foreign pop music’.⁴⁴ Evidently, for members of Mná na hÉireann, concerns about the influence of foreign (British) forces were paramount. Moving later into the 1970s, however, groups such as the Irish Family League were more strategic in how they framed their arguments, drawing on

³⁹ ‘Queues grow at family planning clinics’, *Sunday Independent*, 25 May 1975, p. 8.

⁴⁰ ‘Contraceptive circular “inaccurate”’, *Irish Press*, 27 March 1976, p. 4.

⁴¹ ‘Fighting the pill, porn, nudes and naughty foreign pictures’, *Irish Press*, 10 April 1978.

⁴² Letter from Gus and Mena Cribben to Taoiseach, 5 November 1973, [NAI, 2004/21/461].

⁴³ O’Kelly, *The Permissive Society in Ireland?* pp. 62–3. ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

medical evidence relating to the side effects of artificial contraception, as well as concerns about what the introduction of contraception might lead to, in order to bolster their arguments.

8.2 The Irish Family League

The Irish Family League (IFL) was a group of Catholic campaigners founded in May 1973 and one of the most prominent organisations that campaigned against the legalisation of contraception. The key figures involved in the IFL were its chairman John O'Reilly, a married father of five children, who went on to be heavily involved in Ireland's Pro-Life Amendment Campaign in the 1980s, and Mary Kennedy, who acted as secretary to the group. The executive was composed of less than ten individuals who met on a weekly basis. The group positioned themselves as being concerned with 'promoting a Christian family atmosphere in Ireland, and fostering family welfare'.⁴⁵ The IFL was extremely active in writing to the press and lobbying politicians. By 1980 they claimed to have 2,000 members.⁴⁶ The IFL was formed following a visit from American pro-life campaigner, Father Paul Marx, to Ireland in 1973. Marx, a Catholic priest and Benedictine monk, was one of the leaders of the pro-life movement in the United States, establishing a number of organisations such as the Human Life Center (1971) and Human Life International (1981) and the Population Research Institution (1989).

Father Marx came to Ireland in January 1973 as part of a tour of talks in Ireland and Britain organised by the British SPUC. He gave a lecture at Power's Royal Hotel, Dublin on 15 January.⁴⁷ In his lecture, attended by about 150 people, Marx discussed abortion in the United States and advocated the education of young people in schools on the issue. He showed the audience a series of slides and film strips of normally developed fetuses and aborted fetuses as well as playing an audio recording of 'an ultrasound record of what was described as a foetal heart beating in the foetus of three months gestation'. Marx also drew attention to the family planning clinics that had been recently established in Dublin, stating: 'You have an organisation of family planning clinics paid for with outside money. I give you my word of honour that these people promote abortion – soon if not already', referring to the IPPF which 'you've got it right under your noses' as he waved a booklet on

⁴⁵ Irish Family League, *Is Contraception the Answer?* (Dublin: Irish Family League, 1974), p. 22.

⁴⁶ 'Fighting the "lobby"', *Irish Press*, 8 October 1980. [RCAPA, UCC, BL/F/AP/846/16].

⁴⁷ 'The protection of unborn children', *Sunday Independent*, 7 January 1973, p. 16.

family planning published by the IFPA. Marx also argued that contraception was not the solution to avoiding abortion, stating that ‘contraception leads to abortion’.⁴⁸ In response to Marx’s comments, the IFPA publicly stated that under no circumstances did they advocate abortion.⁴⁹ As part of his visit, Marx spoke to a group of hundreds of teenage schoolgirls at St. Marie’s of the Isles School in Cork on the abortion issue, using slides of aborted foetuses to illustrate his talk as well as showing them a 14 week old foetus in a jar.⁵⁰ The showing of the foetus gained significant publicity and in response, the Archdeacon James Bastible of Cork stated that the foetus had been shown to the group without his foreknowledge and approval.⁵¹ As Kathryn Slattery has shown, Marx and other American anti-abortion campaigners would go on to play an integral role in Irish anti-abortion campaigns in the 1980s, particularly in the development of constitutional activism.⁵²

Following Marx’s visit, the IFL was formally organised in May 1973. As James Jasper has argued, ‘moral emotions are the core of political rhetoric. Indignation is the hottest of the hot cognitions; as a moral form of anger, it encourages action’. Social movements offer a means for activists to channel collective anger into collective protest.⁵³ John O’Reilly, who was a founding member of the IFL, explained to me that he felt the need to set up a group because ‘things were happening and nobody seemed worried about them [...] I was amazed that there was so much approving publicity about contraception although it was illegal’. In a letter to the *Irish Independent* in November 1973, IFL secretary Mary Kennedy, summed up their key aims as being ‘enshrining Christian values in our legislation, promoting Christian education of youth and family welfare; to oppose threats to the family and society such as violence, pornography, divorce, contraception and abortion’ as well as the promotion of natural forms of family planning such as Billings Ovulation and the Temperature method.⁵⁴ IFL member Mavis Keniry founded the Dublin Ovulation Method Advisory Service, which later became the National Association of the Ovulation Method in Ireland

⁴⁸ ‘U.S. priest says Ireland needs campaign against abortion’, *Irish Times*, 16 January 1973, p. 1 and p. 5.

⁴⁹ ‘Family plan group deny advocating abortion’, *Evening Herald*, 16 January 1973, p. 5.

⁵⁰ *Irish Times*, 20 January 1973, p. 6.

⁵¹ ‘Archdeacon says he did not know of foetus’, *Irish Times*, 20 January 1973, p. 13.

⁵² See: Kathryn Slattery, *Building a ‘World Coalition for Life’: Abortion, Population Control and Transnational Pro-Life Networks, 1960–1990*, (PhD thesis, 2010, University of New South Wales), pp.109–121. Available online: <http://unsworks.unsw.edu.au/fapi/datastream/unsworks:9072/SOURCE02?view=true>

⁵³ James M. Jasper, *The Emotions of Protest* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), p. 149.

⁵⁴ ‘Fr. Marx’s campaign against abortion’, *Irish Independent*, 22 November 1973, p. 17.

(NAOMI). As well as these aims, the IFL's objects were to 'promote the Christian education of youth and the welfare of the family' as well as opposing any permissive legislation. Euthanasia and secularism were also to be countered while amendments to the Irish Constitution and laws would only be accepted if they were in line with the Vatican II teachings 'to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs and laws and structures of the community'.⁵⁵ Hindering the legalisation of contraception was, however, the group's key goal. John O'Reilly explained:

The main thing was to try and stop the legalisation of contraception. We had, privately, a lot of other ideas about family life and all this sort of thing. As we visualised it, if contraceptives became freely available, you were going to have much more ... births out of wedlock and demands for abortion. At that time, we had a very, very low rate of births outside of marriage. It was something like about 2% or 3%. Where it's up to about 33% today. We thought flowing from that, there would be more sexual activity. Where you had more sexual activity, you're going to have more out of wedlock births and then you were going to have more abortions, one thing another. Also, we believed that human life should be protected from contraception. And the contraceptives now coming into use were abortifacient at times if not always e.g., the IUD, contraceptive pill etc.

