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Judith Harford & Jennifer Redmond

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'I am amazed at how easily we accepted it': the marriage ban, teaching and ideologies of womanhood in post-Independence Ireland*

Judith Harford ^a and Jennifer Redmond^b

^aSchool of Education, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland; ^bHistory Department, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland

ABSTRACT

This article examines the perspectives of 14 primary school teachers subjected to a marriage ban in Ireland between 1932 and 1958. This oral history study provides a unique platform to examine the construction and articulation of these women's historical memories. Interrogating their perspectives on the marriage ban provides an important window into the social and cultural world in which they lived, the norms and dominant values they encountered, and the ways in which they negotiated their own individual consciousness within a specific cultural framework. Specifically, the analysis of these women's testimony generates significant insights into the gendering of teaching as a suitable profession for women in early twentieth-century Ireland; how gender shaped social and cultural roles; Church control over women's training and employment; and the use of policy to deepen women's social and economic subordination.

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Introduction

This article examines the perspectives of 14 primary school teachers who were subject to a marriage ban introduced into the teaching profession in Ireland in 1932 which required that women primary school teachers who qualified after this date retire upon marriage (Redmond and Harford 2010). The aim of the article is to provide, through personal testimony, key insights into the gendering of teaching as a suitable profession for women in twentieth-century Ireland; how gender shaped social and cultural roles; Church control over women's training and employment; and the use of policy to deepen women's social and economic subordination. Interrogating the perspectives of these women through an oral history methodology highlights the social and cultural world in which they lived, the norms and dominant values they encountered, and the ways in which they negotiated their own individual consciousness within a specific cultural framework.

Reflecting international trends, the marriage ban introduced into the primary school sector in Ireland in 1932 was the outcome of ideological assumptions which held that

CONTACT Judith Harford  Judith.harford@ucd.ie

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the most appropriate place for women in society was the home; it was effectively patriarchy as policy. The ban was also influenced by an economic 'rationale' and linked with high unemployment rates (Oram 1983, 1989, 1996). In Ireland, unemployment rates for men and women remained challenging for the fledgling independent state (Redmond 2018). However, it was not *women's* unemployment rates which stimulated discussions of extending the marriage bar from the civil service into primary schools. Rather, it was the high unemployment rates of *men* which led to discourses on the need to pay men enough to support their families and the consequent 'inappropriateness' of allowing married women to work. The international impact of the Great Depression combined with the economic war between Britain and Ireland led to a depressed economy lacking opportunities for all.

The marriage ban applied principally to white-collar public sector jobs, prompting some scholars to suggest that it was influenced more by social consensus rather than economic imperative. Firing professionals would *not* create jobs for the semi-skilled or unskilled, the bulk of those unemployed in the 1930s (Redmond and Harford 2010). The emergence of a ban in Ireland was not unexpected; the country was, post-independence, metamorphosing into a deeply conservative, nationalistic country led by a fledgling government whose policies were closely shaped by an omniscient Catholic Church (O'Donoghue and Harford 2011). As feminist activist Hanna Sheehy Skeffington observed in 1936, independence for the country did not mean greater independence for women:

in general it may be said that, while the Free State has taken over from Britain, whereas the latter has advanced with regard to the position of women, we have either remained stationary – or have retrogressed. This is particularly the case with regard to married women. (Sheehy Skeffington 1936, cited in Ward 2017, 336)

The ban was introduced through a change in employment regulations by the Department of Education and not through national legislation, which meant that it was part of the terms and conditions of teachers, which could be changed if desired. This carried less weight than restrictions on women imposed through legislation for the civil service, which also banned any woman, regardless of marital status, from being employed at higher levels. There has been some confusion in the extant literature about the differences between the bans in the civil and public sectors and when they were implemented. While it was widely thought that they happened at the same time in the 1930s, the civil service ban came in through Section 9 of the Civil Service Regulation Act (1924) instituted by the Minister for Finance, Ernest Blythe.

This difference also meant that unmarried women teachers could still be employed at higher levels of management and, importantly, that women religious could continue to occupy leadership roles in primary schools. Our interviewees universally misunderstood this subtle difference in how the ban was implemented (through regulations rather than national legislation): it was presented to them as an iron-cast law that could not be changed, effectively quelling any desire they may have had to protest. As in the civil service, the ban was sweetened by a concomitant financial gratuity based on years of service, a payment often used to defray the costs of setting up a first home. In fact, as reported to us, many based their decision on when to marry around the granting of the maximum award – one year's salary for women who taught for at least seven years (Department of Education 1934, 5). A number of women's groups did unsuccessfully

oppose the ban, along with a series of measures aimed at restricting women's role in the Irish Free State, more broadly. These included the Women's Social and Progressive League, Women's Citizens Association, the Joint Committee of Women's Societies and Social Workers, the Women's Graduates Associations and the Irish Women Workers' Union (Cullen Owens 2005). This article examines for the first time the perspectives and personal experiences of women affected by the ban. 14 women aged between 74 and 84 and based in ten counties across the island of Ireland were interviewed.

