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Single Women in Ireland:  
A Re-Examination of the Sociological Evidence.  

Anne Byrne

Introduction

This chapter examines sociological writing about single women in Ireland in the first half of the twentieth century. Historically, Ireland has had an exceptionally high proportion of people who remained single; yet we know little of the fabric and feel of their lives. What was it like to be a single person in a marriage-oriented and familistic society? There has been no sociological study of the lives of single women in Ireland to date, though single women are mentioned in some community studies. Most social scientists, writing about Irish society in the 1940s and 1950s, have at least by default, cast single women as marginal, unimportant and leading largely miserable lives. This chapter details the few sociological accounts which touch on the lives of single women, presenting a variety of interpretations of their situation. The accounts, in the main, demonstrate a distinctive lack of analyses taking the specificities of gender into consideration. The absence of rich ethnographic data and the sound of women’s own voices, talking about their experiences, means that we have little alternative but to re-examine what sociological evidence there is on single women’s lives.¹

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Irish society has experienced great change in terms of the political and social life of the country, in population structure, forms of livelihood, migration patterns, government systems and changes in values and attitudes. In the period before the Great Famine of the 1840s right up to the 1960s, the structure of Irish society altered from a traditional to a modernising society. The population fell from approximately eight million to three million through famine and emigration. A ‘flight from the land’ reduced the number of smallholders. Agriculture shifted from labour-intensive tillage to capital-intensive rearing of livestock and the cultivation of pasture land. An intensive effort to improve the standard of living and lifestyle of the Irish people became a major objective, and part of the ideology of the Irish Free State
in 1922. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century relative prosperity was achieved through a form of population control in rural Ireland—encouraging people either to postpone marriage or to be permanently celibate. We know little about the consequences of this policy on the lives of those on which it was acted out.

Permanent Celibacy and Postponed Marriage

Marriage patterns in Ireland after the famine have been the subject of much interest, since compared to most other Europeans, Irish people have tended to be older on marriage and Ireland has had the highest proportion of people who remain permanently single. Kennedy (1970) noted a rise in postponed marriage after the Great Famine in the 1840s, a second rise in postponed marriage in the 1870s, an increasingly greater discrepancy between the sexes in permanent celibacy after the 1880s (more bachelors than spinsters), then a decline (in the 1970s) in postponed marriage and permanent celibacy. Kennedy’s work has made a significant contribution to what we know about the extent of singlehood in Ireland in the first part of the twentieth century. The term ‘postponed marriage’ refers to the proportion single of those aged twenty-five to thirty-four years, while ‘permanent celibacy’ refers to the proportion of the never married aged forty-five years and over. However, there is dispute both about the interpretation and origins of postponed marriage and permanent celibacy. Hajnal (1965) described a distinctive historical West European marriage pattern consisting of late age at first marriage (bridal age twenty-five to twenty-six) and a high proportion of the population who never marry (between ten and twenty per cent). In western Europe, up to twenty per cent of the female population never married. This is in contrast to Eastern European patterns of almost universal and youthful marriage.

Connell (1968) asserted that Irish population growth in the late eighteenth century can be accounted for by a fall in the age of female marriage. Dickson (1991) rejects this argument and shows that prior to the Cromwellian period (pre-1640), the mean age of marriage among women was twenty-two to twenty-three years; he also found a difference of five years between male and female mean ages of marriage. He suggests that the male age of marriage was closer to the European norm (older), but that this was not the case when it came to women. In the late seventeenth century, ‘servants and maids, female and male were very numerous and, it seems, largely celibate in non-gentry households in mid-seventeenth century Ireland’ (Dickson, 1991, p.232). By the eighteenth century, however, unmarried servants living in the household were much less common and tended to be younger. The shift can probably, for the most part, be accounted for by changes in the nature of work (textile work and similar work brought with it the possibility to earn cash) which allowed more poor women to consider parenthood, which in turn could account for accelerated population growth.

When did a high rate of singleness come to be a feature of Irish demographic life? Is it a new development or a continuation of an older pattern? From the 1850s onwards permanent celibacy amongst Irish women and men increased every year up to the 1960s (Table 1). While the Irish rates were much higher than the English rates, the same pattern of increase can also be discerned in England and Wales. However permanent celibacy in England began to decrease after 1921, while in Ireland by 1936 thirty-four per cent of men and twenty-five per cent of women between forty-five and fifty-four years were single or ‘permanently celibate’ (Table 2). What are the explanations for these patterns? Why did they persist in Ireland? From which class in society did they emerge and how widespread was the adoption of these marriage patterns? What were the effects of postponed marriage and permanent celibacy on the young women and men concerned and the consequences for society? How was the change in marriage patterns brought about? Some of these questions have been partially debated in Irish sociological writing.

Table 1: Percentage Single and Ever Married, 1901-1992

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>25-34 YEARS</th>
<th>35-44 YEARS</th>
<th>ALL 15 YEARS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FEMALE</td>
<td>MALE</td>
<td>FEMALE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S/M</td>
<td>S/M</td>
<td>S/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>53/47</td>
<td>72/28</td>
<td>28/72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>46/54</td>
<td>67/33</td>
<td>28/72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>37/63</td>
<td>58/42</td>
<td>23/77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>26/74</td>
<td>41/58</td>
<td>18/83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>22/78</td>
<td>34/66</td>
<td>11/89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>26/74</td>
<td>38/62</td>
<td>11/89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>32/68</td>
<td>44/56</td>
<td>12/88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

S = Single
M = Married

Source: Census of Population, Various Years.