Concerns about an increase in promiscuity and sexual activity among young people were not unique to Irish conservative groups like the IFL. In the 1960s, as Steven Angelides has noted, 'a moral panic erupted across the United Kingdom, North America and Australia over an apparent rapid rise in rates of premarital sex, promiscuity, immorality, illegitimate births, and venereal disease amongst young people'.⁵⁶ In these countries, sex education was usually put forward as the solution to this problem, although there was considerable debate over the form that this should take.⁵⁷

John O'Reilly had spent five years in Canada in the late 1950s, first in Montreal and then Toronto, returning to Ireland in 1960. He recalled:

And Toronto then was a much looser society than Ireland for instance. And you could see the effects of certain behaviours actually there, the way they were coming out. So, I became convinced for instance like this on certain values, which incidentally at that time for instance contraception was forbidden in Canada, believe it or not. But, there was such an underground market, as a matter of fact, for it, that it didn't make any difference. Abortion was certainly

⁵⁵ *Is Contraception the Answer?* p. 22.

⁵⁶ Steven Angelides, 'The "Second Sexual Revolution", Moral Panic, and the Evasion of Teenage Sexual Subjectivity', *Women's History Review*, 21:5, (November 2012), pp. 831–47, on p. 832.

⁵⁷ Angelides, 'The "Second Sexual Revolution"', p. 834.

for instance *verboden* there. Nobody would think of abortion. Now, for instance, Canada is one of the leading lights in abortion and euthanasia. So, you can see the deterioration.

While some campaigners' visions of the permissiveness of other countries were not based on lived experience, for O'Reilly, it is clear that his time in Canada had a significant impact on his thinking. He explained his concerns at the time about the potential effects that the introduction of contraception would have on Irish society:

The Family Planning Association was founded in 1969, I think. They called themselves the Fertility Guidance Company, at that time. They were founded by and given a grant by the International Planned Parenthood Federation. And all of a sudden, there was propaganda all over the place. I was concerned that there was no adverse reaction to it, that there was nobody opposing it and giving an opposite view for instance to it and citing the effects of it on society. I didn't talk to anybody. There was nobody really that I knew talking about it either. I met an old friend. [...] He said, 'We should really try and do something about it'. I think the first thing we did, was write a circular to the Bishops, getting a few hundred signatures on it and saying that they should be speaking up about it. Then some of us got in touch, as a result of that and had regular meetings. We met other concerned people that were interested and we formed the Irish Family League. So that's about the genesis of it.

As with other groups, for the IFL, the use of petitions helped to demonstrate wider public support for their arguments. Members of the IFL were concerned by the open flouting of the law by groups such as the IFPA and FPS. In an open letter to the Irish government in July 1973, the IFL expressed their concerns about the illegal activities of groups distributing contraceptives in Ireland and requested that the government put a stop to these activities.⁵⁸ In an attached document, the directors of both FPS and the IFPA were listed in addition to the laws that they had contravened.

One of the IFL's major concerns was around young people and the potential for rising rates of promiscuity if contraception was legalised. In a 1973 letter from John O'Reilly and Mary Kennedy to the *Irish Press*, they asserted that the laws prohibiting the sale of contraception 'reflect a standard of Christian morality geared to protect the young and society at large'. They believed that a change in the law would have consequences that 'could only be inimical to public morality and render the rearing of children still more difficult'. Moreover, they raised concerns that some of the clinics did not differentiate between married and single clients. In the

⁵⁸ Open letter to the Government from the Irish Family League, 19 July 1973. [NAI, 2004/21/460].

group's view, 'we do not accept that contraceptive peddling is an altruistic business, engaged in from the highest humanitarian motives. It is a sordid business, involving money, big business, and new vistas for medical careers. It provides medicine with an instant, lazy, and wrong answer to a problem. Its end results are sordidness and death and any short-term good is bought at an eventual terrible price'.⁵⁹ Most notably the letter stated that the group had it on record that one of the family planning clinics had sold contraceptives to an 11-year-old. The 11-year-old in question was John O'Reilly's daughter Deirdre. According to O'Reilly, in an oral history interview:

They were both selling contraceptives, Family Planning Services and the Irish Family Planning Association ... So there was a bit of an entrapment involved. Writing letters into them, and they used to look for a voluntary contribution. But, when we were testing them out and they were a bit unsubtle about it. If you left out the contribution, they wouldn't send you anything. They'd just tell you to send a contribution. But, at least so much, you know?

On 26 June 1973, O'Reilly wrote a letter to FPS with a postal order for 75p requesting condoms and had his daughter Deirdre sign it. FPS sent back condoms in a plain envelope addressed to Deirdre. In his words:

Anyhow, there was a bit of entrapment involved. It was clearly in the Act, that that was illegal. That was an illegal activity. So we reported it to the Gardaí and gathered evidence, reported it to the Gardaí.

On 14 July, he made a subsequent draft letter to FPS enclosing £1.10 and had his 9-year-old daughter Eilish copy the letter word for word. A parcel containing a contraceptive was sent in return. In addition, the IFPA was charged with distributing the booklet *Family Planning for Parents and Prospective Parents* without a permit and for advertising an intra-uterine device for sale. Robin Cochran, secretary, and David McConnell, chairman, of FPS, were interviewed by the Gardaí and cautioned. In the court case that followed at Dublin District Court, the charges were dismissed.⁶⁰ In the court case, the defendants argued that they could not have been aware of the ages of Deirdre and Eilish O'Reilly.⁶¹ And, as John O'Reilly explained 'Unfortunately, the DPP didn't act until the Supreme Court case had taken place. [McGee case which deemed the right to import contraceptives a matter of marital privacy]. And then the activity was no longer illegal. So that fell flat on its face. But it had a chance of winning, or we wouldn't have tried it. But,

⁵⁹ 'Breaking the law', *Irish Press*, 25 July 1973, p. 8.

⁶⁰ 'Family planning summonses fail', *Irish Press*, 20 February 1974, p. 5.

⁶¹ 'Contraceptive charges dismissed', *Cork Examiner*, 20 February 1974, p. 5.

it didn't win.' However, through bringing the case to court, the IFL succeeded in raising concerns about the possibility that young people *could* gain access to contraception through significant coverage of the case in the media. There does not appear to have been unease in the press about O'Reilly's use of his children for the purposes of entrapment. Instead, O'Reilly used his position as a parent to claim authority. For example, in a letter from O'Reilly and Mary Kennedy to the *Irish Press* in July 1973, O'Reilly and Kennedy wrote 'As Irish parents, Christians and citizens, we take grave exception to the activities of certain organisations which are acting in open defiance of the laws of this State by distributing contraceptives and contraceptive literature and fitting contraceptives' and noted that 'we have on record that one of them supplied contraceptives to an eleven-year-old child'.⁶² The same letter appeared in the *Evening Herald* on 17 August 1973.⁶³ Undoubtedly, the idea that children were somehow gaining access to contraception would have created concern among some readers.

