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Representation in Dáil Éireann in Revolutionary  
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# **‘Women of character’: Women’s Political Representation in Dáil Éireann in Revolutionary and Post-Revolutionary Ireland**

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## **Introduction**

This chapter outlines and assesses women’s political representation in Dáil Éireann, the lower house of the Irish Parliament, in both revolutionary and post-revolutionary Ireland. It argues that the establishment of the Irish Free State and the onset of Civil War in 1922 represent a shift in the opportunities available for women to enter parliamentary politics. Although the first woman MP ever elected was from Ireland and six women TDs<sup>1</sup> were returned in the 1921 general election, Dáil Éireann following independence was a ‘colder house’ for women’s representation. The outright opposition of women TDs (and Republican women more generally) to the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1922 was a crucial factor in the decline of women’s representation, as was the influence of various political, legislative and socio-cultural changes in the Irish Free State. Drawing on the parliamentary record and secondary sources, this chapter aims to reveal political women’s agency as activists and politicians in the decades that followed the establishment of the Irish Free State and considers the gendered obstacles the first women TDs faced in their roles. In doing so, the chapter assists with an important reappraisal of women in politics over this period.<sup>2</sup>

## **Women’s Enfranchisement and the 1918 General Election**

After many years of mobilisation and struggle, the passage of the Representation of the People Act 1918 marked an important victory for suffragists and suffragettes in Britain and Ireland.<sup>3</sup> The legislation granted the right to vote to women over 30 who met minimum

property or education qualifications and to all men over 21. The age restriction was to ensure that women did not become the majority of the electorate due to the loss of young men in the First World War. Gender was no longer an absolute barrier to women's electoral participation in Ireland, but formal restrictions related to class and age remained in place until 1922 when Irish women were enfranchised on par with men under the terms of the Constitution of the Irish Free State. Significantly, British women would not win this right for another six years. In terms of political representation, the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918 gave British and Irish women over 21 the right to stand as parliamentary candidates. This created a somewhat odd situation whereby women and men in Britain and Ireland were treated equally as potential candidates, at least formally, but not as voters. Thane<sup>4</sup>, however, shows that men had long run for election as MPs, some successfully, before they qualified to vote.

In Ireland, Cumann na mBan, the women's section of the Irish Volunteers (later the Irish Republican Army or IRA), had asserted a policy at their 1917 convention that members should participate in the public and political affairs of the nation<sup>5</sup>. Women activists urged the Sinn Féin party to recruit women candidates for the December 1918 general election (the first general election in more than 8 years). 4 women had been appointed to the 24-member Sinn Féin executive in 1917 (although women activists had pushed for 6 representatives, citing the promises of gender equality as enshrined in the Proclamation of the Irish Republic in 1916) and the party was, at least on paper, supportive of women's equality. It was committed to women's suffrage on equal terms with men and the final clause of the party's constitution from 1917 onwards read: 'That the equality of women and men in this organisation be emphasised in all speeches and pamphlets'.<sup>6</sup> This resolution, proposed by Dr. Kathleen Lynn and seconded by Jenny Wyse-Power, was passed by general agreement. However, nationalist women were disappointed when Sinn Féin selected only 2 women candidates to run in 1918, Constance Markievicz (Dublin St Patrick's) and Winifred Carney (Belfast Victoria). It was

assumed that women prisoners, like men, would be included among the list of Sinn Féin candidates. Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, founder and chairwoman of the Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL), had turned down an unwinnable seat in Antrim North (the Unionist candidate ultimately received 78 per cent of the vote). Kathleen Clarke, imprisoned in Holloway Jail at the time of the election, was disappointed to learn that she had not been selected to run in either Dublin North City or her childhood home of Limerick City – internal, male-gendered party politics in Sinn Féin had resulted in the selection of two men.<sup>7</sup> Louie Bennett, a suffragette and labour activist, was nominated as a candidate by the Labour Party but she declined to stand (in the end, Labour did not contest the 1918 election to prevent a split in the nationalist vote).<sup>8</sup> Across the islands, there was confusion as to whether women candidates could legally stand for election in 1918 and the one-page Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act was hurriedly passed in November 2018 to clarify their candidacy.<sup>9</sup> Ryan points to Sinn Féin's "somewhat uncharacteristic concern for British constitutional rules" as the party was not sure "whether it would be according to the law" for women candidates to run.<sup>10</sup>

Markievicz, who was Cumann na mBan President in 1918, was in Holloway Jail when selected as a Sinn Féin candidate. On learning the news she wrote to the IWFL to express her hope that the Dublin St. Patrick's constituency would become a centre for women's political participation.<sup>11</sup> Women of all political hues undoubtedly understood the significance of having at least one woman candidate elected, but not all were prepared to concentrate their efforts solely on Markievicz – political ideology trumped gender. Cumann na nBan and IWFL activists did come together very effectively to work on Markievicz's campaign, however the IWFL was disappointed with the lack of support afforded to her by the Sinn Féin organisation and also by the level of campaigning Cumann na mBan did for male candidate

instead of their President.<sup>12</sup> Candidates across the island were in prison so women's participation was vital for Sinn Féin nationally.

Meanwhile Winifred Carney, a committed socialist, was very disappointed with the campaign in Belfast Victoria. A majority unionist constituency, she was selected for a totally unwinnable seat and received just 395 votes (3 per cent). Local Sinn Féin activists were not enthusiastic about campaigning for a socialist woman who insisted on having her own election programme about a 'Workers' Republic' and Carney would later join the Northern Ireland Labour Party, unhappy with the lack of a class perspective in the Sinn Féin platform.<sup>13</sup>

The IWFL was not pleased with the lack of women's representation in the 1918 general and instructed their members to "keep the flag of sex equality flying" in their 1918 Annual Report.<sup>14</sup> Sinn Féin understood the electoral importance of women as a new group of voters and emotionally appealed to them directly for support, however the party was less willing to accept women as candidates.

