Chapter 16
Gender and Sustainability in Rural Ireland
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Introduction

This chapter considers if and how gender is relevant for the sustainability of rural Ireland. When we refer to rural sustainability we mean the continuation of the economic, social, institutional and environmental components of rural life. There are many ways in which we could approach a chapter on gender and rural sustainability. Mobility, education, employment, social class, health care and practically every social structure impacts on gender and the sustainability of rural areas. As these topics are covered in other chapters in this book, we have chosen to focus on gender relations and the sustainability of agriculture and rural development programmes. We review the existing body of research on these topics and consider what they tell us about rural sustainability. The literature review demonstrates how initially research reported gender differences but did not analyse them in any depth. The next phase saw scholars starting to examine the role of women on farms and latterly the role of women in rural development programmes. More recently, scholars have turned their attention to the implications for men of changing gender roles in rural areas. It is clear that any renegotiation of women’s roles has implications for men’s roles, and vice versa. Much of the research we will review focuses on whether a particular construction of a gender role negatively impacts on another. Our rationale is that a good quality of life for men and women seems central to the sustainability of rural living. We conclude by identifying contemporary considerations regarding gender and rural sustainability.

Gender, sustainability, and early sociological studies

Arensberg and Kimball (2001 [1940]) are credited with the provision of the first anthropological account of the main social and economic conditions of rural Ireland. Prior to this, accounts had been presented only through literary or political commentary and controversy. Their documentation of the social and economic conditions of Co. Clare in the 1930s which they consider to have been representative of Ireland, marks the initiation of rural Irish sociological research. Arensberg and Kimball’s work sparked considerable controversy, both for its claims that it is representative of all of Ireland, and for their rigid underlying conceptual model of structural functionalism. As they explicitly indicate in
their introduction, their work aimed to be both ethnographic, and to advance the explanatory power of structural functional analysis (Arensberg and Kimball, pp. xxv–xxvi; Hannan 1982). Hannan (1972) and Byrne et al. (2001) conclusively argue that despite theoretical shortcomings, Arensberg and Kimball’s work is an important ethnographic account of the social and cultural system characteristic of small scale farming communities in the west of Ireland in the 1930s.

Arensberg and Kimball describe the patrilineal system which existed:

The Irish family is patrilocal and patrdominic, and farm, house, and most of the household goods descend from father to son with the patronym. The father is dominant within the family. He comes to stand for the group which he heads; the farm is known by his name, and the wife and children bear his name (p. 80).

Arensberg and Kimball frequently use ‘father, husband and farm-owner’ as synonyms (pp. 46/47). They detail the father’s ‘controlling role’ (p. 46), and attribute it to his status as landowner: ‘The old man abdicates his controlling position with his transference of the farm to his son’ (p. 121). They recount the social standing and precedence accorded to the old fellows, ‘the men of full status who head farms and farm — working corporations of sons, those who have turned or are about to turn over their control to a younger generation’ (pp. 170–74).

Arensberg and Kimball give us a detailed description of the work carried out by women, which suggests the work performed by women is arduous and time-consuming: ‘The first duty of the day falls to the woman. She rakes up the fire and gets it going, and starts getting the breakfast ready’ (p. 35). At about 5 o’clock, the work of the men is over for the day but that of the woman goes on (p. 39). She must prepare, serve and clean up after the tea, milk the cows, help the children with school lessons if necessary, and put them to bed. If she returns to join the men at the fire she continues with knitting and baking. When the whole family has gone to bed she closes up the house and slakes the fire in the hearth. They say too that ‘the woman’s hands are never idle’ and the work of women is as important in farm economy as men’s work (p. 63).

Even though Arensberg and Kimball focus on reciprocity and complimentary roles, they do outline the different status and prestige vested in each role. They speak of the farmwife and mother ‘who serves her men’ (p. 35), who, as they eat stands ready to refill their plates (p. 37) and who does not seat herself to eat until the men have finished. Men’s status as land owners also gave them access to wider social structures; it is because of their position as farm heads and owners that the old fellows, the men of full status, come to ‘represent the interests of the community before priest, schoolmaster, merchant, cattleman and government official’ (pp. 170–74).

