EMPLOYMENT AND DAILY LIFE IN AN IRISH TOURIST TOWN:
GENDERED INTERACTIONS OF EMPLOYMENT,
MOTHERHOOD AND LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS

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Introduction

Ireland has undergone considerable change over the past thirty years. Traditional cultural, moral and social norms have been challenged, opening up opportunities for new patterns of behaviour and identity. Within such a context this paper is specifically concerned with how these changes are being acted out with reference to gender relations in Ireland. It highlights decisions women are making around their personal and working lives, showing the complex manner in which gender interacts with aspects of daily life, employment, household considerations and prevailing ideologies in this contemporary context. It draws on research undertaken in and around Killarney in the south west of Ireland between 1998 and 2000. The research included a broad-based contextual analysis of the locality, including interviews and discussions with representatives of various interest groups in the Killarney area and a series of 48 in-depth interviews carried out with 24 women and men living in the locality. The latter concentrated on aspects of their employment and personal lives and ranged in time from about one hour to up to three hours. These women and men ranged in age from 22 to 45 years of age. Of these, 17 are married, or are cohabiting with their partners in long-term relationships, and the remaining seven are single parents, having primary responsibility for caring for their children. Killarney and its surrounding environs are a traditional tourist destination, which have also experienced considerable growth more recently. Employment in the area is concentrated in the service sector, and with its association with tourism, has a history of flexible working conditions, and offers ample opportunity for and openness to women’s participation in paid employment. The paper first addresses some assumptions on the changing role of women in Ireland and examines the local context of the Killarney area. It discusses choices women within this locality are making, highlighting their backgrounds and the considerations they have around these choices. It argues that while there is evidence of a growing individualism in the earlier lives of women, a range of social forces come together to set boundaries on choices as women assume a greater range of responsibilities in adulthood.

Changing Role of Women in Ireland

Irish society remains divided on gendered lines. However, these divisions are now more subtle than before and there is a perception that one merely has to 'go out and get' it, whatever that it may be and whatever one’s gender, class, geographical location and so on. The more stark examples of gender socialising ideologies and practices have been muted in Ireland over the past thirty or so years. For instance, there is a growing availability of some types of fertility control, greater opportunities and choice in education and a general move towards an ethos of equality of opportunity between men and women. However, girls and boys, women and men continue to be
socialised in gendered ways. Women, while now having access to public life, find that they often enter a world constructed on norms and practices that do not allow for their traditional caring roles. For instance, when entering the world of employment we find that issues such as childcare, community work and eldercare, central to private life-work, have been conceptualised as marginal to that sphere. Norms and practices associated with political life and employment have not made these issues visible. Rather, they assume they belong somewhere else. In not developing adequate and affordable public provision and support for these areas of work, the implicit assumption is that we continue to expect women to fulfil their caring roles within the realms of their private lives.

This is not to deny that Ireland has undergone considerable change in this time. The power vested by the state in ‘the man’ as head of household is contested and marriages are no longer necessarily for life. Whether to marry, co-habit or remain single are now real and viable options. As adults we may move in and out of these and other adult life choices any number of times, without being stigmatised or perceived to be social outcasts. Nurses and teachers, professions with a high proportion of women and subject to being labelled as ‘vocations’ rather than ‘real careers’, are involved in pay and career path issues. A variety of changes have taken place at such a rate that the young and not so young man or woman of the late twentieth and onto the twenty-first century, now lives with expectations and ambitions that were almost unimaginable just thirty years ago. Mary Catherine Bateson, in discussing modern lives generally argues that ‘what is so striking about the emerging shapes of lives is the existence of repeated moments of choice, choice of who to love, whether and when to have children, choice of career perhaps several times in a lifetime’ (2000: 126).

Women have been traditionally socialised towards the private sphere. In Ireland this orientation has been quite distinct, for instance through women’s domestically oriented education, legal and cultural restrictions on women’s participation in public life, and controls over fertility. Women have been closely associated with caring, and with private life. Within the home, religious life, and the few professions that have traditionally been open to women, this role has been narrowly defined, within a heterosexual and paternalistic ideology. In all cases women’s roles within these institutions while being conceptualised as central have also been subservient ones. This subservient status has been upheld through access to resources and decision-making, both of which have been mediated through heads of households and higher male orders within institutions, as well as through the under-valuation of work associated with women. Pat O’Connor (1988) argues that three key elements – caring, reproduction and familism – underlie concepts of womanhood in Ireland. These characteristics are naturalised through ideologies of the church and the institutions of the State. Together with elements of heterosexual love and attraction they ‘effectively obscure the issue of male control’ (1998:108). However, they sit uncomfortably with ‘individual definitions involving personhood, and with all its implications as regards individual autonomy, individual choices, rights and responsibilities’ (1998:108). This dilemma grasps the complexity that women now living in contemporary Ireland struggle with – opposing ideologies of womanhood. On the one hand, there is the traditional one that encompasses dependency and invisibility, in a framework of the heterosexual family unit. On the other hand, there is the prospect of individuality and choice. They operate together within structures that now pull women in opposite directions. Again, Pat O’Connor states that ‘[w]omen in Ireland, regardless of their age, life stage, ascribed class position and participation in paid employment, are surrounded by structural and cultural cues which define their lives’ (1998:4). She goes on to note that this does not imply that women, as a block, experience their position in similar ways. Rather, she argues it is the assumptions that underlie these cues that foster images that promote the naturalisation of caring characteristics over those of independence and individuality.
Ursula Barry argues that ‘[s]ystems of segregation and marginalisation of women within economic sectors and groups of occupations have survived the overall feminisation of employment’ (1996:33). She relates this to the pattern of women’s employment life, where taking time off for caring and a continuing division of time between domestic and waged work often predominate. She argues that the link is strong between the domestic division of labour and patterns of working arrangements in the labour market. As currently perceived, part-time working constitutes a barrier to promotion in employment (Mahon 1991; 1998; Gash & O’Connell 1988). The current, and it seems intractable, household division of labour constitutes a fundamental barrier to participation of women in employment. While there are some indications of changes in attitudes, especially those of younger and more educated people, away from traditional gender roles, there is little evidence of corresponding changes in individual behaviour or in organisational cultural behaviour. Evelyn Mahon’s (1991; 1998) study on the practices of flexible work arrangements in the public service in Ireland supports this view. She found that job-sharing was considered mainly by married women with children and domestic responsibilities, who worked in the lower clerical grades of the public service. Furthermore, the uptake of flexible working arrangements was understood by women who had taken these options to work against their promotion prospects. It conflicted with established organisational concepts that related to commitment to work. These are perceived in terms of working long hours and of being available, often at short notice, for work commitments such as meetings, travel and so on. (Mahon 1991; 1998).

