

The Dearth of Data on Irish Farm Wives: A Critical Review of the Literature

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Abstract: This paper calls attention to the paucity of knowledge and statistical data on the activities of Irish farm wives. The richest sources of information are the anthropological and sociological studies of Irish rural life which began in the 1930s. A critical review of these is undertaken. The limited gender analysis provided by these studies are identified and discussed.

I INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing concern in Ireland that women receive minimal recognition, reward and status for their labour (Duggan, 1987; O'Hara, 1987; Irish Council For The Status of Women, 1986). Any attempts at the investigation of the involvement of women in rural life has been hampered by a lack of detailed statistical data (Phelan, 1989; Sheridan, 1982; Matthews, 1981). The census does not count the spouses of farmers who work on the farm as a separate category and those who work unpaid on the farm are either not counted or referred to as "relatives assisting" (O'Hara, 1987). Where data are available, it is inadequate and misrepresents the farm work carried out by women. There is often no clear rationale for the farm tasks selected to quantify women's involvement and they frequently represent a narrow, gender-biased view of what constitutes farm work (Duggan, 1987; O'Hara, 1987; Sheridan, 1982; Matthews, 1981).

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This dearth of knowledge regarding farm work and the rôle of women in farming life is not peculiar to Ireland. Canadian and American sociologists have also indicated the difficulties of assessing the magnitude and change in the labour input of farm women (farm wives in particular), because of a scarcity of data and deficiencies in the data that have been collected (Huffman, 1976; Sachs, 1983; Reimer, 1986a, b; Shaver, 1990). As unpaid labourers in Canada, the UK and the US for example, the farm work of women has similarly either not been accounted for or else subsumed under the heading of family help (Reimer, 1986b; Huffman, 1976). The statistical data that are available are considered to grossly under-represent women's farm labour — Reimer (1986b) argues that Canadian figures could be doubled or trebled to more adequately represent women's participation. The problem stems in part from the narrow definitions of farm work which are currently operative. These fail to take account of many tasks and work essential to the farm business and many of the tasks that fall into this category are those carried out by women (Reimer, 1986b; Buttell and Gillespie, 1984; Bouquet, 1984).¹ This is even more complicated for farm wives than for wives in most non-farm families because the household and its activities are an intrinsic part of the farm business and also because farm wives have three ways of benefiting their households; market work (off-farm employment), household production (although household production also constitutes farm work in many respects) and farm work (Goodwin and Marlowe, 1990; Deseran, Falk and Jenkins, 1984). The fact that women's farm labour is not acknowledged causes a lack of economic, legal and social recognition for farm wives as co-operators and co-workers on the family farm (Shaver, 1990; Bouquet, 1984; Long, 1984; Shortall, 1990).

It is clear then that in Ireland, as elsewhere, there is a lack of detailed, precise information on the work and lives of women on farms. Our richest sources of information are the anthropological and sociological studies of Irish rural life which began in the 1930s with Arensberg and Kimball. It also provides an insight into the traditional perceptions of women which these studies adopted. This subsequently hindered an enlightened examination of the rôle of women.

The review also allows a certain understanding of how the current dearth of knowledge regarding the position of farm women and their activities has evolved. When the more recent research is reviewed, it is obvious that there is a growing awareness that studies of rural life are incomplete unless they attend to the activities of farm women. Later works have developed from and beyond

1. These include such activities as collection and delivery of spare parts for machinery, transporting and feeding hired farm labour, making and taking telephone calls regarding farm business matters, paying bills and dealing with callers to the farm.

earlier studies and have tried to account for issues which were previously neglected. However there appears to be a number of unasked questions which persist throughout all of these studies. It is this which accounts for the current dearth of knowledge regarding the position of farm women and their activities, rather than anything inherent in the activities of the women.

II STUDIES OF RURAL IRELAND: WHAT THEY TELL US ABOUT WOMEN ON FARMS

In this section, nine of the most prominent studies of Irish rural life will be reviewed. This begins with the work of Arensberg and Kimball (1940). They spent two years in the West of Ireland collecting ethnographic data in the 1930s. Their documentation of the social and economic conditions of Co. Clare is considered to mark the initiation of rural Irish sociological research. The Limerick Rural Survey 1958-1964 is a detailed, multi-disciplinary study of Limerick. It is Part IV, McNabb's section entitled "Social Structure" (pp. 193-248) which is of interest here. This is an examination of the social structure of rural Limerick at that time. Messenger's (1969) anthropological study is based on research carried out on an island in the Irish Gaeltacht, which he identifies by the pseudonym "Inis Beag". He and his wife lived there for most of a year in 1959/60 and returned several times for short visits between 1961-1966 to complete their work. He describes the main thrust of his study as the documentation of the contemporary culture of Inis Beag at that time. Brody lived and worked in five communities in the West of Ireland between 1966-1971. His study (Brody, 1973) is based on the participant observation he carried out during this time, his analysis of national and parish records and information provided by key informants. Although it is much shorter and is not in itself a study of rural Ireland, Gibbon's (1973) article is included here. In this much acclaimed article, Gibbon reviews the work of Brody (1973) and puts forward his own analysis of the driving forces of change in rural Ireland. Similarly, Twomey's (1976) study is not as renowned as the other sociological works reviewed here but it warrants inclusion since, as the title² suggests, it is specifically a study of farm wives and it investigates their power position through an analysis of their involvement in decision-making processes. Hannan and Katsiaouni (1977) state that their study is an attempt to provide some information on nuclear family interaction patterns in Ireland. They examine how and why farm family interaction patterns have changed in Ireland since the 1930s and variations in these patterns.

