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Irish Women Get a Clarion Call From Liberation Leaders

By James F. Clarity
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DUBLIN — Fresh from one more invigorating defeat — this time at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro — Bella Abzug arrived in Dublin as articulate and pugnacious as ever, determined to encourage the women of the world,

and especially of Ireland, who are among the least liberated in Europe.

Ms. Abzug and another giant of the American liberation movement, Betty Friedan, were joining several dozen other women leaders at a conference called the Global Forum of Women, at which the

leaders are sharing their tactics and strategies for gaining and using power.

They picked Ireland largely because of the growing prominence of Mary Robinson, who became the country's first woman president 19 months ago. Mrs. Robinson, who is now constitutionally forbidden to

mix in politics, had achieved a solid record on feminist and human rights issues as a member of the senate and a lawyer.

Her country is in the midst of a national debate on abortion law, which is more restrictive here than that in most Western countries. The parliament just lowered the legal age for buying condoms to 17, but sales in vending machines are still forbidden, and there is no divorce. The birth rate is declining, but is still the highest in the 12-

member European Community. Only 30 percent of married Irish women have jobs outside the home, the lowest rate in the Community. "Something drastic has to take place," Ms. Abzug said of the condition of women in the world. She said that at the Rio summit meeting, women and their ideas on environment were largely ignored by male officials and news organizations.

Generally, she acknowledged in an interview, she was disappointed that after 25 years of campaigning in her own country, women held only 6 percent of the seats in Congress, 2 in the Senate and 28 in the House. Even the Irish parliament, with 13 women deputies out of 166, has a higher ratio.

Ms. Friedan told the opening session of the conference on Wednesday, "It's not a matter of women against men, but women are on the cutting edge" of issues

such as the environment and abortion and sexual harassment. Irish women in the audience spoke out, often in anger and pain.

One woman described how women with cancer were dying in agony because doctors refused them painkillers, or chemical treatments of their tumors, in deference to protecting their fetuses. Another told how, in campaigning against the nation's strict anti-abortion law, she had been called "a lesbian murdering bitch."

"We have to penetrate the World Bank," said a woman who said she had worked in Africa and seen an aid project that installed toilets where there was no water. A middle-aged woman said that she had been married to a wealthy man, but that when she left him, taking with her their six children, she was left poor under national laws of property.

"I'm cleaning for middle-class ladies now," she said. Another woman said the image of women as leaders had been hurt by former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of Britain. "Thatcher was to the Jews, poor what Hitler was to the Jews, Catholics and Gypsies," she said.

There was brief discord: a woman said that the conference was in a fancy hotel, July 3, where Irish working-class women never go, and that many could not afford to pay for the lectures. The organizers said they had provided 100 free places

for such women and child-care facilities.

One of the guest speakers, Frances Kissling, preside Catholicism for a Free Choice. The women to stay in the even if it is perceived as the of women's rights.

"Do not desert organization," she said, "and leave the hands of the yahoos." She "Jesus Christ did not sit waiting for a loan from the E an Community."

But the most powerful figure the session was Ms. Abzug, walking a bit stiffly, still wearing a jaunty hat, still talking firmly, slitting the enemy with the conviction of Cyrano.

Irish women politely shake her hand, to chat for a minute, to be photographed. She had memorized enough to say "Greetings my sister: the women of the world."

Ms. Abzug gripped the with one hand, gestured with the other. Calling once again to seek power, she said she had less than 15 percent places in the legislatures world.

Of what's wrong with the run world, she said: "The let us in, so we had nothing about it. Some scientists world is burning itself out is short."