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## **'All Changed, Changed Utterly'?<sup>1</sup> Gender role attitudes and the feminisation of the Irish labour force.**

### **Introduction**

One of the most dramatic changes in Irish society over the past two decades has been the substantial increase in the number of women participating in the paid workforce, and the concomitant change in gender roles. This gives rise to the question of whether this change in behaviour is also associated with changes in gender role attitudes. This paper uses data from the 1988, 1994 and 2002 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) 'Family and Changing Gender Roles' module to examine changes in Irish gender role attitudes over this period. Although previous studies have looked at the 1988 and 1994 data, this work largely precede the advent of the Celtic Tiger and the associated feminisation of the Irish labour force. This paper provides an analysis of the data up to and including the 2002 survey and contextualises this in terms of the changes in the Irish gender division of labour associated with this period.

This module's focus ensures it is an important resource for those with an interest in changing gender roles and gender role attitudes. A central issue explored is the relationship between attitudes and behaviour and the paper will explore whether increases in Irish women's labour force participation coincided with continuities or changes in gender role attitudes. Given the significance of ISSP as an important resource both for comparative and national level social science research, and especially given that the module is to be fielded again in 2013, the paper also critiques the wording of the questions in this survey, and the extent to which they accurately measure the complexities of gender role attitudes.

## **Changes in Irish Women's Participation in the 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: 1988 witnessed a small increase to a 34.4 percent participation rate; by 1994 this figure had increased to 40 percent; and by 2002 this had further increased to 55.2%, a figure slightly higher than the EU average. By 2008 this figure had risen to 60.5 per cent (CSO, 2008). In the 14 years covered by the ISSP surveys Irish women's labour force participation rate increased by almost 21 percent, representing a major change in the lives of both Irish men and women. Since 1999 Irish society has become one where the majority of women are in the paid labour force. Those working in the home are now in a minority (33 per cent CSO, 2005: 25). The Celtic Tiger period, starting in the early 1990s, was only possible because of this feminisation of the Irish labour force; 'Women account for nine-tenths of the increase in labour force participation since 1990, and the Celtic Tiger has been described as the Celtic Tigress' (OECD, 2006:104).

Particularly notable is the increase in the proportion of married women in the Irish workforce from 34 per cent in 1986 (Kennedy, 2001: 79), to 51.2 per cent in June/ August 2005 (CSO 2006). The numbers of working mothers has also increased dramatically since 1986 (Kennedy, 2001: 70). In 2004 the Quarterly National Household Survey identified 282,700 couples with children under 18 where the woman works and 59,000 working lone parents (Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform, 2004: 10). Rates of female involvement in part-time work increased from 18.7 per cent of women workers in 1992 to 30.5 per cent in

2002 (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). 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 increased demand for labour and changes in the structure of the labour market during the Celtic Tiger boom, the decline in the power of the Catholic Church, increased educational attainment for women, decreases in fertility rates, and major legislative reforms in the 1970s and 1980s associated with Ireland's EEC membership (O'Connor, 1998; Kennedy, 2001; Fine-Davis *et al.*, 2004). However, it is important to note that many difficulties remain for Irish women in the workforce, including low pay, unequal pay, horizontal segregation (O'Connor, 1998; O'Sullivan, 2007), vertical segregation (Bacik and Drew, 2006; Galligan, 2000) and discrimination on the grounds of gender. Irish women's participation in paid employment varies according to family status and age of children, ranging from 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). Overall, despite their changing roles outside the home, Irish women have also retained primary responsibility for caring work in the home (Hilliard, 2006; McGinitty and Russell 2008), with the majority working outside the home also engaging in the 'second shift' (Hochschild, 1989).

As Treas and Widmer (2000: 1431) have emphasised, attitudes about women's employment must be linked to their social and cultural context; 'structural obstacles to combining motherhood and employment, are the dominant influences on normative views'. The Irish fertility rate 2000-2005 was 1.9, one of the highest rates in the EU (OECD 2005). In 2002 Irish women had an entitlement to 18 weeks maternity leave, and were paid 70% of their wages during this period.<sup>2</sup> Also relevant is the model of childcare provision. The lack of state support and childcare provision in Ireland (Kennedy 2001: 77-8; Tovey and Share 2003: 250; Murphy-Lawless 2000) has created a situation whereby childcare was been positioned as a private issue for families to resolve themselves. This is what the OECD (1990) has termed a 'maximum private responsibility' model of childcare, also found in the US and the UK. Overall, these contextual factors are likely to influence attitudes to gender roles and maternal employment.