The IFL's publications and letters to newspapers were rigorously researched and often included references to medical texts as well as statistical evidence in relation to issues such as abortion, venereal disease, and illegitimacy which were used to back up their arguments. This was a distinctive form of campaigning; perhaps activists were aware of the need to support their arguments with evidence rather than overly relying on moral arguments. The IFL self-published a booklet *Is Contraception the Answer?* in 1973, identifying themselves on the cover page as a 'Team of Catholic Parents' (Figure 8.1). 20,000 copies of the booklet were printed and circulated to doctors, pharmacists, nurses, all members of government, priests and nuns.⁶⁴ According to John O'Reilly, this coincided with Mary Robinson's Family Planning Bill which was put to the Senate on 14 November 1973. John O'Reilly stated:

We became very active at this stage. At that time Mary Robinson was pushing a Bill on contraception in the Senate. So we decided to circulate the booklet to people that we thought would be interested or affected by it. We sent a copy to every GP for instance. At that time, they were all in the Golden Pages. We sent a copy to every pharmacist. We sent a copy to some Churchmen here or there, and to people interested in the subject with a letter explaining the situation and explaining the legislation. We were asking for donations so that we could circulate to more people. That's the way it went on.

⁶² 'Breaking the law', *Irish Press*, 25 July 1973, p. 8.

⁶³ 'Legalised murder', *Evening Herald*, 17 August 1973, p. 10.

⁶⁴ 'Postal campaign on contraceptives bill', *Irish Times*, 23 March 1974, p. 9.

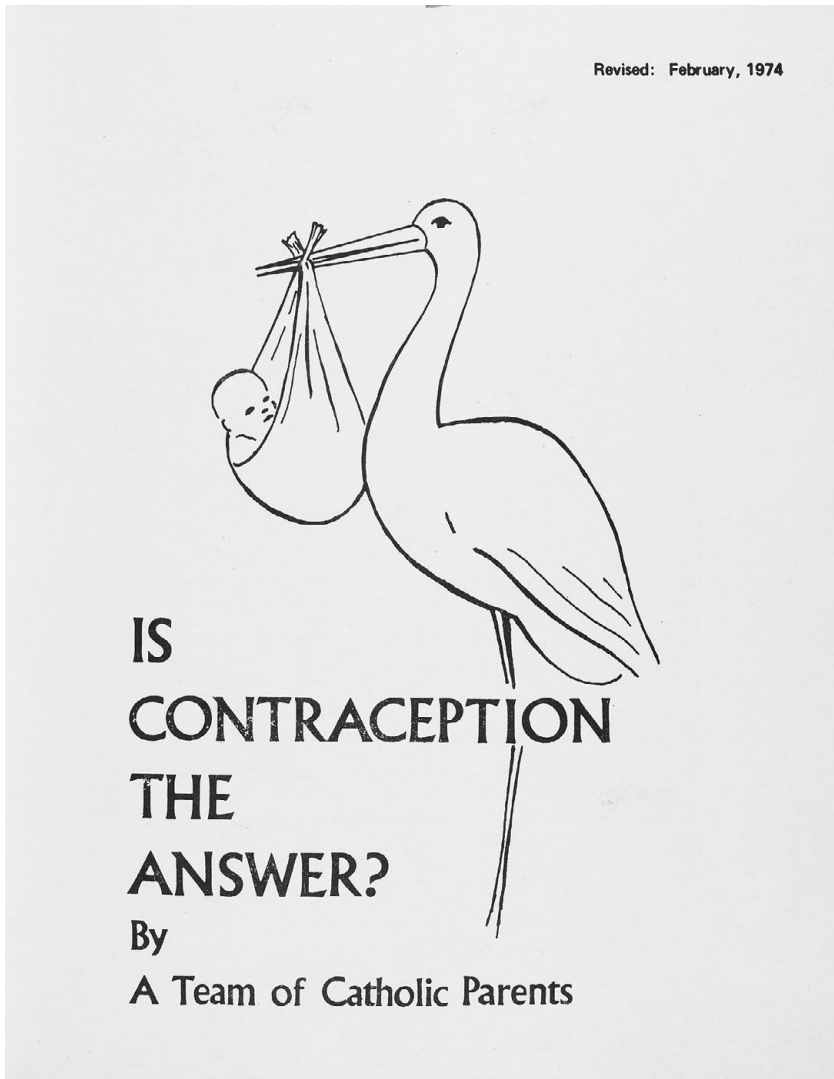


Figure 8.1 Cover of *Is Contraception the Answer?* by the Irish Family League, 1974.

Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

O'Reilly recalled, to his surprise, receiving particular support from doctors and pharmacists who provided contributions to the IFL. In his view, 'There were a lot of doctors, as a matter of fact, at that time, who

resented the idea of legalised contraception and a lot of pharmacists who feared that they might be forced to sell them’.

Is Contraception the Answer? emphasised a number of key points. Firstly, it argued that fundamentally, the use of artificial contraception went against the teachings of the Catholic Church. It claimed that since the publication of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, the Irish public had been subjected to ‘a barrage of brain-washing from the media in favour of contraception and its legalisation in Ireland’, based on superficial reasons and hard cases, including ‘the horde of hypothetical women with sixteen children, living in one room with a drunken, unemployed husband’.⁶⁵ The booklet drew on statistical evidence relating to illegitimate births in England in addition to quotes from medical professionals and campaigners such as Father Paul Marx. Fundamentally, the key argument of the booklet was that contraception would lead to ‘increased promiscuity, increased illegitimacy, rocketing V.D. figures, and a demand for abortion’.⁶⁶ Links were made between contraception and abortion. The booklet argued that IUDs, which were available at family planning clinics in Dublin, were a form of abortifacient because ‘their action is to abort the fruits of conception at an early stage. [...] Yet the I.U.D. is dishonestly described in the FGC’s brochure as a contraceptive and is fitted at their clinics in Dublin. So abortion is actually taking place quite openly in Dublin.’⁶⁷ In addition, the booklet drew attention to the side effects of the contraceptive pill and IUD.⁶⁸ While the publication explained that the early form of the pill was purely contraceptive in action, the newer low-dosage pills were ‘less successful in suppressing ovulation, but if they fail to do this, they will abort the fertilised ovum as does the I.U.D.’⁶⁹ Instead, the IFL encouraged readers to utilise Catholic Church-approved natural family planning methods such as the temperature method and Billings method. Advice on these methods could be obtained by writing directly to the group.⁷⁰ Moreover, it was argued that rather than reducing rates of illegitimacy, the introduction of contraception would result in an increase in births outside of marriage as well as leading to the legalisation of abortion.⁷¹ In order to combat the issue of contraception, readers were encouraged to join the IFL, to make their views known to friends when the subject arose, to write to newspapers, TDs and senators, and ‘become an activist. You are fighting to prevent murder and the slaughter of innocents’.⁷² This wording clearly had pro-life connotations.