Including Constance Markievicz and Winifred Carney, 17 women candidates ran in the 1918 general election. Markievicz was the only woman elected and became the first ever woman MP but refused to take her seat in line with Sinn Féin's policy of abstentionism. In January 1919 she became part of the first Dáil Éireann, the parliament of the revolutionary 'Irish Republic', and was made Minister for Labour (which included responsibility for social welfare) by President of the Dáil Éamon de Valera. This made her the second woman cabinet minister in the world. However, Kathleen Clarke documents how Markievicz did not receive this ground-breaking appointment without a struggle – a further illustration of Sinn Féin's dubious attitude towards women's participation in politics, despite a party platform that outwardly espoused gender equality:

I asked her how she had managed it, as I had noticed that the present leaders were not over-eager to put women into places of honour or power, even though they had earned their right to both as well as the men had, having responded to every call made upon them throughout the struggle for freedom. She told me she had to bully them; she claimed she had earned the right to be a minister as well as any of the men, and that if she was not made a minister she would go over to the Labour Party.<sup>15</sup>

The Department operated under difficult circumstances and Markievicz spent much of the period in prison. She was demoted from Cabinet following a restructuring during the period of the Truce in 1921. She was re-appointed to the role and held it until 1922, but it was no longer a full cabinet post. This move largely symbolised the ultimate exclusion of women from senior political positions. It would be almost 60 years before another woman would hold cabinet rank in the Republic of Ireland, when Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, a Fianna Fáil TD, was appointed Minister for the Gaeltacht (the Irish speaking communities) in 1979.

### **The 1921 General Election**

The 1921 general election was held under the terms of the Government of Ireland Act 1920 which established separate Home Rule Parliaments in Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland (although this was never enacted in the South). All 128 candidates in the South were elected unopposed: 124 Sinn Féin and four Independent Unionist. The 124 Sinn Féin TDs constituted themselves as the second Dáil Éireann.

Disillusioned with how few women were selected by Sinn Féin in 1918 and by the lack of support given to the two women who had been nominated, feminists advocated for the selection of more women candidates in the 1921 election and called on women and men to vote for them. Meg Connery, vice-chairwomen of the IWFL, wrote to the Cork Examiner three days before the election, reminding the nationalist and labour movements of the promises they had made in relation to women's equality in politics.

At the general election of 1918 the women of Ireland were accorded one woman representative. It is up to Irishwomen and progressive Irishmen to see that the country is not treated to another example of political "equality" of this kind. Republican and

Labour forces have now a fresh opportunity of giving practical expression to their pledge of equal rights.<sup>16</sup>

Significantly, Sinn Féin selected and elected 6 women candidates. Constance Markievicz was returned, this time in Dublin South, and she was joined by Kathleen Clarke in Dublin Mid, Mary MacSwiney in Cork City, Dr. Ada English in the National University of Ireland (NUI) constituency, Kathleen O'Callaghan in Limerick City and Limerick East, and Margaret Pearse in Dublin County.

Historians have emphasised that 4 of the 6 women TDs elected to the Second Dáil were relatives of dead Republican heroes.<sup>17</sup> Kathleen Clarke's husband, Thomas Clarke, and Margaret Pearse's 2 sons, Padraig and William Pearse, were all executed for their role in the 1916 Easter Rising. Mary MacSwiney's brother Terence MacSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork and Sinn Féin TD, died while on hunger strike in prison in 1920. Kathleen O'Callaghan's husband Michael O'Callaghan, a former Lord Mayor of Limerick, had been shot in her presence by British forces just two months before the election.

If they are mentioned at all, historians have tended to regard the women of the Second Dáil as 'the guardians of the revolutionary traditions and surrogates of memory'<sup>18</sup> – essentially as male replacements<sup>19</sup> - largely because of their unified opposition to the Anglo-Irish Treaty (as discussed in detail below). Importantly, the women themselves disputed this claim during the debates on the Treaty. A feminist analysis examining these women TDs as individuals and detailing their agency counterbalances the historical work that views these women primarily through the lens of their late husbands, brothers or sons<sup>20</sup>; they entered the Second Dáil for a myriad of political, ideological and personal reasons and not solely because of family. Though the connection these women had to deceased high profile men was undoubtedly important in the candidate selection process, few researchers have acknowledged that each had been involved in political and social causes prior to their election as TDs<sup>21</sup> and 3 had been imprisoned for Republican activities. They were also well educated

relative to ordinary Irish women of the day.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, as Kathleen O'Callaghan argued during the Treaty debate, nationalist women had influenced the politics of their male relatives:

It was the mother of the Pearses who made them what they were. The sister of Terence MacSwiney influenced her brother, and is now carrying on his life's work.<sup>23</sup>

From a Fenian household in Limerick, Kathleen Clarke was an active campaigner prior to 1921. She had formed the first Committee of the Republican Prisoners' Dependent Fund in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising. Significantly, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) selected Clarke to be entrusted with plans for what should happen after the Rising; they felt she could be trusted to carry on with the work in the event of their arrest or death.<sup>24</sup> Clarke was a founder member and Vice-President of Cumann na mBan and became a member of the Sinn Féin Executive in 1917. Clarke served as a District Justice in the Republican courts in Dublin during the War of Independence and was also chairperson of the judges. She was arrested for alleged involvement in the 'German Plot' in 1918 and was imprisoned in Holloway Jail with Constance Markievicz and Maud Gonne MacBride between June 1918 and February 1919. She also had electoral experience before serving as TD, being elected as an Alderman for Dublin Corporation in 1919.<sup>25</sup>