Comparative data from OECD countries indicate the complex interaction between state polices, the importance of dominant industrial sectors and cultural norms, in influencing the manner in which women are being incorporated into the workforce and in how flexible work patterns have been and are developing. Brigit Pfau-Effinger (1999) drawing on Connell’s (1987) model of a gender order uses the concept of gender arrangements in explaining cross-national differences in the interactions between motherhood, paid work for women, and family. This approach ‘consists of three central concepts: the gender system, the gender culture, and the gender arrangement. Social practices of gender and motherhood are conceptualised as the result of the complex interplay of gender culture, institutions, and social actors’. (Pfau-Effinger 1999:65) The gender system refers to the structure of gender relations, incorporating gendered relations between different societal institutions; the gender culture refers to the dominant forms of gender interaction as culturally and historically constructed, and forming the basis or reference points for institutional policies and individual behaviour. They come together to form the dominant gender arrangement operating any in society. ‘The gender arrangement approach stresses the importance of negotiations between actors for social order and social change, even though the negotiations may be based on an unequal distribution of power’ (Pfau-Effinger 1999:66). Perceptions around what are legitimate responsibilities, and acceptable means of achieving balance directly affect accommodations made in a variety of situations. Avenues open to women and men are subject to a set of assumptions. These assumptions underlie how they act as workers and carers and affect the legitimacy of women and men as workers and as carers.

Killarney

While it is a relatively small urban centre Killarney is the second largest tourist destination in Ireland. Indeed, nationally Killarney’s importance as a tourist resort is second only to Dublin, a centre many times its size and the national capital (Bord Fáilte 1992, 2001; South Kerry Development Partnership 1995). Killarney is geographically situated in South Kerry, in the southwest of Ireland. South Kerry is a predominantly rural area, whose two larger towns are Killarney and Kenmare respectively. Tourism dominates the area. As is the case globally and nationally,
within this tourist oriented environment much employment is seasonal, part-time, segregated and targets women, especially at the lower levels of work. In a report prepared by South Kerry Development Partnership, they estimate that tourism ‘is a major seasonal employer and provides a secondary or tertiary income for approximately 56% of households’. The importance of tourism to Killarney is reflected in tourist-related employment in the South West region where 10% of total employment was thought to be directly related to tourism in 1996, and half of all new employment in that region in the period 1990 – 1996. The tourist season in Killarney extends from April to October. This is much longer than in South Kerry generally, where one can expect a maximum tourist season extending from May to October. South Kerry Development Partnership (1995) suggest that seasonality is a factor that has a significant impact on all economic activities in Killarney, reflecting the significance of tourism to the town and its hinterland.

Revenues from tourism were thought to account for 41% of earnings in the South Kerry region in 1993 (South Kerry Development Partnership 1995) and for about 35% of the working population in the area. South Kerry as an area has been described as socially conservative and is considered as typical of ‘a traditional, paternalistic rural society’, (ibid: 41) and ‘a deeply rural society …[slow] to move away from a traditional, paternal hierarchy’ (ibid:45). Killarney is the main provincial town in the region and provides a centre point for social and economic activities. It has a population of approximately 11,000 people. There is a general trend of population decline in the South Kerry region, where it is estimated that the population will have declined by 31% of the 1991 figure by the year 2051. In contrast, the population of Killarney rose by 21% in the 1991 to 1997 time period (Gavaghan and O’Donnell, 1997). Explanatory factors for this increase include the decreasing likelihood of emigration out of a provincial town such as Killarney, in a period of economic growth, as well as benefits from the return of migrants to the area. Killarney’s broad-based service sector also makes it attractive to the growing female employee population (Ibid 1997).