From the perspective of their structural functionalist framework, Arensberg and Kimball describe a rural society that is sustainable because of complimentary gender roles. They present the gender-related division of labour as a functional development within the society. The ‘duties of male and female are complementary’ (p. 195), and the division of labour between the sexes simply represents the separation of human activity into male and female spheres. They describe the division of labour between the sexes as one that arises within a field of larger interests and obligations. It is ‘part of the behaviour expected reciprocally of husband and wife, it is a functional element of their relationship within the family’ (p. 48). They describe the dominant position of the father within the family, and alongside this, provide an anomalous account of reciprocity within the family. This is a charge levied against Arensberg and Kimball by their critics; their concern to assert the importance of structural functionalism means that they provide many descriptions of observed relationships that do not conform to their theoretical model (Hannan 1972). The questions of property, power, women and complimentary work roles are clear examples.

McNabb’s (1964) study of rural Limerick describes a social structure similar to that described by Arensberg and Kimball. He describes the authority and social standing of farm men, while the lives of women are ‘one of unrelieved monotony’ (p. 234). McNabb does consider the sustainability of the rural life he describes. He states that traditional society is well established ‘because it controls the means of production’ (p. 244). Changes regarding the increased availability of education actually serve to maintain traditional norms regarding property and the role of the father, because it becomes more legitimate to have one heir, and educate the other children (p. 244). McNabb maintains that the state also contributes to the sustainability of this structure; these ‘being paternalistic, are part of the traditional framework… they do not change it’ (p. 245). He says too that ‘the chief institutions… are so organized and related to each other as to guarantee the authority of the father and the conservation of property’ (p. 243).

Eithne Viney (1968) described the tough life of women on small farms and labouring families in the 1950s and 1960s. She recounted an unending cycle of hard, physical labour, poor spousal and familial relations, large numbers of children to care for, poor health and little material comforts. This provides an insight into why women might become disenfranchised with rural life and she argued that mothers were encouraging daughters to marry farmers hoping that education would provide an opportunity for daughters to make their way in the world away from family farming (p. 338).

John Messenger’s anthropological study (1969) is based on research he carried out on an island in the Irish Gaeltacht, which he identifies by the pseudonym ‘Inisbeag’. He and his wife spent most of a year there in 1959/60, and they returned eight times between 1961–1966. Like Viney’s study, he signalled gender relations as a threat to the sustainability of the rural structure. Messenger’s account details the exclusion of women from social structures and practices, and also a measure of discontent with their situation. Women confided to his wife that they were unhappy about being forced to remain at home, minding children, and performing tedious household chores. They were resentful of their husband’s greater freedom, and their involvement in numerous social activities ‘forbidden by custom to women’ (p. 77). Women expressed concern about the pressure of
informal controls, particularly with regard to having children (p. 77). Similar to Brody’s (1973) analysis of Inishkille, Messenger reasoned that many of the girls (sic) who emigrated did so because they were dissatisfied with the lot of married women on the island (p. 125). Gender dissatisfaction with rural life is presented as a potential threat to the social structure.

Brody’s (1973) famous study is based on participant observation carried out in five communities in the West of Ireland between 1966–1971. He lived and worked in the communities as a visitor or additional hand, but never as an investigator. Brody believed that demoralization was rampant in the West of Ireland; ‘it is the breakdown of the communities, the devaluation of the traditional mores, the weakening hold of the older conceptions over the minds of young people in particular, to which every chapter will return’ (p. 2). Brody maintained that unlike Arensberg and Kimball (2001 [1940]), he is not about to describe a harmonious and self-maintaining system, but rather one in which the people are demoralized and have lost belief in the social advantages and moral worth of their small society (p. 16). Brody presents emigration as a means of escape from a disintegrating society for disenchanted young people, and outlines the differing rates of emigration for men and women. Women leave when they are younger and they leave in larger numbers. Brody describes a way of life that he does not think is sustainable, and nor does he think it should be. Because of women’s lack of material possessions it is easier for them to leave, and he also states that that ‘country girls have refused to marry into local farms’ (p. 98). It is a bleak image of an unsustainable rural life that this research presents.