Mary MacSwiney's first political association was with the suffrage movement. After training and working as a teacher in Britain, she returned to Cork in 1904 and became a committee member of the Munster Women's Franchise League.<sup>26</sup> Partially but not exclusively because of her brother's influence, MacSwiney's interests shifted from women's equality to the nationalist cause and she was an ardent Republican for the rest of her life.<sup>27</sup> She was a founder member of Cumann na mBan in Cork, holding the inaugural meeting of the branch in the MacSwiney home, and became the organisation's national Vice-President in 1921. She joined Sinn Féin in 1917 and was active in the Gaelic language revival movement. She was also involved in the anti-conscription movement in 1918 and campaigned for her brother in

the 1918 general election. McCool notes that MacSwiney's Republican sympathies were well known to the authorities and she was arrested and jailed after the Easter Rising<sup>28</sup>. She lost her job as a teacher as a result, so established a girls school in her own home. After her brother's death in 1920, MacSwiney travelled to the United States to give evidence before the American Commission about conditions in Ireland during the War of Independence.

A Professor in Mary Immaculate College until her marriage, Kathleen O'Callaghan "took a distinguished part in the cultural, antiquarian and charitable life of Limerick".<sup>29</sup> She was a founder member and Vice-President of Cumann na mBan in Limerick, where she was also a founder member of the Gaelic League. She collected money for the Prisoners' Dependents' Fund in the aftermath of the Easter Rising.<sup>30</sup> As she would later tell the Second Dáil, O'Callaghan was also active in the campaign for women's suffrage.

Of the four women TDs with familial connections, Margaret Pearse comes closest to being a 'token representative'. Pearse has been described as "ill-equipped to cope with the prominent position her sons' fame had bequeathed her".<sup>31</sup> She had, however, protected many men on the run, been a committee member of the Irish Volunteers' Dependents' Fund in 1916 and an honorary member of Cumann nBan between 1917 and 1918.<sup>32</sup> Pearse's biography suggests that she was an independent thinker of a strong nationalist background and greatly influenced the political views of her children.<sup>33</sup>

The charge of being symbolic representatives could not be made against the other two women, Constance Markievicz and Dr. Ada English, as they had not experienced a close personal loss in the conflict. Nonetheless, they were often generalised in the same light. A letter to the editor of the Irish Independent in February 1922 for example described all 6 women TDs as "bereaved women".<sup>34</sup>

From a privileged background in County Sligo, Constance Markievicz was drawn to the cause of Irish independence through cultural nationalism and was active in various nationalist, socialist, labour, and suffrage campaigns.<sup>35</sup> As a member of the Irish Citizen Army, Markievicz was second-in-command at the St Stephen's Green and College of Surgeons garrisons in the Easter Rising. She was court-martialled and sentenced to death for her part in 1916, but later had her sentence commuted to penal servitude for life on account of her sex.<sup>36</sup> She was released under the general amnesty in 1917 but was re-arrested in May 1918.

Dr. Ada English was one of the first women doctors in Ireland and pioneered much-needed reforms in psychiatry. She was a founder member and executive member of the Cumann na mBan branch in Ballinasloe, County Galway and also active in Sinn Féin.<sup>37</sup> Dr. English was Medical Officer of the Irish Volunteers from the organisation's establishment in 1913 and was in Athenry during the Easter Rising (which was one of the few cases of activity outside of Dublin that week). She was close with many leading nationalist figures and was arrested and imprisoned for nine months in 1920 for possession of Cumann na mBan literature.<sup>38</sup>

### **Women TDs and the Anglo-Irish Treaty**

The 6 women TDs elected in 1921 were, therefore, experienced political activists and held strong political and ideological beliefs. We now turn to the significant contribution these women made to the Anglo-Irish Treaty debates in 1921 and 1922. The Irish War of Independence came to an end when a truce was called in July 1921. Irish women had paid a price: 50 women were jailed over the two and a half years of war and many women suspected of Republican sympathies experienced domestic raids and also physical and sexual violence at the hands of British forces.<sup>39</sup> A delegation was sent to London in October 1921 to negotiate the terms of a treaty, which included Arthur Griffith as head of the negotiating team and a reluctant Michael Collins. There were a number of women secretaries.<sup>40</sup> Some

members of Cumann na mBan regretted the fact that no woman plenipotentiary was sent. They felt that, of all their high profile members, Mary MacSwiney would have been a particularly good match for Prime Minister Lloyd George. MacSwiney herself claimed that she had asked de Valera to include her in the delegation, but he had refused because she was ‘too extreme’.<sup>41</sup> MacSwiney was famously uncompromising and would not settle for anything else than an Irish Republic – which de Valera knew was not on the cards. She would thus have stalled the negotiations from the first day. Meanwhile, as the Treaty was being debated in the Dáil, an unnamed TD sarcastically asked Constance Markievicz why she didn’t go over to London instead. She replied: ‘Why didn’t you send me?’<sup>42</sup>

