Chapter 7

GENDER AND ATTITUDES TO WOMEN’S EMPLOYMENT: 1988–2002

Sara O’Sullivan

INTRODUCTION

One of the most dramatic changes in Irish society since 1988 is the substantial increase in the number of women participating in the paid workforce. The 1988, 1994 and 2002 ISSP “Family and Changing Sex Roles” cross-sectional data offers the opportunity to explore changes in attitudes to women’s employment over a key 14-year time period. The nature and extent of these changes will be discussed, with a particular focus on the role of gender in relation to attitudes to women’s employment. The discussion will also include reference to comparative material, concentrating on 2002 ISSP data from Great Britain, Austria, the United States, Hungary and the Netherlands.

A central issue is the relationship between attitudes and behaviour. Are increases in Irish women’s labour force participation accompanied by a move away from traditional ideas about the gendered division of labour? Braun et al (1994: 45) argue that “high female labour force par-

1 I would like to thank Máire Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, Niamh Humphries and Bernadette Rock for their assistance with the ISSP data files. I would also like to thank the editors, Betty Hilliard and Máire Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, for their support and encouragement.
participation alone does not automatically lead to liberal gender role attitudes” (see also Hollinger, 1991). Following Treas and Widmer (2000), the chapter will also explore whether the differences in Irish men and women’s attitudes highlighted in relation to the 1988 and 1994 data persist in 2002. Although not the focus of this discussion, it is recognised that gender is not the only variable of interest here and that age, class, educational levels and current employment status (either of self if female, or spouse if male) are variables that also have explanatory power in relation to this data. A related issue is whether there is any evidence of a backlash in relation to women’s employment, especially maternal employment. The final issue to be considered is how Irish attitudes to women’s employment compare to attitudes found elsewhere.

Women in the Irish Labour Force

From 1926 to 1986 the proportion of Irish women in the labour force remained relatively stable; 32 per cent of Irish women participated in the paid labour force in 1926 and 31 per cent in 1986 (Kennedy, 2001: 70). From 1986 onwards the numbers began to rise sharply, and by 2001 this figure had risen to 55 per cent (Eurostat, 2002: 46). Particularly notable is the increase in the numbers of married women in the Irish workforce from 34 per cent in 1986 to 51 per cent in 1996 (Kennedy, 2001: 79). The numbers of working mothers has increased dramatically since 1986 (Kennedy, 2001: 70). Rates of part-time work increased from 18.7 per cent of women workers in 1992 to 30.5 per cent in 2002 (the figures for male workers are 3.8 per cent and 6.5 per cent respectively), although they remain marginally lower than the European average of 33.5 per cent (Eurofound, 2003). There has also been a large increase in the number of dual income households, from 16 per cent of couples in 1986 to 32 per cent in 1996 (Kennedy, 2001: 76). Of course Ireland is not unique in this respect and broadly similar trends have been noted in other western capitalist societies, although the pace and nature of these changes have not been uniform (Crompton and Harris, 1997; Scott et al., 1996; Panayotova and Brayfield, 1997).

Increases in Irish women’s labour market participation were related to factors such as changes in the structure of the labour market, the decline in the power of the Catholic Church, increased educational attainment for women, and Ireland’s EEC membership (O’Connor, 1998; Kennedy, 2001). Ireland has been characterised as a country with a con-
servative welfare regime, where a breadwinner ideology predominates (van der Lippe and van Dijk, 2002: 226). In the early 1980s, and until the 1990s, there was a belief in a strict sexual division of labour (Treas and Widmer, 2000: 1411). The increased participation of Irish women, and particularly of married women, in the paid labour force has been argued to have challenged both the breadwinner model and “the traditional ideology of women as childbearers and homemakers” (Murphy-Lawless, 2000: 89; see also Kennedy, 2001: 81).

However, it is important also to consider evidence that may lead to a more critical view of these changes (see Kennedy, 2003). Many difficulties remain for Irish women in the workforce, including low pay, unequal pay, horizontal segregation (O’Connor, 1998), vertical segregation (Gal-ligan, 2000) and discrimination on the grounds of gender. State policy has not supported Irish women workers (Kennedy, 2001: 77–8; Tovey and Share, 2003: 250; Murphy-Lawless, 2000). The increase in part-time work for Irish women has “uncertain consequences for gender equality both within the labour force and in the domestic sphere” and is not necessarily a positive development (Fahey et al., 2000: 266). In addition recent figures show that women’s participation in paid employment varies according to family status and age of children; 87.2 per cent for women with no children in comparison to 52.4 per cent for women whose youngest child was aged three or under (CSO, 2004: 21). In contrast male participation rates remain relatively constant irrespective of age or numbers of children (CSO, 2004: 21). This is consistent with Gowler and Legge’s argument that the traditional division of labour tends to reassert itself after children (1982: 147). Following Connell (1987) it can be argued that the gendered division of labour is one of the structural bases of the current gender order and, although the gender order is constantly changing, it is unlikely to be dramatically altered over such a short period of time (see also Ghalam, 1997).

