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FARM WOMEN: CONCERNS AND ISSUES OF AN UNDERVALUED WORKFORCE

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INTRODUCTION

Agriculture, which in Ireland is based on family farming, is considered to be our most important basic industry. Although women have always been involved in family farming, their role on farms and contribution to agricultural output has received very little public recognition. Traditionally, women on farms carried out a range of tasks in addition to their household chores. These activities might have included poultry rearing, butter making and the care of young animals and were often important sources of cash income to the household. Today, as farming becomes more mechanised the nature of women's involvement in the farm enterprise is changing. Moreover, women themselves are becoming aware of the importance of their contribution to the agricultural economy and are beginning to articulate the need for recognition for this involvement.

Ireland's membership of the European Community and European Parliament has brought representatives of Irish farming women into contact with farmwomen in other European countries. They have realised that although EEC Directives on Equal Pay, Equal Treatment and Social Security have benefitted women in the non-agricultural sectors, they have done little to improve the lot of farm women. Irish women have compared their situation with that of women elsewhere in Europe and have found similar problems and needs for reform. More significantly perhaps, as more married women in other sectors retain their careers after marriage, farm women are no longer content to give up the rights and benefits of employment for a lesser status on farms. Women who are actively involved in farming are demanding the same rights and monetary rewards as their male colleagues.

In this paper some aspects of women's involvement in farming are considered. I first look at the extent of women's involvement and the typical roles that they play on farms. I then turn to the major issues of importance to women working on farms in Ireland, and to EEC and national measures which have addressed these issues. Finally, I look at some of the questions raised by social scientists in other countries who have focussed on the situation of farm women.

THE EXTENT OF WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT

Attempts to assess the involvement of women in farming in Ireland are hampered by the lack of detailed statistical data documenting their situation. According to the most recent census figures there are 8,181 women in Ireland who classified themselves as farmers. Eighty per cent of these are widows or single women. A further 3,152 women were classified as daughters or other female relatives working on farms. The census does not count spouses of farmers who work on farms as a separate category. Yearly Labour Force Survey estimates provide even less detail on women working on farms.

The 1985 Farm Structures Survey (CSO, 1987) revealed that there were 118,200 female family members in the farm labour force, accounting for almost a third (30%) of the total family labour force on farms. Of these women, almost two thirds (65%) were the spouses of farmers. The difference between these figures and those from other national statistics point to the likely underestimation of women's input to farming in the Irish statistics. According to the 1985 Farm Structures Survey which is undertaken for the EEC there were an estimated 394,100 family members at work on Irish farms in 1985, contributing 240,700 annual work units. Yet, according to the figures conventionally used for the numbers at work in agriculture there were an estimated 169,600 at work in the agricultural sector in 1985 (Labour Force Survey (1985)). Studies in other countries have drawn attention to the way in which women's work is underpresented in official statistics. As Boulding (1980) has pointed out, women are officially recorded as one fifth of the world's agricultural labour force. Nevertheless, field studies reveal that they are closer to half of the labour force in many countries, and in parts of Africa up to 80 per cent. Boulding's study of a group of American farm women revealed that they performed a staggering variety of tasks. Reimer (1986) on the basis of a study in Canada, argued that even using a narrow definition of agricultural production, official statistics regarding women's participation in the farm labour force should be doubled or even trebled to accurately represent women's participation.

A study carried out in The Netherlands (Bauwens and Loeffen 1983) found that 88 per cent of Dutch farmers' wives take part in work on the farm. These women worked 22 hours per week on average, the work input varying seasonally. In a study of part-time farming in Ireland (Higgins (1983)) found that an estimated 56 per cent of part-time farmers' wives worked on the family farm, contributing an average 41 weeks of labour per year.

The work input of farm women is therefore clearly significant and underestimated in conventional statistics. In the Irish Labour Force Survey and Census of Population unpaid work is not categorized, so that most married women, regardless of how substantial their work input to the farm, are categorized as "engaged in home duties." They suffer the double indignity of having both their farm and domestic roles relegated to non-work status. We know very little therefore, about the nature and extent of women's work on farms in Ireland - far less even than other European countries in which studies focussed specifically on farm women have been undertaken.