⁶⁵ *Is Contraception the Answer?*, p. 2.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶⁹ *Is Contraception the Answer?* p. 6.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

An appendix at the back of the booklet contained details of the two key family planning groups, the FGC, and FPS, as well as listing names and contact details of individuals involved in the family planning movement in Ireland. These names were published ‘not to cause embarrassment to the people concerned but so that if you hear any of these people advocating contraception on the media, you will understand the significance of their doing so’.⁷³ As well as reiterating earlier points about the illegality and perceived danger of the activities of the groups, the booklet also asserted that they had ‘documentary proof that the squalid activities of this organisation include the posting of contraceptives to children. Any child can obtain contraceptives in this way provided that an appropriate “donation” is enclosed’. It was asserted that through the publication of their activities in publications such as *Nikki*, *Woman’s Choice* and the *Sunday World* newspaper, family planning campaigners seemed ‘to be seeking to develop a market for their wares among teenagers, some of whom are mere children’.⁷⁴

In a letter accompanying a copy of the booklet sent to Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave in November 1973, Mary Kennedy stressed that the IFL was ‘much distressed and alarmed by persistent rumours, and more than rumours of permissive legislation in regard to contraception and divorce’ and their concerns regarding the breaches of the law by family planning groups. Kennedy asserted that the existing laws were positive ones if fully enforced, and that if family planning clinics were to be established, they should be based entirely on natural methods. She asked if Cosgrave would receive a deputation of four or five of their members to discuss the situation, emphasising that ‘the question is most important to the real welfare of our country. We pray that God may guide our government’.⁷⁵ Cosgrave’s secretary replied to say that the government had not taken any decision concerning changes to legislation relating to contraception. Furthermore, he wrote that the Taoiseach would be unable to receive a deputation to discuss this matter but that he would bring their letter to the attention of the Minister for Health.⁷⁶

The IFPA produced their own response to the IFL booklet entitled *Facts on Contraception: An Answer to ‘The Irish Family League’*, which was sent to members of government. In this, the IFPA refuted the IFL’s claims around the links between contraception and illegitimacy, the idea that legalised contraception would lead to legalised abortion, links

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 14. ⁷⁴ *Is Contraception the Answer?* p. 17.

⁷⁵ Letter from the Irish Family League to Liam Cosgrave, 3 November 1973. [NAI, 2004/21/461].

⁷⁶ Reply to Mary Kennedy, 6 November 1973. [NAI, 2004/21/461].

between contraception and promiscuity, and claims that the pill and IUD were abortifacients. The IFPA claimed instead that 'effective contraception, provided for women who need it and who want it, is a means of reducing the toll of abortion. To change the laws is not to force women to use contraception, merely to allow them to meet their needs without breaking the law'.⁷⁷

In a follow-up publication called *Whither Ireland?* the IFL discussed other trends that would follow the legalisation of contraception and the separation of heterosexuality from reproduction including homosexuality and test-tube babies.⁷⁸ The contraception issue continued to be conflated with concerns about the introduction of abortion in Ireland. Father Paul Marx returned to Ireland in November 1973 where he gave lectures on abortion at a number of locations, including TCD, UCD and Maynooth, with a total of 20 talks over two weeks organised by the IFL.⁷⁹ At a Dublin meeting attended by 300 people, Marx showed an anti-abortion film 'Abortion: A woman's decision' as well as numerous slides depicting aborted fetuses. He encouraged audience members to help the pro-life cause 'by joining the Irish Family League'.⁸⁰ The IFL began to intensify their activities. Mary Kennedy regularly wrote letters to Irish newspapers, and was often interviewed by the press. In one interview with the *Observer*, she stated that 'The group exists to protect Irish family life from contraception, which will be followed by abortion, divorce, and euthanasia. People should not be given something just because they want it. Some people want guns and drugs, but we don't give them guns and drugs. Contraceptives are even more dangerous.'⁸¹ Given that family planning campaigners wanted contraception to be available to single as well as married people, Kennedy, in one letter, believed that they should perhaps be called 'Promiscuity Promoters'.⁸²

By identifying themselves as 'parents' or individuals concerned with family welfare, conservative campaigners positioned themselves in direct contrast to feminist campaigners. Moreover, the age of conservative activists, who would have, for the most part, been middle-aged at the time of campaigning, meant that they contrasted with the youthfulness of

⁷⁷ *Facts on Contraception: An answer to 'The Irish Family League'* (undated but likely 1974), p.15. [NAI, 2005/7/345].

⁷⁸ *Whither Ireland? A Study (August 1974) of Recent Trends. Contraception and Associated Issues* (Irish Family League, Cahill and Co Printing, Dublin, 1974), p. 11.

⁷⁹ 'Father Marx hits Irish hypocrisy', *Evening Herald*, 15 November 1973, p. 6.

⁸⁰ 'An evening with Father Marx', *Irish Independent*, 19 November 1973, p. 8.

⁸¹ 'Why the priests are calling Dublin "Sin City"', *Observer*, 10 March 1974, no page number. [NLI, Bruce Arnold papers, MS 41,428].

⁸² 'Promiscuity promoters', *Irish Press*, 18 April 1974, p. 8.

members of feminist groups such as IWU and CAP. Yet, one aspect which both feminist campaigners and the IFL agreed on was their concerns about the side effects of the contraceptive pill. Writing to the *Irish Times* in 1975, Mary Kennedy referred to the American Food and Drugs Administration report on the contraceptive pill.⁸³ The following year, in another letter, she asked 'Have we so soon forgotten the thalidomide children and the tragedy of their lives?'⁸⁴ Kennedy also alleged that the contraceptive pill might have potential long-term effects on the third and fourth generation of users of chemical contraception, and cited the work of German doctor Siegfried Ernst while also commenting that 'genetic damage has also been noted in the USA'.⁸⁵ In her view, if groups such as CAP were successful in having contraceptives made available, the tax payer would not only have to pay for the provision of the services but would also 'have to provide compensation when the users suffer damage to their health'.⁸⁶ England was often portrayed in Kennedy's letters in a negative light, with statistics on rising rates of illegitimacy and abortion there often quoted. In 1975, she wrote: 'In England, abortion has debased the profession of medicine and of nursing to that of paid killer, highly profitable to those involved. However, the state of the profession there at the moment must be an example to us of what can happen when the selfishness of the contraceptive society is given free rein'.⁸⁷ Anti-British rhetoric was also common in anti-abortion discourse in the 1980s.⁸⁸

The IFL's concerns over the side effects of the contraceptive pill were also discussed in detail in a subsequent publication in 1975 called *Alert: oral contraceptive*. The publication reminded readers of the thalidomide tragedy of the 1960s where the drug was made available without adequate testing of its effects.⁸⁹ A claims prevention letter which could be used by doctors in the US who were prescribing the pill was also included to illustrate the concerns over side effects and litigation.⁹⁰ The publication asserted that contraception was wrong for a range of reasons, which included the fact that contraception went against the purpose of 'the marriage act' as designed by God. The use of artificial contraception

⁸³ 'Letters to the editor: Family Planning', *Irish Times*, 3 November 1975, p. 9.