Women's role and status in Irish society during the operationalisation of the marriage ban

The promise and potential of Irish independence did not provide the opportunities for women that many expected (Valiulis 1994). Indeed, the period witnessed the development of a gendered ideology that identified woman's role as belonging to the domestic sphere, as wife and mother. Daly (1995) notes that in the first population census taken in the Irish Free State in 1926, a low proportion of women, both married and single, were registered as employed, and these were concentrated predominantly in agriculture and domestic service, with a high proportion of working women employed within the family economy. Cullen Owens (2005) has highlighted the way in which class and land ownership were key determinants of women's life chances, while Clear (2007) has demonstrated how gendered patterns of work dominated employment structures and possibilities. Beaumont (1997) has observed the particularly potent dual influence of economic austerity and Catholic influence in Ireland at this time which led many to believe that employment for middle-class women should not come at the expense of opportunities for men, although it was religious, rather than economic ideology in her opinion that carried the greatest weight. This ideology was promoted by both Church and state which emerged as a powerful alliance protecting the dominant hegemony. Church and state policy in relation to education and related social issues were most closely aligned during the period of the marriage ban (Fahey 1994, 372).

The role of women in what was an 'economically depressed, socially conservative, and religiously devout' society was greatly restricted (McKenna 2006, 43–44). There was an idealisation 'of married, desexualised, at-home motherhood' (McKenna 2006, 44) or alternatively, the sacrosanct role of a nun – dominant discourses of Irish womanhood idealised piety, devotion and selflessness (Inglis 2003). Nonetheless, although women were excluded from decision-making in the Church, they were viewed as central in perpetuating allegiance to the institution. As mothers they were considered to exercise a major responsibility for the spiritual welfare of their families and for encouraging their children to enter religious life (O'Donoghue and Harford 2016). The marriage ban also offered the potential for a greater number of teaching positions to be held by women religious, which strengthened the already powerful hold of the Catholic Church on Irish society, bolstering Catholic social teaching. Ruttledge (2005, 11) argues that women religious had the most to gain from the marriage bar and that 'experienced lay teachers were frequently dismissed to create jobs for novices and [that] the religious held sway over senior posts'. Furthermore, Ruttledge (2005, 13–14) suggests that there was a discomfort with the idea of career women in teaching, and in contrast 'the unqualified Junior Assistant Mistresses (JAMs)

were tolerated in Irish schools despite the obvious concerns for quality in teaching' as they 'were much more socially acceptable than women principals'.

The marriage bar was one of a number of measures, including the 1927 Juries Act and the 1936 Conditions of Employment Act, which collectively sought to limit the citizenship rights of Irish women during this period (Connolly 2002; Ryan and Ward 2018). Measures which curtailed women's social and economic role and status were subsequently highlighted in the landmark report of the first national Commission on the Status of Women in 1972 which specifically named the marriage bar as part of a suite of discriminatory legislation against women (Connolly 2002, 98). This report exposed the cultural stereotype of wife and mother as damaging to women's identity and life chances, solidifying claims made by women's groups in Ireland in previous decades.

This gender ideology was not restricted to Ireland, however, with other European countries pushing a similarly conservative ideology in relation to women, particularly after the First World War. A public service marriage bar was introduced during the inter-war years in several European countries in an attempt to curtail the number of women working outside the home. This conservative ideology, fuelled by an economic depression, prioritised jobs for men. Justifying this policy in 1933, industrialist Sir Herbert Austin commented 'I don't think a woman's place is in industry. If we were to take women out of industry I believe we could absorb all the unemployment. I think men ought to be doing the work instead of women' (*The Times* 25 September 1933; cited in Beaumont 1997, 571).

Similarly, the ban was in effect across the United States from even earlier. The New York Board of Education noted in 1902:

No woman principal, woman head of a department, or woman member of the teaching or supervising staff shall marry while in service. It shall be the duty of a District Superintendent to bring to the notice of the Board of Superintendents the marriage of any such person in his district and such fact shall be reported to the Board of Education, which may direct charges to be preferred against such teacher by reason of such marriage (Anon 1902).