2. Twomey, Timothy J.: "A Study of the Involvement of Farm Wives in Farm, Farm Home and Family Decisions and Tasks". Masters of Agricultural Science Thesis NUI 1976 (unpublished).

They describe interaction patterns as changing from those of the traditional family structure which was typical of rural Ireland during the time of Arensberg and Kimball's research (clear division of labour, patriarchal authority, maternal socio-economic role) towards the "modern urban middle-class" model (minimal spousal segregation, joint decision-making, shared emotional supportive rôles). For this study, 408 husband-wife pairs living on small farms in the West of Ireland were interviewed intensively. Fox's (1978) anthropological analysis of Tory Island details the social structure and customs of this island which he describes as being very different from those of mainland Ireland. The final study included in this review is Scheper-Hughes' (1979) anthropological and psychological study of a mountain village in Co. Kerry, where she lived for a year. She analyses the social structures and culture of "Ballybran", the pseudonym she gives to the mountain village, and concludes that the culture and traditions of rural Ireland have died.

III THE PATRILINEAL SYSTEM OF INHERITANCE – A CENTRAL DYNAMIC

The patrilineal system of land transference in Ireland means that women rarely inherit farms. This system is frequently described but it or its implications for the individuals involved are rarely analysed. Arensberg and Kimball note that the patrilineal system is one of many which could have developed. They describe the different status and prestige vested in the rôles of the country men and women. They attribute the controlling rôle occupied by the father within the family as being directly related to his status as landowner (p. 46). He abdicates this controlling position with his transference of the farm to his son (p. 121). Elsewhere, they recount the precedence which is accorded to the older men: "The men of full status who head farms and farm" (p. 170). It is by virtue of their position as farm heads and owners that the men come to represent the interests of the community before local authority figures and government officials (pp. 170-174). Arensberg and Kimball simultaneously recount how the country districts only vaguely recognise the right of a woman to hold property (p. 133) – in widowhood it is regarded as a trust for a son, brother or some other male relative. Arensberg and Kimball lucidly describe how the land of rural Ireland is owned by the men, and this ownership status carries with it privileges and legitimate access to other farming activities. But they do not consider the profound implications of the community's "vague recognition" of a woman's right to hold property. Since the father's controlling rôle within the family is associated with his status as *landowner*, his representation of community interests before authority figures is linked to his position as *farm owner* and precedence is accorded to the old men who

head farms, the rôle and prestige of women is greatly deflated by their non-ownership status.

McNabb (1964) also describes the authority, social prestige and status which are embedded in the rôle of the father/farmer figure and he too locates the source of all this in his position as owner of the farm (pp. 228/229). Messenger (1969) describes how sons obtain land from their fathers or widowed mothers. When he questioned the islanders about prestige symbols and the positions of individuals in the status hierarchy, he found the only consensus which emerged was the placing of land and capital at the apex of the rank order of symbols and the assigning of men who possess these in greatest quantity to the top end of the hierarchy, and landless men at the bottom (p. 85). He does not comment on the fact, however, that as non-owners women are automatically excluded from the communally agreed status hierarchy. Similarly, McNabb detailed how a man achieves a full economic and social status only when he becomes the owner of a farm (p. 243). Unfortunately the corollary of this for women, who are virtually assured they will never become the owners of farms, is left unexplored.

Both Brody (1973), who tries to be more tuned into the sentiments of women than Arensberg and Kimball, and Scheper-Hughes (1979) argue that rural Ireland is in a state of social disintegration and decline. In outlining the "devaluation" of traditional mores however, they overlook those that remain intact and patterns of ownership and inheritance are some of the most fundamental of these. Brody questions what he considers to be Arensberg and Kimball's idyllic presentation of life in rural Ireland and argues instead that it is fraught with tensions and divisions. He is sensitive to the situation of rural women and describes their migration as an expression of their disillusionment with rural life. He maintains that the woman's rôle has "ironically" (p. 127) given girls an emotional freedom to emigrate from the rural situation. It is ironic because they obtain this freedom through their disinherited position, while the son or owner/inheritor which Brody uses as a synonym (p. 127) is tied by the duty and responsibility that accompany inheritance. But Brody does not consider how or why this situation, which is mobilised against the girls, arose in the first place – or how it obviously remains intact if it is through their exclusion that they gain the "freedom" to emigrate. Similarly, Scheper-Hughes argues that it is easier for girls to emigrate from Ballybran because they are not committed, as the boys are, to carrying on the family farm and name (p. 38). But it would seem impossible for girls to be committed to this system which does not consider them as potential heirs/owners/farmers. She describes how the sexual composition of a family is a major determining factor of size in Ballybran; six or more children usually means a predominance of girls since, for the selection of an heir, parents hope to have

a minimum of two sons (p. 138). She recounts the jubilations which follow when a son is "finally" born on a farm where they have been waiting for an heir (p. 142). It is obvious from this that in Ballybran sons are still considered the legitimate heirs and owners of the land and the main structure justifying this simultaneously denies girls legitimate claims of ownership on the land. Scheper-Hughes leaves us with the understanding that girls are not as integrated into rural life as boys. But had she investigated why this is the case, we would have had a clearer understanding of the position of women in rural Ireland.