Business in Killarney is very much centred on tourism. This is evident through even a cursory investigation of the town and surrounding hinterland. Simply walking through the town, it is evident that large and small guest-houses abound. There are over thirty six hotels located in the town and its hinterland. Additionally, there are a variety of camping sites and hostels. In 1997 Killarney had a total of 125 approved tourist premises providing over 6,700 beds. Additionally, at that time there was an estimated 700 further rooms providing approximately 1,500 beds in unapproved tourist accommodation, totalling almost half of the county’s tourist accommodation. However, the amount of unregistered accommodation may be under-estimated. For instance recent literature on tourist research in Ireland indicates that for every one registered Bed and Breakfast accommodation, one can expect to find three unregistered ones (Breathnach et al, 1994). In any event, employment in the tourist accommodation sector in 1997 was estimated at 1,354 full-time equivalent jobs (Gavaghan and O’Donnell, 1997), absorbing up to 35% of the total registered unemployed workforce during the peak tourist season, July-August.

As would be expected, economic activity in Killarney is concentrated in services. In addition to tourist orientated services, offices and centres of public services such as the Gardaí, Eircom, the Electricity Supply Board, first and second education level administrative offices and teaching centres along with the administrative offices of the Department of Justice, account for approximately 1,200 full time jobs. An estimated further 1,300 full time equivalent jobs are provided for within the general services areas of commercial services. Together, service type activity accounts for over 75% of employment, with tourist orientated services accounting for over 25% of all registered employment in the area. (Ibid). Manufacturing activity, on the other hand, is concentrated both in engineering and in the thirty small to medium enterprises. There are an estimated 1,000 full-time jobs available in manufacturing.
From this brief overview, we can see that a number of characteristics come together in this area which are directly relevant. Set in a socially conservative location, one may expect that personal relations would have traditionally been formed with reference to paternalistic ideologies. Research suggests that there is a clear relationship between rural systems of land ownership, inheritance and conservative patriarchal norms (O’Connor, 1998). And at a more local level, Gavaghan and O’Connell’s analysis (1997) indicates that paternalistic ideologies persist in the general South Kerry region. On the other hand, one could expect some divergence from these norms in the Killarney town area. Tourism is not new to Killarney. In times of economic necessity women in Killarney have had relative ease of access to casual employment, either as direct employees or as operators of tourist accommodation. Research on the implications of tourism suggests a complex interaction between household relationships, employment and identities in tourist centred localities. Cohen (1999) suggests that increased individualisation is to be expected with the development of tourism in a locality. He suggests an emphasis on the economic value of resources can be expected as commodification of areas of life and resources increases. This emphasis on economic gain may replace more traditional status and prestige criteria in the local social strata, impacting on locals’ interaction not only with tourists, but also with each other. Changes in the domestic division of labour are also associated with the employment opportunities a tourist oriented labour forces offers women (Cohen 1999). In his analysis of interaction between gender, class and tourism employment Michael Ireland (1999) suggests that through their involvement with tourism, local women gain more economic and social significance, through their roles as hospitality providers and mediators between visitors and the local population. These changes must be viewed in a context a tourist economy, where businesses can be expected to be open for long hours during the tourist season. Consumption, be it accommodation, sight-seeing, eating and so on, must take place within the location and the immediate time. It has also been noted (Sinclair 1997) that patterns of employment in tourism often reinforce gender patterns. Indeed Breathnach (1994) argues that such reinforcement of traditional patterns is characteristic of the employment structure within the tourism sector in Ireland.

With reference to Killarney, as elsewhere in Ireland, tourism and the service sector has expanded in recent years. Along with this there is an expectation among women that they will have access to the labour market throughout their lives, as can be gauged from the increasing participation of women in the labour force, as well as more long-term change in patterns of employment for women (CSO 1997; Mahon 1994; O’Connell and Gash 1999). There are a variety of opportunities for paid work, in a variety of forms in the area, and in the service sector, which is known to attract female workers. Additionally, there is some evidence among local employers of positive attitudes towards a range of work practices that deviate from the norm of a traditional standard working week. Work in Killarney, being a tourist town with now a seven to eight month season, is heavily reliant on a seasonal and flexible workforce. Although an element of this is full-time and permanent, one can expect to find a reliance to some extent on part-time, flexible and seasonal work, for men and for women. A central question to be addressed is the manner in which gender relations are interacting with the local structure of the labour market, where part-time, seasonal work may be a reality for men and women who wish to live in the area. It has been suggested that the division of labour be viewed as a major element of any gender regime, which incorporates economic, cultural and social aspects of social existence, and is responsive to and interacts with local labour market conditions (Connell 1987, 2000; Crompton 1999).
Experiences of Women and Issues Raised