There are two main types of argument explaining singleness — those that focus on ideological explanations and those that are substantially founded on material concerns. The range of arguments claiming to explain the historic high rates of singleness in the population include the nature of Irish Catholicism, the drive to improve familial and individual standards of living, the stem family system, emigration and labour-force activity of single women. Throughout all
Table 2: Percentage Single in Certain Age Groups, 1936-1991.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE GROUP</th>
<th>15-19</th>
<th>20-24</th>
<th>25-34</th>
<th>35-44</th>
<th>45-54</th>
<th>55-64</th>
<th>65+</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MALES</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>99.9</td>
<td>96.2</td>
<td>73.8</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td>95.0</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>99.9</td>
<td>94.9</td>
<td>67.4</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td>58.0</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>99.7</td>
<td>89.6</td>
<td>49.8</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>99.5</td>
<td>84.6</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>26.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>99.3</td>
<td>81.6</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>99.4</td>
<td>82.4</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>26.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td>88.7</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>99.9</td>
<td>93.9</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| FEMALES    |       |       |       |       |       |       |     |
| 1936      | 99.1  | 86.4  | 54.8  | 30.2  | 25.1  | 23.7  | 22.7|
| 1946      | 98.4  | 82.5  | 48.3  | 30.0  | 25.6  | 24.4  | 23.3|
| 1951      | 98.9  | 82.3  | 45.6  | 27.6  | 25.7  | 24.7  | 23.7|
| 1961      | 98.9  | 78.2  | 37.1  | 22.7  | 23.1  | 25.0  | 24.3|
| 1966      | 98.4  | 74.8  | 31.0  | 20.4  | 20.8  | 24.4  | 23.8|
| 1971      | 97.9  | 68.9  | 25.7  | 17.5  | 18.8  | 22.0  | 21.5|
| 1979      | 97.3  | 66.3  | 21.5  | 12.3  | 15.7  | 18.9  | 23.8|
| 1981      | 97.7  | 67.7  | 21.9  | 11.4  | 14.6  | 18.2  | 23.2|
| 1986      | 99.0  | 77.6  | 26.4  | 10.7  | 12.1  | 16.5  | 21.7|
| 1991      | 99.9  | 86.2  | 31.7  | 11.5  | 10.2  | 14.2  | 19.8|

Source: Census of Population, Various Years.

Of these arguments, the emphasis is on the male experience, with women included in generalisations that are more pertinent to men. A gender analysis is missing. In the ideologically-based arguments, where the experience of women is touched upon, it is as if women are to blame for not marrying and must bear responsibility for the surfeit of men in rural Ireland from the 1900s onwards. In later accounts women are regarded as causing permanent celibacy amongst men, as mothers and as reluctant wives. In materially-based arguments, women are written about as useful labour units but are also cast as dependent burdens and spinster sisters when an inheriting brother wants to marry.

Conflicting arguments abound. There is evidence showing that women were urged to marry by the Catholic Church, to stay at home and have babies and were not encouraged to emigrate. Others opine that mothers actually educated their daughters specifically for emigration, using the threat of lifelong singlehood at home as encouragement. What is not in doubt is that church, state and family colluded in shaping the life choices of generations of Irish women and men, limiting and constraining their sexual and marital relationships. There is little evidence of the emotional and non-material preparation for the single life in a society which had such a high rate of singleness - apart from preparation for the religious life. The lack of visible ethnographic material on women's experiences in this period of Irish social history causes me to question the evidence presented to date.

Irish Catholicism and Remaining Single

Commentators dispute the extent to which Irish Catholicism can account for the high rates of singleness in the population (Connell, 1968, Kennedy, 1970, Hynes, 1978). Evidence is cited demonstrating great reverence for the holy, moral celibate life which both attracted vocations and provided a model for lay people to follow (O'Brien, 1954). Sex was seen as largely immoral, and therefore, the argument goes, to lead a good moral life, it is preferable to remain celibate and therefore single. The lack of widespread divorce, prohibition on birth control and the preference by the Catholic Church that married women should not work are all examined as potential deterrents to marriage. Kennedy, however, argues that the Catholic Church differentiated between lawful and unlawful sex. Lawful and compulsory sex with your spouse was condoned but sex amongst the unmarried was prohibited. Kennedy shows that permanent celibacy did not vary by religion, as non-Catholics also had a high rate of singleness in the 1940s. This points to other factors in the population, according to Kennedy, such as the material and social aspirations of the Irish rather than the nature of Catholicism itself to explain the high levels of permanent celibacy and postponed marriage.

In a study of Irish Catholicism after the famine, Hynes explained the 'devotional revolution' as part of the embourgeoisement of the rising farmer class, who at all costs had to control ownership and consolidate land.