### **The International Social Survey Programme**

The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) was established in 1984 and involved research institutes in Great Britain, the U.S.A., Australia and West Germany collaborating in order to field national modules measuring attitudes to important social issues, on an annual basis. Forty-two countries are now involved in the initiative. ISSP both formalises crucial cross-national collaborations, and places cross-national research at the centre of national research agendas (Ní Ghiolla Phádraig, 2003: 1-2). There is a strong commitment to the production of robust cross-sectional data, so that attitudinal change can be measured over time.

#### **The ISSP 'Family and Changing Gender Roles' Module**

The module has been fielded three times, in 1988 (fielded in 8 countries<sup>3</sup>), 1994 (24 countries/ regions<sup>4</sup>) and 2002 (34 countries/ regions<sup>5</sup>). It is currently scheduled to be fielded

again in 2013. The number of countries/regions participating has increased over time; only seven of these have fielded the modules three times, fifteen have fielded it twice and the remainder fielded it in 2002 for the first time.

The majority of the questions measuring attitudes to family and gender roles were replicated in all years and are outlined below.

### ***1988, 1994 and 2002 Questions***

#### **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

In 2002 two new questions on gender roles were added. These focused on men's involvement in household work and so also focus on attitudes to gender roles.

#### **New Questions 2002 Module**

##### *Attitudes to Gender Roles*

Men ought to do a larger share of household work than they do now.

Men ought to do a larger share of caring work than they do now <sup>6</sup>

This ISSP module, like other major cross-national surveys, has been an important resource for gender scholars. For example several or more of these items were also analysed for the 1988 and 1994 datasets by Treas and Widmer (2000), Scott *et al* (1996), Crompton and Harris (1997), Panayotova and Brayfield (1999), Knudsen and Waerness (2001) and Sundström (1999). This is consistent with a pattern first identified by Grant *et al* (1987). Their study, of a stratified random sample of 214 articles from 10 mainstream American sociology journals between 1974 and 1983, found that articles related to gender were *more likely* than other articles to be quantitative. A more recent study of 1826 gender content articles by Dunn and Waller (2000: 247) also found that the 'large majority of articles were based on quantitative data'. A large proportion of this work, 44 per cent of all articles with gender content, were based on the secondary analysis of quantitative datasets (Dunn and Waller, 2000: 253). The leads them to conclude that 'existing data gathered for other purposes can be re-analyzed and interpreted in such a way as to make significant contributions to feminist scholarship' (Dunn and Waller 2000: 253).

While this is undoubtedly true, there is also a need to approach such data with caution and to highlight its limitations. The use of secondary data may be problematic for gender scholars given the assumptions about gender embedded in the ISSP and other major surveys. It can be argued, therefore, that there is a need for critical engagement by feminist scholars in order to improve the indicators under use. As De Vault (1996: 30) has argued this kind of engagement uses 'the tools of the discipline to "talk back" to sociology in a spirited critique aimed at improving the way we know society'.

## **Attitudes to Women's Employment**

Attitudes are socially constructed rather than fixed attributes of individuals. They have the potential to influence men and women's behaviour as part of a context in which gender roles are produced and reproduced (Sundström 1999; Crompton and Harris, 1997; Knudsen and Waerness, 2001). As Scott *et al* (1996: 4) have argued, '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'. However attitudes are not fixed and changes in behaviour may also lead to attitudinal changes. As Barber and Axinn (1998: 12) have argued, there is a two way relationship between attitudes and behaviour; attitudes are both likely to impact on behaviour and be influenced by behaviour. When attitude change follows behaviour change it can 'help rationalize new behaviours' (Morgan and Waite 1987: 542).

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 (Twenge, 1997), and this trend has been interpreted as reflecting increasing liberalisation and egalitarianism (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 (see, Fine-Davis, 1988; Whelan and Fahey, 1994; Hilliard, 2006; and Craven, 2004). Fine-Davis *et al* (2004: 70) report a shift in attitudes to gender roles from the mid-1970s to a decade later. In contrast to her 1975 findings, Fine-Davis's (1988) 1986 study (a



Dublin sample) found that the majority no longer supported traditional gender roles. 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, particularly amongst male respondents (1994: 52). This they term 'indirect resistance' to married women's labour force participation (1994: 58). They also found a large degree of support for the housewife 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. Younger and more educated respondents tended to express less support for traditional gender roles attitudes. Whelan and Fahey (1994) also argued that that 'Irish responses are by no means uniformly more traditional than the European average' (1994: 50).