There is also evidence in the US that new entrants to teaching, vying for positions, used the argument that married women should remain in the home to free up positions for single women (Falls 1937). Even female trade unionists in Ireland such as Louie Bennett of the Irish Women Workers' Union, believed that priority for jobs should be given to men, promoting the ideology of the family wage/male breadwinner with its concomitant domestic role for women (Ruttledge 2005, 14).

The introduction of a marriage ban for primary school teachers met with widespread government and church approval. The stated reasons for the ban included: the 'upset' caused to schools following the (self-funded) maternity leave of a woman teacher; the unfair economic advantage of double-income professional families; and the problems associated with 'married teachers in mixed schools', a veiled reference to the sight of a pregnant body in the classroom (Acting assistant secretary to the Executive Council, 16 March 1932, National Archives, Dublin).¹ The policy assumption was thus that married women teachers would become mothers and that women would find juggling work and family overly onerous. The ban was staunchly, though not very effectively, opposed by the primary teacher union, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, on the basis that it was unconstitutional, would lead to fewer marriages and that married women

were in fact more suited to teaching children. The leader of the INTO at the time was married to a teacher and was thus personally affected by the change in rules, but the government were unyielding, justifying its policy by claiming that there were difficulties in finding replacements for married women teachers on maternity leave, even though women paid for and often arranged their own cover.² Arguably, the real crux of the issue was that married women teachers were in double-income families, often married to fellow professionals and thus enjoying a higher standard of living than many other families (Redmond and Harford 2010) as revealed in a government memorandum:

There also arises the question of one man one job, particularly in view of the present economic state of the country, and the local irritation or jealousy which arises owing to the comparatively large combined incomes where the man and wife are both teachers, or where a woman teacher is married to a substantial farmer or shopkeeper.³

Memory as methodology: women recount their experience of the marriage ban

Using the methodology of oral history, which captures the ‘rhythm’ (Gluck 1977, 3) of women’s lives, this research encapsulates the perspectives of a group of 14 women on the marriage ban in Ireland in 1932. As such, it provides unique insights into the gendering of teaching as a suitable profession for women in twentieth-century Ireland; how gender shaped social and cultural roles; Church control over women’s training and employment; and the use of policy to deepen women’s social and economic subordination. Aged between 74 and 84 at the time of interview and drawn from ten counties from the island of Ireland, these women were recruited through a snowballing purposeful sampling procedure (Punch 2009), with interviewees asked to invite other women to participate. Selection also took cognisance of Goodson and Sikes’ (2010, 23) observation that ‘adequacy is dependent not upon quantity but upon the richness of the data’. Thus, the number of participants in the study was small, but it was unlikely ever to be large given the age of the cohort. Sampling in grounded theory is premised on the generation of concepts as opposed to specific groups of individuals as it is the representation of concepts, rather than of individuals, which is of significance (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Interviewing women and applying the grounded theory method ‘allowed for retention of the exact words of the seldom-heard participants as data from which categories emerged’ (Kass 2015, 492). As women’s lives and experiences have often not been recorded, grounded theory allows for ‘data collection and analysis to develop theories about social processes that are grounded in real-life experiences’ (Rieger 2018, 1).

In all cases, pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the participants, and identifying data was obscured. Informed by the national and international literature on the topic, a semi-structured interview schedule was devised. Before interview, participants were provided with information on the research project. Then, at the time of the interview, they were given further documentation on the project and were invited to sign a consent form. Each individual was interviewed once, with each interview lasting between one and two hours. Where consent was given, interviews were recorded and where consent was not given, field notes were instead taken, with permission from the interviewee (this occurred in just one case). Transcripts of recordings and field notes were analysed using the inductive analysis and grounded theory procedures outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

Findings: perspectives on women on the marriage ban

The gendering of teaching as a suitable profession for women

Historically, women's relationship with teaching has been a complex one. Teaching was one of the first occupations considered respectable for middle-class women, perceived as an extension of the maternal role. Indeed, Tamboukou (2000, 466) contends that during the nineteenth century, 'teaching was seen as a communication channel, joining the private and public spheres of life'. Much of the rhetoric surrounding women's admission to education in the nineteenth century emphasised the idealised and romanticised role women would play as teachers (Harford 2008). At various intervals single women teachers were valued over married and vice versa (Blount 2000; Goldin 1990; Whitehead 2003). The discourse surrounding the premium placed on single versus married women teachers testifies to the way in which women's marital status has been historically viewed as central to their identity as teachers (Redmond and Harford 2010). It also reflects the tension between the image of true womanhood and women's position as paid members of the labour force (Prentice and Theobald 1991).