Thus strenuous efforts were made to gain and keep control over land and such efforts involved the regulation of its members by each family and a lot of sacrifice and long range planning. In other words, like modernisation elsewhere, modernisation in Ireland, involved a growth in discipline (Hynes, 1978, p.147).

Celibacy, postponed marriage and emigration were all essential aspects of this discipline. Hynes argues that women in particular took to the new Catholicism, which emphasised sexual purity and control of sexual urges. Their interest in the supernatural was purely instrumental, according to him.

In the case of women, they knew that to stay in the marriage market with a realistic chance of getting a husband they had to keep their reputation. Sex
was dangerous to their aspirations and this helps explain why they were receptive to the puritanical elements in the Catholic teachings available to them. Their goal of an acceptable living standard led them to postpone marriage until they were older and ... reduced their fertility more than did those who married early (Hynes, 1978, p.149).

Religious regulation did seem to triumph at this period and could be construed as a strong ideological system which explains the prevalence and acceptance of singleness in the population. But to understand the role of Catholicism and its priests in either causing or perpetrating permanent celibacy and postponed marriage, the role of the State and of economic and social conditions also need to be examined.

**Single for the Sake of Society?**

From the 1840s onwards, there was a concerted attempt by rural dwellers to improve their standard of living. While there is dispute amongst commentators as to the timing of this attempt (pre- or post Famine?) and its relative prevalence amongst cottiers, labourers or tenant farmers, it is apparent that the means of achieving material well-being was consolidation of land and the reduction, in the long term, of the number of dependants on the holding. In order to prevent the further fragmentation of holdings, which was a typical pattern before the Famine, only one child from each family would inherit the land, marry and produce the next generation. This is the idea in its most simple form and it is known as the ‘stem family system’ as opposed to the ‘joint family system’ where property was held in common. Most social scientists who concern themselves with this period in Irish development see permanent celibacy and postponed marriage as consequences of the stem family system.

**Singleness and the Stem Family System**

The consequences of this system of inimicable inheritance were immense, not only on the social structure but on the community and the family, and most particularly on individuals. My concern here is with the latter, and especially with the lives of never-married single women. However, it is extremely difficult to know from sociological accounts of the period how the stem system affected the lives of these women. The stem system was based on three-generation farm households, in which any son could inherit, first or last. In the absence of sons, daughters could also inherit. This was the period of the arranged marriage or ‘match’ of heirs, based on the scarcity of land and the overall objective of improving the living standards of the family. While the heir could marry, he had to ensure that dependent siblings were provided for if they remained on the land, or he had to assist in their emigration or further education. One daughter in the household might possibly marry, if she had a dowry and if she could find an acceptable mate in the community – acceptable in terms of financial and land security and in the number of dependants in her prospective groom’s household. The remaining daughters and sons had few options – they could remain on the land and work as ‘relatives assisting’ or they could try to emigrate. Within the stem family system, there is a continual tension between the status of family members as labour units and as dependants to be cared for by the heir (see Varley, 1983). In the case of non-inheriting sons, there was little chance that their fathers could buy additional land for them, but in some cases they might inherit a smallholding from a bachelor uncle. But setting up a family on a smallholding was a very risky business and most small holders (with under five acres) chose to keep all of the income from the holding for their own personal use, rather than share it with a potential wife and children (Kennedy, 1970).

Those who did marry under this system, tended to do so later rather than earlier. And again, there is dispute about the extensiveness of the stem system and whether it was a new adaptation or simply a continuation of a practice begun by the rising tenant farmer classes before the Famine. There is no doubt however, about the tendency of both females and males to marry in their late twenties and mid-thirties respectively. This was due in the main to the reluctance of the father to either name the heir until the latest possible moment (often as he lay dying) or to hand over the property in his later years. Once the heir was named, he had to secure a marriage partner and care for his dependants, who might be numerous. If the heir was female, often she had to wait until both parents died to inherit, which made her less attractive or acceptable as a potential child bearer and producer of a male heir. Descriptions of the Irish country divorce are particularly poignant in this scenario. Curtin and Varley comment:

Not to have children in 1930s Clare exposed the woman (who was considered the culpable party) to possible verbal or physical abuse at the hands of her husband, or even to being returned in disgrace to her natal home under the then-disappearing procedure known as the ‘country divorce’. Such a separation allowed farm ownership to be transferred to the heir’s brother, in the hope that this man’s marriage would result in the birth of a male child and the desired generational continuity (Curtin and Varley, 1984, pp.31-32).

The stem family system ensured the preservation of property and family lines of inheritance, at all costs.

**The Status and Treatment of the Unmarried**

There is an ambivalence in the literature on the status of the unmarried in the population. While bachelors certainly get a little more attention from sociologists (Brody, 1973, Curtin and Varley, 1984), the unmarried single female, where she is considered, is conceptualised as marginal, on the perimeter in the
community and is written out of accounts with statements that many single women emigrated. Sex, rather than marital status was a prior determinant of one's position in the local community. Single women, compared to single men, were at the very bottom of the social hierarchy with low social status and little solidarity amongst them. The marginalisation of single women and the lack of serious consideration of the nature of their lives by social commentators is rather ironic considering the collective effort to keep women single for as long as possible. Bachelor drinking groups, on the other hand, were regarded as part of the maturation process for single males and socialised young men into prolonging singleness.