There is some disagreement in the literature about when changes in Irish gender role attitudes began to occur. Murphy-Lawless (2000: 89) argues that the increased participation of Irish women, and particularly of married women, in the paid labour force since the 1990s has challenged the predominant breadwinner model and "the traditional ideology of women as childbearers and homemakers" (see also Kennedy, 2001: 81), an argument which implies that in the Irish case, attitudinal changes followed behavioural changes. In contrast Fine-Davis *et al* (2004: 70) suggest that significant attitudinal changes occurred between the 1970s and the 1980s, and that Irish attitudes had become less traditional by the mid-1980s (see also Beale, 1986). In this analysis attitudinal changes are argued to have predated behavioural changes and may indeed have facilitated the major changes that were to come.

Previous research drawing on ISSP data has shown that attitudes to women's employment vary both historically 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 than in either the US or Germany. Crompton and Harris (1997: 186) identify 'substantial differences in attitudes to women's employment, and gender roles' in a study of the Czech Republic, Britain and Norway, (see also Treas and Widmer, 2000: 1412). Knudsen and Waerness, (2001:77) found that Swedes had more favourable attitudes than Norwegian or British respondents, and they characterised Norway as an 'odd case'. 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 (see also Crompton *et al* ,2005), although comparative studies also highlight key similarities internationally. For example, 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 favor full-time, or at least part-time, work once children have left home. All countries recognise that motherhood demands a reduction in labor supply. (2000: 1427)

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 that they termed 'work oriented', 'family accommodating' and 'motherhood centred'. 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 adhere to this

regime. 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' (2000:1423). Respondents belonging to this cluster are hostile or sceptical to women's involvement in part-time work. Hungary and Ireland are characterised as motherhood centred. Ireland, however, 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 '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). Her 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 their extensive analysis of 1994 ISSP data from twenty three 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; Knudsen 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 key finding from the literature is that men tend to be more conservative about gender roles than women, particularly about mothers' participation in the paid labour force (Sundström, 1999; Crompton and Harris, 1997; Scott *et al*, 1996; Panayotova and Brayfield, 1999; 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 have more positive attitudes to egalitarian gender roles than men. Panayotova and Brayfield (1999: 635) argue that this finding reflects the different material and ideological 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, 1999: 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 much commentary implicitly (or explicitly) suggests that women form 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. Analysis of these issues, therefore, must be attentive to the different life circumstances that may be glossed over by considering gender (and, indeed, other factors) at a general level as explanatory variables.

### **Irish Attitudes to Changing Gender Roles**

The 1988, 1994 and 2002 ISSP "Family and Changing Sex Roles" cross-sectional data offers the opportunity to explore changes in relation to attitudes to men and women's roles over a key 14-year time period. As we have already seen the 1970s was a period of social change in Ireland, with changes in gender role attitudes evident (Fine-Davis *et al* 2004). Overall the ISSP data indicates that support for traditional gender roles declined further between 1988 and 2002.

**Table 1: Irish Attitudes to Women's Roles, 1988–2002: Percentage Distributions.**

		<b>1988 N=1005</b>	<b>1994 N=938</b>	<b>2002 N=1240</b>
		%	%	%
<b>1. A job is alright, but what a woman really wants is a home and children.</b>	Strongly agree	8.2	7.5	4.2
	Agree	47.6	40.6	33.0
	Neither	12.7	14.7	14.5
	Disagree	26.1	21.9	30.9
	Strongly Disagree	3.8	9.8	10.5
<b>2. Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay.</b>	Strongly agree	11.1	12.7	6.5
	Agree	52.4	44.9	39.4
	Neither	11.7	12.6	15.2
	Disagree	17.0	16.3	22.2
	Strongly Disagree	3.9	7.6	8.5
<b>3. A man's job is to earn money, a woman's job is to look after the home and family.</b>	Strongly agree	7.1	9.4	2.4
	Agree	34.1	24.4	15.3
	Neither	13.0	12.0	13.1
	Disagree	33.8	33.7	39.5
	Strongly Disagree	11.5	18.6	25.2
<b>4. Both men and women should contribute to household income.</b>	Strongly agree	10.1	26.0	13.1
	Agree	53.9	49.9	54.6
	Neither	14.0	10.8	14.4
	Disagree	18.5	9.7	11.5
	Strongly Disagree	1.7	1.8	1.7
<b>5. Men ought to do a larger share of household work than they do now.</b>	Strongly agree	-	-	12.2
	Agree	-	-	55.0
	Neither	-	-	16.0
	Disagree	-	-	9.8