ROLES OF WOMEN ON FARMS

Given the degree of involvement of women in farming, we know relatively little about the kinds of roles they play and the factors associated with the nature of their involvement. The work input of women is likely to vary greatly throughout the life cycle. Child rearing responsibilities may prevent women from being very involved in farm work at certain stages, yet these may be times when extra labour is most needed. Gasson (1980, 1981), on the basis of a pilot study in England has suggested three types of roles that women may play. These depend on the division of labour between husband and wife (the majority of farm women being wives of farmers), frequency of manual work, women's responsibility for various enterprises (such as poultry, calf-rearing etc.) and their approach to domestic work.

The first role type, the Farm Housewife, occurs in households where there is a clear division of labour between the sexes. The woman spends the bulk of her time on household tasks and is home centered. She does not work regularly on the farm, although she may do so in emergencies. She may however be responsible for indirect farm activities such as account keeping, telephone calls and running errands.

The second role type identified by Gasson was that of the Working Farm Wife who is much more involved in farming activity, generally as an assistant to her husband. Working farm wives share major policy decisions with their husbands, but responsibility for day to day decision making usually rests with the man. Such women are often legal partners in the farm business, and they too are usually responsible for farm accounts.

The Woman Farmer is either involved in an active partnership with her husband, having responsibility for one or more farm enterprises (dairy cows, pigs, poultry), on her own. This may be because she is single, widowed or her husband is not a farmer. These women have, naturally, more autonomy and influence over farm management decisions than women in the other roles mentioned.

These role types seem fairly typical on family farms throughout the world. Craig (1979) has suggested a similar typology for Australian farm women's roles and Pearson (1979) has put forward a similar scheme for American farm women. Gasson and others have suggested that the type of role which women play is influenced by the size of the farm and the social background of the spouses. Several studies have shown that women's direct involvement in farm work is less on larger farms. It is on smaller farms where there is less likely to be an abundance of labour saving equipment in the home and on the farm, that women have the greatest work burdens.

Recent trends in Irish agriculture have affected women's roles. The introduction of modern machinery and equipment together with the ever increasing need for farmers to approach their farm operation in a business-like way - involving account and record keeping, detailed planning and substantial capital investment - has meant that many women have become involved in the administration of the farm. The increase in part-time farming, often a response to inadequate incomes from farming, has resulted in many women managing farms while their husbands work in other jobs. Many women themselves work outside the farm to boost the family income. In these cases it is likely that the wife's income is an important indirect contribution to farm investment as well.

ISSUES FOR FARM WOMEN

The main issues which are of concern to women on farms in Ireland centre around three problem areas. These are: (i) the fact that most farm women have no legal or professional status unless they are farm owners; (ii) that their social security cover is very inadequate compared to women in paid employment; and (iii) that farm women do not have sufficient access to vocational training. Irish women are not alone in their concern with these issues. While legislative structures and other institutional concerns vary between different Member States in the European Community, these are common problems to farm women in Europe.

The quest for legal and professional recognition involves overcoming two difficulties. The first of these is the lack of information on the actual work input of women to farming and the variety of roles they perform. The second is associated with the ambiguity of the concept of the 'farm'. Legally, the farm (unless it is registered as a limited company) does not have a very precise definition. It is a piece of land which is worked to produce an income. On the other hand, the term 'farmer' refers to the person who owns the farm. Often both spouses are involved in ownership, being joint owners or separate owners of different parts of the farm. Frequently, however, the term 'farmer' refers to the decision-maker, the representative of the farm in farming organisations, the person subject to taxation and entitled to social welfare assistance. Traditionally the husband has held this position. There is a need therefore for a clear legal framework in which the term 'farm' can be defined and within which the contributions of both spouses and various family workers can be defined and recognised.

In the area of social security, women on farms are very inadequately covered compared with those in paid employment. Since there is no national insurance scheme for farmers in Ireland women have to rely on basic assistance schemes. There are no maternity benefits, retirement pensions, sickness or disability schemes for women on farms. The need for access to replacement/relief services is constantly being put forward by farm women. These services provide personnel which would replace women's labour in the case of maternity or sickness or to attend much needed vocational training courses. A farm relief service does exist in Ireland but, since there are no state subsidies to users, it is in effect restricted to those who can afford to use it. Ironically it is said by those running the service that, were it not for the involvement of women in the work on many farms, the level of usage of the services would be much higher (O'Hara 1984).