The bachelor group is in revolt against responsibility, and at the same time is a refuge against loneliness. Its members, perhaps unconsciously, create a subtle, psychological ambience, which arises out of a poignant contrast between age and youth, between the past and the present, and which intensifies the feeling that youth is short and must not be trammelled (McNabb, 1964, p.224).

This was part of 'marriage avoidance' strategies condoned by the community, necessary in order to keep the stem family system intact. McNabb noted in his study of a small community in County Limerick in the early 1950s that while people accepted in the course of time that one would marry, marriage was seen as a limitation on male freedom. He describes the opinion of the community as likening marriage to old age - a process which is inevitable and which one would like to defer as long as possible.

The community is not opposed to marriage - it is something in the course of nature and one accepts it philosophically - but each individual avoids its acceptance as long as possible, just as one tries to avoid old age. When such an attitude to marriage reigns, the institution has low status. It may be a personal ideal, but it is not a social ideal, nor is it a positive goal for the majority of the community (McNabb, 1964, pp.223).

The community which controlled marriage, is described by McNabb (1964) as 'favouring' the single person. He does not exactly describe what is meant by this term, but writes that

... the large number of single people in the community has weighted it against marriage and gives the family poor representation. Community life favours the single...The higher percentage single, even in the older age groups, means that there is no stigma attached to the single state. This is supported to a great extent by a celibate clergy...lay people aim at celibacy in the same sense as does the clergyman. Where the single state is an acceptable one, and where the higher proportion of the adult population are single, it is inevitable that the society will be organised primarily for their benefit (McNabb, 1964, p.224).

It seems to me very doubtful the society was organised for the 'benefit' of the single; rather they were the unwitting and perhaps unwilling victims of a system which subsumed individual interests, needs and aspirations to familial, communal and societal goals of economic prosperity. McNabb does comment earlier in his account that the marriage-makers were perhaps aware of the deficiencies in this system - but that for the sake of the family and prosperity, the tradition must endure.

The parents have the depressing spectacle of many unhappy bachelors and spinsters in the neighbourhood, and have no wish to see their children in the same plight...They are quite conscious of the defects in the old system, but cannot see that there is any reasonable alternative (McNabb, 1964, p.221).

Hynes' (1978) reading of the status of the unmarried is quite different. The single in a rural community were generally both without land and children - the two requirements for the continuation of the economic system for which families struggled to maintain.

The stem family system required many people to marry late, if at all, and in the community these unmarried men and women - because they were neither married nor controlled property - had very low status (Hynes, 1978, p.148).

The unmarried, both male and female, were the losers in this system which gave preferential economic treatment to heirs, who could then marry. Hynes sees the bachelor drinking role as one of the devices which men used to cope with their situation, while women chose to emigrate, if they could.

Single Women and Rural Life

The unimportance of unmarried females in rural society is apparent from accounts of studies of small communities. Brody (1973) and McNabb (1974) used schematic models of the communities which they observed, consisting of a series of concentric circles with men at their centres and women on the perimeters. Both place unmarried women on the absolute outside of the communal circle.

In our community, the model is as follows: the centre and larger area represents the bachelors: the next circle represents male children; outside that again is the circle of married people, and the extreme circle is of unmarried adult females (McNabb, 1964, p.224).

Brody (1973) uses a similar model in describing Inishkillane. 'At the centre of this society are bachelors and family men; at its outer perimeter are the women' (Brody, 1973, p.161). He goes on to draw a diagram, with men at the centre, and unmarried women on the outside, those whom he assumes are 'least committed to life in farming society' (Brody, 1973, p.161). He does not pause here, to reflect that perhaps the women (whom he says were unduly influenced by magazines, films and newspapers) may have been thoroughly dissatisfied with their treatment within the family and saw no future for themselves in rural Ireland.

Kennedy's (1970) work on mortality and living standards among the Irish at the beginning of this century gives us some insight into the treatment of young
women and girls in rural Ireland. Using census data, he shows quite clearly that up until 1950 female mortality is greater than male, reaching a peak in the decade 1901-1910, when the female death rate for those aged ten to fourteen years was one hundred and forty per cent of the male death rate. Most of these girls of the children would have been living as daughters in their parents’ own homes and one can only conjecture that hard physical labour combined with a lack of nourishing food contributed to these shockingly higher death rates for females. The decade of high female mortality was also the decade of the greatest transfer of land. Kennedy surmises:

Could there have been other expenses associated with land ownership which resulted in some of the more land-hungry farmers buying fields with money taken away from the support of their families? (Kennedy, 1970, p.61).