Hannan and Katsiaouni’s (1977) study holds a position of importance in the chronology of research on Irish farm life. Their report makes the leap from the anthropological studies we have considered, to the analysis of a modernized, commercial type of farming. Hannan and Katsiaouni state that their study is an attempt to provide some information on nuclear family interaction patterns in Ireland (p. 11). Their main aim is to identify the principle characteristics of farm family interaction, explain variations in interaction, and examine how and why family interaction patterns have changed in Ireland since the 1930s (p. 2). While this farm family structure existed and was suitable within a particular context, this context has changed dramatically and significant changes within the family structure are also to be expected. They identify two crucial processes which are accountable for this: the first is the commercialization of farm production, and the second is the massive expansion of mass communication and modern transport. Hannan and Katsiaouni (ibid.) maintain that these forces combined are likely to lead to changes in people’s beliefs and values ‘as people begin to take on the perspective of prestigious urban reference groups’ (p. 26), and definite adaptations in family task and decision-making patterns will have to be made as a purely circumstantial response to the changing farm and household economy.

The traditional farm family and the modern urban middle-class model are the two anchor points for Hannan and Katsiaouni’s study, and they set out to show and explain variations in farm family interaction patterns along a continuum between these anchors. Hannan and Katsiaouni assume it is natural for their ‘modern urban middle-class model’ to develop in rural communities. They say that the direction of change is ‘almost inevitably’ (p. 16) towards such a model. The summarized description of this model, developed by Elizabeth Bott (1971), recounts the main features as being minimal or no spousal segregation in housekeeping and childrearing roles, similarly power or authority gradients between spouses and between parents and children are minimized, with decision making being largely a joint consultative process. The greater openness of all interpersonal relationships within the family means that maternal specialization in emotionally supportive functions is no longer obvious or necessary.

The basic economic provider role is still predominantly male, and Hannan and Katsiaouni feel this will be particularly so on farms. They say that ‘although the degree of participation by the husband in household and child-rearing tasks is limited by his economic role as provider, what is important is that the norms have changed’ (p. 27). They are describing patterns of social interaction that have not significantly changed but are sustainable because the source of legitimation has changed. There has been a reinterpretation of the old pattern which allows it to remain acceptable. Hannan and Katsiaouni identify how the survival of a given system relies on the belief that it is legitimate. They say of the traditional farm structure that such an overall system could only remain intact so long as it continued to be legitimized by the consensual sets of beliefs and values of the community. This legitimizing ideology remains effectively isolated from contending ideals of family organization which hold in external prestigious groups (p. 20). They argue this traditional society no longer exists, and has now moved towards the modern urban middle-class model. They present this shift as contributing to the sustainability of family farming.

Feminism, farming and rural life

During the 1980s there was an upsurge in feminist studies of the role of women on farms. Irish sociological studies mirror international developments in scholarship. Early research focused on women’s farm work, essential to the sustainability of the farm but rarely accounted for in agricultural statistics (Fahey 1990; Shortall 1992; O’Hara 1994). The patriarchal nature of farming and the power relations within the farm family were studied (Higgins 1983; O’Hara 1998; Shortall 1999). Women’s agency and resistance within farming structures were also considered (O’Hara 1998; Kelly and Shortall 2002). Recent research has focused on how women’s off-farm work impacts on the construction of gender relations within the farm family (Hanrahan 2006; Gorman 2006; Shortall 2006). While women’s off-farm employment is now central to the sustainability of farming, the renegotiation of gender roles has led to a sophisticated analysis of the implications for men, and
what that means for the sustainability of the sector (Ni Laoire 2001, 2002; Kelly and Shortall 2002). We consider these theoretical developments in turn.1