Teaching for women at this time in Ireland, and indeed still to this day, was considered an appropriate profession, one which delicately straddled the public-private divide and contributed to the social, cultural and economic stability of the country. All of the women in this study commented on the way in which teaching had been presented to them as adolescents as an appropriate career choice. Indeed, it was one of the *only* career paths advocated for our interviewees by their parents. On this, Anastasia noted 'teaching was considered the best you know and then the civil service depending on the grade' In relation to her own decision-making around this choice of career, she continued:

I wasn't given any choice - it was known as the 'call to training' in those days and you were groomed for that and if I wasn't called this year, I was told I would have to go back and sit the Leaving Certificate again and do it next year so in fact I wasn't given any choice.

The 'call to training' also evokes the vocational aspect associated with teaching which also made it appropriate for women given the nurturing, ministering and sacrificial elements it encompasses. Nell continued in similar vein:

There was no decision in it - I just got the call to training - saying that I was called and that I'd be going to Carysfort Training College in Blackrock⁴ and to send a telegram if I was going. I remember what I said "call accepted - travelling Friday!" That was just how it was in those days.

This observation indicates the lack of independent agency many young women had at this time, as decisions on education and employment (regardless of class) were made by the whole family, or by parents, not individually by the women themselves. This is evidenced in the following comment from Hannah:

I never made the decision. When I got the preparatory exam, that was it - it was the only opening available at the time. What else were you going to do? One of my sisters did nursing but there wasn't much open to us unless you were the children of teachers or doctors. There was no way you could get into the university because no one could afford it. A lot of the people who went to the primary school I mentioned, the brighter ones, went into the civil service.

On a related point, Rosaleen recalled ‘the nuns’ and her parents decided together that she would become a teacher: ‘I was 16 when I went to the training college, I did two years there, and then I was trained. The nuns had asked my parents if I could teach’.

Helen continued in a similar vein:

There were certain careers that were open to women. You did the civil service or you did nursing or you did teaching, and this was seen as a handy way of amusing yourself until such time as somebody married you.

Amusement, and not professionalism, was at the forefront of the popular imagination about women in the workplace, regardless of their profession or class. Women were seen to be simply ‘marking time’ until they entered their *real* role: motherhood. Claire recalled:

There wasn’t much option. I knew I didn’t want to work in a factory. I was the eldest grandchild – there were always little ones about the house. I never thought of anything else. I didn’t want to do nursing. My aunt had a big influence on me. Also, if you went into nursing a lot of people had to go to England to do nursing.

Emigration was a reality for thousands of women in Ireland during this period, and while those who could access scholarships or pay for teacher training were in a more fortunate position than many others, it was still a prospect for the less affluent. There was thus an interplay between the kinds of employment considered appropriate from a gendered perspective and the economic reality that many young women needed to work to support themselves and/or their families. Hanora reflected on the prejudicial attitudes that made her change her own career ambitions:

In those days, well I suppose like all youngsters, I thought it would be marvellous to be a vet but at that time, that kind of profession was frowned on for ladies. I remember a girl in my class telling one of our teachers, a nun, that she really wanted to be an air hostess and the nun’s response was ‘an air hostess? A maid in the air? What nonsense.’

The nun continued: ‘Teaching is a much more appropriate profession for a young lady.’

Gender and the shaping of social and cultural roles

All 14 of the women interviewed commented on what they remember as the conservative and dismissive attitudes towards women in the period in which the marriage ban existed, although most freely accepted cultural attitudes and did not resist the gendered ideology of their youth. This conservative agenda related to attitudes towards women working outside of the home, professional roles considered appropriate for women, and particular roles within the teaching profession deemed suitable for women. Echoing McKenna’s (2006, 43) research on embodied ideals and realities for Irish women in the period 1930–1960, in which marriage and motherhood were idealised, Hannah recalled ‘I was 24 when I got married ... when you were 24 in those days you were expected to get married – there was pressure on women to do so.’ She continued: ‘I always thought my status in life was to get married and have children – and to have security – and I always wanted to marry someone who had land’. Delia elaborated on the contemporary domestic ideals:

It was accepted at that time that women were housekeepers and that the woman’s place was in the home – not out earning and that was kind of handed down to us – it was accepted as being the norm and women who exercised their right or started talking up – they were

considered a little bit outcast – it was considered rebellious that they wanted this independence from their husbands.