Viney (1968) provides a grim description of life in rural Ireland for women on small farms or in labouring families in the 1950s and 1960s – much of it confined by hard physical labour, in houses with few material comforts, with no opportunities for leisure and poor relations between husband and wife, fathers and children. Marital fertility on the other hand was high, with no opportunity and no permission for women to limit the number of children, as contraceptives were not widely available and were forbidden by the Catholic Church. Mothers did not encourage daughters to marry farmers but according to Viney a mother might give ‘the girls an education that will enable them to make their way in the world away from any other farm’ (Viney, 1968, p.338). Nursing, teaching and typing were the favoured occupations. But single women who stayed at home had to ‘work as hard as their mother did, and in return are given pocket money, their keep and an occasional lump sum for clothes’ (Viney, 1968, p.338). Pocket-money instead of wages was seen as preferred for family members who worked on the farm as not to confuse them with ‘that despised being, a “servant girl” – a term still used for female help’ (Viney, 1968, p.339). The servant girl however had the possibility of financial independence, an option not available to the spinster sister who stayed at home. McNabb also described the labour of young women which included household chores, looking after younger children and heavy farm work.

When a daughter reaches sixteen, if she remains on the farm, she must do a full day’s work, and too often her life is one of unrelied drudgery. There is almost an Oriental attitude to girls. They are favoured neither by father or mother and accepted only on sufferance (McNabb, 1964, p.230).

McBreen’s Heifer – or How Much is a Woman Worth?

Hynes (1978) considered the impact of modernisation on single women in rural society, but mainly in terms of their economic value. The single woman’s worth as labourer (albeit unpaid) steadily decline and this in turn affected not only her marriage prospects, but her very survival. Changing patterns of agriculture, from a labour-intensive system to capital-intensive system reduced women’s economic input both as labourers and as producers. Their value in the economic exchange system was decreased. In the marriage market, as only one son could seek a bride, but all women were potential brides, supply far outweighed demand and ‘reduced the value of any particular woman’ (Hynes, 1978, p.149).

In order to improve her position in the rural marriage market, the single woman was dependent on either her father or her brother to provide her with a dowry. She was constrained no matter which way she turned, as she was economically dependent on the family whether she stayed at home on the farm or wanted to marry.

McNabb also acknowledged women’s poor position in the marriage market, but attributed it to their lack of importance in all aspects of community.

... the girl is subservient to all other members of the family and shares no confidences either with her parents or her brothers. Her only right is to a dowry if she marries with her parents’ consent... The females play a weak role in community life and cannot be said to have any direct influence on the marriage pattern (McNabb, 1964, pp.224-231).

Marriage, according to McNabb’s account, is men’s business and women have no input or rights in the conduct of marital affairs. He does, however, note that some women were not happy with these arrangements and are ‘beginning to lay down conditions and are setting their faces against being pawns in property transactions’ (McNabb, 1964, p.224). Women’s disenchchantment with rural society is also explained by their disenchantment with rural men.

The modern country girl is turning away from the land. The wealth of the prospective husband, although still important, is not so decisive as his personal appearance, his manners and the kind of home he can provide. She objects to the ‘muck and dirt’ of the farm life and would prefer to marry a professional man or even a white collar worker... The status of the farmer has gone down considerably in the eyes of the female population (McNabb, 1964, p.221).

Hynes hypothesises why women may have been dissatisfied, and, though he does not name it, he describes patriarchy.

... the falling status of women together with the increasing separation of the sexes, both results of the triumph of the stem family system, would make the people receptive to beliefs which stressed the authority of the male and the different, complementary but ultimately subordinate contributions of the female in society and especially in the family (Hynes, 1978, p.149).

An insider’s view of the situation is passionately present in the letter below written in response to a newspaper competition for the best account of how wives met their husbands. A very annoyed person (signed as ‘cut the coddin’) wrote:

Nothing irritates me more than your idiotic series ‘How I met my Husband’. Every honest woman in this country will tell you that she met her husband
through the amount of money or property she happened to possess... there is no sentiment in your 'sahool' (sic) Irishman when it comes to taking a wife. She must have a fortune or he is not interested. Incidentally, Irishmen make the worst husbands in the world. They are mean, selfish, lazy and with absolutely no respect or consideration for women (Times Pictorial, October, 1952).

**Single Women and the Flight from the Land**

Given the constraints on marriage and the poor prospects for unmarried women who remained on the land, the dominance of the family in economic and social affairs and the allegedly poor relations between the sexes, it is not surprising that as soon as they were able, single women fled from rural Ireland. This can be read as rebellion or at the very least resistance to the patriarchal constraints that sought to control and restrain their lives. It could be argued that rather than submit to the exigencies and constraints of rural life, single women created alternatives for themselves, and sought new strategies for economic, social and personal survival. This however is not the view presented at the time.

Single women, unlike married women, participated in the labour market but conditions in the 1940s were so unfavourable and wages so low, that work did not confer any social status of importance (see O’Dowd, 1987). Single women chose to migrate and emigrate in the face of poor working conditions, long hours, low wages and few career prospects. Ireland at this time had one of the highest rates of female migration and emigration in the Western world (Jackson, 1987, Rudd, 1988). However, commentators of the period, writing in the 1950s up to the late 1970s, do not regard emigration as rejection or as a form of rebellion. Single women were seen as agents of decline in rural Ireland, rather than as agents of change in the conditions and circumstances of their own lives. For example, Brody’s central thesis on population decline and consequent demoralisation in the community of Innishkilleen seems to rest on women’s shoulders. He states that decline is inevitable as women have rejected rural life.

The decline has not been halted, and is unlikely to be halted in the near future, precisely because country girls have refused to marry into local farms. So long as they reject life in the parish, no new generation can emerge and no check to the downward trend can be effected (Brody, 1973, pp.98-99).