In December 1921, a Treaty was signed by the plenipotentiaries. It required members of Dáil Éireann to take an Oath of Allegiance to the British crown. It also provided for the division of Ireland into north and south and required the south to pay land annuities to Britain. The document was signed without consulting the cabinet. It was considered to be far from the Irish Republic that so many including Mary MacSwiney had wanted and made sacrifices for. The delegates knew this, but it was as much as they were going to get from the British negotiators. Furious, MacSwiney sent each of the Irish delegation a letter to tell them that they had made a grave mistake and urged them to reject the Treaty.<sup>43</sup> MacSwiney had made her lasting judgements on Griffith and Collins who, in her singular worldview, she now regarded as ideologically enslaved by the British.<sup>44</sup>

Debate over the Treaty began in the Dáil on the 14<sup>th</sup> of December. What ensued was weeks of acrimonious and deeply personal debate over the terms of the document, with the cabinet and Dáil deeply divided. The partition of the island and the fate of nationalists in Ulster were mentioned only in exceptional cases. Most opponents focused on the unacceptability of the Oath of Allegiance which they regarded as continued rule by a foreign power, while TDs in favour argued that the Treaty represented the first step towards full freedom.<sup>45</sup> Throughout

the debates, women TDs were small in number but highly visible. As well as making their own extensive contributions, Constance Markievicz and Mary MacSwiney regularly intercepted pro-Treaty speeches with comments and questions.

Each women TD spoke against the terms of the Treaty and they claimed to represent the majority of Irish women in doing so. For example, Mary MacSwiney claimed to ‘know the women of Ireland’<sup>46</sup> and Margaret Pearse knew ‘the hearts and sorrows of the wives of Ireland’.<sup>47</sup> The all-male pro-Treaty side also argued that they represented female opinion on the Treaty. Women were accused by pro-Treaty TDs of emotionally evoking the ghosts of dead male martyrs to justify their stance, motivated solely by grief and anger and not reason.

Finian Lynch, for example, argued that:

Now we have a great deal of emotion here and a great deal of emotional speeches about the dead. I say for myself that the bones of the dead have been rattled indecently in the face of this assembly.<sup>48</sup>

Margaret Pearse asserted her right and the right of others ‘to speak in the name of their dead’.<sup>49</sup> Most of her contribution focused on the legacies of her two sons, particularly Padraig Pearse. She feared being haunted by the ghosts of her sons if she supported the Treaty. After outlining her own reasons for opposing the Treaty, Kathleen Clarke brought up her late husband Tom Clarke in the second half of her speech. She described seeing him before his execution in 1916, where he told her of his belief that they had struck the first blow for Irish freedom: ‘I still believe in them’. Kathleen O’Callaghan stated that she had been elected on account of her husband’s murder; she had ‘paid a big price for that Treaty and for my right to stand here’. Nonetheless, she denied that women TDs were opposed to the Treaty solely because of personal loss: ‘The women of An Dáil are women of character, and they will vote for principle, not for expediency’.<sup>50</sup>

As Knirck argues,<sup>51</sup> there is no doubt that women TDs understood the symbolic importance of using their familial connections to the dead. There were many attempts to discredit them

for doing this, even questions raised about their mental stability, but the discourse gave women TDs considerable sway over shaping the debates.<sup>52</sup> However, a gendered re-reading of the debates shows that not all women deputies were prepared to adopt this narrative. Mary MacSwiney, who spoke for four and a half hours in total throughout the debates, refused to conjure the tragic image of her dead brother (even as others did do) and opposed the Treaty on her own ideological terms. Constance Markievicz, who had no martyred relatives, was one of only two TDs to represent working class interests. In a lengthy speech of opposition, Dr. Ada English stated that she had ‘no dead men to throw in my teeth as a reason for holding the opinions I hold’ and disputed the argument that other women TDs only had opinions because of personal grievances.<sup>53</sup>

### **The 1922 Franchise Debate**

Despite the external confidence exhibited by pro-Treaty TDs that they were the ‘true’ representatives of female opinion on the Treaty, no one really knew how women would vote on the issue. The united stand taken by women TDs against the terms of the Treaty must have given the pro-Treaty side cause for concern in regard to the full enfranchisement of Irish women on equal terms with men.<sup>54</sup> Hostility was likely entrenched by the fact that Cumann na mBan was the first organisation to vote against the ratification of the Treaty: 419 against and 63 in favour.<sup>55</sup> In the aftermath of the Treaty split in March 1922, Kathleen O’Callaghan proposed that women over 21 should be given the right to vote at the next election, in accordance with the promises of equal suffrage made in the 1916 Proclamation. Hanna-Sheehy Skeffington, in an article in the *Irish Freeman* in May 1922, estimated that women aged between 21 and 30 would account for about one-seventh of the electorate if enfranchised.<sup>56</sup> A former member of a suffrage society, Deputy O’Callaghan’s reasoning for extending the vote to these women was primarily a nationalist one – young women had

played their part in the struggle for Ireland and had earned their say in the country's constitutional future:

During these last years of war and terror, these women in their twenties took their share in the dangers. They have purchased their right to the franchise and they have purchased their right to a say in this all-important question before the country.<sup>57</sup>

Constance Markievicz spoke strongly in favour of O'Callaghan's motion, stating that the suffrage movement had been her first bite 'at the apple of freedom and also made reference to the 'young women and young girls who took a man's part in the Terror'<sup>58</sup>. The whole debate was a curious affair, so entangled as it was with the Treaty question. A number of male anti-Treaty TDs who had been less than enthusiastic about gender equality in the past now found themselves advocating for full suffrage rights, whereas Pro-Treaty TDs who previously supported full enfranchisement were now arguing against it.<sup>59</sup> Pro-Treaty TDs accused Kathleen O'Callaghan and her supporters of trying to bring down the Treaty. O'Callaghan responded that the Pro-Treaty faction had no reason to fear more women voters if they truly believed themselves to be representatives of female opinion on the Treaty – a large women's vote in favour would strengthen the ratification of the document and not threaten it, she pointed out. Arthur Griffith, himself a long-time supporter of votes for women, had advised an IWFL delegation that there was no time to update the electoral register before the general election and that the Dáil did not yet have the power to update the franchise. To the disappointment of feminist campaigners, Griffith pledged that his government would fully enfranchise women voters after the next general election. O'Callaghan's motion was lost, with 38 votes in favour and 47 against.