This social pressure to conform to traditional roles based on heteronormative and patriarchal tenets explains the lack of effective resistance to the ban by any group within the primary school sector. Helen reflected on the ideas underpinning the ban whereby women's careers were secondary to the need for male employment: 'The jobs were for men and men were the wage earners and we were the cooks, and that was the role model you generally had, you see, in your own mother.' Claire expanded on this issue in more detail:

I suppose that the time de Valera had told us we should all stay at home, and the Church had a huge influence, I didn't want my family to suffer because I was a teacher and I didn't want my teaching to suffer because I had a family, so I threw myself into everything. The Constitution said marriage was sacred and family was sacred and we should all stay at home and wash the dishes. In fact, I remember when I told my mother I was offered a job as a principal, she said "you can't take a man's job" and that was the attitude of that generation.

The gendered organisation and culture of schools reinforced this ideology. On this, Nell recalled that the principal was always a man who invariably taught the senior classes (fifth and sixth class). Women, on the other hand, were typically expected to take the younger classes because 'like mothers, women would be better able to deal with small children.' (Nell). This attitude reflected the view that men were more suited to the older, and therefore more academic tasks associated with teaching children of eleven and twelve years, and women were more suited to managing basic teaching and learning tasks and to dealing with younger children still prone to incontinence. Hannah similarly recalled: 'I taught juniors because it was always considered that a man would teach the senior classes'. Saoirse made the same point: 'It was men who were made principals at that time and it never occurred to me that I would ever aspire to become one. It was always men who were promoted to principalship in those days'.

Interviewees recalled the expectation that they would not become politicised through their membership of teacher unions or through other forms of public activism. Bridget observed 'there were very few women involved in the INTO, you know, at that stage.' More pointedly, recalling an occasion in which she attended a meeting of the INTO, Esther observed:

You were meant to sit there and say nothing, and I remember one time I went to a meeting and I might have been the only woman there and one man said to the other 'what did she say?' They really thought that women should be seen and not heard as a teacher.

She further recalled being encouraged by several younger women teachers to go for the Chair of the union because 'the young teachers wanted a woman as the men had a total monopoly'. This indicates there were nascent objections to patriarchal control of the union, but they were not strong enough to form an active, politicised caucus within the union. Esther declined the Chair, however, but did take up the position of Deputy Chair. These views concur with O'Leary's (1985) findings, namely that women were marginalised from the governance and strategic direction of the INTO. The lack of strong female leadership at union level was acknowledged as influential by the interviewees, many of whom did not take an active role in the INTO until their later years when they returned to

teaching. It can be argued that it took the direct experience of discrimination through the marriage bar to activate some women to engage further with the union, the only vehicle through which individual teachers could influence policy decisions made at governmental level.

Other interviewees connected their own experience to that of women in wider Irish society whom they perceived to have subordinate status. Rosaleen noted:

Women were second class citizens. One of the reasons they had the ban was that if a woman were pregnant and she came into school what a scandal it would be for the poor unfortunate children. And when we were teaching, the men were paid more than we were for the exact same job.

Similarly, Claire recalled an Inspector's attitude towards her when he realised she was married and still working in a temporary capacity (women could resign and be re-employed temporarily at the discretion of the local school manager):

I had an inspector who came into the classroom and he said 'are you married?' and I said 'yes' and he said 'you should be at home minding children' and I said 'well I don't have any children.' I was only married a few months at this stage. Nowadays if an inspector said a thing like that he would be up in court.

May, however, spoke about her determination to have her own financial independence irrespective of the introduction of the ban and societal norms, demonstrating individual resistance and a personal strategy to subvert rules she could not change:

I made up my mind from day one I wasn't getting married until the marriage ban was lifted. I was very decisive about it, probably because of my own background. My mother was a dress-maker and my father had a temper. He lost more jobs than he got because of his temper. So, it was my mother who reared us. It was she who held the house together. [...] 'I swore if I ever got married, I would be independent, and no way was I going to keep any man.'

The research found that while the participants were not actively conscious of the work of a number of organisations aimed at resisting the ban, many found ways at local and individual level to exert agency in a patriarchal system that sought to deny them such power. These women were operating in an era between the first and second wave feminist movements, a time in which small rebellions were not enough to incite major change, but nonetheless they may have contributed to it. As Connolly observed (2002, 56), 'Peak periods of feminist activism do not emerge from nowhere and prior, and more isolated, types of activism generally create the conditions for a subsequent wave of resurgence'.

Church control over women's training and employment

The ban remained in place until 1958, a period which reflected the peak of Catholic hegemony when Church and state policy were most closely aligned (Fahey 1994). Church control over education in particular was absolute, the Catholic Church claiming not only a primary role for itself but a superior right in relation to the state (O'Sullivan 1996). Their role in education was critical to the promotion of Catholic social teaching and was assured through their control over curriculum development, over the training of new teachers and over the hiring of school personnel (O'Donoghue and Harford 2011). This was also assured through the control over single-sex, boarding denominational teacher training colleges. The removal of these teacher training colleges from the broader university

landscape also contributed to an anti-intellectual, deeply restrictive experience for student teachers (O'Donoghue and Harford 2016).