Finally, in order to contextualise the Irish experience it is necessary also to look at the situation in the comparator countries. The OECD reports that in addition to Ireland, the Netherlands also experienced a period of rapid growth in female labour force participation from 1981–2001 (OECD, 2004: 2). Austria, Great Britain and the United States experienced more modest growth during this period. In Hungary there was a small decline in female labour force participation between 1991 and 2002, from 53.2 to 49.8 per cent (OECD, 2005); this can be linked to the
transition from state-market society. In 2002 participation rates were lowest in Hungary, and highest in Great Britain (see Table 7.1 below).

In relation to part-time work, low levels are found in Hungary, the United States and Austria, and high levels in Ireland, the Netherlands (highest in the OECD) and Great Britain (OECD, 2004: 3). Levels of family support also vary considerably across the six countries. Austria is characterised by the most generous child benefit provision in the OECD and the sixth most generous systems of both (paid) maternal leave and childcare subsidies per child. Hungarian mothers are entitled to four years’ paid maternal leave and childcare facilities are “extensively available” for preschool children (Hass et al., 2004: 9). In the Netherlands women workers are offered the ninth most generous child benefit provision in the OECD, although provision for paid leave and childcare is low. Great Britain, Ireland and the US are characterised by low childcare subsidies, low levels of paid leave and poor child benefits (OECD, 2004: 10).

Table 7.1: Key Statistics (Adapted from OECD, 2005; Tables 2b, 5b, 5c United Nations, 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Length</td>
<td>% wages paid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>49.8</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>24 wks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>18 wks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>58.7</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>16 wks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>64.7</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>16 wks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>12 wks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GB</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>26 wks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ATTITUDES TO WOMEN’S EMPLOYMENT

Much of the available work on attitudes to women’s employment focuses on the US, although a number of recent studies have used ISSP data to examine attitudes elsewhere. Overall the general trend in attitudes to women’s participation in the paid workforce has been towards relatively positive attitudes towards female labour force participation (Twenge, 1997). This trend has been interpreted as reflecting increasing liberalisation (Evans, 2000). However, a “strong conviction remains that women’s family responsibilities, particularly those involving young children, must come first” (Scott et al., 1996: 490).

Previous studies of Irish attitudes to gender roles have examined attitudes to women’s paid employment, including Fine-Davis (1983 and 1988), Whelan and Fahey (1994), Hilliard (2006) and Craven (2004). Whelan and Fahey (1994) analysed the 1990 European Values Survey data which fielded some of the same questions as the ISSP survey, including all the ones to be analysed here. They found positive attitudes to women’s employment, coupled with concern about possible effects on children. This they term “indirect resistance” to married women’s labour force participation (1994: 58). They also found a large degree of support for the homemaker role, and this, and not a paid job outside the home, was seen as what women “really want” (1994: 52). The most significant differences between groups were found in relation to age; education was also found to be an important variable. They also argued that “Irish responses are by no means uniformly more traditional that the European average” (1994: 50). Hilliard (2006) drawing on 1988, 1994 and 2002 ISSP data, argues that support for traditional gender roles amongst Irish respondents has significantly declined since 1988. Practice, however, as evidenced by the domestic division of labour, had changed very little.

Previous research drawing on ISSP data has shown that attitudes to women’s employment vary both across time and cross-nationally. Scott et al. (1996), in a comparative study of Germany, the UK and the US argue that the trajectory of attitudinal changes in the three countries was very different, with the pace of change in Britain much slower that in either the US or Germany. Crompton and Harris (1997: 186) in a study of the Czech Republic, Britain and Norway, identify “substantial differences in attitudes to women’s employment, and gender roles” (see also Treas and Widmer, 2000: 1412). Knudsen and Waerness (2001: 77) found that Swedes had more favourable attitudes to women’s employ-
Changing Ireland in International Comparison

Such variations are only to be expected given the different patterns of female labour market participation and the historical position of women across national contexts (Knudsen and Waerness, 2001). These differences make cross-national studies particularly interesting.

Treas and Widmer (2000), in their analysis of the 1994 ISSP data, argue that there is considerable agreement across the 23 ISSP countries in relation to attitudes to women working. “All countries endorse married women’s full-time employment before children. All countries favour full-time, or at least part-time, work once children have left home. All countries recognise that motherhood demands a reduction in labour supply” (2000: 1,427). However, differences remain important in relation to both gender roles, and how motherhood and employment should be balanced.