All 6 women deputies ran in the general election when it was held in June 1922 but only Mary MacSwiney in Cork City and Kate O'Callaghan in Limerick City were re-elected (O'Callaghan was unopposed), both in constituencies with strong anti-Treaty sentiment.<sup>60</sup>

Pro-Treaty Sinn Féin TDs won 45 per cent of the vote and anti-Treaty Sinn Féin TDs 28 per

cent. Pro-Treaty candidates received over 75 per cent of the vote in total. The results showed that, contrary to their claims, women TDs and Cumann na mBan were not reflective of the opinions of ordinary women voters (at least those under 30). Women voters wanted peace and sided with the Provisional Government. Anti-Treaty Sinn Féin TDs refused to take their seats in the third Dáil, which never assembled due to the outbreak of Civil War.

### **Women's Representation in Post-Revolutionary Ireland**

The Constitution of the Irish Free State in 1922, which formally ratified the Anglo-Irish Treaty, had a largely liberal-democratic ethos and dropped women's voting age to 21 (Article 12). Article 3 also made reference to wider citizenship rights and responsibilities 'without distinction of sex'. Many suffrage campaigners were initially optimistic about the constitutional rights being guaranteed to women and hoped that women's full enfranchisement would further improve the position of women in Irish society.<sup>61</sup> However, the statute book shows that a gender-based definition of citizenship was envisaged by the Free State government, one which ascribed different roles and functions to women and men. In spite of feminist opposition, a series of legislative changes were introduced by the Cumann na nGaedheal and Fianna Fáil governments during the 1920s and 1930s which severely restricted women's participation in the public, economic and social affairs of the new state.<sup>62</sup> A rigid division was created between the public and private spheres - although the government, the Roman Catholic church and even most women saw the primary role of women in independent Ireland as a wife and mother, as had been the case before independence, feminists were concerned that 'a woman's domestic role appeared to undermine her rights as an equal citizen'.<sup>63</sup> Despite women's activities in the nationalist, labour and feminist movements and their participation in early Dáil elections and the establishment of all new political parties, there was now a clear sense that women should undertake their duties as citizens in the home and not in the public domain. The growing

dominance of the Roman Catholic Church, and its nexus with a more conservative generation of political leaders relative to the 1916 signatories, heavily impacted on the gender ideology of the Irish Free State. While gender roles in the revolutionary period were relatively fluid, in the post-revolutionary period they were very rigid.<sup>64</sup>

The position that women TDs and Cumann na mBan had taken on the Anglo-Irish Treaty is fundamental to understanding the subsequent role of women in political life in Ireland.<sup>65</sup>

Their fervent opposition to the document – which was interpreted by pro-Treaty factions as outright opposition to peace after many years of bloody conflict - constructed a discourse among male political elites, the Roman Catholic Church and wider society that women were too inflexible, bitter and emotional for politics. Republican women were seen as ‘abnormal individuals’.<sup>66</sup> Pro-Treaty historian, P.S. O’Hegarty, wrote that Republican women were ‘practically unsexed’<sup>67</sup> and ‘the implacable and irrational upholders of death and destruction’.<sup>68</sup> When Mary MacSwiney and other Republican women campaigned against W.T Cosgrave’s re-election as President of the Free State in 1923, the Irish Times reported that the President argued that they ‘should have rosaries in their hands or be at home with knitting needles’.<sup>69</sup> The 1922 election had illustrated that Republican women were not representative of ‘ordinary women’ and this gave the Free State further armour to suppress them. The aforementioned legislative changes introduced by the Free State, which essentially bound women’s lives to the home, created further socio-cultural obstacles to women’s participation in politics. These pieces of legislation were likely introduced, at least in part, to symbolically and literally control and punish Republican women. It was also the case that, by opposing the Treaty, women TDs had self-excluded themselves from serving in politics at a time when the norms of parliamentary democracy in Ireland were being established.<sup>70</sup> They were also deprived of first-hand political experience. As a result of all these factors, women were significantly under-represented in Dáil Éireann for many decades after independence.

The political system was dominated by two parties, Cumann na nGaedheal/Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, and neither was sympathetic to women's political equality<sup>71</sup> – but were content with party women to work 'in the background'.<sup>72</sup>

Five women TDs were elected to the fourth Dáil in August 1923. Constance Markievicz, Mary MacSwiney and Dr Kathleen Lynn were all re-elected as Republican candidates. They were joined by Caitlin Brugha in Waterford, a widow of Deputy Cathal Brugha who was killed by Free State troops a month before the election. Sinn Féin deputies refused to take their seats in the fourth Dáil. The only woman to take her seat was Margaret Collins-O'Driscoll, a sister of the late Michael Collins, who was elected as a Cumann na nGaedheal TD in Dublin North.