⁸⁴ 'Letters to the editor: the pharmacist's duty', *Irish Times*, 24 November 1976, p. 11.

⁸⁵ 'Letters to the editor: the pharmacist's duty', p. 11. ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ 'Students' call', *Irish Press*, 29 December 1975, p. 6.

⁸⁸ Delay, 'Wrong for womankind', p.323; Lisa Smyth, *Abortion and Nation: The Politics of Reproduction in Contemporary Ireland* (Ashgate, 2005), p. 49.

⁸⁹ Irish Family League, *Alert: Oral Contraceptive* (Dublin: Irish Family League, undated but c.1975), p. 2.

⁹⁰ *Alert: Oral Contraceptive*, pp. 8–9.

was also believed to result in selfishness which could cause unhappy marriages or their break-up. Contraception was believed to lead to 'psychic troubles' as a result of the 'frustration of the instinct of parenthood'. In addition, it was emphasised by the IFL that the legalisation of contraception would be followed by the legalisation of abortion. Concerns were also raised about how legal safeguards could be enforced to prevent young people from using contraception and about the impact of legalisation on Ireland's small population. Finally, the IFL believed that if contraception was legalised it could result in eugenic programmes to 'better' the population, arguing 'once the floodgates are opened, the tide will sweep through' and reminding readers of the practices which occurred during the Second World War. Finally, a focus on the legalisation of contraception also distracted attention from 'the real economic evils of society' such as housing and unemployment.⁹¹

A detailed section on the IUD emphasised the IFL's belief that this acted as an abortifacient because it interfered with the implantation of the fertilised ovum in the womb.⁹² Readers were advised to be aware of 'humanist reformers' who had 'devised a very effective technique in altering social laws' which had been particularly effective in the United Kingdom and in Southern Australia. The tactics had three stages, the first being to promote public controversy in the media about the issue in question, the second to 'prove' that public opinion was in favour of reform of the law, and the third was a parliamentary phase with the introduction of a private members bill 'coupled with the isolation of opponents who are labelled fanatics or "Catholics who are trying to impose their moral views on the community"'. The IFL claimed that these tactics were being used in Ireland and that 'the unfortunate thing is that comparatively few people seem to be aware it is happening'.⁹³

By 1976, the group's language around the contraception issue had become more pro-life in nature. In their publication *Why you should oppose contraception*, they focused on two reasons why contraceptives were wrong: the first being that 'many so-called contraceptives are in fact abortifacients and human life is so precious that nobody has the right to kill' and secondly that the introduction of artificial contraception would bring 'so many other evils in its wake', leading to rising rates of extra-marital sex, promiscuity, VD and illegitimacy and eventually the introduction of abortion in order to cover contraceptive failure.⁹⁴ The IFL was convinced that the majority of the population did not want contraception to be legalised and felt that a referendum would illustrate

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 4–6. ⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6. ⁹³ *Alert: Oral Contraceptive*, p. 10.

⁹⁴ *Why You Should Oppose Contraception* (IFL, 1976).

this. Contraception was viewed as being ‘the wedge to break Ireland’s Catholic heritage’ and readers were advised to oppose it for the sake of their children.⁹⁵

The IFL believed that family planning groups were concerned with the profits to be made from artificial methods of birth control rather than women’s health. In a letter to the *Evening Herald* in 1974, Kennedy asked why family planning clinics in Dublin ‘decry the reliability of the natural Billings Ovulation method, yet they claim to help women who have difficulty in achieving pregnancy, obviously they are able to identify the fertile time. What is the factor then which makes them push the artificial methods at all costs?’⁹⁶ In a 1976 letter to the *Irish Times*, Kennedy asserted that pills and devices were being ‘pushed in this country by concerns whose motivation is purely commercial’ and that such concerns were being supported by family planning groups, ‘the young people in Irish Women United and by some in the universities’. This meant, in her view, that all publicity was being given to artificial methods and none to natural methods.⁹⁷ In addition, Kennedy believed that Irish doctors prioritised prescribing the pill over other forms of contraception:

We have been told by women seeking information on natural methods: ‘He would not spend five minutes to discuss the problem with me, but just wanted to write a prescription for the Pill’. Other women have told us that doctors did their best to persuade them to take the Pill when they went for a post-natal check-up, even though these women had not asked for advice and were indeed already adequately spacing their families.⁹⁸

In Kennedy’s view, prescribing the contraceptive pill meant that doctors did not have to spend time advising on other methods which would take more explanation. Furthermore, in a letter later that year, Kennedy asserted that she believed there was opposition towards natural methods such as the Billings method because ‘there is no money to be made from showing a woman how to learn and use this method’.⁹⁹ She also claimed in 1978 that the example of the ‘married woman with 10 children and a drunken husband has been dropped in favour of contraceptives for the young and single’ because the latter would ‘provide a more lucrative market for the trade’.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ *Why You Should Oppose Contraception* (IFL, 1976).

⁹⁶ ‘Question of family planning’, *Evening Herald*, 19 October 1974, p. 5.

⁹⁷ ‘Letters to the editor: Availability of contraceptives’, *Irish Times*, 13 February 1976, p. 6.

⁹⁸ ‘Letters to the editor: Availability of contraceptives’, p. 6.

⁹⁹ ‘Letters to the editor’, *Irish Times*, 29 December 1976, p. 9.

¹⁰⁰ ‘Letters to the editor’, *Irish Times*, 13 June 1978, p. 13.

The activities and letters of the IFL received significant attention. Mrs. Ann Collins from Finglas in Dublin, writing to the *Evening Herald* in 1973, stated that the group had ‘a nerve trying to dictate to the Irish people on the very personal matter of family planning. It is the prerogative of myself and every other woman to have the number of children I desire and I don’t mean fifteen or sixteen [...] People like Mary Kennedy and John O’Reilly nauseate me, with their puritanical attitudes’.¹⁰¹ Another frequent opponent was journalist Hilary Boyle, who argued that as a single woman, Kennedy could have no understanding of the challenges facing disadvantaged, married couples. For example, in one letter to the *Irish Press* in 1978, Boyle argued ‘if the amount spent by these single women on “false dogmas invented by men” was spent instead on helping the poor get proper homes and to limit their families to the number they can afford to feed and clothe, then one would consider them Christians and worth listening to.’ Boyle argued that Kennedy and another advocate of the Billings Method, Sister Mary O’Sullivan, ‘cannot fulminate on how wonderful the Billings method is unless they have tried both it and married life’.¹⁰² Such comments clearly impacted on Kennedy. In an interview with the *Irish Press* in 1980, she remarked ‘Because you are celibate or because you are not married does not mean you don’t have feelings. You still have to get on with people’.¹⁰³ Others wrote to newspapers defending the IFL’s activities. Following an interview between Mary Kennedy and Rodney Rice on an RTÉ radio programme in 1978, where Rice allegedly shouted down the interviewee, Maureen Fehily from Blackrock wrote to the *Evening Herald* to complain about Rice’s impartiality and treatment of Kennedy. She hoped that Kennedy was ‘not unduly discouraged; she can rest assured that the majority of people would endorse her views’.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, in August 1978, Marie Dunleavy MacSharry, former secretary of the Nazareth Family Movement, wrote to the *Irish Independent* to complain about Pat Kenny’s treatment of Mary Kennedy in an interview on RTÉ radio.¹⁰⁵