Background and Educational Levels

Of those who attended school in Killarney they had either attended a local single sex secondary school or a local co-educational community college. The community college held the advantage over the single sex school in that the women considered the student-teacher relationships there to be more equitable and open. However, a drive to study had to come from the students themselves and this was also identified as a difficulty, where the teenage girl may not have developed high levels of self-motivation for study. Those who attended the single-sex girls’ school thought that there was little room for open relationships between students and teachers. However, here the girls were actively encouraged to study by the teachers in this stricter regime. Strictness in secondary schools was often referred to and was viewed negatively. It was associated with a religious influence and in particular with single sex schools. Experience of this related to the introduction of what were perceived to be ‘silly rules’, for instance, those that included separate indoor and outdoor footwear, and attempts to limit students associating with students from another school in the locality, usually catering for students of the opposite sex. Such instances led to further alienation on the part of the student, and an association of education with pettiness and outdated regulations. These schools were also often associated with a hierarchal relationship between students and teachers that allowed little room for the students to express themselves. The perception was that the regimes’ subtle or not so subtle focus was to keep boys and girls apart. It also clearly associated sexuality with something that ideally was an unwanted intrusion into the work of learning. The framework that evolved through such an emphasis was that the education of girls was in competition with their emerging sexuality. Only when the latter was controlled and fitted into appropriate roles could education be continued properly. Additionally, emerging sexuality was implicitly conceived of as heterosexual – there was little emphasis on keeping girls away from girls or boys from boys. The almost non-issue of homosexuality in an environment that is seemingly so fearful of sexuality is uncanny. When viewed in terms of the young lesbian, gay or bisexual woman or man it raises questions on what messages this absence brings. Studies of gay, lesbian and bisexual experiences have indicated that girls and boys are aware of their sexual preferences before the age of nineteen (GLEN and Nexus 1995) and that experiences of isolation, depression and confusion ‘begins at secondary school when sexual identity is being formed’ (GLEN and Nexus 1995: 44). Such negative experiences are reinforced by the lack of positive images of homosexuality as well as of role models (GLEN and Nexus 1995; Second Commission on the Status of Women 1993).

The message such a focus brings with it is that emerging sexuality and sexual desire needs to be controlled. This seems to be operationalised for girls through recourse to policing of their movements and associations. When confronted it is conceptualised in terms of heterosexuality and with an uneasiness and suspicion of uncontrolled or unsupervised association with boys. We can see therefore that the institution of education has a definite role to play in emerging sexual identity and of associations of this with gender roles. It makes a contribution to the dominance of heterosexuality, and an acceptance of authority and the policing of personal aspects of women’s lives.

There was also some evidence of a class bias, for instance where allegations of theft were made and associated with the young person’s familial background. Incidents were highlighted where assistance of social workers were called upon by school authorities, on the strength of allegations and without the carrying out of internal investigations within the school. The quick action in calling for the assistance of another state institution displayed a prejudice based on assumptions
of family background. It also displayed a degree of paternalism in calling in social welfare representatives and not on police representatives, where the latter’s role is to investigate allegations of crime. The circumstances involved in the particular incident later revealed the innocence of the accused. However, the prejudice had been displayed, the young student’s self-esteem had been attacked and the incident contributed to a furthering of alienation from education. The actions undertaken demonstrated the manner in which negative labelling and familial background worked together to allow punitive actions to be undertaken that reinforced negative self-image. Reference was also made to subtle segregation perceived to be operating within schools where those students from lower income backgrounds tended to be marginalised. This was associated with the streaming of classes and was combined with a lack of attention to career guidance outside of areas such as higher level entry points, or traditional areas of work for women such as nursing. Such a tendency was portrayed with reference to the lack of information on ‘ordinary’ jobs, i.e. employment options accessible to the school leaver and available locally.

Those who had not completed second-level education particularly displayed a detachment from education. They tended to have assumed that their disinterest was due to their own lack of, say intelligence, focus or application, rather than as a result of the trends and biases within the education system itself. Sometimes they expressed their surprise at doing well in State exams, where they had expected and had been led to believe, that they would not be capable of doing well. Added to this was a perception of the sheer irrelevance of second level education in particular to their lives and interests as young teenagers. At times this also led to early school leaving. Alternatively, completion of a leaving certificate course signalled a welcome end of their relationship to education and the real beginning of their lives over which they would now have some control. The formal connection was at best something to be forgotten. However, in more cases damage in the form of negative images of self, disassociation from further training, association with education and failure, and placing the source of this failure within themselves remained with the young person into their adult lives. These images and perceptions were accepted by the woman or man and verbalised in terms of their self-images and reference to their perceived lack of intelligence, and/or inability to learn, that remained with them from this time. Interestingly, the tendency to pass on such images to their children was not evident.

There is an obvious link with educational achievement and experience and employment opportunities in later life. Early school leavers are at a high risk of unemployment and in a society that increasingly values qualifications those without them have access only to low paid and often insecure employment. Girls who leave school without qualifications are at likely to become absorbed into home duties. Their labour force participation is interwoven with a complexity of interaction between their household composition, labour force and welfare dynamics. They themselves are likely to attract only low paid employment. Their participation in the labour force and in further training is negatively associated with their partners’ earning potential. They are subject to changes in the demands of unpaid work and familial responsibilities, in a context of low state support for the latter, the continuing conceptualisation of women within heterosexual relationships as dependents, and a continuing societal assumption that women have responsibility for unpaid work. (Mahon 1991; 1998; Barrett et al 2000). With increasing emphasis on qualifications in a society where there is now a participation rate in higher level education and almost 100% participation by school-leavers from professional backgrounds, (Clancy and Wall 2000) questions are raised on the value of completion of second level with no further engagement in education or training. For many of the women and men with whom I spoke, further training was associated with a big commitment, which now may just be insurmountable and probably unachievable in any event, in the light of earlier experiences.
Employment

