

Experiences and perceptions of rural women in the Republic of Ireland: studies in the Border Region

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ABSTRACT

There has been surprisingly little study of Irish rural women and much of the limited research has focused on farm women. This paper reports on investigations of the experiences and perceptions of rural women in general in two study areas in counties Louth and Leitrim, in the Border Region of the Republic of Ireland. The aspects dealt with are transport, employment, education and training, childcare and elderly care, health, social contacts and information, migration, and rural living. Access to services and opportunities presented difficulties but many accepted this as an inevitable part of rural living, which generally was favoured. There were variations, however, between the study areas and to a greater extent between different women depending on their circumstances.

Key index words: rural women, Republic of Ireland.

Introduction

The dearth of gender studies in the discipline of geography in Ireland was highlighted in a thematic section in *Irish Geography* by Ní Laoire and Linehan (2002) and that section was an important contribution towards redressing the deficiency. However there has not been any paper relating specifically to women in rural Ireland in *Irish Geography* or publications by geographers elsewhere known to the authors of this paper. Of other writing by geographers, the most relevant, though not dealing with women in particular, has been the discussion of rural service accessibility by Cawley (1986; 1989; 1999). Despite the prominence which gender issues have received in Irish social studies (Tovey and Share, 2003), specific consideration of rural women has been surprisingly rare. Such treatment as there has been has tended to focus on the declining sector of farm women, culminating in the books by O'Hara (1998) and Shortall (1999). With reference to books on Irish gender, the chapters or papers specifically on rural women related only to farm women, these being one in Beale (1986), one in Curtin *et al.* (1987) and three in Byrne and Leonard (1997). There was no specific treatment of rural women in Bradley and Valiulis (1997), O'Connor (1998), Hill (2003) or Central Statistics Office (2004). The limited treatment of rural women is evident also from an inspection of the Irish periodicals *Women's Studies Review* and *Irish Journal of Feminist Studies*. There was a report of a symposium on farm women in *Irish Journal of Sociology* (IJS, 1997). The paucity of items dealing specifically with Irish rural women at the time of publication was evident in the bibliography by Finn and Forde (1993) and the situation has not improved greatly since then. It is the purpose of this paper to contribute to the limited study of Irish rural women in general.

While rural women have much in common with their urban counterparts and differences have lessened, the spatial features of distance, low population densities and small scale of settlements that characterise rural areas, together with the nature of rural societies, contribute to differences. These have prompted many studies by geographers elsewhere (Little, 2003).

Attention tended to focus initially on farm women, challenging the traditional stereotype of the contented home-loving farm woman whose interests centred around her family as part of the perceived rural idyll. Studies extended with reconstructions of the rural, with increasing concern about rural deprivation and more recently with the cultural turn within rural geography and the interest in rural 'others'. References are contained in the books by Whatmore *et al.* (1994), Chapman and Lloyd (1996), Little (2002) and Goverde *et al.* (2004). Separate consideration of women is merited because rural living and disadvantage impinge on them in ways different from men, associated with features such as their lesser access to transport, more women being in the elderly age groups, particular health considerations, more disadvantaged economic status, difficulties in access to the labour force, much greater family and caring commitments, relative invisibility in much agricultural and rural development research and programmes and their under-representation in decision-making. Thus, as stated by Hughes (1997), there is need for the inclusion of women's subjective experiences as a legitimate tool of research in understanding the rural way of life and, in the Irish context, Owens (1992) called for more and better information on the realities of rural women's lives. These objectives are addressed in this paper.

Methodology

Two study areas with populations of about 2000 adult women were chosen in the Border Region of the Republic of Ireland, one in the east and the other in the less developed west. The eastern one was on the Cooley Peninsula in co. Louth and comprised four electoral divisions near to the small town of Carlingford. The other area was more sparsely populated and consisted of fourteen electoral divisions around the small town of Drumshanbo in co. Leitrim. The study areas are referred to in this paper as Cooley and south Leitrim or Leitrim respectively. Cooley is relatively close to the large towns of Dundalk in the Republic of Ireland and Newry in Northern Ireland but for the south Leitrim area the nearest urban centre of comparable size is Sligo, about 50 km distant.