Single women were blamed for their anti-rural attitudes for denigrating life on the land and were described as guilt-free desertsers, who left home and family without as much as a backward glance (O’Brien, 1954, McNabb, 1964, Viney, 1968, Brody, 1973). Most commentators were simply not interested in the single woman’s experience or her plight, and the single woman was described as leaving rural Ireland for the attraction of the cities whether at home in Ireland, England or the US. Female migration, is only looked at in terms of the consequences for the surplus of males left behind – postponed marriage or permanent celibacy. McNabb asserts that it was the more vital and less conservative people in the community who emigrated. He described the girls (sic) who remained ‘...as rather passive and not likely to go out of their way to be attractive to men or to help them over their diffidence in the face of new responsibilities’ (McNabb, 1964, p.220). Women were blamed for leaving, succumbing to the lure of the city and if they stay behind they were further vilified as somehow inferior and dullards. McNabb’s unsympathetic interpretation of single women’s motivation to emigrate or not greatly compromised his ability to understand and represent the female experience at the time.

Because of their increasingly marginalised position in rural communities, single women certainly had more to gain by moving to the large towns and cities of the US and England and they continued to leave in a steady stream right up to the 1960s. The preponderance of single women in Irish towns also meant that there were not enough urban males available for marriage.

The result was the degree of permanent celibacy among females was higher in urban than in rural areas, at least between 1926 and 1966. The fact that spinsterhood was more characteristic of Irish urban than rural residents needs to be emphasised to counter the general impression that permanent celibacy in Ireland was primarily a rural phenomenon (Kennedy, 1970, p.170).

Kennedy has interpreted both emigration and remaining single as alternative ways of securing ‘respectable adult status’ for men and women in Ireland, though he admits it was more difficult for single females to achieve if they remained in rural Ireland, due to women’s subordinate role in the countryside. Being single and independent in an urban context was the only way single women could secure respectable adult status.

... many Irish women preferred urban over rural lifestyle, even if it meant the possibility of becoming a spinster... since 1961 in Irish rural areas there have been about twenty four bachelors for every ten spinsters (Kennedy, 1970, p.72).

In a letter to the *Times Pictorial*, Miss S B Henderson asks why marriage rates are so low and expresses her opinion of city men:

Can it be that only in the city one sees a pretty girl or are men so mean that they will not share what they can earn with anyone else? Or can it be that the girls do not think that the men are good enough for them? In any case, I think that most of the young men in Dublin are a poor, scruffy, badly groomed, untidy lot (Times Pictorial, 12 July, 1952).

Walsh (1985) interprets these patterns quite differently, asserting that since 1926, women had a better prospect of marriage than men, as in general the numbers of men far outweighed the numbers of women, right up to the 1960s. But there is little evidence that women preferred marriage in rural Ireland to being single and independent in the towns and cities. As many commentators noted, if the women were looking for husbands they were going in the wrong direction.
The Vanishing Irish?

By the end of the 1950s much anxiety began to be expressed about late marriage and the high rate of singleness in the population. The Commission on Emigration noted with concern:

A profoundly adverse effect on the psychology of the people must be produced where so many do not marry at all, or else postpone marriage to ages higher than are customary elsewhere or are desirable or natural. There is something gravely wrong in a community where there is such widespread frustration of a natural expectation, and in our considered view, the low marriage rate is one of our two great population problems — the other being emigration... (Commission on Emigration and other Population Problems, 1948-54, Majority Report, para 164, in Walsh, 1985, p.32).

Irish marriage patterns were described as the 'strange enigma of a race that believes passionately in family life and yet produces more old bachelors and more old maids than any race in the civilised world' (O’Brien, 1954, p.220). In his concern for the vanishing Irish, O’Brien described

The most pathetic aspect of the whole tragic situation is that the women of Ireland, who crave wifehood and motherhood as much as, if not more than the women of other races, are pulled willy-nilly into a spinsterhood not of their own choosing. Is it any wonder that after enduring their plights for decades they are now fleeing from the island of bachelors so that Eire has now one of the lowest proportion of women to men of any country in the world? (O’Brien, 1954, p.221).

While the accuracy of O’Brien’s demographic statistics may be questioned, the postponement of marriage and celibacy — a strategy to improve familial and national prosperity — was now interpreted as a national tragedy. From the 1950s onward a concern about rural depopulation and the flight from the land is reflected in public pleas in newspapers and in radio broadcasts by politicians aimed at workers to return from England and engage in labour at home (see Times Pictorial, 7 January, 1950 reference to radio broadcast by Taoiseach Costelloe) and in exhortations to young Irishwomen to stay in rural Ireland and marry the surplus of bachelors in order to repopulate the land (O’Brien, 1954). At this point, public discourse certainly changes from supporting celibacy and postponed marriage to actively encouraging marriage and high fertility within marriage.