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	-	-	2.6
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We can see in table 1 that the proportion strongly agreeing and agreeing that 'what a woman really wants is a home and children' fell from 1988 to 1994 and again in 2002, with the largest change observable between the 1994 and 2002 surveys. However it should be noted that a large proportion continue to agree with this statement, although this has declined, and in 2002 for the first time more respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement than strongly agreed or agreed. There is evidence of ambiguity also, with 12-14 percent of respondents across the three surveys reporting, that they neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement, and the proportions reporting they cannot choose or refusing to answer increasing from 1.6 percent in 1988 to 6.9 percent in 2002.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare male and female responses to this item. There were significant differences found between male and female respondents across all three surveys, with female respondents more likely to disagree than male respondents as is evident from table 2, below.

**Table 2: Gender differences in response to 'A job is alright, but what a woman really wants is a home and children'.**

	<b>1988</b>		<b>1994</b>		<b>2002</b>	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Male respondents</b>	2.58	.986	2.75	1.151	3.01	1.104
<b>Female respondents</b>	2.78	1.126	2.94	1.184	3.19	1.166
<b>Conditions</b>	t(986)=-2.968 p = .003		t(884)=-2.364 p = .018		t(1086)=-2.555 p=.011	

\*Scale: 1=strongly agree; 5= strongly disagree.

Despite these differences, the overall trend for both male and female respondents is away from agreement with the statement, and away from a traditional attitude to women's gender role.

Bivariate analysis shows that more traditional attitudes were found in older respondents (1988  $r=-.329$ , 1994  $r=-.340$ , 2002  $r=-.255$  all sig at 0.01 level) and in less well educated respondents (1988  $r=.376$ , 1994  $r=.318$ , 2002  $r=.233$  all sig at 0.01 level). It is interesting to note that the strength of the correlation coefficient for both age and education has decreased over the period.

A high level of support for the role of homemaker is in evidence (see table 1), with a preponderance 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. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare male and female responses to this item. It found significant differences in 1994 only, with male respondents ( $M=2.51$ ,  $SD=1.072$ ) more likely to agree than female respondent ( $M=2.66$ ,  $SD=1.227$ ) conditions;  $t(880)=-1.967$ ,  $p = .050$ . Again bivariate analysis found more traditional attitudes in older respondents (1988  $r=-.225$ , 1994  $r=-.229$ , 2002  $r=-.210$  all sig at 0.01 level) and in less well educated respondents (1988  $r=.167$ , 1994  $r=.216$ , 2002  $r=.162$  all sig at 0.01 level), although the correlation here is weaker than for the previous item.



It is in relation to normative gender roles (item 3) that the largest shift in attitudes is evident from 1988 to 2002. Less than 20 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that 'a man's job is to earn money, a woman's job is to look after the home and family' in 2002, compared to 41.2 percent in 1988. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare male and female responses to this item. Again significant differences were found in 1994 only, with male respondents ( $M=3.13$ ,  $SD=1.281$ ) less likely to disagree than female respondents ( $M=3.42$ ,  $SD=1.276$ ) conditions;  $t(918)=-3.466$ ,  $p = .001$ . Similar to the first two items, the results of bivariate analysis show that older respondents were likely to have more traditional attitudes (1988  $r=-.406$ , 1994,  $r=-.443$ , 2002  $r=-.369$  all sig at 0.01 level), as were less well educated respondents (1988  $r=.388$ , 1994  $r=.359$ , 2002  $r=.310$  all sig at 0.01 level).

In relation to the statement "both men and women should contribute to household income" there is less change evident in the period under study overall, with the 1988 and 2002 results broadly similar. However the 1994 data shows a large increase in the proportion strongly agreeing with this statement, a trend that is reversed in the 2002 data. Again the language used in this question is problematic. It is difficult to ascertain exactly what this question is measuring and the results suggest that it may not simply be measuring the level of support for the dual income family.