Gibbon (1973) claimed that previous sociological studies of Ireland had given an unrepresentative picture of a homogeneous, harmonious society. While Gibbon illustrates class differentials and identifies the dominance of the large farmer, he does not note the gender differentials or identify the male dominance inherent in the situation he describes. Whether referring to large or small farms, he speaks of "his" farm, household and family labour force without further comment (p. 485). He describes the development of capitalism in agriculture as threatening small and inefficient farmers, but it seems clear that it has not threatened the pervasive view of farming as a male industry.

Twomey (1976) notes the patrilineal line without comment — he finds a higher percentage of female ownership than the national average in his study and says this probably reflects a higher percentage of widows in that county (p. 5). He notes too that the increased financial independence of women with off-farm employment is positively associated with their authority position and involvement in farm decisions (p. 76). So Twomey implicitly recognises that women are only likely to own land in unusual circumstances, and he also recognises the importance of financial independence for the authority position of farm wives and their involvement in farm decisions. However he does not identify the link between the two factors. The patrilineal line of inheritance contributes in many respects to the greater financial dependence of the wives. They do not have any ownership claims on the land, and although as he illustrates they do work on the farm, they must secure off-farm employment to obtain the financial independence which then legitimates greater involvement in farm decisions.

Hannan and Katsiaouni's study (1977) includes an important dimension which focuses on the lives of farm women. This is their attempt to identify and understand the change from the traditional rôle of farm women as depicted by Arensberg and Kimball to a more "urban" type rôle where women's activities become more house bound. However, the "modern urban middle-class" model used by Hannan and Katsiaouni as one of the anchors of their research overlooks many of the different dynamics at play in the rural situation, particularly relating to women, which will affect interaction patterns. One of

the most fundamental of these is the patrilineal system. They point out that, unlike non-farm work, the work context of the farmer is very much within the family (p. 86). This is a very different situation than that of most of his urban counterparts, as is the fact that he usually owns his means of production and is his own "boss" (Hannan and Katsiaouni found in 79 per cent of the cases they interviewed that husbands had inherited the farm). His wife, on the other hand, usually occupies the position of an unpaid worker. However, neither the effects of this for inter-personal relationships and gender power relations, nor the link between these effects and the patrilineal line of inheritance are raised.

Fox (1978) describes how different patterns of inheritance operate on Tory Island. He describes how males and females inherit land equally (p. 99). The main consideration is "land of the marriage" (p. 106). That is, each marriage requires land and this must be provided for. If a woman or man were to marry and their spouse had land, they would not press their claims to their home land but would leave it for other siblings. He describes this system as a sensible adaptation to a difficult environment in that it allows the rational distribution of land which, given the island's population and terrain, would not be facilitated by the patrilineal system of inheritance (p. 126). However, his description of the "holding" and ownership of land contains a number of contradictions with this egalitarian image of inheritance patterns. He notes that men predominate in records of ownership since "women are far more likely than men to relinquish claims" (p. 99). It is unclear why this is so if men and women are truly equal heirs. He describes how land will be spoken of as belonging to a man but, *on analysis*, will turn out to belong to him and his two sisters (p. 99). Fox also outlines the case of a girl who inherited land from her father on her marriage. When her father bought more land after her marriage, he divided it between his sons and *son-in-law*. These recountings illustrate that, while the normal patrilineal system of inheritance does not hold on Tory, it has not significantly weakened the identification of holding/owning land as the legitimate domain of the male. The woman may be a channel through which land is obtained, but it is only in the anomalous situation of widowhood that she is noted as a holder/owner (p. 113).

The social, economic and power position of women in farming life is greatly reduced by their limited claims to the land. This position is perpetuated by the patrilineal line of inheritance. This order of the situation is so deeply entrenched that it is viewed as natural and unchangeable and not only is an alternative rarely considered by the individuals involved, but the profound implications of this system are often glossed over by social analysts. Indeed, it leads to statements regarding inheritance that are contrary to presented evidence. McNabb (1964) says that "all members of the farm have equal rights"

(p. 243) regarding inheritance, and Hannan and Katsiaouni state that "the process of land acquisition through inheritance and purchase is related to age and family cycle stage" (p. 69). These incongruous statements reflect the general neglect of these studies to focus attention on and examine the relationship between land acquisition and gender or the gender power relations implicit in the males' almost guaranteed position as "owner", while females are continuously disinherited.