Therefore, by the late 1950s, in spite of initially poor economic conditions, the generations who matured after the second world war, started to marry at a higher rate and at a younger age. There was a steady increase in the marriage rate and a decrease in the age of brides and grooms, along with a reduction in the differences in age between men and women on marriage. But as the marriage rates increased, marital fertility decreased, giving some credence to the notion that the lack of availability of contraceptives and the consequent difficulty in limiting family size may have been a deterrent to marriage in the past. Rising incomes and a period of relative prosperity in Ireland, combined with decreasing prospects abroad, may also have been important factors in pushing up the marriage rate in the 1960s.

These patterns continued until the late 1970s and early 1980s when the marriage rate began to decline and the proportion single in the population began to increase. Walsh describes this increase in the proportion single for the age group fifteen to thirty-four years as significant and marks the end of decline charted since 1936 (Walsh, 1985, p.148). The economic recession of the late 1970s and 1980s then had an effect on marriage rates and average age of marriage, witnessing a return to deferred marriage and a later marrying age. Whether this is due to economic forces alone or disenchantment with the institution of marriage can only be determined by time, more precise census information and further research.

Conclusion

Traditionally high rates of male celibacy have been explained in terms of an agricultural economy, impaltable inheritance, the excess of males over females, female migration and urbanisation. The cohort of Irish women who have never married has however been overlooked by sociologists in a manner which unfairly reproduces the prejudices of society. In her own words, Imelda from Dublin writes:

The women of Ireland are a sorely tried lot. Virtue is preached at them from every corner — and I am not talking here about the church — but what national happiness can one expect if the women of the country are being frustrated. This frustration is being elevated to the status of a national mission, and the state is slowly dying. The few young men who want to live their lives free of hide bound restrictions are going away, and the girls are going away also because they cannot find the emotional outlet so dear to all women in this country. I pity the poor Irish women over forty and fifty who are unable to make a new start in life; they must remain behind with the gummy old chaps, who are grand fellows in their own way, but would fly from marriage, like the devil from a paraffin torch placed to his posterior (Times Pictorial, quoted in O’Brien, 1954, pp.230-231).

Discussion Questions

1. What are the most convincing explanations for the persistence of the high rate of singleness in Ireland in the first part of the century?

2. Is there any stigma attached to being a single woman in Irish society today?

3. Can you recall the life and circumstances of any female or male relative who never married?
Women and Irish Society

4.

What images are evoked by the words 'spinster' and 'bachelor'?

Notes

1. This chapter is background material to work on the lives of never-married women in contemporary Irish society being conducted by the author.

2. In a song by Percy French, a man deliberates whether to marry 'Pretty Kitty' or 'Plain Jane', though she had a 'face that the devil designed' would be accompanied by a heifer and thus the attractiveness of the marriage bargain is increased.

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Times Pictorial Weekly, various years.


26.

Lesbian Politics and Community

Geraldine Moane

Introduction

The phrase 'rapid social change' has become almost a cliché to describe economic, social and cultural changes in Ireland over the last 30 years, indeed, over the last decade. Often, the phrase has connotations of tremendous progress, of the sweeping away of the old restrictions and prejudices of the past, and with them, the psychological inhibitions. Yet rapid social change does not necessarily imply marked psychological change. In the case of homosexuality, for example, it is apparent that fear and prejudice is alive and well in Irish psyches and society, despite important legislative changes, unprecedented inclusion of lesbians and gay men in progressive social agendas, and increasing depictions of lesbians and gay men in art and culture.

Understanding Lesbian Existence – Conceptual Issues

The continued existence of prejudice, despite rapid social change, is one of the many paradoxes of lesbian and gay existence. These include an existence marked on the one hand by prejudice and discrimination (homophobia), and on the other by celebration and community solidarity (lesbian and gay pride). Coming to awareness of lesbian or gay sexuality occurs even where there is total silence about lesbian and gay existence. Lesbians and gay men are spatially dispersed, yet have developed a strong sense of community and culture. Homosexuality has been a criminal offence, yet government funding has been provided to lesbian and gay groups.

Variety and complexity is another feature of lesbian existence which must be acknowledged. Indeed, it would be impossible for one writer to provide a comprehensive account of lesbian existence, or more specifically, of lesbian politics and community in Ireland. As Patricia Prendiville (1996) points out, lesbian politics and community are embedded in a changing social context and
The growing importance of gender in sociology and the growth of Women's Studies courses and scholarship in community, third-level and continuing education in Ireland prompted us to bring together gender-based social science research in a single text. Examining gender relations enhances our knowledge of the social. Using this knowledge, we are aware that inequality is not a natural state, but a social product. Feminists have described and theorised about social relations and practices which dominate, shape and constrain women's lives. Gender relations are based on the understanding that men have greater economic, social and productive power than women. The male gender is considered dominant, the female gender subordinate and oppressive gender relations are both recreated and maintained when we continue to observe these forms. Feminist theorising and the facts of gender inequality continue to be documented in the social sciences and this text is part of that endeavour. Gender is a key concept for feminist social scientists; and in this text we examine the gendered character of social relations, institutions, structures, practices and discourses. Moreover, gender is considered to be problematic; particularly as inequality can be one of the consequences of gender relations. However, as gender is considered to be a social product by many theorists, it is believed that oppressive gender relations can be altered.