A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used in the research but with greater emphasis on the latter. Following pilot testing, a postal questionnaire incorporating both types of question was sent to a sample of 300 women drawn randomly from the electoral register in each area. The minimum age for inclusion on this register is eighteen years. Response had been encouraged by articles in local newspapers and parish newsletters and in interviews on local radio stations. Of the 176 usable questionnaires returned, 94 were from Cooley and 82 from south Leitrim. The ages of the respondents were found to be representative of the numbers of women in the corresponding census of population age groups, except that there was some under-representation of women over 65 years, as would be expected, and of those aged 25-34 in south Leitrim. There was no evidence that demonstrated that the sample was unrepresentative in other respects. In statistical testing, a significance level of 0.05 was applied. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 women in each area. They were selected purposely so that a cross-section of women of different ages, family circumstances, socio-economic backgrounds and occupations was included. Only two of the women contacted had declined to be interviewed, both for reasons of family illness. Discussions were held with several groups of women in each study area, with a combined total of more than one hundred participants. In this paper, information derived from the questionnaires is referred to as from 'respondents' and that from face-to-face meeting as from 'interviewees'. The two sources tended to reinforce one another.

Transport

The availability of appropriate transport is basic to the accessibility of rural women to services and opportunities and to lessening the isolation of living in the countryside (Chapman and Lloyd, 1996). Public transport services by train, bus and taxi had diminished in both Border Region study areas with declining demand, resulting from population loss and especially the growth in private transport. Although there was no railway station in either area, there were stations within 25 km at Dundalk and Carrick-on-Shannon. Older interviewees remembered fondly the light railways that had served both areas in the past. A bus service between Dundalk and Newry passed through Cooley and this suited people going to work in either town. The timing was not considered convenient for other purposes, however, and only three percent of respondents used the bus daily. In Leitrim there was no equivalent service to towns in the vicinity and no respondent used public transport on a daily basis. No respondent in Cooley lived more than 5km from a train or bus route but in south Leitrim 33 percent either did or were unaware of where such a route was. The State free public transport scheme for those aged over 66 years could be of little or no benefit to many of the elderly. Only eight percent of respondents rated the public transport services in their area as 'good', while 62 percent considered them to be 'poor'.

The growth in private transport had lessened the effect of distance for most people and reliance on it had increased to the extent that almost three-quarters of respondents used a household motorcar at least once per day. Yet eight percent of respondents in Cooley and twelve percent in Leitrim reported that they never or seldom travelled by private car. There was a mean of 1.6 cars per household, with 46 percent having two or more cars but seven percent with none. Of those who could drive, 79 percent reported access to a family car 'always' or 'most of the time'; 27 percent of all respondents either could not drive or never had access to a car. Most non-drivers were in the age cohorts 18-24 and over 65 years but all women aged 35-44 were able to drive. Nutley and Thomas (1992) had found that in rural Northern Ireland car ownership was the most critical factor affecting personal mobility and that an enormous social divide had developed between those with and without the regular use of a private car.

While the rate of car ownership was high, it was evident that for some this was putting a severe strain on household finances. For them, operating cars would not have been merited on the basis of income level but it was regarded as a necessity because of living in a rural environment. Most severely affected, however, were those without access to a car, principally the poor, the elderly, young people and those incapacitated. Their restricted mobility greatly curtailed the ability of these women to participate in the economic and social lives of their communities and their difficulties had been accentuated by the centralisation of services. Getting a lift from a neighbour or relative was the most common form of transport for them, followed by taxi and bus usage, but taxis were considered expensive by those on limited means. Many of the women with cars spent large amounts of time driving such people and their own children to various services and activities. The transport problem for young people in Leitrim was eased somewhat by the provision of inexpensive bus services by night clubs but those in Cooley had to travel by car to Dundalk, involving substantial costs and the concern of mothers about traffic accident injuries and deaths. Temporary mobility deprivation was encountered by women in one-car families when the car was at the workplace with the partner. While it was acknowledged that substantial improvement in public transport to serve the whole rural community would not be feasible, there is a need for locally-organised flexible schemes based on the identified needs of target groups in rural society. Such services