During the short-lived fifth Dáil (June-August 1927), Collins-O'Driscoll was joined by Constance Markievicz (who was too ill to participate and died in July), Kathleen Clarke and Caitlin Brugha. The three women TDs now took their seats in Dáil Éireann (in Markievicz's case symbolically) as members of the new Fianna Fáil party. Meanwhile, Mary MacSwiney, Dr Kathleen Lynn, Caitlin Brugha had stayed with the now-struggling Sinn Féin (MacSwiney became the party's 'de facto' leader and Vice-President). The party could only run fifteen candidates in June 1927 and elected six TDs, all men. MacSwiney and Dr Lynn both saw their share of the first preference vote half relative to the 1923 general election (illustrative of the loss in Sinn Féin support nationally) and neither would serve as parliamentarians again. Brugha, meanwhile, had retired from electoral politics after one Dáil term.

Cumann na nGaedheal's Margaret Collins-O'Driscoll was the only woman TD elected to the sixth Dáil which sat between September 1927 and 1932. Kathleen Clarke unsuccessfully ran for Fianna Fáil in the same constituency as her, Dublin North, in the general election and an independent woman candidate Kate McCarry ran in Donegal (receiving just 164 votes). As a bearer of the much-respected 'Collins' name and its intimate associations with the

establishment of the Irish Free State and as Cumann na nGaedheal Vice-President between 1926 and 1927 – in addition to being the only woman TD for five years - legislation strongly opposed by the women's movement undoubtedly placed Collins-O'Driscoll in a difficult situation and she rarely spoke on women's issues.<sup>73</sup> Her contribution to the 1925 Civil Service Regulation Bill, which confined state examinations for senior civil service posts to men, is cautious. While 'by no means in love with it'<sup>74</sup> and accepting that it did place some limitations on women, Collins-O'Driscoll did not believe that it infringed on women's constitutional rights. She argued that she was elected to represent a wide community, not because of her sex, and that women voters in the next election could elect women TDs to amend the legislation in they wished. Collins-O'Driscoll also supported 1929 censorship legislation banning access to written information about birth control.

Although various women's organisations attempted to break the 'male monopoly' of Irish electoral politics, the 1930s through to the early 1970s was a bleak period for women's representation in Dáil Éireann. No general election returned more than five women TDs at a time. In a party recruitment system that was highly male-gendered and also increasingly localised, most women TDs had to rely on political dynasties as an entry route to politics.<sup>75</sup> Many men elected to the Dáil over the 20<sup>th</sup> century also succeeded a relative. However, in proportional terms women TDs were historically more reliant on these connections in such a conservative climate. The vast majority of women deputies elected between the 1930s and the 1970s were widows (or sometimes daughters) of deceased male TDs. By-elections were particularly important for this phenomenon as political parties attempt to capitalise on the 'sympathy vote' after a local TD's death, in a political system that became increasingly localised in the years after independence.<sup>76</sup> It should be emphasised that while women relatives were advantaged relative to other women, they were not guaranteed as easy route to selection or election and some faced gendered resistance in their attempt to enter public life.<sup>77</sup>

Ireland was not alone in electing widows to office in this period. The term the “widow’s mandate” or the “widow’s succession” was first coined in the United States, such was the prevalence of women succeeding their deceased spouse in the Congress.<sup>78</sup>

Like the first generation of women TDs, the election of women from the 1930s to the 1970s was often linked to personal tragedy and death. A number of authors have minimised their role as political representatives. For example, McElroy describes them as ‘honorary men’<sup>79</sup> and Manning similarly concludes that:

Thus, in the half century of independence, the impact of women on Irish politics in both numerical representation and quality of that representation has been slight. Indeed, it is difficult to ignore the judgment of one leading feminist and historian, Dr. Margaret Mac Curtain, who wrote in 1978: ‘Irish women in post revolutionary Ireland did not make political traditions; they inherited them from fathers, husbands and brothers’.<sup>80</sup>

That women TDs over this period nearly ‘always placed party before sex’ and rarely made feminist contributions to parliamentary debates, at a time when women’s rights were being eroded, has been lamented.<sup>81</sup> However, their efforts in politics must be placed ‘in a context of a social and political life that was inimical to the participation of women’.<sup>82</sup> Most of these women TDs focused on constituency-related matters as opposed to national issues - but so did male TDs.<sup>83</sup> The main role of a backbench TD was to provide local representation and this was, and still is, the driving factor for electoral success. As a result, most women TDs of this ‘wave’ had long-established political careers (in many cases longer than their husbands) and impressive results at the polls. They provided a service that was expected of them by constituents. The parliamentary record also suggests that a number of women TDs did speak to women’s everyday concerns, even if the discourse was not ‘feminist’ in tone.<sup>84</sup> Through their constituency work women TDs were almost certainly aware of issues and difficulties specific to women in Irish society, but the nature of the political climate meant that many social issues could not be placed on the parliamentary agenda.<sup>85</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Despite the political gains made by women in the 1918 and 1921 general elections, this chapter has shown that women were soon ‘faded out’ of national politics in the post-revolutionary era. It would be the 1977 general election before the number of women TDs matched what was achieved in 1921. This is at odds with numerous democracies in Western Europe where the proportion of women representatives increased, if slowly, in the decades following suffrage. The united position that women TDs took on the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty (one that appears to have been at odds with ordinary women voters), in addition to the rigidifying of gender roles in the post-revolutionary period, acted to suppress opportunities for Irish women to enter public life. The consequences of this historical under-representation remain to this day.