Treas and Widmer (2000) identified three different attitude regimes termed *work-oriented*, *family-accommodating* and *motherhood-centred*. Two countries from each regime are included in this study. In the work-oriented cluster respondents are least likely to recommend that women stay at home; less traditional views on gender roles are also characteristic. The Netherlands and the United States belong to this grouping. In the biggest cluster, family-accommodating, respondents are least likely to endorse full-time work for mothers. Both Austria and Great Britain are characterised as family-accommodating. In the motherhood-centred cluster respondents are the most conservative on gender roles and are most likely to recommend that women stay at home once they have children. Treas and Widmer argue that in this cluster there is “low consensus on how mothers with school-age children should balance motherhood and employment” (2000: 1,423). Part-time work is not preferred by respondents belonging to this cluster. Hungary and Ireland are characterised as motherhood-centred. Ireland is at the boundary of this cluster and it is argued that a small shift in attitudes would result in a move to a different cluster (Treas and Widmer, 2000: 1426).

Sundström (1999: 194) argues that “when analysing attitudes in a comparative perspective, it becomes important to also analyse the institutional frameworks within which people act” (see also Crompton and Harris, 1997; Knudsen and Waerness, 2001). Attitudes are socially constructed rather than fixed attributes of individuals. Treas and Widmer emphasise that attitudes about women’s employment must be linked to their social and cultural context; “universal factors, namely, the struc-
tural obstacles to combining motherhood and employment, are the domi-
nant influences on normative views” (2000: 1,431). Scott et al. (1996: 4) argue that “attitudes are important indicators of people’s latent tendencies to respond to the opportunities and constraints that are posed by the structural conditions of life”. Sundström’s (1999) analysis of German, Italian and Swedish attitudes highlights the different gender regimes found in each of these states (see also van der Lippe and van Dijk, 2000). However, Treas and Widmer (2000: 1409), in an analysis of 1994 ISSP data from 23 countries, argue that “[t]here is only mixed support for the hypothesis that public opinion conforms to state welfare regime type” (see also Breen and Cooke, 2005).

Age is another crucial variable (Hollinger, 1991; Knusden and Waerness, 2001). Younger people are, in general, “less worried about working mothers than older generations” (Sundström, 1999: 202). However, the relationship between age and attitudes is a complex one with both life cycle and generational changes playing a role (Scott et al., 1996; Sundström, 1999).

Another finding across studies is that men tend to be more conserva-
tive about gender roles than women, particularly about mothers’ partici-
pation in the paid labour force (Sundström, 1999; Crompton and Harris, 1997; Scott et al., 1996; Panayotova and Brayfield, 1997; Knudsen and Waerness, 2001; Breen and Cooke, 2005). Sundström (1999) argues that Swedish men’s attitudes to gender roles are much more conservative than might be expected, and more conservative than men in some other countries:

The Swedish example stands out as the most positive to female labour market participation . . . but also present the largest gender gap in attitudes towards women’s paid work. The Swedish case indicates gender conflicts in which men withdraw from childcare and household responsibilities, something that women compensate for through part-time work. (1999: 34)

As Scott et al. (1996) note, it is women who have experienced the most dramatic changes in relation to gender roles and overall women appear to have more positive attitudes to gender roles than men. Panayotova and Brayfield (1997: 635) argue that this finding reflects the different interests of men and women.
[W]omen are more likely to support an egalitarian division of labour, including women’s employment, because it is in their interest to lessen the burden of two full-time jobs (paid work and family work) and to increase their own economic resources. Men’s attitudes also reflect their self-interest, whereby men may support women’s employment out of economic necessity, but only if it does not interfere with women’s traditional housework and child-rearing responsibilities nor with men’s role as primary breadwinners. [italics in original]

Their comparative study of Hungary and the US leads them to conclude that the gender gap “transcends differences in economic, political and social organization” (Panayotova and Brayfield, 1997: 650). As Sundström (1999: 204) argues, men and women have markedly different lived experiences of combining paid and unpaid work (see also Knudsen and Waerness, 2001). These different experiences influence “ideas about the different natures of men and women” (Connell, 2002: 61), and so impact on attitudes to women’s participation in the labour force. A note of caution must be sounded here, as women are not a homogeneous group. Ghalam (1997: 16), drawing on Canadian research, argues that women’s attitudes to women’s participation in the paid workforce “tended to correspond with their own work and family arrangements”. Canadian women who were either in paid employment, or looking for paid employment, had more positive attitudes than women who worked full-time in the home.

In a comprehensive analysis of these gender differences, Treas and Widmer reach the conclusion that, in general, “[i]n most countries, men and women have very similar attitudes” (Treas and Widmer, 2000: 1,426; see also MacInnes, 1998). However, Ireland, the Czech Republic, Italy, Russia and Slovenia are identified as the exception to this rule. The attitudinal differences between Irish men and women identified by Treas and Widmer (2000) result in them belonging to different clusters; Irish men are characterised as motherhood-centred while Irish women are characterised as work-oriented.