IV THE ANALYSIS OF THE FATHER/SON RELATIONSHIP

The failure to fully investigate the links between the farm wives' disinherited position and their position in the family farm and community is all the more surprising since an awareness of such links is displayed by the analyses of the father's transfer of the land to the son. Arensberg and Kimball ponder the power relationships between father and son in some detail — they discuss the "lifelong subordination" (p. 56) of sons who at that time often did not inherit the farm until they were middle aged. They discuss the lack of say that sons have at farms and markets and they describe the father/son division of labour as more than an arrangement of farm management — it was part of the system of controls, duties and sentiments which made up family life and reflected their relationship with their parents. This leads them to conclude that it is impossible to treat the two spheres of behaviour, that is family life and farm rôles, separately (p. 56). McNabb (1964) outlines how the father greatly values his authority and social prestige and holds on to these tenaciously. He is inspired to hold on to them in this tenacious fashion by the fact that he himself has been a dependant for so long. He describes how the son is intensely aware of his subordinate position (p. 231) and, when he inherits, he gets those things which he had been deprived of for so long — ownership and the right to dispose of his own private property (p. 229). This results in his determination to prevent his family "from invading his own personal domain" (p. 229). Messenger (1969) details how the father's transference of land to his son is not without difficulties, "most fathers in Inis Beag are loath to surrender their property and with it control of the family" (p. 68). Brody (1973) describes how fathers are having to recognise the increased independence of their sons consequent on wider social changes. This recognition takes the form of earlier inheritance and involvement in farm management. He notes that the dominance which the father had over his son has been a source of amazement for most commentators on Irish life (p. 109). Such a system required an extraordinarily deep-felt respect for the father's authority and it was perpetuated by the continual assumption of the father's rôle by the son.

Arensberg and Kimball's description of the importance of owning land is insightful and valuable. They clearly relate the subordinate position occupied

by the son and his limited participation at fairs with his non-ownership status prior to inheritance. It is a great pity that the position of the farm wife or what her absence from the fair represents is not scrutinised in the same way. McNabb indicates how it is the lengthy powerless position of the son which results in the entrenchment of the father's power-position. However, the power/powerless positions of the husband/wife, father/mother are not explored in the same way by McNabb, Messenger or Brody. In many respects, the position of the women presents greater difficulties than that of sons in that, while a son is faced with a long subservient wait, he is a potential father/owner arbiter and judge. The lucid descriptions of the dynamics of the father/son relationship illustrate the crucial importance of land ownership for status and prestige. These insights could have proved even more enlightening had they also been examined in relation to gender.

V THE ANALYSIS OF GENDER ASCRIBED WORK RÔLES AND ACTIVITIES

All of the studies describe the gender prescribed spheres of activity and frequently present these as having rigidly defined boundaries. Some of the studies detail the dissatisfaction of some women with these rigidly prescribed rôles (Messenger, Brody, Hannan and Katsiaouni, Scheper-Hughes). However, some fundamental questions about these prescribed rôles are never raised: for example, how they initially developed and are maintained particularly if some rôle players are dissatisfied with their prescribed spheres of activity, or the different social status and economic consequences of the differing rôles.

Arensberg and Kimball present the gender-related division of labour as a functional development within the society. The duties of each are complementary (p. 195). Despite this image of a natural evolution of complementary rôles, they describe the different status and prestige vested in each. The farm wife or mother "serves her men" (p. 35), and does not seat herself to eat until they have finished their meal. The husband/father occupies the "controlling rôle" within the family (p. 46). Arensberg and Kimball accept without question the greater status which is awarded to the work of men. They say it is harder, more varied and wider in scope and attitudes reflect the greater valuation given to male activities; "The authors have heard men admonish a woman for interruption with such phrases as: 'woman, be silent while we [men] are talking about ploughing'" (pp. 48-49). Here it is clear that the differing status also operates beyond the spheres of work — in this instance it is obvious in interpersonal relations and it also seems to be closely identified with gender since they tell her as a "woman" to be quiet. While Arensberg and Kimball say that the work of the men is harder and more valued,

their description of the woman's activities leaves us unclear about why this is the case (pp. 35-39). The women begin work earlier each day than the men, their work is presented as being more time-consuming and they end later. They also state that the work of the women is as important for the farm economy as that of the men. But at no point do they explore the anomaly between this observation and the low status awarded to the women's work, or why their contribution to the farm is not more recognised. Nor do they investigate why such rigid sanctions, taboos and myths are necessary to maintain the gender related division of work (a man concerning himself with "women's" work "is the subject of derisive laughter" [p. 48]) if it is the natural complementary division they suggest.

Arensberg and Kimball provide useful insights into the different status accorded to the gender work rôles and how this pervades other aspects of rural life. But their focus on the complementary nature of these rôles means that while they give us valuable insights into what the women do, they fail to address how or why the rôles developed. They also do not question why the male rôle is superior in terms of status, prestige and financial reward, or indeed why it is the men who came to occupy this rôle.

It is clear throughout McNabb's (1964) study that the designated work rôle of women is demanding and time consuming. He recognises the exploitative nature of the women's rôle, saying daughters are never compensated for their work on the farm (p. 188). He describes the "unrelieved monotony" of the woman's work and says her tasks are "onerous and unvarying" (p. 234). Additional to this are the increased farm duties which she and the children must shoulder when her husband has gone to town, a hurling match or a race meet. The woman, on the other hand, "rarely sees the outside of her home" (p. 234). Despite the onerous, monotonous tasks she undertakes and her constant availability as a relief worker, she is not acknowledged as making an important contribution to the family farm. As a bride, she must compensate for her entry to the farm with a dowry and she and her work always occupy a lower social prestige position (pp. 226-227). McNabb provides a strong sense of the unequal position occupied by farm women. While this is useful, it stops short of an investigation of how or why this position is allocated to women, how she feels about it or what encourages her to continue subscribing to such an exploitative rôle. His observations would be even more fruitful had they prompted these questions.