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The contributors in this text use gender as an organising category in their analyses; theorise on the basis of women's experiences of oppressive social relations; seek to examine the relationship between the researcher, the research participants and the research process; make visible hidden aspects of women's lives and identify alternative strategies which empower women to act as agents of social reform. These practices are considered to be part of the process of doing feminist research. A standard criticism of social science research is that
in the main it has been concerned with those areas of life which men have found problematic. Research topics and questions have tended to be based on only those aspects of social life which are apparent or important to men. It has also been assumed that women’s concerns about and interests in social relations are similar to men’s. Feminist social scientists reject this assumption and stress the importance of identifying those questions which emerge from women’s often problematic and difficult experiences of the world. Trying to explain and understand the human condition only from the viewpoint of a male experience leads to an incomplete and even ‘perverse understanding of social life’ (Harding, 1987). Feminist research methodologies have now moved on from simply ‘adding in’ women to the research topic. It can be argued that a new sociological paradigm has been created and feminist methodologies have contributed to changing the practice and process of doing research. Feminist sociologists have criticised existing sociological theories and methodologies, discovered new research areas, emphasised interdisciplinary approaches in research and writing, and politicised the research process (see Harding, 1987, Wallace, 1989). Feminist social science research is research for the emancipation of women rather than merely research on women.

The text reflects a combination of research methodologies, both qualitative and quantitative. The range of methods include ethnography, in-depth interviews, participant observation, large scale surveys and longitudinal studies. Census and statistical data, archival material, case study material, published and unpublished documents, recorded interviews, and existing research publications are all used in innovative and creative ways to explore aspects of women’s lives heretofore little known and unacknowledged. Women’s support and activist groups contributed to the research, both as participants and researchers, as well as many individual women committed to making visible the paucity of scholarship on women’s lives in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. Contributors draw on feminist theorising to make sense of their data; for example authors make use of feminist poststructuralist critiques to understand the regulation of sexuality among young women or feminist structural arguments to examine the impact of modernisation on equality issues. Feminist critiques of Irish society, North and South, of the prevalence of patriarchal practices in the welfare state, in the Catholic Church and in the family are recurrent elements of many of the analyses. However, the enduring and persistent character of inequality permeates all of the research findings. Differences between women are revealed, showing up the heterogeneity of the category ‘woman’. The research in this text also exposes, not only inequality and differences connected to gender, but those also associated with sexual orientation, intellectual and physical abilities, ethnic group membership and economic class. Bringing together the evidence of inequality in Irish society and making visible the hidden aspects of women’s lives are significant elements of this text.

The development and expansion of Women’s Studies programmes in Ireland also prompted us to bring together social science research on women’s lives. As teachers of Women’s Studies, we realised the need for a text based on Irish society which would add a comparative dimension to courses which use UK, European or US source material. We are also aware of the exponential growth of feminist scholarship in Ireland, particularly within social science and we felt a text drawing this scholarship together was required. In addition, bringing together research from both parts of Ireland, North and South, allowed us to view the effects of gender in two very different societies. The text is based on a call for papers, to which we received an immense response — much more than we first anticipated. The sections represent current areas of Irish social science scholarship in Women’s Studies; education, work, citizenship and the welfare state, mental health, reproduction, motherhood, violence, rurality, power and politics. Disability, sexuality and the negotiation of power within households are also treated in the section on ‘hidden lives’. But while these contributions continue to advance our explorations of inequality and place feminist research firmly on the Irish sociological agenda, there are of course absences — absences which we hope will be filled in the future by another volume.

Irish sociology began to pay attention to ‘the social differences between men and women’ with the publication of Gender in Irish Society (Curtin, C, Jackson, P, O’Connor, B. (eds.), 1987). This was preceded by two Women’s Studies publications in 1986 — Women in Ireland: Voices of Change, (Beale, I.) and Personally Speaking: Women’s Thoughts on Women’s Issues (Steiner-Scott, L. (ed.)) — both of which explore changes in Irish society through the eyes and voices of women. These and other publications have helped to mark and push out the boundaries of gender-based research so that additional dimensions of inequality can be unravelled and vital connections made between scholarship and activism (see for example Smyth, A. (ed.), 1993 Irish Women’s Studies Reader; contributions to Clancy, P, Drudy, S, Lynch, K, O’Dowd, L. (eds.) 1995 Irish Society: Sociological Perspectives, UCG Women’s Studies Centre Review, Vol. 1-4, 1992-1996, Lentin, R. (ed.) 1995-1996 In from the Shadows: UL Women’s Studies Collection Vol. 1-2, Irish Journal of Feminist Studies, 1996). In a survey of feminist research in Ireland, Lentin (1993) however, laments the lack of a feminist perspective in most gender-based sociological research as well as the dearth of ‘empirical data to make visible the material realities of Irish women’s lives’. It is the editors’ aspiration that this challenge has been at least partially met with the publication of this text. Aspects of Irish social, political and cultural systems are revealed in the volume and we hope that Women and Irish Society: A Sociological Reader will be useful to students.
in higher and adult education as well as the those interested in understanding women's lives in Irish society at the end of the twentieth century. The research contained within this volume is inspired by the women's movement and constructed from feminist perspectives. In exposing social, economic and political inequalities, it promotes the liberation and emancipation of women.

References

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