**Variables and Measurement**

The ISSP data set includes a number of questions about gender role attitudes and attitudes to women’s employment. All were fielded in 1988, 1994 and 2002. Several or more of these items were also analysed for the
Gender and Attitudes to Women’s Employment


A: Attitudes to Gender Roles

1. A job is alright, but what a woman really wants is a home and children.
2. Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay.
3. A man’s job is to earn money, a woman’s job is to look after the home and family.
4. Both men and women should contribute to household income.

B: Attitudes to Women Working over the Life Course

5. Do you think that women should work outside the home full-time, part-time or not at all under these circumstances:
   - After marrying and before there are children
   - When there is a child under school age
   - After the youngest child starts school
   - After the children leave home

C: Attitudes to Perceived Consequences of Women’s Paid Employment

6. A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work
7. A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works
8. All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full time job

The original response categories (A and C above) ranged from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. When presenting the Irish data I have followed Sundstrom’s (1999: 200) method of analysis for reasons of clarity. The “agree” figures are made up of the totals from the “strongly agree” and “agree” responses combined. The same method is used to calculate
the “disagree” figures. The remainder, who said they neither agreed nor disagreed, have been eliminated. In relation to the comparative data, this last category has not been eliminated; this would have distorted the overall picture as the proportions disagreeing varied from country to country.

**FINDINGS**

The discussion uses descriptive cross-sectional statistics to outline Irish attitudes to women’s paid employment under the headings identified in the previous section. The focus will be threefold:

1. The differences between Irish men’s and women’s attitudes.
2. Variations in these differences over time.
3. Comparisons with 2002 ISSP data from Britain, the Netherlands, Hungary, Austria and the US.

**Attitudes to Gender Roles**

In relation to item 1 (see Table 7.2 below) both men’s and women’s attitudes move in a similar direction and at a comparable rate, with the numbers agreeing that “a job is alright, but what a woman really wants is a home and children” decreasing. In 1988 and 1994 more men and women agree than disagree with this statement. The decrease in those agreeing is most pronounced between 1994 and 2002. In 2002 only 44 per cent of women agree, although more men continue to agree (49 per cent). The difference in men and women’s responses is similar in 1988 and 1994 but is not statistically significant in 2002.

A high level of support for the role of homemaker is in evidence (see item 2, Table 7.2), with a preponderance of both men and women agreeing with the statement that “being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay” in 1988, 1994 and 2002. It is important to note, however, that overall support for the homemaker role is on the decline; this decline is most pronounced between 1994 and 2002. Both men’s and women’s attitudes in this respect are moving in a similar direction. The difference in men’s and women’s responses is relatively insignificant by 2002.
Table 7.2: Irish Attitudes to Women’s Roles, 1988–2002
(Percentage of males and females agreeing with each statement and significance levels for Chi-square)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>X²</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. A job is alright, but what a woman really wants is a home and children.</td>
<td>71.3</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>65.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay.</td>
<td>78.4</td>
<td>72.9</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>75.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. A man’s job is to earn money, a woman’s job is to look after the home and family.</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>45.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Both men and women should contribute to household income.</td>
<td>73.9</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>n/s</td>
<td>83.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is in relation to normative gender roles (see figure 7.1 above) that the largest difference between Irish men’s and women’s attitudes to gender roles is in evidence. The difference in men and women’s responses begins to close by 2002, when it is moderately significant, having been highly significant in the first two datasets (see Table 7.2). This is also the question where the most attitudinal change is evident from 1988 to 2002. Again we can see that both men’s and women’s responses are moving in a similar direction, albeit at a different pace and from a different starting point.

In contrast, in relation to the statement “both men and women should contribute to household income” there is less change evident in the period under study (see Table 7.2 above). This can be accounted for by looking at the 1994 and 2002 data; men’s response remains relatively stable (83.5 per cent agreeing in 1994 and 83.8 per cent in 2002) while the number of women agreeing with this statement declines from 90 per cent in 1994 to 82.3 per cent in 2002. In 1994 the differences between men and women’s responses are moderately significant, while in 1988 and 2002 they are not significant.

Overall the ISSP data indicates that support for traditional gender roles declined between 1988 and 2002. The rate of change is not uniform across questions and variation is evident in relation to differences between Irish men and women’s attitudes. Gender differences lose their statistical significance in 2002 in relation to item 1, and become less significant in relation to items 2, 3 and 4.
**Attitudes to Women’s Roles: Ireland in Comparative Focus**

The 2002 ISSP data indicates that substantial differences persist cross-nationally in relation to attitudes to women’s roles (Crompton and Harris, 1997; Treas and Widmer, 2000). Overall, Dutch respondents have the least traditional attitudes to women’s roles, while Hungarian respondents have the most traditional attitudes. Irish attitudes to gender roles could not be said to conform to a definite pattern overall. Gender differences are statistically significant cross-nationally in relation to the majority of items.