The final item of interest is the question focusing on the gendered division of labour in the home. In 2002, the majority of respondents, 55 percent, agreed that men ought to do a larger share of housework than they currently do, with only 12.4 percent of respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement. It is interesting to note that there is some

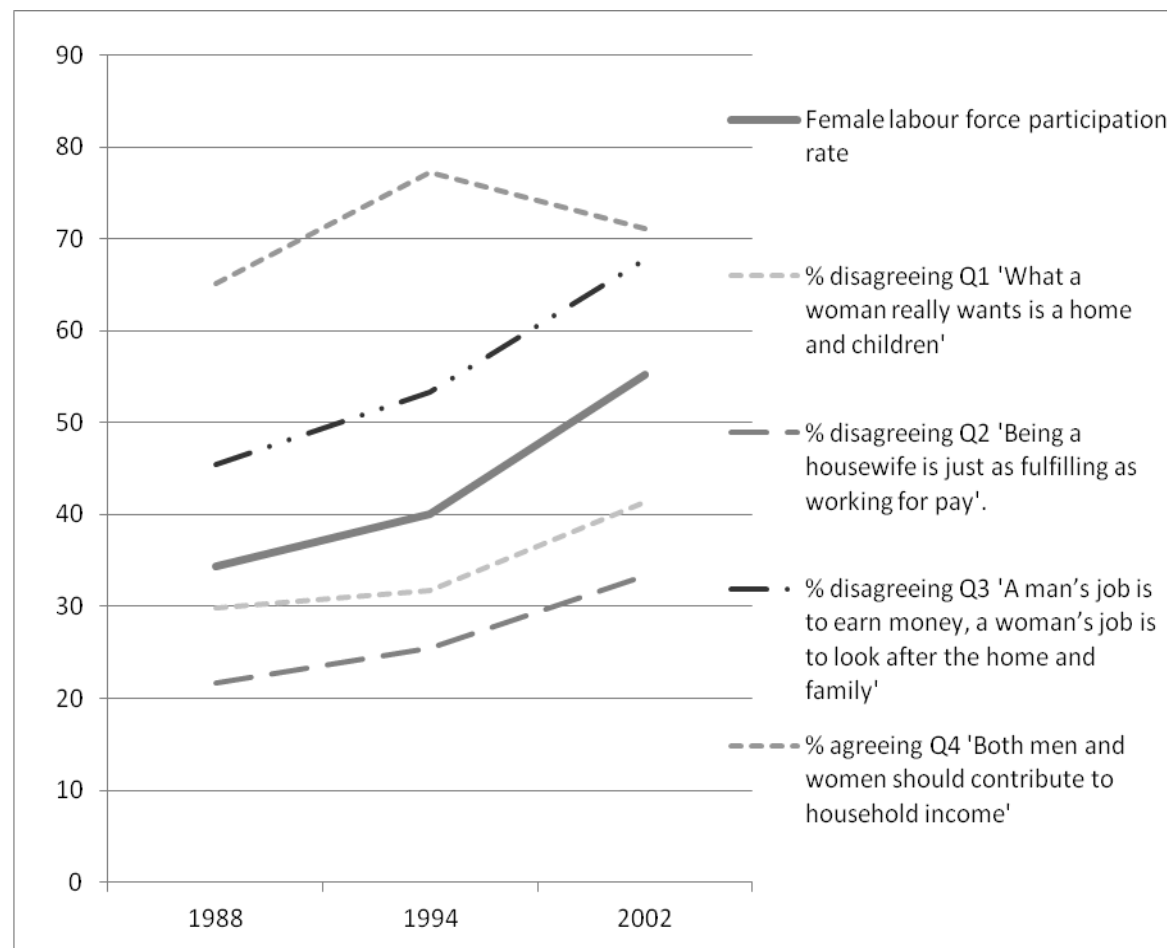
ambiguity evident in relation to item 5, with 16 per cent unsure and a further 4.4 percent who either could or would not answer the question.

Overall the period from 1988 to 2002 was one of considerable attitudinal change in Ireland, continuing the trend towards less traditional attitudes to gender roles that Fine-Davis *et al* (2004) report began in the mid-1980s. The same broad pattern is evident as found in other research in relation to age and education, with more traditional attitudes found in older and less educated respondents for items 1-3, but not for items 4 and 5. The same pattern found in relation to sex is also evident, with men tending to hold more traditional attitudes than women. However, despite these variations, the general trend across all groups is in a similar direction i.e. towards less traditional attitudes to women's roles.