Importantly, this research also offers a reappraisal of the early generations of women parliamentarians in the Republic of Ireland. Previous scholarship analyses the selection, election and political priorities of these women largely through their connections to dead men – they are often characterised as surrogates. This discourse persists in relation to the Republican women TDs of the early 1920s and also the ‘widows and daughters’ elected from the 1930s onwards. This chapter puts forward a more critical, feminist reading of the history of women’s representation in Dáil Éireann. It emphasises early women TDs as individuals with political agency, but also illustrates the institutional constraints of the male-gendered political culture that they entered into. Familial connections to national revolutionaries or local TDs undoubtedly gave these women an advantage in the candidate selection process and election contests relative to other women. However, the politics of most historical women TDs likely came from a myriad of influences, including their own personal backgrounds and records of political activism, and not solely out a sense of duty to men.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> A TD or Teachta Dála is a member of Dáil Éireann, the lower house of the Oireachtas (the Irish Parliament). It is equivalent to an MP or Member of Parliament.
- <sup>2</sup> For another recent re-appraisal of the first generation of women TDs, see Sinéad McCoole, “Debating not negotiating: The female TDs of the Second Dáil”, in Liam Weeks and Mícheál Ó Fathartaigh (eds.), *The Treaty: Debating and Establishing the Irish State* (Dublin: Irish Academic 2
- <sup>3</sup> Caitríona Beaumont, “After the vote: Women, citizenship and the campaign for gender equality in the Irish Free State 1922-1943”, in Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward (eds.), *Irish Women and the Vote: Becoming Citizens* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2018), p.231.
- <sup>4</sup> Pat Thane, “Women and political participation in England, 1918-1970,” in Esther Breitenbach and Pat Thane (eds.), *Women and Citizenship in Britain and Ireland in the Twentieth Century* (London: Continuum UK, 2010), 12-13.
- <sup>5</sup> Margaret Ward, *In their own voice: Women and Irish Nationalism* (Cork: Attic, 1995), p.86.
- <sup>6</sup> Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism* (London: Pluto Press, 1983), p.125.
- <sup>7</sup> Kathleen Clarke, *Revolutionary Woman 1978-1972: An Autobiography* (Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 1991), p.164.
- <sup>8</sup> Louise Ryan, “Why did only two women stand for election in 1918?”, Irish Times, December 10, 2018. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/why-did-only-two-women-stand-for-election-in-1918-1.3697445> (Accessed 19 July 2019).
- <sup>9</sup> Ryan, “Why did only two women stand for election in 1918?”, Irish Times.
- <sup>10</sup> Ryan, “Why did only two women stand for election in 1918?”, Irish Times
- <sup>11</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, p.135.
- <sup>12</sup> Ward, *In their own voice*, 92.
- <sup>13</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, p.135.
- <sup>14</sup> Ward, *In their own voice*, p.93.
- <sup>15</sup> Clarke, *Revolutionary Woman*, p.170.
- <sup>16</sup> Meg Connery, “Letter to the editor”, *Cork Examiner*, April 21, 1921, 7. Irish Newspaper Archive.
- <sup>17</sup> Mary Daly, “The ‘women element’ in politics: Irish women and the vote, 1918-2008”, in Esther Breitenbach and Pat Thane (eds.), *Women and Citizenship in Britain and Ireland in the Twentieth Century* (London: Continuum UK, 2010), p. 81.
- <sup>18</sup> McCoole, “Debating not negotiating: The female TDs of the Second Dáil”, p.138.
- <sup>19</sup> Margaret MacCurtain, “Women, the vote and the revolution”, in Margaret MacCurtain and Donncha Ó Corráin (eds.), *Women in Irish Society: The Historical Dimension* (Dublin: Praeger, 1978), pp.46-57.
- <sup>20</sup> Catherine Lee and Anne Logan, “Women’s agency, activism and organisation”, *Women's History Review* [online]. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2017.1346880>
- <sup>21</sup> However, see McCoole, “Debating not negotiating: The female TDs of the Second Dáil”, pp.147-152.
- <sup>22</sup> McCoole, “Debating not negotiating: The female TDs of the Second Dáil”, p.147.
- <sup>23</sup> Dáil debates on the “Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland,” Sessions 14 December, 1921 to 10 January, 1922.
- <sup>24</sup> Sinéad McCoole, *No Ordinary Women: Irish female activists in the revolutionary years 1900-1923* (Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 2015), p.164.
- <sup>25</sup> Maedhbh McNamara and Paschal Mooney, *Women in parliament. Ireland: 1918-2000* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2000), p.75.
- <sup>26</sup> McNamara and Mooney, *Women in Parliament*, 80.

