

Invisible Comrades

Below we reprint an edited version of a two page article which was published in the latest edition of *An Glor Gafa/The Captive Voice* (Vol 3, No 3), a magazine written by republican prisoners. The author, Brendí Mc Clenaghan, is in Long Kesh Prison, Northern Ireland. While many readers will not see the connection which the author does between lesbian and gay liberation and the form of 'liberation' espoused by the republican movement, we reprint the article as an example of the sort of debate which needs to be opened up within a whole range of movements, from Fianna Fail to the Conservative Party to Trade Unions, if we are to achieve equality. The significance of the author's courage in coming out within two environments which many assume to be homophobic, the prison system and the republican movement, is also notable. It offers an example to lesbians and gays who could contribute to changing attitudes in less physically threatening environments.

Gay men and lesbian women have been involved in the struggle for independence for as long as any other section of our people. You might claim that you have never known or met a gay man or lesbian woman but you have met one or more - today, last week, last year, twenty two years ago - for they have been there among us, in the struggle alongside you. The primary reason you have not noticed them is that the prevailing culture in our society in relation to sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular compels lesbians and gays to conform. Thus, their sexuality becomes invisible.

It is now time, indeed long past time, to open up debate among republicans on the issue of gays and lesbians, our oppression and its causes, and on our right to be visible equal partners.

Women as a whole were once virtually invisible in the national struggle. While there is still a long way

to go to overcome male chauvinism and sexism, at least today women have succeeded in putting feminist issues on the agenda of the anti-imperialist fight.

Social and economic oppression is something the people in the whole of Ireland have suffered and in the North, the weight of British occupation is an added burden. As gays and lesbians, we are doubly oppressed for we have had to endure further oppression within our families, local communities and within the republican movement.

The state's laws deny equality in marriage, education, social welfare, employment, adoption, life insurance - the list is endless. Both the British and Irish states have appalling records in the area of gay and lesbian rights, especially when compared to other countries in Europe.

All the churches promote traditional, stereotypical views in relation to matters like contraception, abortion,

sex education for young people and the rights of women in marriage. The Catholic Church in particular seeks to maintain its control over our lives and our sexuality, and it has spawned organisations such as Family Solidarity whose views on homosexuality range from the patronising and arrogant to the downright chilling.

The most direct expressions of homophobia are insults, derision and threatened or actual violence. Indirect expressions are sometimes harder to pin down but are nonetheless just as offensive: the pressures to "be what you are but keep it secret and don't rock the boat". This is nothing short of moral blackmail as it is usually accompanied by comments like, "What will the family think", or, "It will harm the Movement/struggle". Thus gays and lesbians are forced into invisibility within both the community and the republican movement, and consequently within the struggle.

This is a situation which must be confronted not only by gays and lesbians but by everyone who espouses the ideals of republicanism. "We declare that we desire our country to be ruled in accordance with the principles of liberty, equality and justice for all", states the 1919 Democratic Programme of Dáil Eireann.

Our participation in the national liberation struggle is not a detraction from its nature and objectives; on the contrary, it is a reinforcement

that the struggle is indeed about the freedom and equality of all who are oppressed. No one should feel excluded. The prejudices of others can be resolved only by confronting them and by exposing the oppression that those prejudices give rise to, with the resultant fear, isolation and violence. The experience of such feelings is not imaginary: they are a daily reality for gays and lesbians in the Bogside, Falls, Monaghan, Dungannon, Ardoyne, Ballymun, Crossmaglen and every other town and village in Ireland.

Simon Nkoli, a gay anti-apartheid activist involved in the Delmas treason trial in South Africa in 1986 had this to say [about our being invisible]:

There are lots of gay activists involved in political organisations, but because of the pressure upon the gay and lesbian community we are afraid to come out. "What will people think if they know I'm a gay person? I'd better fight against apartheid in a hidden way." The danger of that is that when South Africa is liberated, we as gay people will seem never to have taken part in liberating our people. What will we say if people ask, "What did you do to bring about change in this country, where were you during the battle?" We'd have to come back to them and say, "We were with you but we didn't want you to know we were there." That would be a foolish answer.

Brendí McClenaghan



Brendí (centre) with Eoin and Cathal of GLEN

Isolation Double Cell