A number of themes emerged when women spoke of their hopes and aspirations regarding employment. These included meeting and working with people, finding work hours that would suit sporting interests and an interest in working in childcare related areas. For those women who had an interest in participating in sporting activities and who considered it an option, working in a job with regular hours was preferable. However, comments on the difficulty of obtaining such work in the Killarney area were common. Sports that they were involved in were varied, including rowing, basketball, camogie, football, rugby and squash. Some were involved in a number of different sports simultaneously while others were heavily involved in one particular sport. For those women who had an active involvement in sport, their social lives also revolved around this interest. In some instances such involvement provided a means to keep busy and perhaps, out of difficult home environments. It was also common that their friends, and in some cases, brothers and sisters, were also involved in sport. It brought them together, provided a base for friendship, an opportunity for travel, and an organised leisure base. Sometimes training schedules could be gruelling. At times this required a great deal of commitment, in cases running to four evenings a week, in addition to morning training sessions. Where achievement may not have been central to employment, participation in sport allowed these young women an opportunity to be challenged, and at times, to excel in their chosen sport(s). Employment provided an opportunity to earn money and often work colleagues were also team colleagues, providing an environment where all worked and played together as they drifted into adulthood.

Meeting people and pursuing a career in childcare were two other important themes that emerged when considering employment options. Meeting people may have been perceived as contrasting with office work. The latter was thought by some to be boring, stationary and repetitive. On the other hand, a job that entailed meeting people, be it in a shop, in a bar or in a restaurant was perceived more positively by some, because of the room for interaction with people that such work allowed, and which could be easily imagined by the uninitiated. In these instances, irregular working hours were not perceived to be problematic. In any event, it was likely that the young woman would combine two or more jobs in her early working life, arranging other activities around the little free time left, as well as in the slack off-season months.

A number of women had an interest in following a career in childcare. However, they were either discouraged from following this interest or felt that the options open to them in terms of participating in training effectively ruled out such a course of action. Some undertook courses of study related to this field on completion of second level school. However, they were not likely to continue this into a career in childcare. In more cases interest in becoming involved in childcare was overtaken by the more ready availability of hotel/restaurant/shop work. In other cases, interest in childcare was renewed or operationalised through care for their own children, and in casual childminding.

The atmosphere in a tourist-oriented centre for those with few financial and personal commitments is one that combines work with play, emphasising both within an ambience of transience – the tourists come and go, the workers come and go, there is relative ease of movement from one job to another. Friends and colleagues gather and socialise in their free time, catch a little sleep here and there and experience the freedom that comes with living in the present, where long term plans and aspirations can be put aside relatively easily – Such an environment is attractive for those wishing some anonymity and those experiencing the first tastes of freedom.
The notion of drifting, drifting into relationships, drifting out of school, drifting into work and commitments, emerged as a way of living and being. At some point, however, the drifting had to be controlled and decisions had to be made on future directions. A number of factors pre-empted the wish to make some attempt to control their futures. These included increasing weariness associated with constantly working; realising that survival within an abusive relationship was no longer tenable; the purchase of a house; the arrival of children; and a disenchantment with a social scene that, over time, simply extracted too much.

A Question of Pregnancy

Becoming pregnant significantly affected the lives of all those women who had children, both within their relationships and within their work environments.

Pregnancy and Employment

Issues around pregnancy itself, becoming and being pregnant, emerged as important for women in their employment and personal lives. In terms of employment the continuation of their working patterns was linked to the type of work that the women were engaged in prior to their pregnancy. It is possible to divide the work in which the women engaged into three categories: those who were engaged in low-skilled service employment with a high degree of contact with public, i.e. as shop assistants, waitresses, hotel workers and bed and breakfast workers; those who were in full-time permanent employment; and those working on contract/temporary employment.

Those women who were in more secure employment generally fell within employment regulations. They were in a position to avail of maternity leave, with options to return to work some time after the birth of their babies. These were generally those women who were working in offices for some time, and those who had undergone some professional training who were in this position. Others worked within the existing employment system and, where it was possible, took advantage of any flexible working arrangements open to them on their return to work, following the birth of their baby. For those women working in Killarney in full-time employment, their options were limited to availing of statutory maternity leave. The situation for women who were working abroad at this time differed. Sometimes it was in a possible to adjust and to reduce working hours on return to employment after the birth of her baby, while continuing on a professional career path. This option was considered positively, and especially valued for those who had left such situations and had subsequently come to work and live in Killarney. Relocating to Killarney often had a price associated with it in terms of employment for the woman. Some had considerable difficulty in securing employment, at a level consistent to their qualifications and experience, and having a degree of flexibility that would take caring responsibilities into account. However, the support of a husband/partner or lack of such, as well as the health of the new-born baby and the mother, were often the most significant factors that impacted on the woman’s ability to and options around returning to and maintaining herself in employment. Sometimes this was a time when she seriously considered relocating to live nearby her own parents, who would offer her support and assistance.

Generally, those women who were engaged in low-skilled service employment worked through their first pregnancies. Sometimes, they continued with only one job, giving up those jobs considered more supplementary at various times during the course of the pregnancy. For instance, a woman may have continued working in a shop during the day-time, but give up her evening time waitressing job, or vice versa. Hours may be further reduced, should circumstances permit and should she feel a job was becoming too demanding, towards the end of the pregnancy. It was
generally in or around this time, that long and unpredictable hours associated with service employment became to be viewed as problematic. Difficulties also arose at this time of their lives, for women with regard to split-shift working, that is working early in the mornings and again in the evenings, with time off during the day. Factors likely to be considered in limiting hours worked, were whether or not the woman could expect support from her family and partner, should she have one, as well as that level of support. Only a small number of women in this situation were in a position to avail of maternity leave and be guaranteed employment after their pregnancy. Generally, they did return to previous employments some time after their babies were born, with reduced hours of work and different terms of employment. As mothers of young babies, their hours of work now suited their newly acquired caring responsibilities. Having second and further children meant further balancing the increased requirements of childcare with their want to, and necessity to contribute financially to the household, sometimes placing the women under considerable stress, and often leaving them exhausted.