On the dominant role of the Catholic Church in the education system at this time, Helen recalled 'the church was in charge of education at that time. In those days you got your job but in line with getting your job you had to be available on Sunday mornings to play the organ in church and that kind of thing.' Bridget commented in similar vein 'I remember I had to train the church choir and be there for the various masses and church celebrations.'

Nuns and priests also exercised key roles in the management of schools, including the hiring and promotion of personnel (Harford and O'Donoghue 2011; O'Donoghue and Harford 2016). Their control over the management and governance of schools intensified in the period during the operationalisation of the marriage ban. By the 1960s, there were 3,789 primary schools in the country under the management of a local priest, staffed by a total of 8776 Catholic lay teachers. Similarly, 55 per cent of all secondary school teachers in Ireland were Catholic nuns, brothers and priests (Duffy 1967, 79). Alongside these schools were Catholic primary schools managed by religious orders. Principally located in urban areas, these schools were staffed by a total of 2948 members of religious orders and 1,990 Catholic lay teachers (O'Donoghue and Harford 2011).

Responding to a question as to whether or not she ever aspired to become a principal, Hannah commented as follows: 'I did, but a lot of the time it was the nun who became principal.' Delia similarly recalled the key role of the parish priest in deciding who became principal of her school:

All those things depended on the local priest. The parish priest was the boss of the teachers and he came to the school and he just said to me "are you interested in becoming the new principal?" and I said "if you consider me suitable." Now this will just tell you the way it was. We were completely under the thumb of the clergy. That was my response to him – if you think I am suitable, I will take on the role – I wasn't even asked to make an application.

Helen echoed these comments as follows: 'In those days if I remember rightly, there were very few lay schools and all the promoted posts were in the hands of the religious.' Some respondents in this study, however, recalled the role of women religious in circumventing the ban. Helen commented as follows:

I presented myself to the nun in Gardiner Street and the most amazing person, in 1957. And I told her I would not be coming back to work and she said 'Why not Miss Murphy?' and I said 'Well I've got married' and she said 'Well that doesn't matter, you can come ...' in those days, if I can keep going, you went back then as a temporary additional which meant you went back on the salary you stopped at. You didn't go back as a sub. So, you were continued on with the good salary. So, she said to me 'You can come back as a temporary additional' and I said 'I think it might be more convenient for us both to know that I'm well pregnant now and it mightn't ...' and she said 'Yes, you are quite right' but she said 'I will have a job for you in September' and she had a job for me in September. A week later.

Helen alludes to an aversion to pregnant women teachers in the classroom, with women thus literally embodying sexual relations. Revulsion towards the female, fertile, sexualised body in the classroom appears to have contributed to the rationale for the ban. Seán Moylan, Minister of Education, noted in 1953: 'There is bound to be comment and a degree of unhealthy curiosity in mixed schools of boys and girls and even in schools for girls only, during the later months of pregnancy of married women teachers.'⁵ Revulsion

or shame towards the pregnant body was also recorded by Leane (2014) in her qualitative study of attitudes towards sexuality with twenty-one Irish women born between 1914 and 1955, a similar cohort to this study. Leane (2014, 41) argued that pregnancy was ‘a definitive physical manifestation of sexual activity’ and as such women’s bodies were regarded as distasteful in public. Primary school teachers were thus not marked out for special treatment in terms of the admonitions on their pregnant bodies in the classroom; it was simply part of a wider culture in Ireland that associated sexual activity with shame, even if conducted within the ‘respectable’ confines of marriage.

Lack of transparency and information in relation to women’s rights

The lack of transparency and information in relation to women’s rights with respect to the ban permeated all the testimony. Without exception, each of the participants commented on the lack of information they received on the marriage ban, its implications for their livelihood and future careers and their right to protest. What also emerged was a sense in which women training to be teachers were effectively cut off, sequestered, from the real world of Irish society. This isolation disempowered these women further.

Commenting on the way in which women training to be primary school teachers were sheltered from what was happening in the outside world, Hannah recalled:

We never saw newspapers or heard the radio in Carysfort [training college]. We had a little priest who used to come in and teach us religious instruction. Sometimes he would surreptitiously read a headline out of a newspaper, but he always had one eye on the door in case a nun came in. I think the nuns saw us almost as novices and hoped that some of us would possibly go on and become novices at some stage. We were entirely cut off and we never had any visitors ... our letters were all read by the nuns before we could read them.