**Table 7.3: Attitudes to Women’s Roles, 2002 by country**
*(Percentage disagreeing with each statement)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NL</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>AU</th>
<th>GB</th>
<th>IR</th>
<th>HU</th>
<th>% Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. A job is alright, but what a woman really wants is a home and children</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>37.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay.</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. A man’s job is to earn money, a woman’s job is to look after the home and family</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>69.3</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>39.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Bold type indicates that gender differences are statistically significant)

In the majority of countries under study more respondents disagreed than agreed with the statement that “a job is alright, but what a woman really wants is a home and children” (see Table 7.3 above). However, 39.5 per cent of American and 62.1 per cent of Hungarian respondents agreed with this statement, more than the numbers disagreeing. Austrian respondents had the least commitment to the traditional gendered division

---

2 Disagree used as it indicates a negative view of traditional gender roles.

3 The difference between the countries with the highest and lowest percentage disagreeing is recorded here.
of labour, with 50.6 per cent disagreeing with this statement. In comparison, only 12.8 per cent of Hungarian respondents disagreed with this statement. There was a very large difference, 37.8 per cent, between Austrian and Hungarian respondents. Irish attitudes were closest to British attitudes in relation to this item.

In relation to item 2, only in Austria and the Netherlands do more respondents disagree than agree that “being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay”. American respondents demonstrated the highest level of support for the homemaker role, with 62.7 per cent agreeing with the statement. In contrast Dutch respondents were the least likely to agree (26.3 per cent). Here Irish attitudes were again similar to British attitudes.

In relation to item 3, Hungarian respondents hold most traditional views, with 29.7 per cent disagreeing that “a man’s job is to earn money, a woman’s job is to look after the home and family”. This was the only country where more agreed than disagreed with the statement. Irish respondents were the most likely to disagree (69.3 per cent), closely followed by Dutch respondents (67.5 per cent).

### Table 7.4: Both men and women should contribute to household income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NL</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>AU</th>
<th>GB</th>
<th>IR</th>
<th>HU</th>
<th>% Difference^4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>40.1</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>81.6</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>69.6</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>41.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A high degree of support is evident in relation to women’s obligation to contribute financially to the household, and more respondents agreed than disagreed with this statement across all six countries. However, there were large differences in the numbers agreeing, from a low of 40.1 per cent in the Netherlands to a high of 81.6 per cent in Austria. Approximately one-third of Dutch and American and one-quarter of British

---

^4 The difference between the countries with the highest and lowest percentage per category is recorded here.
respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, which would appear to reflect some ambivalence towards the statement. This also goes some way to explaining the large difference reported (41.5 per cent). The differences in the percentages disagreeing were lower at 20.7 per cent. Only in Austria and Hungary were differences between men’s and women’s responses statistically significant.

To conclude, it must be noted that the language used in many of these questions is imprecise and this may have implications in terms of the validity of the findings. For example, “job” is used in two different senses; it refers to paid work in the first statement and to unpaid work in the fourth. Moreover, the word is used in a contradictory way. “A home and children” are placed in opposition to a job in the first statement, but this work is subsequently defined as a job (in the third statement).

In relation to statement two, the phrase “working for pay” is very general. It does not distinguish between full and part-time work, which is problematic; Hakim (1996) has argued that attitudes to part-time and full-time work are quite different. This point is reinforced in the next section when we move on to look at a more nuanced question, examining attitudes to women working at different stages of the life course.

**Attitudes towards Women Working at Different Stages of the Life Course**

The majority of Irish men and women believe that married women should work full time before they have children, and again when their children have left home. Both these figures have increased from 1988 to 2002. Only a minority believe that married women with pre-school or school-age children should work full time. This is in keeping with the general trend reported in previous studies. The percentage of men in this minority group rose in 1994 (from 8.1 per cent to 13.3 per cent for mothers with pre-school children and from 19.5 per cent to 26 per cent for mothers with children at school) and fell in 2002 (to 9.6 per cent and 25 per cent respectively).

There has been an increase in the numbers of men (47.9 per cent) and women (52 per cent) who believe that women with preschool children should work part time. In contrast, in 1988 and 1994 the preferred option from this group was that they stayed at home. Once children are at school there is a consensus that part-time work is appropriate; there has
been a significant decrease in the numbers believing that women in this position should stay at home.