Those women who were in contract employment associated their pregnancies with non-renewal of their contracts. This is true wherever they happened to be living at the time of their pregnancies. In the case where the women were working in the locality on contract work, the common perception was that any future potential employment prospects for them within the area would be damaged should they pursue cases of discrimination. In other instances, any prospects of changing from a temporary working arrangement to a permanent contract evaporated once employers became aware of a pregnancy.

Pregnancy and Issues of Identity

For women the process itself, their health and well-being throughout it, were experienced at psychological, emotional and physical levels. They wanted to recount and speak of these experiences. In some ways such reflections validated the complexity of such experience and the process of pregnancy. Such reflections and ongoing concern with the process of pregnancy can also be viewed as a pre-cursor to acceptance of primary roles in caring and in particular of facilitating a more ‘hands on’ caring roles associated with motherhood.

The vast majority of the women with whom I spoke engaged in heterosexual relationships and whether planned or not, their pregnancy was accepted within the dominance of heterosexuality that operates in our society generally. However, a small number of women identified as lesbian and were involved in lesbian relationships. The question of pregnancy and children was very different for these women. Where the woman had little or no interest in having children no problem or difficulty was posited. However, where the woman in such circumstances expressed wishes to have children, problems were perceived, particularly in terms of the stigma that such children may be subject to when growing up in the locality. So genuine were such fears that the question of having children may have been ruled out, at what sometimes seemed like a high personal and emotional cost. So again, the dominance of heterosexuality clearly arose in the context of pregnancy. This was most noticeably stated in discussions around choices that lesbian women made not to become pregnant. Such decisions were made in the context of tensions associated with a stigmatised view on homosexual and lesbian identity prevalent in Ireland (Glen and Nexus 1995; O’Connor 1998), and an associated perception that children reared in single sex households would potentially suffer excess teasing and harassment. It can also be viewed in the context of a persistence of conservative views on sexuality in Ireland (Inglis 1997; Delamere 1985). Such views are consistent with the findings of Whelan who argues that ‘Irish values are distinctly conservative in relation to abortion and sexual freedom’ (1994: 214). These views were also aligned with attitudes on motherhood, which was generally accepted within a heterosexual context and in the context of the primacy of mothers as carers. Such attitudes towards
motherhood are dominant in Ireland (O’Connor 1998) and elsewhere (Harrington 2000; Hays 1996).

The focus that pregnancy brought with it on the identification with motherhood, the acceptance of motherhood and primary care often refocused women’s attentions on the viability of their relationships. Issues around the expectation of support in their pregnancies often highlighted inherent tensions within relationships that had previously been glossed over. Questions arose as to how viable their positions as mothers would be in the context of the willingness of their partners to accept responsibilities as supportive partners and fathers. Women referred to being ‘ready for motherhood’ and spoke of the changes in their lives and priorities that motherhood brought with it – these changes were accepted as being part of the job of being a mother. There was a real and developed awareness that such changes were not so great for their husbands and male partners, and this was accepted overall within the model of the heterosexual couple household.

For those relationships that did survive this period, women accepted and embraced the ideology of mothers as primary carers and embarked on a course of balancing their various commitments within this framework. Within this context men were expected to be involved with their children and to support and assist women in their work of mothering. In those relationships that didn’t survive pregnancy and early child-rearing, tensions around such support were evident.

The Role of the Catholic Church

The role of the Catholic Church, particularly in instances where young women digressed from traditional expectations, highlights a continuing acceptance of the church as an intermediary and as a source of moral authority. In instances of crisis pregnancies, anxiety among family members sometimes led to seeking pastoral advise from local clergy, especially where a parent may have become uncomfortable or even shocked with the news. However, there wasn’t a simple acceptance of this moral authority. Often, recourse to such guidance was instigated by family members to placate parents, and especially mothers of the younger women. The younger women acquiesced in the interest of restoring calm and in some ways as a means of re-validating their positions within their families. Siblings were sometimes instrumental in mediating the ‘crisis news’ and supporting the woman through any family negotiations. Older and married sisters seemed to be particularly important sources of emotional and practical support. The ‘moral guidance’ sought was a means of restoring the status quo within families, for parents a sanction of their daughter’s transgressions and for daughters a way of calming down extreme reactions to them.