Farm women are also concerned about recognition of their need for vocational training. Many women who are wives of farmers have had no prior experience of farming. Since most women enter farming by marriage, there is a great need for in-service training. Although suitable courses do exist, farm women argue that it is extremely difficult for them to attend courses unless they have access to relief services. Because of this fact, those who do attend courses are not necessarily those most in need for training, but rather those who do not need or can afford replacement services. Representatives of farming women argue that vocational training also enhances the professional status of farm women and increases their self confidence. In the long run it may also contribute to altering the established practice whereby sons are almost invariably chosen to inherit the family farm.

Farm women are also concerned about their poor representation in farming organisations. The agricultural establishment is almost totally male-dominated and women find great difficulty in penetrating a wall of traditional attitudes and male prejudices in order to raise issues which concern them.

EEC MEASURES

As in the case of women in paid work the problems of women in agriculture and in other self employed occupations have received considerable attention at EEC level. The Programme of Action on the promotion of Equal Opportunities for Women (1982-85) prepared by the Commission, highlighted the special problems of farm women, particularly their vague occupational status. This has meant that, although existing Directives (76/207 and 79/7) concerning equal treatment in employment and social security, apply to self-employed women, the ambiguity of their work status made these Directives difficult to apply. The Programme therefore recommended the application of the principle of equal treatment for self-employed women. The Report of the Committee of Enquiry of the European Parliament into the Situation of Women in Europe also urged that women on farms and other self employed occupations have the same rights as their counterparts in employment.

In the farm sector the Advisory Committee on Social Questions affecting farmers and members of their families drew up a draft document in 1981 which provided a basis for policy measures to improve the situation of women farmers. The following year a European seminar on the Legal and Social Position of Women in Agriculture held in Italy recommended the adoption of a Directive to guarantee equal treatment for women farmers.

All of these efforts resulted in the preparation of a proposal for a Directive on the application of the principle of equal treatment between men and women in self-employed activities including agriculture and on protection during pregnancy and motherhood, by the EEC Commission in 1984. This Directive provided for equal treatment for all self employed persons, particularly those who genuinely participate in the self-employed occupation of their spouse, but are neither employee nor partner. The Directive provided for equal treatment in the establishment of family businesses including access to credit, the removal of any legal barriers to the setting up of legal partnerships between spouses and the removal of any disincentives in the tax laws which would

restrict the remuneration paid to a spouse. The Directive also asserted the spouses' right to share the profits or receive payment for work input in the same way as any other employee if they wish, and to build up an independent entitlement to social security, particularly in relation to pregnancy and maternity benefits. Recognition of the work of spouses was provided for by the provision that they be entitled to representation on an equal basis with self-employed workers in professional bodies and have equal access to vocational training. Finally an article in the Directive specifically set out that women in self-employed occupations (including spouses) have access to compensatory allowances or relief services during interruptions in their occupation due to pregnancy and maternity.

The scope of the Directive was quite broad and covered most areas of concern to farm women which are amenable to legislative action. The Directive itself was discussed in detail at a special seminar in Dublin Castle in 1984. Among the points raised at this seminar was the limitation of confining the Directive to spouses only and the fact that it did not provide for any sanctions in the event of the principle of equality being violated. The problem of social security protection in countries such as Ireland, which do not have a social insurance system was also highlighted, as was the cost of providing access to replacement services for farm women.

The conference was addressed by the then Taoiseach, Garret FitzGerald TD, who made no commitment on behalf of the Irish government to ensuring that the Directive would be adopted. Indeed at subsequent meetings of the Social Affairs Council Ireland was one of the countries which objected most to the provisions of the Directive. The final version adopted by the Council in December 1986 omitted all but a few of the original provisions and is a fairly insignificant document. Gone are the original Articles prohibiting discrimination in the tax system, the right to remuneration, to recognition in professional bodies, to vocational training and to independent entitlement to social security. Guaranteed access to replacement services or allowances during pregnancy or maternity have been replaced by an undertaking to "examine" whether, and under what conditions, such services and benefits are provided. Now the Directive merely suggests that Member States consider how encouragement could be given for recognition of the work done by the spouses of the self-employed. In its diluted state it is unlikely to have any significant or lasting effect on the situation of farm women.

IRISH GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT

'Irish Women: Agenda for Practical Action' is a Report of a Working Party on Women's Affairs and Family Law Reform set up by the former Minister for Women's Affairs in 1985. In a Chapter entitled 'The Position of Women in Rural Ireland' several aspects of women's position in farming were examined and a number of recommendations made. These include 'special efforts' to encourage women to participate in agricultural training programmes, 'consideration' of the abolition of stamp duty in relation to transfer of a farm into part ownership of spouses, consideration of the idea of giving farm women independent rights to social insurance contributions, and a recommendation to farming organisations that they encourage women to become actively involved at all levels in their organisations.