have been inaugurated belatedly in a number of counties under the Rural Transport Initiative and one serves part of south Leitrim. The poor quality of rural roads in Leitrim and liability to flooding added to the difficulty of transport there.

Employment

The employment situation was identified as a major factor in Irish rural poverty (Curtin *et al.*, 1996). The percentage of questionnaire respondents under 65 years and not in full-time education who were in some form of paid employment in the present study was 65. It seems possible that this proportion may have been boosted by a greater reluctance to reply to the questionnaire on the part of those not working outside the home, because of lack of confidence and/or literary skills. Despite its proximity to the employment centres of Dundalk and Newry, the proportion in Cooley was only slightly higher than in south Leitrim. In the latter, however, the fact that the women were more likely to be engaged in teaching, nursing and public sector employment in general probably reflected more limited alternative employment opportunities there. Some of the work was in the informal sector and would not be recorded in official statistics. Questionnaire respondents who worked outside the home reported significantly higher household incomes.

Of the women in paid employment, those in Cooley were more likely to be in part-time or temporary jobs, 39 percent as compared with eleven percent in south Leitrim. This was principally a function of the area's tourism industry, affording seasonal and casual employment in accommodation provision, restaurants and pubs, and to a much lesser extent associated with the port of Greenore. Much of the employment in tourism was of relatively low status but many women expressed a preference for such part-time work because it can be combined more readily with family commitments. The availability of such work can, therefore, act as a disincentive to seeking full-time employment. The opportunities for part-time work were increasing in south Leitrim.

On the questionnaire, those women who were not in paid employment were asked to give reasons for this, some quoting more than one reason. Almost two-thirds of these women cited home responsibilities or a preference for not working outside the home. This was more common in south Leitrim, where childcare was more problematic, though improving, and single mothers were less inclined to work outside the home. This reason accords with the finding of Byrne *et al.* (1995) that many rural women were prevented from taking employment because of household and caring responsibilities and assisting in family farms and businesses. Over half the respondents who were not in paid employment had not been able to obtain or felt that they could not get an appropriate job. This reflected the difficulty of access to employment for rural women. Over one-third referred to the financial costs with respect to transport, alternative care for their children or elderly relatives and loss of social welfare benefits. Many of those not in employment tended to lack self-esteem and confidence.

The problems experienced by rural women in accessing appropriate employment are a function not only of the characteristics of the rural labour market but also of the emphasis placed on women's family roles (Little, 2002). It appeared from the Border Region research that there was still some conformity with the stereotypical image of a rural woman as being 'a family woman, traditional and conservative, absorbed in the care of the home and the farm or garden' (Braithwaite, 1994: 12). Although lessening, some traditional patriarchal relationships remained, with men regarded as the primary bread-winners and their partners as either secondary earners or full-time housewives. Her husband's position had a major bearing on a

woman's status in society, together with such voluntary service as she performed within the community. Patriarchal attitudes had been reported also from rural south Armagh by Kilmurray (1991), from Clare by O'Donovan and Curtin (1991), from west Galway by Braithwaite (2001) and on Irish farms by O'Hara (1998) and Shortall (1999). In both Cooley and south Leitrim, the majority of women with children or elderly relatives felt that their care responsibilities must take precedence over any labour market activity. Many of those who were employed saw the financial rewards as being less important than the social advantages. Most of those in low-skilled or part-time jobs felt that difficulties with family responsibilities, transport and training would preclude them aspiring to better employment. Those in professional occupations were more likely to continue working when they had children. On farms, many women in the past earned income from poultry and assisted with farm tasks but increasingly the off-farm income earned by spouses had become an important element in maintaining the viability of farm households.

