

THE IONA INSTITUTE

**Submission by The Iona Institute in response
to Ireland's 3rd periodic report under the
International Covenant on Economic, Social
and Cultural Rights**

November, 2011

Introduction: In regard to Ireland's 3rd periodic report under ICESCR, our particular interest is in Article 10 dealing with the rights of the family.

Article 10.1 commits signatory countries to giving the family "the widest possible protection and assistance". The family is described as the "natural and fundamental group unit of society, particularly for its establishment".

What does this mean? What does Article 10.1 mean when it speaks of the family as the "natural and fundamental group of society"? What would success or failure in giving the family "the widest possible protection" look like? These are questions the Government should consider and answer.

Recommendation one: Provide additional data concerning marital breakdown and family structure in Ireland today.

The Iona Institute believes the Government's report should provide Census Data in the section on the family so that the UN can gauge the state of family life in Ireland today. We feel it is particularly important to provide the figures for marital breakdown and family structure.

We note that detailed figures have been provided for women and poverty. Similarly detailed figures, drawn from Census data, should be provided for the family. Some of the figures are set out in the appendix to this submission.

Recommendation two: Set out the indicators the Government uses in evaluating whether it is meeting its commitment under Article 10.1 to offer the family the "widest possible protection".

We believe the report should set out clearly what indicators the Government uses to evaluate the health of the family in Ireland and how it would evaluate whether or not it is achieving its commitment under Article 10.1 to protect the family. In other words, what would look like failure in this regard? What would look like success?

Is the fact of rising marital breakdown an indication of failure, and is its opposite an indication of success?

Does the Government have a view as to the desirability, in general, of mothers and fathers raising their own children together?

It would be very strange if the Government did not have a view on this and even stranger if it declared itself indifferent on the question of marriage and whether children, as a general rule, should ideally be raised by their two married parents or not.

Child Trends, a non-partisan US-based research body has summarised the evidence in favour of marriage vis a vis child welfare as follows:

“Research clearly demonstrates that family structure matters for children, and the family structure that helps the most is a family headed by two biological parents in a low-conflict marriage...There is thus value in promoting strong, stable marriages between biological parents.” (Marriage from a Child’s Perspective: How Does Family Structure Affect Children, and What Can we Do about it?)

Consideration also needs to be given what Article 10.1 means when it speaks of the family as being the “natural and fundamental group unit of society, particularly for its establishment”.

Obviously there can be no society without the family existing first, without men and women having children. Without this “natural and fundamental group unit”, society cannot even exist.

This is why, arguably, one of the first duties of the State is to protect the natural family of mother, father and child.

We conclude this section by simply repeating that the Government must establish in its own mind what indicators it will use for determining whether it is succeeding or failing in its duty until Article 10.1 to protect the family as the “natural and fundamental group unit of society”.

Such indications are used when measuring progressing in combating poverty and indicators needs to be used to measure progress in protecting the family.

Recommendation three: Emphasise that promoting marriage is a means of reducing poverty among women.

We believe the report should mention the fact that marriage can offer strong protection against poverty, especially poverty among women and children. As Appendix 1, Table 1 of the report itself makes clear, lone motherhood is a strong predictor of poverty. In 2009, 16.6pc of lone female parents were in consistent poverty compared with 5.4pc of all women.

An ESRI report called ‘Monitoring Poverty Trends in Ireland 2004-2007’, showed that two-thirds of children living in consistent poverty live in lone parent families, which is three times the number of children who are in lone parent families.

Recent data from Eurostat shows that Ireland now has jointly the highest percentage of children living in single parent families in the EU at 23pc versus the EU average of 14pc. This is a big driver of poverty in Ireland among both women and children.

The Government needs to ask itself whether it is desirable or not that the percentage of single parent families is so high when compared with the EU average, and whether policy instruments can be developed that would reduce our rate to the EU average or even below that.

The Government should also be cognisant of research which shows that a higher rate of marriage reduces levels of poverty. One US study by Isabel Sawhill and Adam Thomas called “For Richer or for Poorer: Marriage as an Anti-Poverty Strategy” estimates that if the US marriage rate had been the same in 2001 as it was in 1970, the poverty rate would have been 20 to 30pc lower than its actual 1998 value.

Therefore, the evidence indicates that the Government should promote marriage as part of an overall strategy aimed at reducing poverty among both women and children.

Of course, it has been suggested by some policy analysts that such a goal, even if it was desirable, is unrealistic. But in their book 'Creating an Opportunity Society' (Brookings Institute 2009), Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill answer this contention well: "To those who argue that this goal [promoting marriage] is old fashioned and inconsistent with modern culture, we argue that modern culture is inconsistent with the needs of children".

The Iona Institute believes that the Government needs to seriously consider the evidence that more widespread marriage would reduce poverty, to make mention of this fact in the Women and Poverty section of its report, and to make the promotion of marriage part of its overall anti-poverty strategy.

At a minimum it needs to consider the evidence in respect of marriage and poverty, and if it chooses to reject the evidence that a higher rate of marriage would reduce poverty, to set out why it rejects this evidence. Is it that it judges the 'evidence' itself to be faulty, or does it believe that it is unrealistic to promote marriage, or even judgemental to do so?

ENDS

Appendix: Trends in family life in Ireland from 1986-2006 (The follow figures are drawn from Census data)

- In 2006 there were 200,000 separated or divorced adults in Ireland. In 1986 the figure was 40,000.
- In 2006, there were 121,000 cohabiting couples in Ireland, up from 31,000 in 1996. Five percent of children in 2006 were being raised by cohabiting parents.
- In 2006, there were 189,000 single parent families in Ireland, up from 104,000 in 1986. In 2006, 21 percent of children were being raised in single parent families.
- According to Eurostat, the average number of children being raised in single parent families in the 27 EU member-states was 14pc. In Ireland, the figure was 23pc, which is jointly the highest in the EU along with Latvia.