An early and continuing focus of research for sociologists, geographers and economists is the ‘invisibility’ of farm women’s work and theoretical analyses of why it is so (Fahey 1990; Shortall 1992; O’Hara 1994; Heenan and Birrell 1997). This body of work borrows heavily from Marxist debates, particularly notions of petty commodity production, and the separation of productive and reproductive work on the farm (Reimer 1986). Feminist scholars argue that narrow definitions of productive farm work meant that much of the reproductive work carried out by farm women is unacknowledged (Bouquet 1982; Whatmore 1991; Brandth 2002; Little and Panelli 2003). Feminists identify the many ways in which women’s farm work is essential to the farm business (Gasson 1992). Attempts are made to bring farm women ‘out of the shadows’ (O’Hara 1994) of the family farm to illustrate the unequal gender relations within the family and the different status of work carried out by different family members. This research follows broader feminist trends by noting it is not the nature of women’s work that leads to lack of recognition, but rather women’s position within a patriarchal household (Oakley 1974; Walby 1990; Whatmore 1991; Delphy and Leonard 1992). Whatmore’s theory of patriarchal gender relations remains the most sophisticated analysis to date of women’s farm work (Whatmore 1991). Her concept of domestic political ideology is developed from the recognition that home and work share the same location on a farm, and production, reproduction, family and economy must be analysed in an integrated rather than a fragmented fashion. Through this approach an understanding of the exploitation of women as farm housewives and unpaid farm labourers is advanced.

Early studies on power relations focused on relations within the farm family and the situations and circumstances that influenced women’s involvement in farm decision making (Bokemeier and Garkovich 1987; Hanan and Kasbiaouni 1987; Oldrup 1999). The reasons why men and women occupy different positions within the farm family is a central component of empirical and theoretical analysis. Of particular interest is that women enter and engage in farming through specific kinship relations, as wives, daughters, mothers and widows. Given the patrilineal nature of land transfer from father to son, women marry into farming, and thus enter the occupation through marriage rather than through occupational choice (Breen 1984; Kennedy 1991; O’Hara 1998; Shortall 1999). Their husband is already established as the ‘farmer’, and he is also (at least initially) the owner of the capital resources necessary to farm. This position impacts on the valuation of women’s work and on their public place in farming.

A great deal of subsequent research examines the power relations embedded in the public representation of women and the under-representation of women in farming organizations (Shortall 2001). There are very few women in the Irish Farmers’ Association or in the Ulster Farmers’ Union. Other work explores the stereotypical representations of men and women in the farming media which reinforce the conception of farm work as masculine (Duggan 1987). Farm women on the other hand are portrayed primarily as mothers and housewives by way of their domestic functions. Other research examines how agricultural education and training also reflects and reinforces power relations through gendered provisions of training (O’Hara 1994; Shortall 1996). Theoretical analysis of why these power differentials exist and persist, leads to the critical factor that allows men to hold the occupational position of farmer and to occupy the public face of farming: land ownership. The prevalent patrilineal line of inheritance means that women rarely own farms in their own right. This is central to gendered power divisions within farm families (Shortall 1999). While the centrality of land ownership to gender power differentials in farming is debated (Silvasti 1999; Brandth 2002), it is likely that even though there are situations where women are land owners, the pervasiveness of male land ownership is a key component lending weight to the ideology that positions men at the heart of farming.

The initial focus of research on farm women sought to illuminate women’s farm work which had previously been eclipsed, and to understand the different gender and power relations within the farm family. It tended to present subordinate women and dominant men as static and homogeneous categories, and sought structural and causal explanations. Research in the 1970s and 1980s is described as occupying ‘the rural women’s subordination category’ (Berg 2004). More recently, choice, agency, resistance and the altering of gender identities over time have become more prominent in the research agenda. Research examines how women on farms are not simply accepting victims of patriarchal relations, but rather they are active agents, constructing and shaping their roles within farming (O’Hara 1997, 1998; Gorman 2006; Hanrahan 2006). Indeed O’Hara’s research found strategies of resistance that threatened the sustainability of farming families; her research found that women had left agricultural areas in order to avoid the types of lives their mothers had led, and she also found that mothers are encouraging their daughters to leave rural areas. It is a similar act of resistance to the one that Viney and Messenger had reported almost forty years earlier, but this time mothers are actively participating in their daughters’ exit strategies. Other research identifies off-farm work, and the subsequent financial independence, as an expression of women’s agency and resistance (O’Hara 1998; Hanrahan 2006).

The growing emphasis on agency, choice and resistance is a necessary counterbalance to explanations that seemed to lean towards structural determinism. Hoggart (2004) cautions that there is still a tendency for research to focus on women’s ‘subordination’, and there is more scope for ‘celebratory explorations’ of women in rural societies (p. 2). While there is merit in this assertion, it remains the case, in farming at least, that women’s options in terms of resistance and choice are ones that have not greatly diminished the patriarchal nature of agricultural institutions.