Labour force participation rates by rural women traditionally had been low compared with those of men and urban women. The dispersed development of manufacturing and service industries throughout the State began to alter this situation substantially (Gillmor, 1985). Yet an industrial policy bias in favour of male employment in rural areas was detected by O'Donovan and Curtin (1991). It was towards services, however, that interviewees in the current study areas looked when asked what types of employment would be most beneficial to their local area; by 'decent jobs' they meant principally skilled work using computing and other office skills. It was felt that such jobs were so scarce locally that when a vacancy arose in the private sector it was likely to be filled by someone connected to the employer. The main complaint, however, was the general dearth of appropriate employment for women within rural areas and difficulties of access to urban employment. While this had been a particular concern in Leitrim, a major change has been occurring there with the expansion of the large MBNA financial services office development in Carrick-on-Shannon and associated substantial multiplier effects. It must be recognised, however, that the extent of family commitments and personal preferences expressed in both study areas indicates the importance of social and cultural influences in addition to job availability and that greater provision of employment opportunities might not lead to corresponding increases in female participation in the labour force. The development of computer technology offers the potential for working at home in rural areas but it had made negligible impact in the study areas.

With regard to the work available, interviewees believed that employers should be more flexible and recognise the difficulties which women experience in combining their family responsibilities with employment. They would like to see more crèche facilities, job-sharing and imaginative attitudes towards alternative work schedules, such as flexible working hours and evening and weekend shifts. They felt that public service offices could be more pro-active in adopting staggered opening hours, for the benefit of both the users and providers of the services. Several interviewees expressed the view that there was a bias in favour of men in recruitment and promotion in some private sector firms. Many felt that there was still an attitude amongst some employers that women's work was mainly for 'pin money' and that they do not need to be paid as much as men. There appeared to be a general understanding, and an acceptance by many women themselves, that there was women's work within the community that did not require remuneration. It was evident that there was a large amount of voluntary community work dependent on women, and especially on those without paid employment or in part-time or seasonal jobs. Increases in full-time employment impact on this voluntary community effort.

Education and training

Education and training are critical not only in affecting access to employment but also in contributing to women's self-esteem and general quality of life, so that the women attached considerable importance to them. The educational levels of respondents in the Border Region areas were high, with only eight percent not extending beyond primary school, chiefly the older women. Of those under 65 years, 53 percent had attended or were participating in third-level education. Women in south Leitrim in particular expressed concern that their children had to leave the county for third-level education and thus were less likely to return. The rate of admission to third-level education is higher in co. Leitrim than in any other county in the Republic of Ireland although there is no such institution within the county. In both areas, the costs involved in living away from home for third-level education were of major concern and women considered this to be one of the main disadvantages of rural living.

The educational services for those under eighteen years were rated as 'good' or 'ok' by 87 percent of respondents and only six percent considered them to be 'poor'. Of respondents with children, only twelve lived more than 8 km from the nearest primary school and 30 percent lived more than 8 km from a second level school. Where needed by their children, interviewees felt that the school transport services were very satisfactory. Access at second level was facilitated greatly by there being a vocational school in each area that provided for most of the students. Bus services operated to bring other students, principally from middle-class homes, to secondary schools in Carrick-on-Shannon and Dundalk. One consequent disadvantage involved for them was the curtailment of extra-curricular activities outside school hours, unless their parents were able and prepared to collect them by car. It was revealed in south Leitrim that the daughters of some households were sent to boarding school, with the reason given being that the range of subjects offered in the local school was considered insufficiently broad for girls, especially in relation to cultural subjects such as music and art. Similarly in Cooley, it seemed that proportionately more girls were sent to secondary school in Dundalk, with boys more likely to attend the local vocational school with a view to becoming trade apprentices. It seemed that in both areas there was more emphasis on girls acquiring third-level qualifications, perhaps influenced in part by the dearth in the rural areas of what were considered jobs suitable for women.