In 1978, the IFL undertook a survey of over 1600 homes in the Dublin (Raheny) constituency of the Minister for Health, which showed that 80% were against the legalisation of contraception.¹⁰⁶ The IFL suggested that the majority of people in the country were opposed to the legalisation of contraception and that a referendum on the subject should be held.

¹⁰¹ ‘Incensed by attitude of Irish Family League’, *Evening Herald*, 27 August 1973, p. 10.

¹⁰² ‘Letters to the editor’, *Irish Press*, 12 April 1978, p. 8.

¹⁰³ ‘Fighting the lobby’, *Irish Press*, 8 October 1980, p. 9.

¹⁰⁴ ‘“Unseemly display” in RTE interview’, *Evening Herald*, 13 April 1978, p. 17.

¹⁰⁵ ‘Manners on RTE’, *Irish Independent*, 11 August 1978, p. 12.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Irish Family League survey’, *Irish Press*, 12 December 1978, p. 3.

The IFL met with Charles Haughey, Minister for Health and Social Welfare in July 1978 in order to put their medical, social and demographic objections to the legalisation of contraception.¹⁰⁷ The group was one of a number of groups that met with Haughey.¹⁰⁸ In their meeting with Haughey, the IFL argued that 'laws must be based on fundamental moral principles' and that the government was committed by the Constitution to protecting marriage and the family, both of which, they felt, would be threatened by the legalisation of contraception.¹⁰⁹ They also raised concerns about the power that the bill would place in the hands of the medical profession, arguing that 'in other countries it is the medical profession which performs the millions of abortions carried out'.¹¹⁰ The IFL and their supporters were also concerned with biases in the media. In 1979, they aired their disappointment at being offered two audience seats for a discussion on the Family Planning Bill, rather than being invited to be on the discussion panel. The IFL stated that they would be boycotting the programme because they felt it would be 'biased toward the pro-contraception lobby'.¹¹¹ The IFL also claimed to have collected over 80,000 signatures against the legalisation of contraception.¹¹²

From 1977, the IFL became a member of the newly founded umbrella group the Council of Social Concern (later COSC) along with the Nazareth Family Movement., the League of Decency, Society to Outlaw Pornography, Parent Concern, Youth Alert, and Veritas Christi.¹¹³ COSC was affiliated with the Knights of St. Columbanus, a Catholic fraternal organisation.¹¹⁴ According to John O'Reilly, who joined the Knights in the early 1970s 'When the Charlie Haughey Bill on contraception came up, they decided they wanted to set up a committee to sort of reach a decision on stuff that arises'. COSC was chaired by Nial Darragh with O'Reilly acting as vice-chairman and it published a booklet, *The Gift*

¹⁰⁷ 'What we told minister', *Limerick Leader*, 29 July 1978, p. 7.

¹⁰⁸ Haughey met with representatives from the Medico Social Research Board, The Irish Medical Association, the National Health Council, The Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland, the Irish Pharmaceutical Union, The Catholic Hierarchy, the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, the Jewish Representative Body, the Health Boards, the Irish Nurses Organisation, the Association of Social Workers, the IFPA, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, and representatives of organisations such as NAOMI which promoted the Billings method of family planning. Dáil Éireann debate, 24 October 1978, 308:6, Questions: Availability of Contraceptives.

¹⁰⁹ 'What we told minister', *Limerick Leader*, 29 July 1978, p. 7.

¹¹⁰ 'Family planning bill', *Irish Press*, 10 April 1979, p. 8.

¹¹¹ 'Boycott of RTE by Family League', *Irish Independent*, 18 May 1979, p. 8.

¹¹² 'No swing to contraception', *Irish Independent*, 26 February 1979, p. 6.

¹¹³ 'Legalised abortion' warning to Haughey', *Irish Independent*, 25 March 1978, p. 9.

¹¹⁴ O'Reilly, *Masterminds of the Right*, p. 48.

of *Life* in 1978 which was edited by O'Reilly. The booklet was sent to bishops, politicians and members of the medical profession. Similar to other publications O'Reilly had been involved in, it outlined a number of key arguments against artificial contraception. Conception was deemed to take place at the moment of fertilisation with prevention of this union classed as abortion. Only natural forms of family planning were advocated. Artificial contraceptives were deemed to be damaging to health, unreliable, 'damaging to personality, interpersonal relationships and personal dignity', and 'pushed by profit', while they were also said to cause increases in VD, promiscuity, illegitimacy, abortion and marital breakdown.¹¹⁵ In relation to the proposals to legalise contraception, the publication argued that the government 'should legislate against the importation of contraceptives for 'free' distribution' and instead provide sponsorship for natural methods of family planning.¹¹⁶ John O'Reilly explained that 'it was through the Council of Social Concern that we ruminated for instance what was going to happen to stop the further deterioration for instance, after the contraceptive period'.

Members of the IFL, in common with family planning and feminist activists, were disappointed with the 1978 Health (Family Planning Bill). A December 1978 statement read as follows:

The Bill is a nasty offering to the people at the Christmas season, reminding us of Herod and the massacre of the innocents, as Fianna Fail like Judas prepares to betray innocent blood. The Bill is a shamelessly cynical sell-out to the contraceptive trade. There is no pretence of providing any safeguards whatsoever against contraceptives for the unmarried, or to children without the knowledge of their parents. No steps have been taken to ban abortifacients masquerading as contraceptives and in use by the medical profession engaged in contraceptive work.¹¹⁷

While the IFL ultimately did not succeed in its key aims around contraception, it did, in John O'Reilly's view, have some success:

I think our main contribution, in hindsight, is very difficult. We obviously didn't fail in the purpose, in its ultimate purpose. The only thing is, I'd say, we did expose a lot of objections to it. That the advantages being touted weren't there. Then I think probably the Taoiseach at the time, actually voting against it, gave it a respectability then, that there are a lot of other people against this as well. The church did speak out afterwards. They published four pamphlets on family planning. I suppose, we found a basis for opposing abortion when it did come along. Doing it at a different level, getting doctors involved and getting lawyers involved.