The research debate has tended to present research as sitting in one of two opposing camps; on one side is research that focuses on ‘patriarchy and

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1 There are two excellent reviews of the international literature on this topic: Brandth (2002) and Little and Panelli (2003).
the subordination' of women, and on the other is research that focuses on the 'resistance and agency' of farm women. However both structural constraints and strategies of resistance co-exist. Women are agents who make choices and engage in both strategies of resistance and co-operation in farming and within the farm household. It is also the case that the patriarchal nature of farming and the farming industry persists despite resistance and a changing society. Gorman’s recent work (2006) neatly combines a structural focus with strategies of agency. She examines how farm household livelihoods are influenced by evolving gender relations within farm families. She considers how gender roles and relations impact on the process of livelihood decision making, and whether individuals within the farm family pursue off-farm employment or strategies of farm diversification. Most importantly Gorman’s work contributes to the complex debate on how to combine research on individual behaviour and action within the farm family, alongside collective household strategies.

The extent to which off-farm earnings alter gender roles and positions within the farm family has been a research question of interest for some time and classifications or models of farm women have long included the category of ‘women working off the farm’ or ‘women in paid work’ (O’Hara 1998). Women’s unequal status within the farm family is seen as tied to their subordinate economic position in relation to the male breadwinner. With the generally declining income of the agricultural industry, women’s off-farm work is increasingly subsidizing the farm, and women on farms are now more likely to be the primary breadwinner (Kelly and Shortall 2002; Gorman 2006; Hanrahan 2006). In many cases the decision to work off-farm is motivated by the dire need for more income. Other research found the decision to work off the farm and increase independent earnings to have been a positive choice (O’Hara 1998).

Regardless of the motivating factors, this represents a fundamental change in women’s economic status within the farm family, and could potentially have significant implications for gender relations. However, it is not necessarily increased resource contributions that lead to renegotiated domestic work and gender roles, but rather gender ideologies (Layte 1998; Shortall 2006). Agrarian gender ideology is such that even women may have an independent source of income off the farm, the fact of living on a farm means they continue to be positioned as farm women and traditional gender roles remain pervasive. It is also the case that for farm women, an individualistic approach confuses the fact that women not only act as individuals but also as members of farm households (Wheelock and Oughton 1996). Women’s off-farm labour is often part of a farm household survival strategy to maintain the farm and men’s occupation as the farmer. Any analysis of the likely impact of women’s off-farm earnings on gender roles within the farm family must also take account of the historical context, power and established gender relations in the farm family. But in terms of the sustainability of family farming, there is no doubt regarding the contribution of farm women’s off-farm income to the continuation of this social structure in Ireland.

With modernization and globalization, the economic position and social status of traditional rural professions weaken. Farmers have difficulty providing for their families and see their identity as the breadwinner disappearing (Bock 2006). This has led to a difficult reconstruction of gender roles for farm men. For a very long time the Irish rural man was seen as financially independent, a property owner, and having a romantic way of life. Men feel a sense of failure about not being the primary breadwinner on farms, and research has also shown the problems of mental illness, alcoholism, isolation and loneliness amongst both farming and non-farming rural men. We have described early anthropological and sociological studies that demonstrate the extent to which Irish farming/rural masculinity was tied to land ownership, control of property, being the breadwinner, and being the ‘head’ of the farm family (Martin 1997). Ni Laoire (2001) demonstrates how the reconstruction of masculine identity negatively affects men’s well-being.

Similarly Kelly and Shortall (2002) found that men in Northern Ireland had difficulties with their changed economic status and felt a sense of personal failure about no longer filling the breadwinner role. They suggest that women try to protect men’s mental well-being and sense of self-esteem by maintaining this image of farming men as breadwinners. It is likely that a sustainable agricultural sector will continue to rely on off-farm incomes. Ni Laoire (2002) argues that the increased competitiveness and rationalization of agriculture threaten institutions and values that are at the core of masculine farming identities such as the patriarchal family farm, and the prestige of land ownership. Kelly and Shortall (2002) also found demoralization linked to changing masculine identity. The way in which gender roles will be negotiated and structured within a sustainable structure of agriculture requires further research.