This sense of cloistering was echoed by other interviewees. Claire also alluded to the way in which women student teachers were at a remove from wider society:

We weren’t allowed newspapers or radio. I remember my sister saying that she was four years in training and the only news that was put up on the bulletin board was that John McCormick [a famous Irish singer] had died. We weren’t allowed papers or radio or anything that would connect us with the outside world.

The vacuum in relation to information on what was going on in the outside world also included a lack of information on the marriage ban itself. When asked to recall when they heard about the ban, none of the women could identify an exact point in time they received information. By the time most of the interviewees were in training, the ban was firmly established and rarely questioned. Rather, they spoke about being aware of its existence and their acceptance of it as the norm. The constructed gender roles which shaped women’s lives at this time were not only insidious, but often so subtle, that even the women experiencing them were not fully aware of their import (Spencer 2005). On this Helen recalled: ‘I don’t remember when we were told about it. We just knew it was there’. This view was echoed by Hannah: ‘I don’t remember when I heard about it. We didn’t really have a voice at the time. That was the reality’. This observation reflects the norms within wider Irish society in which the marriage ban, unequal pay and the discrimination against women in the workplace crossed many sectors. Esther elaborated further:

I don't ever remember thinking deeply about it or saying I should be able to stay working as a teacher. There just wasn't that attitude at that time. I think we developed that attitude later, the recognition that we would fight for our cause.

Single-sex, denominational training colleges for both men and women at this time were deeply regimented and controlled, transmitting clear and unambiguous gendered messages to students (O'Donoghue and Harford 2016). Manliness founded on principles of physical strength, confidence, courage and 'backbone' was considered to be essential for male primary school teachers (O'Donoghue, Harford, and O'Doherty 2017). Comments of teaching practice supervisors include references to the importance of displaying 'manliness': of 'speaking and acting in a manly fashion'; 'increased manliness desirable'; and 'complete lack of manliness' (O'Donoghue, Harford, and O'Doherty 2017). Acting in appropriate 'womanly' ways was also emphasised for women students who were cautioned never to wear:

... dresses cut in a suggestive style or so loosely about the neck as to allow the collar-bone to appear or cut equally low at the back; dresses with sleeves less than two inches below the elbow for daywear or more than one inch above the elbow for evening wear, or without sleeves to the wrist for church wear; dresses of transparent material, unless a slip complying with the above regulations be worn underneath; not wearing shades in stockings that suggested the nude (Ní Bhroiméil 2008, 8)

Similarly, women were admonished never to:

Adopt immodest poses, talk loudly or laugh boisterously in public, utter coarse or irreverent exclamations, drink alcohol at dances or entertainments, attend improper cinema shows, plays or all night dances or partake in immodest or suggestive dances or sea-bathing (Ní Bhroiméil 2008).

The sheltering of student teachers from the outside world made their experience one of a pseudo- novitiate, and this was reflected in the standards of dress, deportment and behaviour that were imposed on them. As Hannah further revealed:

We wore a uniform, a black dress with a silver tie and black tights and black shoes. We were like novices. The discipline was so strict. We got out on a Saturday for a few hours from 4–6 and one Sunday a month we got out for a half day. We had to be back by seven at night. A bell was rung and if didn't have your foot inside the door by the last toll you were considered late and you had to report to the head.

The curriculum in the training colleges was also gendered with an emphasis on singing and needlework, subjects deemed essential for women teachers. As one of the women interviewed, Delia, recalled, 'you had to do needlework and singing and if girls didn't get singing, they didn't get called to training – you had to get singing.' This emphasis on 'accomplishments' reveals the rather antiquated notions regarding appropriate skills for female educators that persisted not just in Ireland at this time, but internationally.

On the lack of effective union opposition to the ban, Delia recalled her experience of being a member of the INTO in the late 1940s and early 1950s:

I was in the INTO at the time. I don't remember anyone talking about it. It was accepted and dismissed as a fact of life ... That was the way in those days. Most women gave up their work when they got married. It wasn't considered the thing for married women to be working outside of the home. Once you were married, you worked in the home. So, no notice was taken of the ban.

Delia's comments reveal the wider societal acceptance of the marriage bar that saw it used in private firms that were not subject to any laws on the matter. Saoirse also alluded to the fact that at union level, there was little or no engagement with the issue:

You see it was men who were in charge of the committees, of, and of the meetings as well at that time and it didn't affect them and therefore it wasn't relevant you know. I'd say that was a big part of the problem.

Without union support therefore, it was left to individual women to negotiate, where they could, an extension of their employment after marriage on a temporary basis- or leave the profession.