Reasonable satisfaction with adult education services was expressed by 59 percent of respondents and 24 percent thought that they were poor. While courses in computer and office skills were offered in both areas through FÁS or local Partnership schemes, there were complaints that these were restricted to those on the official unemployment register or in receipt of social welfare benefits. Some women in Cooley travelled to courses in Dundalk and both areas benefited from their Border location in giving access to courses in Newry and Enniskillen within Northern Ireland. In co. Leitrim some outreach courses are offered in association with Northern Irish institutions. Apart from the costs and time involved in accessing courses, there were complaints that generally their timing was not suited to the home commitments of many women. There were some feelings that there was inadequate coordination or follow-up to courses. The impression was gained that in Cooley, as compared with south Leitrim, the women had lesser ambition in relation to training and education in general for themselves and their daughters. This seemed to be related at least in part to the availability of part-time, seasonal and casual employment in tourism lessening the feeling of a need for further education, whereas the lesser employment opportunities in Leitrim appeared to have acted as a stimulant to educational ambition.

Childcare and elderly care

While childcare has become of major concern in general with the increased participation of women in the labour force, the problem is reinforced in the rural context by the factors of distance and greater deficiency in facilities. Of the 51 respondents who worked outside the home and had children under eighteen years, 41 percent considered childcare facilities to be 'poor' and only sixteen percent rated them 'good'. Interviews with women in this position revealed that the majority relied on private arrangements for childcare, either with extended family members or with local women in their own homes or those of the children, with few organised facilities. As payment arrangements seemed likely to be part of the informal economy, this helped to keep costs down but involved implications for the remuneration, conditions and status of the childminders. Childcare was least problematic for those women in well-paid employment and it presented the greatest difficulties for single mothers and others in low-income households where childcare costs might outweigh the financial benefits of working. Some of the lone parents considered childcare to be the principal barrier to employment, while for others the need was felt more in the context of providing occasional respite for themselves rather than allowing them to engage in employment. Several of these women with children expressed interest in training in a caring profession once their children no longer needed caring.

As with childcare, care of the elderly and disabled was a burden borne mainly by women and it presented similar difficulties in relation to engagement in employment. Care of the elderly seemed to be a problem for rural women in particular because of greater expectations on the part of family and community there that they would provide such services willingly and without payment. The services providing help for the elderly were rated as poor by 27 percent of respondents with persons aged over 65 in their households but 45 percent of them rated help for carers as poor. The inadequacy of support for carers was a common complaint amongst interviewees, several of whom had been or were involved with caring for an elderly relative or neighbour. The plight of the elderly living alone in the countryside was of major concern in both areas. Many women expressed the view that elderly and disabled people would be better cared for in their homes than in institutions if more adequate support services would be made available within the community. There was a general shortage of carers in Cooley. In south Leitrim much care was provided on a voluntary basis but there were concerns about the future of caring because of the needs of the number of older single people living alone and of elderly parents without family support because their children had migrated, while the supply of carers would lessen as more married women returned to employment.

Health

Of the various health services that respondents were asked to evaluate, that of general practitioner was rated most highly by a wide margin; GP services were considered good by 59 percent and poor by only five percent. The doctors were popular and considered to be caring and readily available, being especially attentive in emergencies. There were two GPs in each study area, affording an element of choice. Most women, however, tended to remain with the same doctor and they did not necessarily attend the one nearest to them. The service that received the next highest 'good' rating was that of dentist, at 46 percent, but 23 percent of respondents considered the dental service to be poor. Many women in Cooley went to Newry for dental treatment, for reasons of access and cost advantages in Northern Ireland. The dental care for schoolchildren was considered to be very good in both areas. In Leitrim

the attention given to primary health care by the North Western Health Board was commended. In both areas, however, attendance at GP and dental surgeries presented particular problems for those without ready access to a car and who, consequently, had to rely mainly on getting lifts from relatives and neighbours. They included a disproportionate number of elderly people, who are the most likely to require attention. For them, the distance and difficulty in getting to a surgery may discourage attendance and the consequent neglect of minor ailments could lead later to the need for hospital or more serious dental care, as was considered in rural Cork and Kerry (Storey, 1994).