Messenger also tries to present us with some understanding of the woman's rôle when he analyses the status and power attributed to her rôle. He maintains that within marriage she is the "strong" person in the household, sharing at least equally in decision-making and, in many cases, the husband bows to her decisions. This is not only the case for minor matters but in affairs of

“utmost importance” and “activities normally within the male sphere, such as farming” (p. 78). However, there are many questions surrounding the position occupied by women which he leaves unaddressed. It is unclear why it is only “within marriage” that women occupy this egalitarian position or why it is not carried over to public spheres and recognised there. He does not question why certain activities “normally within the male sphere” are identified as such if he usually bows to his wife’s decisions in matters relating to these activities. Nor does he investigate whether the involvement of women in such decisions is affected by the perception of these activities as being outside of her legitimate sphere. Messenger’s image of wives as equal participants in family power structures is contrary to the control and greater status his study identifies with the male rôle and it is difficult to align with the account the women gave to his wife about how restrictive they find their rôle. Many confided that they were unhappy about “being forced” to remain home minding children and performing tedious household chores (p. 77). They frequently expressed jealousy of and resentment against what they considered to be the less time-consuming and stressful workload of men, and the greater freedom enjoyed by their husbands (p. 77). The women provide the material which allows Messenger to describe how unhappy they are with the form of division of labour on the island and the work they are assigned by this division. This gives an important perspective on how the women feel about their prescribed rôle. But Messenger does not move beyond this to question why it has to be this way or what social forces hold it in place regardless of the voiced dissatisfactions of the women.

Brody documents the increased reference to urban standards by the rural community as a reflection of the decline and disintegration of traditional mores and values. However, he overlooks how this reference to urban standards occurs from within traditionally defined spheres rather than destroying traditional mores and values. The father and son negotiate the son’s earlier inheritance as a sign of his increased independence, the wife places greater emphasis on cleanliness and tidiness in the home. He describes the exclusion of women from the social centres of the community and details “the insignificance attributed to womanhood” in public life (p. 110). While the woman’s influence may have been significant in home and community life, “it was informal and domestic: women had at least to appear to be without authority . . .” (pp. 110-111). Why must the women appear authority-less? What maintained her rôle in this way? What would a different female rôle have threatened? Brody supplies sharp valuable observations but there are many subsequent questions left unasked.

Twomey begins his study with the auspicious statement that unique to farming is the strong interdependence between family and business, between

the consumption and production unit. He none the less conducts his study using a traditional narrow definition of farm work which is based on visible, monetarily rewarded farm yard work. If women increase their involvement in these activities and actively seek information about these activities, they will have strengthened "their bargaining position" and become more involved in farm decisions (p. 64). Although it is not overtly stated, there is a tacit implication here that women are in a position where they must strengthen their bargaining position. He maintains that women become involved according to their "interests and activities" (p. 35). However, he does note that the larger the family, the less time she has available to become involved in farm tasks and decisions. Her involvement varies when she is freed of these restrictions (p. 85). He suggests too that there are activities which "by their very nature and by tradition" (p. 81) women are more involved in, for example milking and calf-feeding activities.

While Twomey sets out by stating the importance of the farm wives' activities for the farm business, he continues to overlook the unrecognised farm work of women by only undertaking an assessment of their involvement in visible, traditionally defined farm tasks. He investigates their involvement in a limited number of farm activities and although he notes how women's prescribed rôle prevents them having the time or energy to invest in these tasks, he does not clarify the link between these two points – the activities of women do not allow them more time to become involved in the stereotypical "farm" activities. He does not establish why it is necessary for her to engage further in these "farm" activities in order to guarantee her rôle in farm decision-making given the links he ostensibly recognises between the farm and the household. Twomey gives a clear indication of the uncertain status of farm wives when he discusses the case of farm wives with off-farm employment. He claims they are more likely to be involved in farm decisions because they receive the same status and privileges as men in their place of work and so may "demand" the same rights with regard to running the farm, and the visible monetary contribution they now make also means they can "demand" a bigger say (p. 76). However, he does not investigate the corollary of this for those farm wives who do not have off-farm employment, or what it implies about the status and value attributed to their work.

Hannan and Katsiaouni (1977) perceive the farm as the production unit, the house as the consumption unit, and both as constituting completely separate spheres. They then go on to say that task rôles in the farm family can be divided into those of the husband (the farm), the wife (household and housekeeping) and those which are joint or demand at least some husband participation (the children) (p. 122). They maintain that recent changes in rural Ireland augment this separation, farm wives becoming increasingly