There is an interesting pattern in male responses evident. There is a move towards more positive attitudes to full-time work for women in all stages of the life course between 1988 and 1994. However, from 1994 to 2002 this trend continues, only in respect of married women after children have left home. As already indicated, this period saw an increase in numbers of working mothers. This data may therefore be indicative of a backlash against maternal employment. However, the cross-sectional nature of the data makes it difficult to make any such claim. In addition the questions examine what people think ought to happen and so are not necessarily reflective of experience and practice. A large majority of both males and females, in all employment categories, think that married women, both prior to having children and after the children leave home, should work full-time. In the case of pre-school children, part-time work is the approved route of women respondents, apart from those who are homemakers, or retired (who mainly advised “staying at home”). Men who were full-time employees also mainly suggested part-time employment, but overall males were somewhat more approving of “stay at home” mothers than were females, although most differences were not significant.

Table 7.5: Irish attitudes towards married women working at different stages of the life course 1988–2002 (percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>X²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After marriage, before kids: Work . . .</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>77.3</td>
<td>n/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay Home</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With pre-school child: Work . . .</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>n/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 n/s = significance level equal to or greater than .05.
Overall the trend is towards more supportive attitudes towards married women’s participation in the paid workforce, and in particular for part-time work. Such nuances are not captured by questions reported in the previous sections which do not distinguish between different types of work. Differences between men and women are no longer significant in 2002.

The attitudes reported here for 2002 can be termed work-oriented (Treas and Widmer, 2000). There is an increase in support for part-time work for mothers with pre-school and school-age children; there is a decline in support for mothers staying at home. However, the data is limited insofar as it remains unclear whether such attitudinal changes are reflective of changes in Irish women’s labour market participation, or indicative of an increased commitment to gender equality.

Irish Attitudes towards Married Women Working at Different Stages of the Life Course in Comparative Focus

As one might expect there was some variation in relation to responses to women’s work over the life course, reflecting different labour force participation for women in the different national contexts, as well as different gender regimes. Hungarian attitudes to gender roles remain the most traditional of the six countries under study. However, in Table 7.6 (below) it is evident that the pattern of responses to this series of questions was broadly the same across these five countries and less divergence is evident here than was found in relation to gender roles. This may reflect the precision of the question. To return to the Treas and Widmer (2000)
typology, it would appear that this convergence means the regimes become less useful when analysing the 2002 data.

Broadly speaking the majority view is that women should work full-time before they have children, with between 80.9 per cent (US) and 92.8 per cent (Hungary) responding in this way. In all cases more women than men chose this answer. It is interesting to note that, across the board, support for women working full-time is higher than the female labour force participation rate (see Table 7.1).

Table 7.6: Attitudes towards married women working at different stages of the life course by country 2002 (percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Should women work . . .</th>
<th>Netherlands</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>Austria</th>
<th>Great Britain</th>
<th>Ireland</th>
<th>Hungary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>After marriage, before kids: Work . . .</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>88.6</td>
<td>80.9</td>
<td>92.4</td>
<td>89.7</td>
<td>86.4</td>
<td>92.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay Home</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>With pre-school child: Work . . .</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>45.9</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>46.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay Home</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>45.4</td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>56.2</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>46.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>After youngest at school: Work . . .</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>68.1</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>70.1</td>
<td>76.1</td>
<td>63.1</td>
<td>54.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay Home</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children left home: Work . . .</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>85.6</td>
<td>76.1</td>
<td>80.7</td>
<td>75.1</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td>90.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay Home</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the case of women with pre-school children, full-time work is the least popular option across all six countries, with 3.9 per cent of British and 16.6 per cent of Dutch respondents choosing this option. There is a difference of opinion cross-nationally about the best option for women with preschool children. Part-time work is favoured by respondents in the Netherlands and Ireland. Again there is a disjuncture; Ireland has the third lowest rate of part-time employment for women, and the Netherlands has the highest (see Table 7.1). Staying at home is the preferred option for respondents in Austria and Great Britain (and Hungarian men at 50.1 per cent).

In the case of women with school-age children, the majority preferred the option of part-time work. However, the degree of support for this option was not uniform, and high levels of support for full-time work were evident in the US, Hungary, the Netherlands and Ireland. The lowest level of support for women with school-going children to stay at home was evident in the Netherlands (2.9 per cent) while the highest was in Austria (19.9 per cent).

Overall there was agreement that married women should work full time when their children have left home. The most support was found in Hungary (90.5 per cent) and British respondents (75.1 per cent) were the least likely to answer in this way. Differences here were less important than for other stages of the life course. However, it is difficult to interpret this comparative data, as there may be considerable cross-national differences in the ages at which children leave home. In countries where it is usual for children to leave home early this question may be interpreted differently than in countries where it is usual for children to remain at home for a longer period.

Overall the pattern of Irish responses was similar to American responses (see also Collins and Wickham, 2004).