¹¹⁵ *Gift of Life* (Dublin: Order of Knights of St. Columbanus, 1978), p.1.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹¹⁷ 'Family plan bill is 'undemocratic'', *Cork Examiner*, 29 December 1978, p. 4.

In a letter to the *Irish Independent* in 1979, the IFL was one of a number of groups under the banner of COSC which expressed its indignation at the operation of the illegal CAP shop detailed in Chapter 7, Contraceptives Unlimited. Although a complaint had been lodged about the shop the week it opened, seven weeks later, it continued to operate 'with impunity, despite the fact that those responsible for the operation have stated, in the press, that they are knowingly breaking the law'. Chairman of COSC Nial Darragh expressed his frustration that 'the law should be fragrantly broken, our Constitution violated and the responsibility passed from one to another without any action being taken in the matter is, to say the least, scandalous.'¹¹⁸ By 1979, the organisations affiliated with COSC also included STOP, Christian Political Action Movement, Mná na hÉireann, Pro Fide and the Concerned Doctors Group.¹¹⁹ It later became a member of the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign to push for the eighth amendment.

8.3 The Responsible Society

Following the legalisation of contraception for *bona fide* family planning purposes in 1979, conservative groups began to mobilise on the abortion issue. One such group was the Irish branch of the Responsible Society, founded in 1980. The Responsible Society had originally been established in England in 1971 and its key concerns were around issues of sexual morality, and in particular sex education and the morality of young people.¹²⁰ The Irish branch was founded following a public meeting in March 1980 where Valerie Riches, of The Responsible Society in England, gave a talk on the theme of 'The Permissive Society and its Lessons for Ireland'. Riches' paper was followed by talks by Professor John Bonnar and Dr. Austin Darragh. Following this event, the group who organised it decided to form an Irish branch of the society. John O'Reilly, who had been chairperson of the IFL, was secretary of the Responsible Society and Bernadette Bonar, a pharmacist, was chairperson, with other committee members including John Lee, Julia Lane, Denis Barror, Brian Forbes, Helen O'Donnell and Sheila Killian.¹²¹ The organisation published a newsletter called *Response* which it sent to members along with the newsletter of the British organisation. According

¹¹⁸ 'Law being held up to ridicule', *Irish Independent*, 25 January 1979, p. 10.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹²⁰ Valerie Riches, 'The responsible society', *Journal of the Institute of Health Education*, 11:4, (1973), pp. 20–5.

¹²¹ *Response: newsletter of the Irish Branch of the Responsible Society*, 1:1, Spring 1982, p. 1. With thanks to John O'Reilly.

to John O'Reilly, 'We published about 1500 copies of our *Response* that we sent every quarter. But, we sent them actually to certain politicians and to bishops. We also sent them to some prominent lay people. We'd send round to the people who were on the mailing list'. The Responsible Society focused on a range of moral issues including primarily abortion, sex education, divorce, and later AIDS and IVF but for the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on their work on the contraception issue.

In common with the previous groups, the Responsible Society was inspired by the work of conservative campaigners both in the United Kingdom and United States. Bernadette Bonar, the chairperson of the Irish branch of the Responsible Society, explained to me:

That was an English organisation and they were very concerned about what was happening there. Increase in promiscuity and that which was being promoted and dishing contraceptives to young people. If you're dishing out contraceptives for young people, for youth isn't it? Promiscuity, yeah. They were very concerned about that. They were also terribly concerned about sex education in the schools. The parents were really conned there. Parents thought it was teaching them to be chaste and to be self-respecting and so on and so forth. It was about how to use the condoms. Just so ugly. So evil. That was all coming from Planned Parenthood.

Bonar was concerned that similar practices could occur in Ireland. When I asked if she was worried about this, she told me, 'Oh, we'd no doubt. We had no doubt, no. No doubt in the world'. Moreover, her testimony raises concerns about individualism and the power of governments to introduce legislation relating to moral issues. Using the example of abortion, she stated, 'But you see the English people had no say, that's the important thing there. Neither had the American people. It was foisted on them'. In addition, Bonar expressed her concerns about the increasing liberal attitudes of the medical profession and the impact of the secularisation of Irish society:

I was elected to the Eastern Health Board, as a pharmacy representative. Many a rows there of course about it. Some of the doctors were great, they were very anti-contraception as a conscience issue. It was morally wrong and that. Then as the years go by, you get different doctors in and they kind of go with the flow. There's a decline in religious practise, of course, as well. I suppose you'd have to say that's what guides people, your beliefs. As G.K. Chesterton said, "If you don't believe in God you can then believe in anything".

Father Paul Marx was also invited by the group to give a talk in September 1980 during which he referred to abortion in the United States and Britain, particularly drawing attention to how 'children were encouraged to experiment with sex as a result of lurid sex education

courses financed by the State' and how, as a result, 'the incidence of VD, unwanted pregnancy and abortion soared among adolescents'.¹²² Professor Charles Rice, of Notre Dame University, the author of a number of pro-life books, provided a lecture on pro-life constitutional amendments to the group in June 1981.¹²³ Valerie Riches also regularly visited Ireland to give talks on topics such as sex education.¹²⁴

While most of the Responsible Society's energies were focused on the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign in the early 1980s, their newsletters, letters to the press, and public talks also addressed their concerns regarding the liberalisation of the law around contraception. For instance, in 1984, they reported on the government's plans to amend the Family Planning Act so that condoms would be made available in chemists to persons over aged 18 rather than on prescription. The Responsible Society argued that the proposed bill 'would be society's seal of approval on sexual relations outside marriage and all the evils which flow therefrom, illegitimate births, abortions, venereal disease et cetera' and that if the bill passed, 'other 'reforms' such as illegitimacy, adoption and finally Divorce would be considerably easier'.¹²⁵ In a talk given to the Women's Political Association in Waterford in 1984, Bernadette Bonar echoed these sentiments and stated that politicians 'have an enormous responsibility to represent the views of the electorate and not be influenced by minority pressure groups who for ideological or commercial reasons seek to destroy the traditional moral values of our Society'.¹²⁶ The Responsible Society members were clearly concerned with the issue of young people and promiscuity, believing that the passing of the bill and 'the diversification of outlets is such as to amount to an uncontrollable situation and it is widely admitted that contraceptives for 18 year olds, in practice means 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17 year olds as well'.¹²⁷

It is important to note here that the views of conservative groups were not unusual and were mirrored in the responses of many members of the general public. Surviving correspondence sent to the Irish government indicates that many agreed that the amendment to the Family Planning Act would be a step too far. Nora Hurley, writing to the Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald in 1985, stated that 'this bill can only promote fornication' and 'if this bill is passed, and I hope and pray that Our Blessed Lady will not allow it as it will bring a curse on our beloved country, your chances

¹²² 'Heartbreak of girls on the abortion trail', *Irish Independent*, 23 September 1980, p. 16.