### **Changing Behaviour and Attitudes in Ireland: Comparing Trends**

It is interesting to examine these attitudinal changes in comparison to changes in the female labour force participation rate over this period (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1 Attitudes and behaviour: A comparison**



What is immediately evident is that the trend in women's participation in the paid labour force follows a similar overall pattern to the attitudinal changes in relation to questions 1, 2 and 3. There are differences between attitudes and behaviour, as might be expected given the different types of measures involved. For example a large degree of support for the home maker role is evident across the three periods, despite changing behaviour. The picture is different in relation to the third statement; here the proportion disagreeing that 'a man's job is to earn money and women's job is to look after the home and family' is consistently ahead of the female labour force participation rate. When it comes to support for the dual income

family the pattern is different, with this support being significantly ahead of behaviour in 1988 and 1994, and converging with it in 2002.

### **Measuring Attitudes to Gender Roles: Critical Comments**

Overall, 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 third. Moreover it is also 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). It can also be asked why home and children are presumed to be part of the same package? The type of work involved in housekeeping and childcare are very different and it is only in the traditional homemaker role that they are collapsed. A distinction between these two types of work, caring work and cooking and cleaning, is necessary in order for precise data to be collected.

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 given that attitudes to part time and full time work are quite different (Hakim, 1996). This point is reinforced when we move on to look at a more nuanced question, examining attitudes to women working at different stages of the life course.

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

The majority of Irish respondents 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 (see for example Treas and Widmer 2000; Scott *et al*, 1996). There has been an increase in the proportions who believe that women with pre-school children should work part time. In contrast, in 1988 and 1994 the preferred option for 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 proportions believing that women in this position should stay at home.

**Table 3: Irish attitudes towards married women working at different stages of the life course 1988–2002**

	<b>1988 N=1005</b>	<b>1994 N=938</b>	<b>2002 N=1240</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
<b><i>Should women work:</i></b>			
<i>After marriage, before kids: Work . . .</i>			
Full-time	74.1	77.7	73.6
Part-time	16.9	10.6	9.7
Stay Home	6.2	3.8	3.0
<i>With pre-school child: Work . . .</i>			
Full-time	8.9	10.8	9.0
Part-time	33.3	35.6	42.6
Stay Home	52.4	45.2	33.1
<i>After youngest at school: Work . . .</i>			
Full-time	21.2	23.8	22.0
Part-time	49.3	45.2	53.8
Stay Home	25.3	22.3	9.0
<i>Children left home: Work . . .</i>			
Full-time	62.9	67.6	64.0
Part-time	24.0	18.4	18.1
Stay Home	6.9	5.0	2.2

There is an interesting pattern in responses evident with 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 does not continue. As already indicated, this period saw an large 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, along with sampling error, make 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.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare male and female responses.

**Table 4: Gender differences in attitudes to women working at different stages of the life course.**

	1988		1994		2002	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
	After marriage, before kids					
Male respondents	n/s		1.26	.551	1.23	.532
Female respondents			1.14	.424	1.14	.408
Conditions			t(772)=3.478 p=.001		t(828)=2.92 p=.004	
	With pre-school child					
Male respondents	n/s		n/s		2.35	.641
Female respondents					2.23	.646
Conditions					t(1047)=2.96 p=.003	
	After youngest at school					
Male respondents	2.14	.716	2.04	.751	1.91	.608
Female respondents	1.96	.670	1.93	.668	1.80	.564
Conditions	t(891)=3.88 p=.000		t(886)=2.367 p=.018		t(1047)=2.96 p=.003	
	Children left home					
Male respondents	1.46	.659	n/s		n/s	
Female respondents	1.35	.689				
Conditions	t(833)=12.70 p=.007					

\*Scale: 1=strongly agree; 5= strongly disagree.

In the case of pre-school children, part-time work is the approved route of female 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.

There were significant differences found between male and female respondents across all three surveys, in relation to women working once the youngest child is at school. Male respondents were more likely to be in favour of women with school age children saying at home than women, while women were more likely to favour full-time work than men.

Overall the trend is towards more supportive attitudes towards married women's participation in the paid workforce, and in particular for part-time work. Importantly, such nuances are not captured by questions reported in the previous section which do not distinguish between different types of work.