like their urban counterparts and increasingly confined to household activities, while the commercialisation of agriculture necessarily exaggerates the exclusive economic provider rôle of the male (p. 24/p. 15). Because Hannan and Katsiaouni accept the different gender roles without asking how they were established or why they are maintained, they present likely future developments in a way which continues to obscure the unrecognised farm work of women. By stating the farm wife is becoming increasingly like her urban counterpart, the important contribution of wives to the farm, both through their household/farm work and their more visible farm yard work, is further obscured. Two-thirds of "farmers" interviewed said that, without the contribution of wives and younger children, some line of production would have to be dropped. They also note that a high level of economic activity requires a high level of efficiency in farm, household and farm yard operations and in farm management generally (p. 160). But, by stressing similarities with her urban counterpart, the continuing importance of farm wives and their household activities for general farm production are obfuscated. Similarly, their notion of the inevitable more exclusive economic provider rôle of the male masks the productive importance of the wife for the farm business. This perception that rôles will "inevitably" develop in this way is not shared by other analysts. For example, Gasson (1981) and Kessler (1976) maintain that the mechanisation of farming should allow females even more opportunity to become involved in the farm yard since it reduces the need for physical strength. Hannan and Katsiaouni describe the farm wife as increasingly withdrawing to the farm house as her previous farm yard activities are dropped because they are no longer economically viable, or have expanded to become commercial enterprises (p. 26). This observation would have been more useful had it prompted Hannan and Katsiaouni to ask why farm wives drop farm yard activities if they become commercial enterprises or why it is considered "natural" for her to retreat to the house in the face of these. It is clearly not a question of ability since, in the aberrant 2 per cent of cases where husbands were incapacitated, wives did nearly all the farm work (p. 70). Rather than questioning the fundamental division of labour, they diverge into an examination of variations of established patterns, i.e., whether a greater or lesser number of children means more or less husband participation in child care. However, child care basically remains the primary concern of the wife. Nor do they assess the implications of the different status and recognition awarded each rôle, or question whether this too is "inevitable"; they maintain that "deeply institutionalized normative factors" set limits to the extent of the husband's helpfulness, especially in housekeeping (p. 131) and they recount female breaching of basically male dominated spheres as not being nearly as seriously ridiculed as the reverse "a reflection, no doubt, of the relative status

or prestige ascribed to both male and female rôles" (p. 71). Hannan and Katsiaouni recognise the different status attributed to the gender prescribed rôles. But they do not explore whether the persistence of gender specific rôles will also mean the persistence of differing status and prestige positions.

Scheper-Hughes describes how the normally small profits from the tourist season are looked upon as "windfalls" by most guest-house women, analogous to their old "butter and egg" money (p. 50). She describes this "butter and egg" money as having been perceived as the only legitimate source of income for the older generation. While Scheper-Hughes gives a clear indication of the women's limited access to the farm family finances, she does not question why this is the case. Both the butter and egg and the guest-house money represent the non-recognition of the farm wives' contribution to the farm, in that they are sources of income to which she is legitimately entitled, since she has been solely responsible for them and they are perceived as being "extra curricular" farming activities. The implication in this, however, is that she is not automatically perceived as being entitled to the general farm income, or as having made an important contribution to it. This, however, is not explored by Scheper-Hughes.

These studies give us a strong sense of the work and activities of women in rural Ireland. They also give us an impression of the status and privilege attached to their rôle and on the merit of these points alone the studies contribute greatly to our understanding of the lives of rural women. But there are a number of crucial questions these studies fail to ask. How and why did these gender rôle divisions occur, what are the implications for rôle players, why do women continue subscribing to a system which they frequently appear unhappy with? It is true that a number of the studies point to female migration as an expression of discontent, but what about those who stayed? What is it that holds the system so solidly together, that the only option is migration? Messenger (1969) never questions why the grievances of the women remain secrets to which his wife is privy, or why these grievances are not turned into action that instigates changes. McNabb (1964) claims that, while women would like their husbands to play a more intimate rôle in family relations, they are afraid any change in his rôle will weaken their own (pp. 229/230). Brody, Messenger and Scheper-Hughes all argue that mothers encourage daughters to emigrate because they do not want them to occupy the same restrictive rôles as they did. This shows their recognition of the deep dissatisfaction of the women, and the difficulties in changing the current situation. However, this observation did not lead in any case to an exploration of the strength of the social structures and legitimacy supporting rôle definitions which made exodus the only considered alternative. The fundamental legitimacy, restrictiveness and continual perpetration of prescribed spheres of activity are not rigorously scrutinised in any of the studies.

VI PARTICIPATION IN FARMING AND RURAL SOCIAL ORGANISATIONS

All of the studies provide an insight into the farming structures, organisations and other social groups which existed in rural Ireland at the time of their research. While these descriptions are valuable, there is a lack of rigorous analysis regarding who was involved in these groups, factors affecting participation or status awarded to participants.

Arensberg and Kimball (1940) give a detailed description of fairs which were the direct ancestor of today's mart, the first of which was introduced in 1955. They describe the local fair as a matter of pride, being considered an index of the industry and wealth of the region. They were the "chief occasions of commercial and monetary activity" (p. 293) and they provided the "great testing ground for male prowess, skill and intelligence" (p. 289). One of the most salient features of the fair was the absence of women – "They are masculine affairs" (p. 283). This is recounted as a legitimate, descriptive feature of the fair without considering exactly what this exclusion signifies. It means women do not feature in the chief economic/monetary event, in the source of local pride, nor partake in the industry and wealth of the region. She is absent from the testing ground for "prowess, skill and intelligence". There is an implicit suggestion about the contribution she has made to these areas if her absence is "legitimate" and her invisible position is further consolidated by her lack of involvement in the prestigious activities associated with the fair.