¹²³ *Response*, 1:1, Spring 1982, p. 1. ¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:2, Summer 1982, p. 1.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3:4, Winter 1984, p. 2.

¹²⁶ 'Majority want no change in Contraceptive law', *Munster Express*, 28 December 1984, p. 5.

¹²⁷ *Response*, 4:1, (Spring 1985), p. 3.

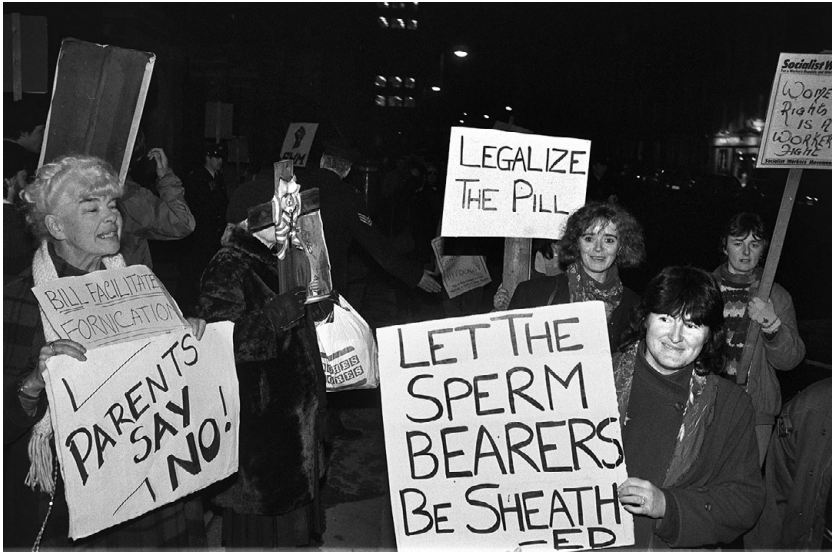


Figure 8.2 Protest at Leinster House/Dáil Éireann during the debate inside Dáil Éireann on the Health (Family Planning) Amendment. Protestors from the Socialist Workers Movement came face-to-face with anti-contraception activists. Photograph by Derek Speirs.

of winning the next election are nil'.¹²⁸ Jerry Gallagher, a retired teacher, writing to Garret FitzGerald, used stronger language, stating in a typed letter with the subject 'Re: Family Planning Bill' the brief statement 'Next time I hope Maggie Thatcher disembowels you. Out * Out * Out *'.¹²⁹ Similarly, writing to then President Hillery, Maureen Kennedy, the mother of six children, pleaded for him not to sign the 1985 amendment to the Family Planning Act, believing it 'will destroy the fabric of our society and weaken the moral behaviour of our young people, and so, also undermine the family'.¹³⁰ Writing to the Taoiseach in February 1985, Sheila Diskin stated 'I do not consider that young girls should have use of contraceptives and I think they should only be given by G.P.s to married people. We have seen the rise in syphilis and V.D. in other

¹²⁸ Letter from Nora Hurley to Garret FitzGerald, 15 February 1985. [NAI, 2015/88/611].

¹²⁹ Letter from Jerry Gallagher, 22 February 1985. [NAI, 2015/88/611].

¹³⁰ Letter from Maureen Kennedy to President Hillery. Undated but likely February 1985. [NAI, 2015/77/94].

countries where they are readily available'.¹³¹ A letter to Minister for Health Barry Desmond from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul Foxrock Conference stated that 'We are greatly concerned and believe that this proposition of yours if implemented, would seriously demoralise our youth and lower the standard of their social behaviour.'¹³²

It is clear that the Responsible Society and other conservative groups in the 1980s came together on the issue of abortion. Bernadette Bonar explained that, 'We went completely behind the SPUC. We were clubbed up with them. Joined forces. We had great meetings. Tremendous meetings. Everyone was just ... Marvellous really.' Similarly, John O'Reilly's testimony regarding his involvement in conservative organisations shows the overlap between the different groups:

We were really interlocked. We were really very much interlocked. And later on, not in the beginning for instance, I was Vice Chairman of SPUC Ireland. And I was Secretary of the Responsible Society. And then Vice Chairman of The Council of Social Concern. So, we were very much interlocked.

Ultimately, the campaigns against contraception in the 1970s provided campaigners with the skills, experience and networks which would be crucial to campaigns against abortion in the early 1980s and beyond.

8.4 Conclusion

Anti-contraception campaigners represented an important social movement in 1970s and 1980s Ireland. The arguments put forward by conservative groups are revealing and highlight new ways of thinking about popular individualism in Ireland in this period, illustrating how, as in Britain, by the 1970s, people were becoming more insistent in 'defining and claiming their individual rights, identities and perspectives'.¹³³ Tools such as petitions and statistical evidence were used to back up activists' arguments, while they also drew on a rhetoric of moral decline and otherness in their publications. They not only indicate deep-rooted tensions around the modernisation of Ireland but also highlight the persistence of early twentieth-century postcolonial ideas that Ireland was under attack from 'foreign' influences, usually Britain.

¹³¹ Letter from Sheila Diskin to the Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald, undated, [NAI, 2015/88/611].

¹³² Letter from St. Vincent de Paul Foxrock Conference to Barry Desmond, Minister for Health, 11 December, 1984. [NAI, 2015/88/611].

¹³³ Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Natalie Thomlinson, 'Telling stories about post-war Britain: popular individualism and the "crisis" of the 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28:2, (2017), 268–304, on p.302.



Figure 8.3 Pro-life march and rally, GPO, Dublin, 12 May 1979.
Photograph by Clodagh Boyd.

Anti-contraception groups in Ireland which emerged in the 1970s were concerned with a number of issues. Earlier groups such as *Mná na hÉireann* and the Nazareth Family Movement focused on a nationalist rhetoric that prioritised Catholic values and a vision of a morally pure Ireland, in contrast with Britain. As such, their campaigns had echoes of the anti-contraception rhetoric of the 1930s which classed contraception as a ‘foreign’ influence. With the establishment of the Irish Family League and engagement of individuals such as John O’Reilly, the anti-contraception arguments focused on the health risks of artificial contraception and concerns that its legislation would lead to other perceived social evils, in particular abortion. Yet, groups such as the Irish Family League and the Responsible Society were also influenced by the work of conservative groups in the United States and United Kingdom and these transnational networks were important to the trajectories of these groups.

Moving into the 1980s, the perceived moral decline of young people was an important theme in campaigners’ propaganda, reflecting fears about the expansion of access to contraception which they believed would result in increased promiscuity. However, at the heart of campaigners’ concerns was a fear that following the legalisation of contraception, abortion would follow. While the Family Planning Act of 1979 was a significant

disappointment to conservative campaigners, the networks and campaigns formed against contraception in the 1970s provided an important bedrock for anti-abortion campaigns to follow in the 1980s and 1990s, and also enabled activists to form key alliances with international campaigners, which would prove crucial to these later campaigns.