It should be noted that 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. Another problem is the patriarchal assumptions underpinning the questions focussing on maternal employment, which assume that women have primary responsibility for childcare. These assumptions are almost Parsonian and may certainly be problematised. As Oakley and Oakley (1979: 183) have argued 'the definition of 'work' as meaning "paid employment" is sexist, as is the phenomenon whereby the 'women's employment is analysed in relation to responsibility for children, but that of men is not'. It is an example of what Oakley and Oakley (1979: 186) call first order sexism 'i.e. it is a reflection of fundamental sexist social reality' (see also Mason and Lu, 1988).

This raises the issue of why only data about maternal employment is collected (Maier 1991: 191 cited in Danner *et al*, 1999)? The Dutch central statistics office has developed a number



of questions that do not have this focus and these offer an interesting alternative model. One such question asks 'Imagine you and your partner could decide together how much each of you participates in paid work each week. How much work would you do in that case do? And how much work would you want your partner to do?' (Pfau-Effinger, 2004: 126). This question allowed a range of different orientations to be captured - male breadwinner, female breadwinner, male full-time and female part-time, female full-time and male part-time, both breadwinners, both work part-time and no breadwinner.

### **Irish Attitudes to Perceived Consequences of Women's Paid Employment**

The increase in Irish women's labour force participation has led to much speculation about the consequences of this recent social change. 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.

**Table 5: Irish Attitudes to Perceived Consequences of Women's Paid Employment, 1988–2002 (Percentages)**

		1988 N=1005	1994 N=938	2002 N=1240
		%	%	%
6. A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work.	<b>Strongly agree</b>	15.5	18.3	13.1
	<b>Agree</b>	38.5	42.8	45.7
	<b>Neither</b>	6.9	5.7	7.4
	<b>Disagree</b>	28.8	21.5	21.0
	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	9.2	10.0	8.1
7. A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works	<b>Strongly agree</b>	8.9	9.3	4.1
	<b>Agree</b>	42.5	38.0	29.6
	<b>Neither</b>	8.8	8.2	11.9
	<b>Disagree</b>	32.6	29.6	37.6
	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	6.4	11.1	11.6
8. All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full time job	<b>Strongly agree</b>	11.4	10.7	5.7
	<b>Agree</b>	41.3	40.2	30.6
	<b>Neither</b>	9.2	9.1	12.7
	<b>Disagree</b>	29.9	25.5	34.5
	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	7.1	12.8	11.2

In relation to item 6 (see table 5 above), from Irish attitudes have become more positive about working mothers, with a majority of respondents believing that working mothers could establish relationships with their children that were equal to those of mothers working in the home. However is only a small increase in the percentage agreeing with this statement from 1988 to 2002, and a substantial minority of Irish respondents remain negative about the ability of working mothers to maintain good relationships with their children.

The overall pattern in relation to item 7, sees a large reduction in the proportion of respondents believing that preschool children with working mothers suffer. What Whelan and Fahey (1994) term 'indirect resistance' to maternal employment appears to have decreased over time. The pace of change is different for men and women here; the proportion of men agreeing with this statement declines as a relatively even rate, while the proportion of women agreeing increases between 1988 and 1994, and then falls sharply between 1994 and 2002 (see table 5).

When we look at the final item we see that in 1988 the majority of respondents, 52.7 percent, agree that family life suffers when the woman has a full time job. By 2002 there has been a change, and only 36.3 percent agree with this statement. There is not much movement in relation to this item between 1988 and 1994, and the drop from 1994 to 2002 is therefore sharp. This is in comparison to item 7, where the picture is one of gradual change in attitudes over time.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare male and female responses to these items. It found significant differences for all three in 1998 and 2002, but not in 1994 (see table 6 below).

**Table 6: Gender differences in attitudes to perceived consequences of women working.**

	1988		1994		2002	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
	A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work.					
Male respondents	2.86	1.239	n/s		2.83	1.217
Female respondents	2.70	1.303			2.49	1.181
Conditions	t(991)=2.066, p=.039				t(1070)=4.862, p = .000	
	A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works					
Male respondents	2.68	1.10	n/s		3.05	1.138
Female respondents	2.99	1.96			3.39	1.113
Conditions	t(988)=-4.246 p=.000				t(1091)=-5.072 p=.000	
	Family life suffers when the woman has a full time job					
Male respondents	2.71	1.152	n/s		3.07	1.148
Female respondents	2.87	1.227			3.22	1.191
Conditions	t(980)=-2.146 p=.032				t(1172)=-2.156 p=.031	

\*Scale: 1=strongly agree; 5= strongly disagree.