Arensberg and Kimball identify the *cuaird*, the evening gathering of the old men of the community, as playing the most decisive rôle in political and social life. The community regulates its internal affairs through the *cuaird* – "it is here public opinion is formulated" (p. 184). Once again, the exclusion of women is quickly dismissed; "The women do not go on *cuaird* like the men. Their sphere of activity is better confined within the family sphere" (p. 196). They do not investigate whether such confinement is reflected in the status and prestige position she occupies. Indeed, they present an ambivalent explanation of the status of women in relation to the *cuaird*. They claim that, while women do not take part in the *cuaird*, they are not excluded or treated lightly (p. 196). At the old men's *cuaird*, the woman of the house is nearly always present. "She remains silent or is ignored" so long as their talk deals with the world of the men's interests but, when talk turns to her sphere, she is consulted and ready to take an active part (p. 196). Arensberg and Kimball seem to have presented a misleading interpretation of the women's rôle regarding the *cuaird*. While they note the exclusion of the women they simultaneously maintain they are not excluded or treated lightly. But their evidence points to the contrary – it details how the women have had a position

of non-participation created for them in one of the most active, powerful social structures of that time.

McNabb (1964) notes that "the chief institutions . . . are so organised and related to each other as to guarantee the authority of the father and the conservation of property" (p. 243). He does not explore however how, in order to do this, they must necessarily be mobilised against farm wives/women. In order to uphold the authority of the father and conserve his ownership of property, the continued marginalisation of women is essential. He describes how the participation of farmers and farm labourers in one farming organisation, *Muintir na Tire*, reflects traditional class structures (p. 208); farmers occupy the front row seats and speak more often, while farm labourers sit at the back "and do all their talking outside the door" (p. 208). This valuable insight into stratification in rural Ireland fails, however, to pick up on the marginal position occupied by women — it is not a question of whether they occupy front or back row seats, because they are absent.

McNabb identifies community organisations which were developing at that time as organised forces of change. But he does not consider whether the manner in which these organisations operate, who the members are and the issues they address will determine if they are agents of change or props for the existing order. Regarding the position occupied by women, it seems to be the latter. New farming educational groups and structures continue to be aimed at "young men", those who always had access to farming knowledge. Farming organisations now operate at a national and international level "welding the farmers into a power group capable of influencing national policy" (p. 246). But these organisations continued and continue to be primarily male dominated and, in representing farmers at a national and international level, they present it as a masculine industry. McNabb claims the development of the Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA), while having an unambitious programme, will be significant in that "for the first time, women have the opportunity to assume an institutionalised rôle outside of the home" (p. 246). As a result, women will have a greater influence on community affairs. McNabb provides an understanding of the extent of women's non-participation in farming institutions and organisations. This new institutional rôle is a novelty. But the fact that women are unused to having a platform will have implications for the way it develops and is used. It would also have been fruitful if McNabb had recognised the significance of their platform being placed outside of the central farming arena. It could also be argued that the increased involvement of women in ICA-prompted community affairs corroborates their unrecognised farm household/work rôle. Their activities include voluntary cooking and organising of meals for local events, organising outings for local children and events for the elderly (Shortall, 1990).

In his discussion of power structures on Inis Beag, Messenger (1969) distinguishes between formal and informal control structures. These structures define the parameters of social behaviour. Formal control structures achieve this through the negative threat of physical punishment or banishment and the positive reward of government services. Informal control structures use gossip and ridicule as negative force and group approval as a positive reward (p. 55). Positions in the formal control system are occupied by administrators of local and national government services, politicians, bailiffs, government guards and officials. Positions in the informal structure are occupied by the bishop, the parish priest, the curate, the headmaster and the "King" (the local entrepreneur or "gombeen" man). Messenger notes that the formulation of public opinion, political and social life and local policies "rest largely in the hands of government officials and the priest, headmaster and King" (p. 66).

While he provides a useful introduction to the power structure of the island, Messenger does not address the positions occupied or unoccupied by women. Of all the formal/informal social control positions he details, not one is occupied by an island woman. Equally as startling as this is the fact that it does not even warrant a comment from Messenger. He does not explore the sources of legitimation of the women's absence from formal and informal power structures or why they acquiesce to their own exclusion. The fact that women are not present in these structures is a non-issue.

Brody (1973) describes the bar as "the focus of community life" (p. 160). It is where "men meet and discuss". Local women do not frequent the bars, they meet in the shop. He says that those least involved in farming life are also the least likely to go to bars and least at ease with the bar's ways, and they are the least committed to life in the farming society (p. 161). He describes those who spend most time and feel most at ease in the shop as those "furthest removed from farm work. It follows that they are also most removed from any commitment to staying in the countryside at all" (p. 163). But there is a fundamental difference between being least committed to life in a farming community and being most excluded by life in a farming community. McNabb (1964) who also describes the bar as the place where men meet to "discuss business and local events" (p. 233), gives us more of an insight into the social customs which prohibit the presence of women: "A respectable woman would never set a foot inside one of these places unless there was a grocery shop attached. She certainly never drinks in the local bar" (p. 233). In this way, women are excluded from the most important meeting place where business is discussed informally. Her absence is almost virtuous — the bar is not considered a fit place for a "respectable woman". Similarly, it would seem more appropriate for Brody to deduce that those who frequent the shop in Inishkillane are not those furthest removed from farm work but those who receive

least recognition for their farm work or are furthest removed from farming structures.