Conclusion

Marriage bans were common across much of Europe and the US and Ireland was not atypical in this regard. What is different, in the Irish context, is how late the ban was rescinded, remaining in place until 1958 and lifted as a result of a skills shortage in the profession. Its persistence was due both to the deeply conservative nature of Irish society which saw women's place as firmly within the domestic sphere, as well as to the lack of a coherent, organised feminist lobby within the teaching profession specifically. The ban reflected a *status quo* so deeply entrenched in the mindset of the Irish people that even those most affected by the stunting of their career did not object outright; confirming this Nell, one of the interviewees, simply stated: 'no, no there was no rebellion or no meetings about it or trying to get it back no'. The patriarchal reasoning behind the ban was part of the fabric of Irish life that saw 'respectable' women cloistered or in the home and 'wayward' women contained in institutions such as Magdalen laundries. Women often tried to navigate the system by teaching for the maximum amount of time to gain the highest retirement award. They also accepted temporary positions that saw them work for lesser pension rights and poorer terms where local priests and school boards allowed for the subverting of rules. The price of this was only to become evident much later when many women (the full extent of the problem is unknown as records were not kept by the Department of Education) were faced with gaps in their pension credits, and a lesser retirement award as a result, as even if they engaged in temporary teaching work during the period of the marriage ban they were not entitled to claim this as pensionable service. The INTO fought to get pension credits for such women, including those who were in training colleges at the commencement of the ban. The latter issue was discussed at INTO Council meetings with the Department of Education in 1978 and 1979 leading to the INTO balloting its members in 1980 as to whether to accept a deal of five years' service credit for women affected at the time the ban came in to compensate for these women having been prevented from giving full service to qualify for their pension (INTO, 'Marriage Ban' leaflet 1980). The ban was also on the active agenda of groups such as the National Council of Women, the Irish Women's Workers Union and Joint Committee of Women's Societies and Social Workers throughout the period 1930–1960s.

Married women teachers were relatively fortunate as they had the ability to regain their jobs, progress their careers and amend the deficit in their pensions by paying 'top up' amounts to cover the time they were out of employment if they wished, or to pay back

the marriage gratuity they had received which negated any pension entitlement for the years worked up to marriage. This was reported by Nell who was able to pay extra contributions to cover her five years' of lost service and Delia who recalled paying £250 to restore her full pension due to receiving the marriage gratuity. Anastasia personally visited the Department of Education for weeks to argue her case to receive a full pension entitlement as she was missing seven years; her persistence led her to receive an additional year, but not the required forty years' service for a full pension at 80 per cent of salary. Others were not able to restore their pension entitlements: Saoirse lost out on four years' worth of pension rights; Claire lost eight years; Hannah said she retired on a 'very small lump sum' in comparison to her peers because of the ban.

Interrogating the perspectives of the women in this study on the impact of the marriage ban provides an important window into the social and cultural world in which they lived, the norms and dominant values they encountered, and the ways in which they negotiated their own individual consciousness within a specific cultural framework. Specifically, the analysis of these women's testimony generates significant insights into the gendering of teaching as a suitable profession for women in early twentieth-century Ireland. Norms based on sexual differentiation in society were used to limit women's careers and ambitions and this article has shown how policy could deepen women's social and economic subordination.

Notes

1. Note that women taught boys and girls at primary school level.
2. Memorandum, 'The Question of the Proposed New Rule Providing for the Discontinuance of Women Teachers on Marriage,' 15 November 1932, NA DTs6231a, National Archives, Dublin.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Carysfort Training College, Blackrock, Co Dublin was established in 1877 under the auspices of the Sisters of Mercy as a training college for Catholic girls who wished to become teachers.
5. Minister for Education, Memorandum for the Government, 'The Rule Requiring Women Teachers to Retire on Marriage,' 14 February 1953, NA DT/s6369a, National Archives, Dublin.

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Notes on contributors

Judith Harford is Professor of Education, Deputy Head of the School of Education and Vice Principal for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in the College of Social Sciences and Law, University College Dublin. She is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society (London) and the Massachusetts Historical Society (USA), the Ireland Canada University Foundation Flaherty Visiting Professor 2017–2018 and a Fulbright Scholar in the Social Sciences 2018–2019. She has held visiting scholar appointments at the University of Toronto and Boston College.

Jennifer Redmond is Assistant Professor in the Department of History, Maynooth University, Ireland. She is Vice Chair of the Royal Irish Academy's Historical Studies Committee, a member of the steering committee of the Irish Humanities Alliance and a former President of the Women's History Association of Ireland.

ORCID

Judith Harford  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5511-1283>

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