Gender and rural development

For the last couple of decades, rural studies have moved from an almost exclusive focus on agriculture to an extensive engagement with debates on rural development and the most appropriate way to ensure the sustainability of rural areas. The Irish sociological study of rural development has examined different questions over time. Earlier work focuses on increasing participation in rural development initiatives, their holistic nature, representativeness and what was meant by ‘community’, governance, partnership and social inclusion (Cuddy 1992; O’Malley 1992; Commins and Keane 1994; Shortall 1994a). While rural development programmes aim to achieve sustainability, they also aim to enhance participatory democracy and the legitimacy of sustainability initiatives. Scholars note that while there is a considerable body of research on Irish farm women, there is less well-developed body of research on Irish rural women (McNerney and Gillmor 2005). Most of the research that has emerged considers the role of women in rural development structures and programmes (Owens 1992; O’Hara 1994; Byrne 1995; O’Connor 1995; Byrne and Owens 1998; Shortall 2002).
While women in farming have had to contend with the ideological and cultural barriers of a very masculine industry, feminists view participatory forms of rural development as providing considerable potential to include women in political structures in a way that has not previously been achieved. Rural women had always been active in community and voluntary activities (O’Hara 1994; Byrne 1995; Byrne and Owens 1998; Shortall 1994b). However, it quickly became obvious that few women were participating within new rural structures of governance. In Northern Ireland the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) regularly state a commitment to engaging women in their Rural Development Programmes, but how this will be done is never explicitly stated. In addition, no data on gendered participation in rural development initiatives exists, although qualitative research demonstrates women’s under-representation in development initiatives (Shortall and Kelly 2001).

In the Republic, women are better represented in the community and voluntary sector as participants and staff members, while continuing to be under-represented in the formal political sphere or in leadership positions in the statutory sector. This is despite a Government commitment to achieve a 40/60 per cent gender balance in respect of nominees to state boards (Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development 2000; National Women’s Council of Ireland 2002; Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform 2003). O’Connor (1995) argued that the few women in senior positions in rural development initiatives receive a disproportionate amount of media coverage which distorts public perceptions about the level of women’s engagement.

A recent review of women’s participation in decision-making in national and local politics, in regional authorities, on state boards and representation on National Development Planning committees points to women’s continuing under-representation and exclusion from decision-making (National Women’s Council of Ireland 2002). Women’s marginal access to political power shows ‘the deep and persistent inequality between women and men in Irish society... (raising) fundamental questions about the representative nature of decision-making in this country’ (National Women’s Council of Ireland 2002, p. 5). The report of the Advisory Committee on the Role of Women in Agriculture (2000) comments that the involvement of women in decision-making is necessary to ensure that the broader social perspective of rural development is fully realized (p. 24). Engaging women in decision-making is clearly one important aspect of sustainable rural development.

Similarly to the position of women in agriculture, the debate around the participation of women in rural development follows lines of agency versus structural constraints. It is argued by some involved in rural development that the initiatives are there if women choose to get involved, as Shortall and Kelly (2001) reported from their research. A certain amount of rural development funding has focused on capacity building and empowerment programmes for women. On the other hand, while globalization processes are linked to the sub-national structures that have developed, it remains the state that hollows itself out (Jessop 1994; Rankin 2001), thereby reproducing the power struggles, contradictions and dominant ideologies of the state at sub-national levels (Rankin 2001). The ideological perspective adopted by rural development initiatives may well embrace traditional gender ideologies. It is for this reason that the more recent research on women’s role in rural development is arguing for a more critical and complex analysis of the construction and management of rural development initiatives and the gender ideology they suppose (O’Connor 1995; Byrne and Owens 1998; Kelly and Shortall 2002). The Northern Ireland Women’s Resource and Development Agency reports that women’s networks have to work doubly hard to demonstrate that they are development bodies rather than women’s groups. It is noted that involving women and addressing gender are two very different matters. Indeed it is suggested that a focus on the number of women involved in rural development initiatives is invidious because it detracts from an examination of the gender relations that underpin rural policies, while giving the impression that gender inequalities are being addressed. Rural development programmes have assumed the male norm and women must adopt this pattern of behaviour to participate. An ideological perspective that accepts the male norm may persist unabated if the focus is solely on women. When the focus moves from involving women to addressing gender relations, it becomes apparent that women’s under-participation cannot be addressed by focusing on women alone.