Twomey (1976) considers it likely that the participation of farm wives in structures and organisations concerning the farm business will increase their involvement in decisions and tasks. However, he overlooks the extent to which many of these structures and organisations discourage her involvement and reinforce her marginalised position. He acknowledges that agricultural advisers have often attempted to encourage the adoption of new farm practices by working with the farm operator or husband alone (p. 2) and elsewhere he says that the involvement of wives in expansion programmes should have implications for the advisory service (p. 32). The level of involvement of farm wives in information-seeking activities is expected to be positively associated with their level of involvement in farm decisions – it “generally strengthens their bargaining position in decision-making because they can draw on knowledge and experiences relevant to the content of the decision” (p. 64). Again, Twomey overlooks the manner in which agricultural organisations subtly discourage wives from becoming informed about the farm business. Irish agricultural services follow a policy of addressing notification of farm walks, demonstrations and courses to husbands. This tacitly suggests to wives that they are not expected or encouraged to attend. The low female attendance then acts as a further deterrent confirming the idea for many women that they have no legitimate place at these activities (Shortall, 1990). A superficial investigation of a positive relationship between farm wives’ involvement in information-seeking activities and farm decision-making processes overlooks the extent to which the information farm wives have access to is somewhat predetermined by other factors.

Twomey maintains too that the modern farm family in rural Ireland will become more egalitarian with the increased participation of family members, including wives, in voluntary organisations. But, like McNabb, he fails to examine the nature of the voluntary organisations women become involved in. Most extend their unpaid servicing rôle into the community through their voluntary activities – cooking for local events, organising outings, fund-raising and maintaining community property. The organisations men typically become involved in do not have the same servicing rôle (Shortall, 1990). Similarly, Hannan and Katsiaouni suggest that the participation of husbands and wives in formal organisation membership, in the mass media, and the “increasing collaboration in a market economy which would involve the husband-father in ever wider networks of market relationships and his wife in more consumption orientated relationships” (p. 91) will expose them to meaningful alternative ways of organising family rôles. But the depth of the alternatives provided by these external reference groups are questionable; farming groups reaffirm

the industry as a male preserve — it is the father they envisage becoming more involved in market relationships, while the wife becomes increasingly involved in consumption orientated relationships. Thus, contact with external reference groups is not necessarily liberating — here it seems to be supporting the legitimacy of the fundamental order of the social structure.

VII CONCLUSION

In more recent years, many critical feminist studies have focused attention on the lives and work of women (Oakley, 1974; Oakley, 1982; Raphael, 1975; Mitchell and Oakley, 1979; Goode, 1970). Other studies have questioned the sociological theories which were the basis of feminist research. (Beechey, 1978; Delphy, 1981; Eichler, 1980; Sanday, 1973). When these patterns are related to Irish farm wives, it is clear that more attention has been focused on the lives and work of women on Irish farms in more recent years. Despite this, there remains a paucity of knowledge and statistical data on their activities. When the theoretical underpinning of some of the sociological and anthropological studies of rural Irish life are examined, we obtain an insight into how this has arisen. There are many questions pertaining to the lives of farm wives which are not raised. The persistence of the patrilineal line, its links with status, prestige, economic power and the implications for women of being continually excluded from this have not been analysed. It has contributed greatly to the pervasive identification of men with the land. This, in turn, seems to have influenced what is defined as “farm work”. “Farm work” is not all the work essential to the farm business but rather the farm work which is carried out by men. Hence, the narrow parameters which only allow a limited knowledge of the work of farm wives are established. The unquestioned acceptance of the patrilineal line leads these studies to question the economic, social and cultural consequences of inheritance patterns for sons without any consideration that similar questions could be raised for women. The fundamental legitimacy, restrictiveness and continual perpetuation of prescribed spheres of activity are not rigorously scrutinised. These spheres, through time restraints and perceptions of what are the legitimate activities of each, allow differential access to recognised farming resources, knowledge and skills. It affects too the way in which agricultural advisers and professionals dealing with the farm relate to farm wives. Farming organisations and groups are male dominated and present farming as a male industry at local, national and international levels. The involvement of a woman is seen as an aberrant

situation by both the farming organisations and the farming media,³ which also contributes to the pervasive perception of farming as a male industry (Shortall, 1990).

While the studies reviewed provide us with an insight into the lives of farm women, they seem to have been restrained by the authors' acceptance of the "unquestioned" fundamentals of the order of the rural situation. There are a number of crucial questions central to an understanding of gender issues which remain unasked. What are the sources of economic, social and political prestige in the farming context? We do not know why the work and activities of men and women are valued differently and receive differing amounts of recognition. Nor do we know why the structures of farming life are organised and pertain to women in a manner which shows little recognition for their work. Neither has there been any rigorous analysis of why women are so notably absent from farming structures. These are some of the questions which future studies of rural life must ask.

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3. For a comprehensive description of how the farming media has marginalised women see Duggan (1987). She traces the treatment of women by the farming press from the mid-1950s. She highlights the many ways in which women are presented as consumers, while their husbands are treated as producers. The farming activities of women, which she clarifies, are ignored by the farming press.

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