---

6 For example in the Netherlands (Solda, 2000).

7 For example, in Great Britain in 1999–2000 53 per cent of men and 37 per cent of women aged 20–24, 32 per cent of men and 11 per cent of women aged 25–29, and 10 per cent of men and 3 per cent of women aged 30–34 were living with their parents (Matheson, 2001).
Perceived Consequences of Women’s Employment

The increase in Irish women’s labour force participation has led to much speculation about the consequences of this recent social change. In the final section attitudes to perceived consequences will be examined. Overall the trends reported here reflect an increase in positive attitudes towards female labour force participation over time, and Irish women are particularly positive in this respect. The findings suggest that variations in men and women’s responses have either remained the same or have increased over the period under study. Although there was convergence in men’s and women’s attitudes in 1994, this pattern did not continue and divergence reappeared in 2002.

Figure 7.2: “A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as mother who does not work” (% agreeing)

In Figure 7.2 we see that from 1988–1994 both men’s and women’s attitudes moved in the direction of a more positive view of working women. From 1994–2002 this trend continues for women but moves in the other direction for men, with the number of men agreeing with this statement decreasing from 64.9 per cent to 61.5 per cent. The difference between men’s and women’s responses is relatively small in 1988 and 1994 and is not of statistical significance. However, the difference in men and women’s responses is much larger in 2002; 9.6 per cent more women than men agree with this statement. The significance of this difference is indicated by a chi-square measure of .001.
The overall pattern in Figure 7.3 is broadly the same for both men and women. What Whelan and Fahey (1994) term indirect resistance to maternal employment has decreased over time. The pace of change is different for each; the number of men agreeing with this statement declines as a relatively even rate, while the number of women agreeing increases between 1988 and 1994, and then falls sharply between 1994 and 2002. The differential between men and women’s responses is statistically significant in both 1988 (.000) and 2002 (.000). In 1988 14 per cent more men than women agreed with this statement. In 1994 the gap between the sexes closed to 5 per cent and is no longer statistically significant, but reappeared in 2002, with 11.7 per cent more men than women agreeing with this statement.
In Figure 7.4 we see that in 1988 the majority of both men and women agree that family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job (62 per cent and 56 per cent. By 2002 there has been a change, and only 44.0 per cent of men and 43.5 per cent of women agree with this statement. Men’s responses move gradually in a positive direction from 1988 to 2002. There is almost no movement in women’s responses from 1988 to 1994; however, from 1994 to 2002 there is a sharp drop of 13.3 per cent in those agreeing with this statement. There is more convergence between men’s and women’s responses to this question than found in relation to Figures 7.2 and 7.3 (above) and the differences reported are not statistically significant.

Perceived Consequences of Women’s Employment: Ireland in Comparative Focus

So how does Ireland compare to other countries? First of all we can see that in relation to item 1 in Table 7.7 (below) Irish respondents were the most likely to disagree with the statement that working mothers “can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work”, with 31 per cent of respondents disagreeing with this statement. In Hungary, Austria, the US and the Netherlands, less than 20 per cent of respondents disagreed with this statement. This
would appear to indicate that a substantial minority of Irish respondents are negative about the ability of working mothers to maintain good relationships with their children.

**Table 7.7: Attitudes to Perceived Consequences of Women’s Paid Employment, by country 2002 (percentages agreeing)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>NL</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>AU</th>
<th>GB</th>
<th>IR</th>
<th>HU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td>73.4</td>
<td>76.0</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>68.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with her children as a mother who does not work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>66.4</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>65.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>63.3</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>53.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, the next two items paint a somewhat different picture. Overall the numbers agreeing with the statement that “a preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works” decline over time. Scott et al. argue that in comparison to respondents in other countries, “the Irish have become somewhat more concerned about possible negative consequences of women working” (Scott et al., 1996: 479). However the number of Irish respondents disagreeing with the statement in 2002 is the highest (51.1 per cent). British respondents, like their Irish counterparts, were more likely to disagree than agree (44.2 per cent). In contrast Dutch, American, Austrian and Hungarian respondents were more likely to agree than disagree with this statement. Only in Hungary and Austria do a majority of respondents agree with this statement and indirect resistance to maternal employment remains important in these countries.

In relation to the third statement a similar pattern emerges; more British and Irish respondents disagree than agree that “family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job”, and the number of Irish respondents disagreeing is the highest at 48.6 per cent. The pattern elsewhere is different, and more respondents in the other four countries agree with this statement than disagree. These figures suggest that Irish respondents are less concerned about the impact of women’s paid employment on
family and children than are respondents elsewhere; Hungarian and Austrian respondents are most concerned.