The North Leitrim Men’s Group’s report (2001) explores the issues for men with a changing sense of masculinity. They consider the farming community but also rural men more generally. They report the far higher rate of single men in North Leitrim, and also the problems of mental illness, alcoholism, social isolation and depression. They recount the difficulties of getting support and assistance to many of these men because of the ‘hard man image’ which prevents rural men from admitting their problems or seeking help. Again it is clear that rural studies need to consider the implications for men and women of renegotiated gender roles. A sustainable way of rural life needs both men and women.

Research from the UK has examined the gendered nature of the construction of rural development policy. Studies of rural policy tend to avoid references to the relationship between policy and the construction of gender identities, or the operation of gender relations (Little and Jones 2000). From their research, Little and Jones (2000) argue that male control of the rural development policy process sustains patriarchal gender relations. They argue that greater attention needs to be given to the construction of rural policy and the priorities assumed. They contend that male power is reinforced within the policy making process, favouring particular masculine working practices and values (p. 637). The very projects that appear inclusive and transformative may turn out to be supportive of a status quo that is highly inequitable to women in the diversity of women now living in rural Ireland. The approach to rural development may have changed but a particular gendered ideology persists to the detriment of women. The ‘weak version of equality’ adopted by the state falls short in promoting an egalitarian culture, in which the renegotiation of gender roles may be possible (Connolly 1999; Kirby 2002). Further Irish research on this topic would be useful.
The exclusion of women from emerging structures of rural governance is linked to its management through the two Departments of agriculture on the island, and rural development organisations, all predominantly 'masculine' in culture. Both Government departments have equality strategies. In the Republic, gender mainstreaming is a stated goal though critics are sceptical of its capacity to anticipate and deeply engage with the chronic problems of gender inequality (McGuaran 2005). Including 'new' people in policy making, increasing the proportion of women in decision making positions, grassroots pressure from women's groups, political will and a commitment to changing organizational culture are some of the changes McGuaran identifies if gender mainstreaming is to become real as opposed to ideal (p. 11). In the North, all Government departments are obliged to have an equality strategy following the 1998 Northern Ireland Act. Northern Ireland's approach to gender mainstreaming has received some favourable reviews in policy circles both for its insistence on a participatory-democratic model and the relative sophistication of the model of equality impact assessment to be used (Beveridge et al. 2000). While this legislation has put gender equality onto the DARD agenda, a lack of gendered baseline information, lack of a gender equality ethos, and lack of expertise have contributed to a limited impact to date (Donaghy and Kelly 2001). Favourable equality legislation exists North and South. However there is a time lag between structural change and change at the agency level. Vigilance is needed to ensure unfavourable gender relations are not incorporated in rural policies in a new guise.

Conclusions

It is immediately obvious that employment, transport, migration patterns and education are essential to rural sustainability. This chapter demonstrates that gender roles, and the re-negotiation of gender roles are central to rural sustainability. Here we have examined how gender interacts with a sustainable way of rural living. We focused specifically on farming and rural development programmes. The literature reviewed shows that after the foundation of the State there was a rigid patriarchal gender order that led to a sustainable way of rural life regarded as legitimate and beyond question. Messenger's study in the 1960s is one of the first times that mention is made of gender roles threatening the sustainability of rural life; he reports that young women leaving the island because of dissatisfaction with the types of lives the older women had to endure. O'Hara (1998) also identified women's flight as a threat to the sustainability of farming. More recent research has shown that men's difficulties with the restructurin of rural male gender roles poses a potential threat to the sustainability of rural areas (Ni Laoire 2002, 2005; Kelly and Shortall 2002). Arguably this may also present another opportunity to de-legitimize patriarchal ideologies in a changing society.

The exclusion of women from rural governance structures has been identified as a problem at a policy level by both relevant Government departments. Including women in high-level decision-making is important as is reviewing the dominant but light version of gender equality in operation. This chapter demonstrates that gender roles, and the negotiation of gender roles is central to rural sustainability. Rural sustainability is more likely to occur with gender equality.

References