Hospital services were rated 'poor' by 26 percent of respondents in relation to in-patient care and 31 percent with regard to out-patient care. These proportions may seem low in the context of criticism of the hospital services nationally. Both services were given the highest levels of satisfaction by older women, possibly because their expectations were lower as a result of their experience of conditions in the past. Interviewees in both areas expressed concern at the distances they had to travel to hospitals for visiting patients and for treatment, especially in emergencies. A particular problem in Cooley related to children, the nearest hospital in the Republic of Ireland where they would be treated being in Drogheda, more than 80 km from parts of the area. Several mothers referred to bringing their children to the hospital in Newry, even though they paid for treatment there because they were resident outside Northern Ireland. Women and their families in south Leitrim had the journey to hospital in Sligo. Distance and isolation resulted in difficulties in accessing ambulance services in both areas, exacerbated sometimes by ambulance drivers having problems in locating houses in the countryside. The centralisation of hospital services in particular has resulted in greater problems of accessibility for rural residents, with tradeoffs between accessibility and quality of service.

The health issues with which the women were most dissatisfied were family planning and women's health and counselling services, considered poor by 58 percent of respondents. Interviewees in both study areas referred frequently to the lack of adequate family planning services and the extent of unplanned pregnancies among single young women. Of particular interest was the fact that of all respondents aged 18-45, and hence in their reproductive years, 39 percent indicated 'don't know' when asked to rate family planning and women's health services and 41 percent rated them as 'poor'. Every Leitrim respondent under 25 years either did not know how to evaluate these services (64 percent) or considered them to be poor (36 percent). Several of the younger interviewees in both areas felt that, while there was a need for a family planning and women's health centre, they would prefer to attend one outside the locality because of the stigma attached to being seen patronising such a centre. Interviewees expressed concerns about the relative disadvantages of their areas with regard to access to breast cancer screening services. Clearly there were problems relating both to the availability and quality of family planning and women's health and counselling services and to the information about them.

Social contacts and information

Physical distance can have a bearing on social distance and participation in society and on access to information. When respondents were asked how many people they met and said 'hello' to each day apart from their immediate family, 26 percent reported less than two people. The proportion was 59 percent among those aged over 65, indicating the greater isolation of the rural elderly. Levels of daily contact were highest for those with access to a car and those who drove and, to a lesser extent, those who lived near to other people and to

services but no other relationships with life patterns proved statistically significant. Almost half of respondents felt that rural women suffer from isolation.

Braithwaite (2001) reported on the role of women's groups in reducing the isolation of rural women in west Galway and providing information to them. In the Border Region areas, the proportion of women who did not belong to any social or community organisation was 65 percent. For the remainder, activities centred mainly around the Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA) in Cooley and the Women's Group in south Leitrim, together with school and church associations. Several young women in Cooley felt that the ICA did not cater for their interests or welcome them. Almost 60 percent of respondents there felt that entertainment facilities were poor, with expressions of opinions that they tended to be oriented more towards tourists than local people. In contrast, the proportion in Leitrim was only 30 percent, a response that seemed to be influenced by strong traditional music and pub cultures centred on Drumshanbo. A mobile cinema has contributed to access to entertainment in co. Leitrim. In both areas there was concern that sports facilities were mainly male-oriented.