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- <sup>27</sup> Charlotte Fallon, *Soul of fire: A biography of Mary MacSwiney* (Cork: The Mercier Press, 1986), p.17.
- <sup>28</sup> McCoolle, *No Ordinary Women*, p.201.
- <sup>29</sup> McNamara and Mooney, *Women in Parliament*, p.82.
- <sup>30</sup> McCoolle, *No Ordinary Women*, p.209.
- <sup>31</sup> Anne Dolan and William Murphy, “Pearse (Brady), Margaret”, in *Dictionary of Irish Biography* [online]. <https://dib.cambridge.org/home.do>
- <sup>32</sup> McNamara and Mooney, *Women in Parliament*, p.82.
- <sup>33</sup> Dolan and Murphy, “Pearse (Brady), Margaret”, *Dictionary of Irish Biography*.
- <sup>34</sup> May Fox “To the editor”, *Irish Independent*, February 25, 1922, 7. Irish Newspaper Archive.
- <sup>35</sup> McNamara and Mooney, *Women in Parliament*, p.72.
- <sup>36</sup> McCoolle, *No Ordinary Women*, p.203.
- <sup>37</sup> McNamara and Mooney, *Women in Parliament*, p.79.
- <sup>38</sup> McNamara and Mooney, *Women in Parliament*, p.79.
- <sup>39</sup> Louise Ryan, “Drunken Tans’: Representations of Sex and Violence in the Anglo-Irish War (1919-21),” *Feminist Review*, 66 (Autumn 2000), pp.73-93.
- <sup>40</sup> McCoolle, *No Ordinary Women*, p.85.
- <sup>41</sup> McCoolle, *No Ordinary Women*, p.85.
- <sup>42</sup> Debate on the Treaty”.
- <sup>43</sup> Fallon, *Soul of Fire*, pp.79-80.
- <sup>44</sup> Fallon, *Soul of Fire*, p.80.
- <sup>45</sup> Mel Farrell, “‘Stepping Stones to Freedom’: Pro-Treaty Rhetoric and Strategy during the Dáil Treaty debates”, in Liam Weeks and Mícheál Ó Fathartaigh (eds.), *The Treaty: Debating and Establishing the Irish Free State* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press), pp.14-41.
- <sup>46</sup> “Debate on the Treaty”.
- <sup>47</sup> “Debate on the Treaty”.
- <sup>48</sup> “Debate on the Treaty”.
- <sup>49</sup> “Debate on the Treaty”.
- <sup>50</sup> “Debate on the Treaty”.
- <sup>51</sup> Jason Knirck, *Women of the Dáil: Gender, Republicanism and the Anglo-Irish Treaty* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), p.78.
- <sup>52</sup> “Debate on the Treaty.”
- <sup>53</sup> “Debate on the Treaty.”
- <sup>54</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, p.174.
- <sup>55</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, p.172.
- <sup>56</sup> Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, “The Irish electorate”, *The Freeman*, May 10, 1922. Margaret Ward, *Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington: Suffragette and Sinn Féiner – Her memoirs and political writings* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2017), p.192.
- <sup>57</sup> Dáil Éireann debate on “Irish women and the Franchise,” 2 March, 1922.
- <sup>58</sup> Dáil Éireann debate on “Irish women and Franchise.”
- <sup>59</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, pp.176-177.
- <sup>60</sup> McNamara and Mooney, *Women in Parliament*, p.83.
- <sup>61</sup> Beaumont, “After the vote”, p.232.
- <sup>62</sup> Beaumont, “After the vote”, pp.233-247.
- <sup>63</sup> Beaumont, “After the vote”, p.233.
- <sup>64</sup> Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, “The Politics of Gender in the Irish Free State, 1922–1937”, *Women’s History Review* 20, 2 (2011), p.1.
- <sup>65</sup> Daly, “The ‘women element’ in politics”, pp.81-83.
- <sup>66</sup> Geo. A Lyons, “Women and the Franchise”, *Irish Independent*, November 11, 1922: 6. Irish Newspaper Archive.
- <sup>67</sup> P.S. O’Hegarty, *The Victory of Sinn Féin: How it won it, and how it used it.* (Dublin: The Talbot Press, 1924), p.103.
- <sup>68</sup> O’Hegarty, *The Victory of Sinn Féin*, p.104.
- <sup>69</sup> Fallon, *Soul of Fire*, p.102.

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- <sup>70</sup> Frances Gardiner, "Political interest and participation of Irish women 1922-1922: The unfinished revolution", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 18(1), p.19.
- <sup>71</sup> Mary Clancy, "Shaping the nation: Women in the Free State Parliament, 1923-1937", in Yvonne Galligan, Eilís Ward and Rick Wilford (eds.), *Contesting politics: Women in Ireland, North and South* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1999), pp.209-216.
- <sup>72</sup> Claire McGing, "Women, Nationalism and Politics after the Easter Rising". Paper presented at *RTE – Reflecting the Rising*, Dublin, March 28, 2016, pp.15-18.
- <sup>73</sup> Interestingly, most female senators over the 1920s and 1930s held outwardly feminist views. Perhaps because there were more women in the Seanad than the Dáil, they regularly spoke out against gender-based discrimination. See Clancy, "Shaping the nation: Women in the Free State Parliament, 1923-1937", pp.207-209.
- <sup>74</sup> Dáil Éireann debate on "Civil Service Regulation (Amendment Bill)", 18 November, 1925.
- <sup>75</sup> Clancy, "Shaping the nation: Women in the Free State Parliament, 1923-1937", p.206.
- <sup>76</sup> McGing, "Women, Nationalism and Politics," p.17.
- <sup>77</sup> McGing, "Women, Nationalism and Politics," p.14.
- <sup>78</sup> Diane D. Kincaid, "Over his dead body: A positive perspective on widows in the U.S Congress", *Western Political Quarterly*, 31(1), pp.96-104.
- <sup>79</sup> Gail McElroy, "The impact of gender quotas on voting Bbehaviour in 2016", David Farrell, Michael Marsh and Theresa Reidy (eds.), *The Irish Voter 2016* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), p.166.
- <sup>80</sup> Manning, "Women and the elections", 158.
- <sup>81</sup> Maurice Manning, "Women in Irish National and Local Politics, 1922-1977", in Margaret MacCurtain and Donnacha O'Corrain (eds.), *Women in Irish Society: The Historical Dimension* (Dublin: Arlen House, 1978), p.96.
- <sup>82</sup> McNamara and Mooney, *Women in Parliament*, p.17.
- <sup>83</sup> Daly, "The 'women element' in politics", p.84.
- <sup>84</sup> McGing, "Women, Nationalism and Politics," p.14.
- <sup>85</sup> McNamara and Mooney, *Women in Parliament*, p.17.