Male respondents were less likely to agree that a working mother could establish a warm relationship with her children than female respondents. Women were more likely to disagree that a preschool child was likely to suffer if the mother was working and that family life suffers when women work full time. Again it should be noted that the focus on maternal employment only is problematic. A value-neutral question would examine the consequences of both parents working and either the father or mother working.

## Conclusion

Overall the fourteen year period from 1988 to 2002 saw major changes in Irish attitudes to family and gender roles. The general trend has been away from traditional attitudes to gender roles and towards increasingly positive attitudes to maternal employment. 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 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. Although there is no automatic association between increased female labour force participation and more liberal gender role attitudes (Braun, *et al* 1994), the findings presented above suggest that in the Irish case changes in behaviour have coincided with a period of attitudinal change, albeit these attitudinal changes sometimes lag behind current practices and at other times predate them. Although the changes are all in a similar direction, away from traditional attitudes, there is variation in the pace of these changes. The overall picture is one of both attitudinal and behavioural change, and a reshaping of the Irish gender order. Overall Irish attitudes can be characterised as work oriented.

Finally, although these changes in Irish attitudes are interesting to note, overall a strong case can be made that the Family and Changing Gender Roles module is reflective of patriarchal norms and has the tendency to stress sex difference. This is particularly problematic in a research instrument which aims to study changes in this area. As has already been argued, the language used in many of these questions is also imprecise and this may have implications in terms of the validity of the findings (see also Braun, 1998, Mason and Lu, 1988).

Overall these indicators are rooted in an assumption that family and children are the domains of women and not men (what Eicher 1988 terms gynocentrism). There are no questions about appropriate work for men with pre-school and school-age children, about the consequences of men taking on increased responsibility for unpaid work in the home, or

about the consequences of male employment for pre-school children. This can be argued to be reflective of strong beliefs about men's and women's different 'natures'. The new question asked in 2002, on men's contribution to the domestic division of labour, is welcome and allows the degree of resistance to the traditional gendered division of labour to be measured. However it does not address the imbalance across the survey as a whole. 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.

Braun (1998) puts forward a historical explanation for some of these problems, reporting that the 1988 Family and Changing Gender Roles questionnaire drew on the American General Social Survey, (GSS) running since 1972. He argues that a focus on women's behaviour only was in keeping with the understanding of the time i.e. that it was women's changing behaviour that was of interest. Most of the items have remained in the survey due to a commitment to collecting cross-sectional data, and the rule that only one-third of questions in a module can be revised. However there are difficulties in continuing to use items which assume a traditional division of labour that does not correspond to behaviour in many countries. This is something raised by Mason and Lu (1988) in relation to the GSS items more than twenty years ago.

Given that the module is scheduled to be run again in 2013 it is crucial that a discussion about the quality of these measures takes place. Otherwise its usefulness may be seriously compromised. The Dutch central statistics office questions discussed earlier offer an interesting alternative model and considering the inclusion of these – or, indeed, other questions – may be one way to ensure that the validity and utility of the ISSP survey is

optimised. In that way it will enhance our ability to address and critically reflect on changes in gender roles and gender role attitudes, rather than confirming the traditional gender roles that already exist.

## Notes

1. W.B. Yeats *Easter 1916*.
2. Paid maternity leave in Ireland increased to 22 weeks in 2006, and there was a further rise to 26 weeks in 2007, with 80% of wages paid.
3. 1988: Austria, Great Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, USA, West Germany
4. 1994: Austria, Great Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, USA, West Germany, Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Germany (East), Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Norway, Philippines, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden.
5. 2002: Austria, Great Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Netherlands, USA, Germany, Australia, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Norway, Philippines, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Brazil, Chile, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Flanders, France, Latvia. Mexico, Portugal, Slovakian Republic, Switzerland, Taiwan.
6. The second of these new questions was not included in the questionnaire fielded in Ireland. Instead an alternative question was asked in its place 'men already do as much household work as their time permits'. However, for some unknown reason, the results of this question are not included in the dataset.
7. The difference between the countries with the highest and lowest percentage agreeing is recorded here.

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