Being pregnant and becoming parents then affected women in important ways, as they now focused more on future concerns and adjusted their lives to this new identity. These issues highlight the interaction of reproduction with ideas of motherhood, fatherhood, and morality. It also draws attention to underlying notions inherent in the construction of the typical worker, exposing contradictions between caring and employment commitments. The gendered manner in which these issues are acted out draws attention to the manner in which gender roles are being perpetuated with reference to discourses around our notions of work and worker, motherhood and fatherhood. They facilitate the perpetuation of unequal involvement in aspects unpaid, caring and emotional work by women and men; justifying and normalising women’s disproportionate participation in such work, and simultaneously deflect attention away from women onto the welfare of children.
Becoming Mothers

In most cases while pregnancy, and more especially, the arrival of children brought significant changes with it, the relationships continued. The extra work and new set of priorities that a newborn baby brings to any household was then distributed on the basis of roles and expectations operating within everyday lives of the couples. Mostly, the women assumed the major responsibility for caring for the children. This was expressed in ways such as not feeling happy about other people caring for the baby; perhaps feeling a need to compensate for the lack of attention from the fathers of the babies; concerns for the babies health; expressions that babysitters may not be in a position to fully care for and monitor the children adequately. Those women who were married or who were in long term relationships were in a position to view their income-generating activities as secondary. They generally expressed wishes to concentrate on childminding as a priority for them. However, where this was not the case, and, for instance where the woman continued with full-time employment, she did so while also maintaining the major role of carer within her household. Where couples remained living together, it was common for the new fathers to help and support the women. Usually this was done within a breadwinner ideology, with the new mothers and fathers mostly viewing the role of father in a supportive capacity. Women commented on the perceived inability of men to cope with young children, as well as the frustration they thought they [fathers] would feel at having to care full-time for children in their homes. Where they cared for their children themselves, for long periods, women also experienced such frustration; they commented on loneliness, isolation and stress they felt, especially on occasions when they cared full-time for children and had little social outlet. However, these women often felt guilty about feeling lonely or isolated, generally because they felt that they ought to be grateful for the support offered to them, mostly by family members. They also felt that in some way they had to live up to an image of mothers of past generations who were perceived not to have complained and to have been fully available to their families. Feeling lonely led to a belief that they were inadequate, and were demanding more than they were entitled to in their lives. Such feelings were managed through a belief in their primacy as carers; through going out with and/or visiting friends occasionally; getting involved on a small scale in some sporting activity; or just taking the opportunity to go for a walk in the evening when possible. However, the prospect of staying inside, often alone with children most nights was a reality for all the single mothers and a good number of those co-habiting. While not a state of affairs they relished, it was one that was accepted as part of choice they believed that they had freely made, and was part of the price of motherhood.

Some of the women had had a lot of experience of children before having children of their own. This may have been through caring for younger siblings and extended family members. Others had had little or no prior experience of children. However, all assumed that their role as mothers was intrinsically bound up with being a primary carer. The limitations this brought to their personal freedoms were an accepted part of being mothers and were voiced in comments pertaining to putting off having children, once freedom from younger siblings was experienced; those comments that referred to being ‘ready for the job’, having had a number of years of freedom; and looking beyond an intensive child caring time, to a time of more personal freedom as the child/children grew older. Comments such as the latter were sometimes qualified by implications that by this time they may be ‘past it’ or unable to enjoy life because by that time they would realistically be too old. Becoming a mother was also associated with an increase in confidence for some of the women. This was expressed in terms of being able to stand up for themselves, and associated with having a voice, as well as a reference to negating what they perceived as incorrect and negative assumptions made about them when they were younger. In this manner it was a source of achievement and a possible route towards increasing self-esteem.
Marriage & Co-habitation

Marriage was often viewed in terms of a signifier of commitment to one another, having a degree of permanence, as a natural progression in the relationship, and as necessary in order to offer stability to children and continuity to the relationship. Sometimes the alternative of co-habitation was posited as so similar in its practical application as to be an unnecessary informality – so the question posed then would be why not get married instead of why get married, should one wish to co-habit with a partner in the longer term. It is necessary here to draw attention to the exclusion of single sex relationships from this option. In Ireland marriage is confined to those heterosexual couples who are deemed available to marry.

 Mostly marriage as an institution or way of establishing and continuing relationships was questioned only when it didn’t meet expectations of mutual support and sharing of interests, or when there were doubts as to the permanence of the relationship, due to current difficulties. In other words, where it was an option, it was generally accepted as the first or preferred one. At the same time there was an overall acceptance of co-habitation as an accepted way of living and as a valid choice, particularly where marriage was not an option or had been tried and had proved to be unsuccessful. Such sentiments seem to reinforce Whelan’s findings ‘that emerging Irish patterns of family values represent a ‘pick-and-mix’ approach, which blends a variety of traditional and modern value positions together to form a distinctive alternative’ (Whelan 1994: 47).

There was an expectation of mutual support and sharing of responsibilities within a marriage or co-habiting relationship. Unlike the separation of responsibilities that is associated with a male breadwinner / female homemaker model, there was an expectation that men would be involved with housework and caring and that women would contribute financially to the household. However, it could be viewed in terms of an adapted breadwinner/homemaker model, in that whatever the actual reality, women made more adjustments to their employments to facilitate caring work and there continued to be an onus on men to have attachments to employment.

Women generally took on and accepted primary roles as carers for children. However, this was undertaken along with a wish to remain in some way financially independent. Through working at facilitating the requirements of the range of carers available to them, they were able to maintain diverse responsibilities. The strain of this facilitation and co-ordinating of responsibilities was expressed in terms of it being a short-term situation that would ease once children became more independent. It was viewed as necessary and temporary, allowing one to imagine a time in the future when the demands of motherhood would be less stressful and time consuming. Women’s income was generally calculated taking into consideration any deductions for childcare costs, even in situations where she was the main breadwinner of the household. However, the involvement of mothers was viewed as central to the well-being of children, making the stress of balancing needs a necessary part of having and rearing children for women. Observations of being ‘ready for motherhood’ already ‘knowing what it was like’, having come from a large family of siblings, and just ‘loving motherhood’ in general were all comments used in relation to motherhood. They indicate both the expectation of hands-on care by women and an acceptance that primary responsibility as embedded in notions about motherhood.