Lack of access to information on the part of Irish rural women had been highlighted by Braithwaite (1994). With reference to a number of specified services, respondents in the present study were asked as to whether they considered information to be readily available to rural women. The responses indicate that there is scope for substantially improving the provision of information to rural women, with a view especially to improving the situations of the more disadvantaged. Those services for which the availability of information was considered to be highest were education/training opportunities 62 percent, health services 59 percent and social welfare entitlements 55 percent. Employment opportunities received an intermediate rating of 45 percent. Only about one-third of respondents considered information to be readily available with reference to funding for rural development, legal rights, tax/financial services and entrepreneurial opportunities, with migration or emigration issues rated lowest of all at fourteen percent. Responses by age group were generally similar, though those aged over 65 were the most satisfied with social welfare and health service information. This group and those under 25 years were the least satisfied with information on migration or emigration issues, perhaps because of experience in the distant past in the case of the former and present realities in the latter.

Access to information was a key issue for many of the women who were interviewed, especially those on social welfare benefits. The opening hours of welfare offices and constraints imposed by transport availability and school commitments resulted in problems for some. Difficulties of dealing with social welfare offices were felt most acutely by those who had become widowed or separated from husband or partner and hence were in distressing situations. It was only by talking to others in similar circumstances that many discovered their entitlements. Lone parents had missed opportunities to avail of allowances because of lack of information and some complained of gender discrimination in the treatment of social welfare recipients. Conversely, opinions were expressed that some rural women and old people in particular had feelings such as not wanting to ask for help, not wishing to reveal their situations and fear of being seen by the community to be in receipt of welfare benefits. Local newspapers and 'word of mouth' were identified as the main sources of information, with organisations for senior citizens having a role for the elderly. A number of women singled out the former Gay Byrne radio programme as having raised the consciousness of rural women to social and personal issues that they would have found very difficult to discuss within their communities.

Migration

Migration is a critical issue in rural societies, involving in the past and still in some areas predominantly outmigration and in recent times some rural areas experiencing net immigration, the so-called counterurbanisation. Migration was found to be of particular significance in Leitrim, not surprising in the context of that county's long history of large-scale emigration. Many of the older interviewees there expressed regret that they had not left when they were young, feeling that there was a certain stigma attached to remaining at home and that they were inferior to those who had the initiative and courage to leave. For the first time since the famine of the 1840s, the population of co. Leitrim increased in the 1996-2002 intercensal period and, with the continuance of natural decline, this growth was attributable to net immigration. This resulted in some special references to new arrivals being made by interviewees there.

The proportion of respondents who had not been born in the locality was 41 percent in south Leitrim and 30 percent in Cooley. Of those who had lived elsewhere, 58 percent in Leitrim and 50 percent in Cooley had come from abroad. These levels of mobility may seem high for these rural communities; the possibility that the response to the questionnaire might have been higher among immigrants cannot be discounted but a contrary effect would be that recent immigrants might have been less likely to be on the electoral register. That mobility is likely to have been higher than among men is suggested by the predominance of marriage and family circumstances among the reasons given for moving to the area, 73 percent in Cooley and 57 percent in south Leitrim. Of the other reasons, economic factors were somewhat more important than lifestyle considerations but it is noteworthy that the latter accounted for 20 percent of the reasons for moving to south Leitrim. New tax-incentive housing there has attracted some return migration, commuters and second-home owners but a counter effect has been escalation in the cost of housing.

In south Leitrim there was evidence of antipathy towards the number of what interviewees termed 'hippie-type' foreigners. There were feelings that they had come to avail of cheap housing and land and of the social welfare and educational benefits. There was criticism, including from some immigrants, of newcomers not mixing socially with, understanding and contributing to the local community. Antagonism could be triggered in instances such as occurred when newcomers demanded curtailment of religious education in the local school. Some other interviewees felt that newcomers had added a welcome multicultural atmosphere to the area, that many were friendly and that their children contributed to school enrolments. There were some feelings that newcomers were better able to find out about their entitlements and were more likely to demand their rights. Contradictory views were expressed in both areas in relation to employment; there was resentment among women that houses and jobs were being taken by newcomers to the disadvantage of their own children and relatives but some immigrants, including women marrying into the areas, claimed that it was more difficult for them to access local employment.