However, the report did not make any concrete recommendations on any of the issues it addressed, nor specifically did it recommend the adoption of the proposed EEC Directive. Although the Directive was by far the most significant and comprehensive document relating to the occupational position of farm women ever produced, the report confined itself to describing the Directive and its provisions without discussing its implications. On the question of relief services for farm women, for instance, the issue of access to these services was not addressed. There appears to be an assumption that if such services exist, all farm women have access to them. The report did set out clearly many of the issues affecting women in farming, but its recommendations were so innocuous as to be meaningless. Perhaps this reflects the absence of a strong lobby on behalf of farm women, and the farming organisations' lack of interest or commitment to these issues as much as anything else. It also reflects the absence of a good data base which should underpin any examination of the situation of women in farming in Ireland. The report does not however refer to this fact, although this scarcity of information would be obvious to anyone reading the contents.

ISSUES FROM RESEARCH

The role of women in agricultural production, for many years overlooked by social scientists as a topic for serious research, has become a focus for study in recent years. No major research project which examines the situation of women in farming has yet been published in Ireland, but studies from other countries are becoming more numerous. The purpose of this section is not to review this literature as such, but to highlight some of the issues which have been raised. In a book with the telling title The Invisible

Farmers, Sachs (1983) examined the role of women in agricultural production in the USA. Male bias in the US system of agriculture has led, Sachs argues, to the erroneous assumption that women are not involved in agricultural production. This bias in turn has been transferred to developing countries, resulting in a lessening of women's power and access to agricultural resources. The shift to commercial agriculture has often resulted in the exclusion of women from decision-making and male bias is further reflected in the exclusion of women's labour input to agriculture in official statistics.

Hill (1981) argues that farm women want the three Rs - recognition, respect and remuneration. The importance of understanding the relationship between family and kinship ties and the farm business are stressed by Hill. Farm women may find it difficult to assert and protect their rights when they are associated with ties of emotion and affection. They may feel guilty that they are betraying those they love and their own nurturing role by being assertive.

Another issue raised by Hill is the problem of defining the work of farm women. Activities such as answering the telephone, purchasing feed and fertilisers or awaiting deliveries obviously constitute work, but these have traditionally been discounted (especially by economists) as not being part of the work input into the farm. The fact that women's work (of which the three activities mentioned above are but typical examples and most definitely not a complete list), has not been considered important means that women themselves can be dismissed as insignificant contributors to the farm operation. The typical pattern of male domination is reinforced in the agricultural establishment by the identification of farmer with male. Only studies which focus on women's work specifically and assess its importance to the farm operation can eliminate this bias.

Women's labour is not the only factor of production which they contribute to farming, their land, capital and management inputs are often very significant and frequently overlooked according to Flora (1981). She also makes the point that women on farms can be seen as a kind of reserve labour force to be called on at peak times to ensure the maintenance of the farm operation. They are substitutes for paid labour and much less expensive. Elbert (1981) points out that women in farm families have a real stake in passing on a farm business and necessary skills to their children. This fact distinguishes them from women in situations where occupations and family are separate. Farm women play an important 'integrating' role in farm families, helping to ensure a smooth transition from one generation to another. Finding a way to accommodate the search for individual recognition alongside this function, without conflict, is a real challenge for women on farms.

A FINAL COMMENT

Irish farm women who have been actively involved in the women's movement, particularly in making the case for the introduction of measures such as the EEC Directive are bitterly disappointed at the final form of the Directive and are often despairing at what they perceive to be apathy or disinterest on the part of the farm women around the country. Yet they and I encounter many women who wish to be part of a movement for change, who are brimming with enthusiasm for exploration of the options for women and who are rooted in, but not bound by, the kind of common sense that springs from the soil. They see the women's movement as urban-centred and sometimes remote from their concerns. They have difficulty in travelling to meetings over long distances but they frequently make amazing efforts to attend them. They are the foundation on which changes in attitude in rural Ireland can be built. For regardless of changes in regulations or laws or implementation of Directives, major attitudinal change must underpin any real and lasting change in the situation of women of farms.

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