Overall, therefore, a somewhat contradictory picture emerges in relation to Irish attitudes to the consequences of women’s paid employment. Irish attitudes are closest to British attitudes in this respect. If we examine differences between men’s and women’s responses by country we can see the Ireland is not the only country where there are differences between men’s and women’s attitudes. These differences are also important in relation to the US and Austria where gender differences in relation to all three statements are statistically significant. The pattern in Great Britain is closest to Ireland, with significantly more men than women taking a negative view of the impact of on family life of employed mothers, regarding the first two statements, but not the third.

**Conclusion**

Overall the general trend in Irish attitudes to maternal employment and gender roles has been towards increasingly positive attitudes. This trend is consistent with findings from other countries. A movement in attitudinal regime, as predicted by Treas and Widmer (2000), was found to have occurred between 1994 and 2002. There is a decline in support for the gendered division of labour and Irish attitudes can no longer be characterised as motherhood-centred but as work-oriented. However, it must be noted that the data does not allow us to test whether such attitudinal change is merely reflecting the economic necessity (and social reality) of women’s labour force participation, rather than indicating increased support for the principle of gender equality.

Bivariate analysis indicates that some differences between Irish men’s and women’s responses previously identified by Treas and Widmer remain of interest and are worthy of further exploration. Despite Irish women’s increased participation in the paid labour force, unpaid and caring work remains, in the main, the responsibility of Irish women (O’Connor, 1998; Eurostat, 2002; Murphy-Lawless, 2000; see also Rush and Richardson, Chapter 5 and Hilliard, Chapter 6 of this volume). This double burden might be hypothesised to lead to women developing negative attitudes to their labour force participation. Paradoxically, however, it is Irish men who appear most concerned while Irish women remain more positive about mothers’ participation in the paid labour force. One possible explanation is that men, who as a group have historically benefited from
women’s unpaid work in the home, wish to retain this privilege (Hartmann, 1994). Connell notes that men’s “collective choice not to do childcare . . . reflects the dominant definition of men’s interests and . . . helps them keep . . . power”. Or, as Pleck (1995) has argued, women’s increased labour market participation could be seen to challenge the breadwinner role and, by extension, masculinity; “their wives’ taking paid work takes away from them the major and often only way they have of experiencing themselves as having worth” (Pleck, 1995: 11). This central issue needs to be explored further, but this data does not allow us to do this.

The increased participation of Irish women, and particularly of married women, in the paid labour force has been argued to have challenged both the breadwinner model and the related belief that women have primary responsibility for the domestic sphere (Murphy-Lawless, 2000; Kennedy, 2001: 81). Overall, in 2002, Irish respondents agreed that “being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay” but disagreed that what “women really want is a home and kids” and did not support the traditional breadwinner model. Irish respondents were found to no longer support a traditional gendered division of labour. There is support for women entering paid employment and for continuing with this employment after children. There is no evidence of a backlash against women’s employment.

However, it must be noted that the questions that focus on maternal employment are problematic as they assume that women have primary responsibility for childcare. In this respect the “traditional” division of labour remains strong. There are no questions about appropriate work for men with pre-school and school-age children, or about the consequences of men taking on increased responsibility for unpaid work in the home. This can be argued to reveal strong beliefs about men’s and women’s different “natures”.

In relation to the comparative data Ireland can no longer be characterised as an anomalous case. Irish attitudes to gender roles and to maternal employment are not in any way exceptional. The period 1988 to 2002 was one of attitudinal change in Ireland, Austria and Hungary and one of relative stability in American and British attitudes. Given the pattern elsewhere, we might expect a slowdown in the pace of attitudinal change.

---

8 The Dutch central statistics office have developed a number of questions without any such assumptions that offer an interesting alternative model (Pfau-Effinger, 2004: 126).
change in Ireland in this respect in the future. Finally, although this ISSP module is termed “Family and Changing Gender Roles”, the variables under discussion here focus primarily on femininity, with a particular focus on the mother. This is problematic in two respects. First of all, it has been argued that the consequences of the current gendered division of labour applied to childless women as well as to mothers (Cockburn, 2002). Secondly, since the late 1980s the sociology of gender has moved towards a relational understanding of gender, working from the starting point that the study of gender has to incorporate masculinity as well as femininity (Connell, 1987). The best of this work allows social scientists to critically examine femininity and masculinity “as they develop in relation to each other within a system of structured social inequality” (Messner and Sabo, 1990: 13). It would be very useful if the ISSP questions reflected this shift; a focus primarily on femininity prevents a more nuanced understanding of changes in attitudes to the gendered division of labour emerging and so is necessarily limited.

References


Gender and Attitudes to Women’s Employment


Eurofound (2003), Part Time Work in Europe http://www.eurofound.eu.int/working/reports/ES0403TR01/ES0403TR01_2.htm [accessed 5/4/05]


Gender and Attitudes to Women’s Employment


Tovey, H and P. Share (2003), A Sociology of Ireland, 2nd Edition, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.