Rural living

Respondents were asked to rank, in order of their perceived importance, desirable characteristics of rural life on a list provided. Calculation of scores showed that safety for young children was considered clearly to be the most important of the attributes, being evaluated as such by the majority of all age groups except those under 25 years. Following it

in order, and differing only slightly in importance, were: privacy, safety for teenagers, freedom from crime, freedom from pollution, good community spirit and freedom from traffic. The majority of the youngest age group ranked good community spirit as the most important attribute.

As a measure of the level of satisfaction with their rural environments, respondents were asked to indicate their reaction if they had to move to a large town or city because of circumstances outside their control. Three-fifths would have been unhappy to move and only one-fifth pleased to move, with overall levels of reluctance to move being slightly higher in Cooley. Of those unhappy to move, 58 percent in Cooley had been born in the area and in south Leitrim only 35 percent. A statistically significant relationship between these two variables in Leitrim indicated that native Leitrim women were more likely to want to move than those born outside the area, there being no significant relationship in Cooley. There was a significant relationship between age and attitude towards moving. As might be expected, pleasure at the prospect of moving was highest, at 42 percent, among those under 25 years, with uniformity between the study areas. Despite differences the data indicated overall preferences for rural living.

Questioning of interviewees about rurality and the advantages and disadvantages of rural living indicated some divergences of opinion by age and area. Many of the younger women in both areas found their rural communities to be socially claustrophobic and confining; they disliked the feeling that 'everyone knows everyone and what they are doing'. Conversely, older women cited this closeness as being one of the main advantages of living in a smaller community. As one aspect of this, all those interviewed said that they could gain direct personal access to their local county councillor or TD (member of parliament) should they have a problem and they had confidence that the politician would do his or her best to solve it. They believed this to be an important advantage of rural life over that in large urban areas. Some interviewees in Cooley seemed to associate rurality with poverty and hence to consider that they themselves were not rural. All the older interviewees in south Leitrim considered their area to be rural and even expressed pride in their rurality. The attributes that they associated with rurality were seen as advantages – space, freedom, lack of traffic, slow pace of life, high moral values. The disadvantages of rural living, such as lack of access to a wide range of services and goods, were viewed as the price to be paid for what they considered to be a better overall quality of life.

The more favourable perception of rural life by the older women, even though they faced current difficulties, was one indicator of the amount of change that had been occurring; they often made comparisons with the past, referring to the extent to which matters had improved. Some of the changes were those that had occurred in the Irish economy and society as a whole and others had a more specific rural and local dimension. They combined to give the study areas a dynamic character, the transformation of rural economy and society being evident in many aspects of the research. With its less developed character in the past, the pace of the changes that were occurring was more evident in south Leitrim. In both areas the changes were impacting in different ways on gendered lifestyles, experiences and opportunities. There were, however, strong elements of continuity in rural life also. These were evident in adherence to some traditional attitudes and values, in strong family and kinship ties and in the persistence of a patriarchal ethos.

One major consequence of the changes that was evident in the research was the increasing heterogeneity of the rural societies. While a tendency in the past to think of the

situation of rural women in terms of uniformity was simplistic, the diversity had become much more pronounced. This resulted from trends such as the declining dependence on agriculture, the evolution of rural areas as being places of residence separated from work, the immigration of people to the study areas and changes in society in general. Outcomes of the heterogeneity for the research were the variety of responses, the complexity of relationships and the contradictions that emerged. Space does not permit these to be explored fully but it has been made evident that, while there were common features, rurality impacted differentially, not only between Cooley and south Leitrim, but to a greater extent amongst the women within each study area. For many the advantages of rural living predominated and the rural way of life was seen as being superior to the urban but for other women the difficulties associated with inter-related aspects such as mobility, employment, caring commitments, service accessibility and lifestyles figured prominently in their experiences and perceptions of rural life.

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