There was a perception that with increases in commitments, the time that was available to be with one another diminished, and was further diminished through their partners’ commitments to things such as hobbies, friends and so on. This was sometimes set in the context of a perception that they themselves may have had a feeling that their own interests and identities were submerged within or by the relationship; priority being given to partners’ and children’s interests.
Some women stated that they had given up a great deal of their own interests and hobbies in order to give time to their relationships with their partners and its associated responsibilities. Where a partner had a lot of external commitments, this sometimes meant the women now spent a great deal of time on their own, and were often confined to their house for long periods of time.

**Childcare Arrangements**

Family members were the preferred option in considering childminders. When they were available, childminding arrangements were organised as much as possible in order to suit this availability. In such cases the babysitting remained within the family/unpaid realm of work, and hours were negotiated according to the shifts and balances inherent in personal relationships. In all cases where such an arrangement existed, babysitting was shared out among the woman, her partner where he existed, her/his mother and less usually her/his father, and to a lesser extent various members of their extended families. However, the woman took responsibility for arranging her hours to maintain the balance of this set of relationships, and in ensuring that extended family members, as well as her partner would not be called on too much. At the same time she attempted to ensure her own freedom from caring, in particular in order to enter into /continue with part-time employment.

Acquiring such employment did not seem to present any great difficulties, although at times finding the most suitable arrangement may have taken a number of attempts. For instance, the woman may have wished to work two to three evenings a week, or to work mornings only, or perhaps only at weekends, depending on her particular circumstances, qualifications and history of employment. Problems arose with regard to rates of pay – this had to be sufficient to warrant her working and, if seasonal, had to span enough weeks to qualify for social welfare payments during the off-season winter months.

A small number of women relied on paid childminders to care for their children while they worked. These were more likely to be in full-time permanent or contract employment, returning to work after maternity leave. Such options were only considered in the absence of extended family members who were available to engage in childminding. Of critical importance here was identifying a long term and reliable person, or people, to care for the children or in locating a suitable crèche. Particularly where child-caring responsibilities included catering for more than one child, arrangements could be complex. They often involved careful timing, possibly including lunch hour feeds, and often came together to become workable, through utilising various forms of transport – cars, bikes and walking – to connect various people and components of the overall arrangement. Should anything become misaligned, it was likely to have knock-on effects on the whole arrangement. Dealing with problems presented difficulties in the context of a scarcity of available facilities. Women sometimes perceived themselves to have little choice but to continue with child-caring arrangements that worked even partially, because of the onus that was on them to continue to contribute financially to their households. Where there was the option of parental leave, it was often discounted. The financial costs associated with taking unpaid leave were simply believed to be untenable.

Issues faced by those women who were co-parenting and living with their partners in couple based households were perceived within the perspective of the household unit. They involved viewing child-caring through the lens of a mother/father scenario. For example, when addressing childcare they were likely to do so in terms of their relationship with their husband/partner. For instance they may have perceived that their husbands/partners would become frustrated in taking major responsibility for childcare and so would not consider this as an option. In such cases these concerns would be also taken into account, to lessen the weight of child-caring responsibilities on
their partners. Such perceptions and assumptions reinforced the primary role of mother as carer and guardian of child-caring responsibilities within their households.

**Household Work**

In general, those women with whom I spoke were not particularly concerned about who did what household work. The issue of retaining individuality was often stressed and making space to take time out in whatever way suited, emerged as important. In the vast majority of instances, women had assumed major responsibility for household work when they started to live with their partners and this pattern became more established with time. In most cases, they believed husbands/partners to be willing to take on most household work, identifying the particular jobs they [men] would not wish to do. They also generally expressed a view that household work was not an important consideration, that it was not very time consuming, and that they [the women] tended to notice things more quickly. However, the perception was that if something needed to be done, either person would do it, depending on who was available at any given time and who noticed the necessity of the work. That person was most likely to be the woman. What seemed to be of most concern was the perception that work would be shared when necessary and that the woman didn’t perceive herself to be over-worked.

Together these issues highlight the gendered nature of co-habitation. It draws our attention to the ways in which roles are adopted and developed in long-term intimate relationships and highlights the way in which a complexity of influences come together facilitating gendered patterns of behaviour.

**Single Parents**

**Becoming Single Parents**

Difficulties in relationships were often likely to reveal themselves with pregnancy, and especially after the birth of a new baby. A small number of husbands/partners showed little interest in taking on a role as active father or of adjusting their habits to take account of an increased household number. In such instances the women first became disappointed in the reactions of their partners and acutely felt the lack of support for themselves and the babies sometimes leading to a breakdown of the relationship. In these instances the women continued to rear their children in single parents households. While in all these instances support from parents was forthcoming, it was often imbued with subtle yet clear messages that the transgression not be repeated.

A number of issues arose in relation to single parent households that are worth considering here in more detail. They highlight the interaction of local conditions, state apparatus, familial relations and friendships to both reinforce, challenge and influence gender roles and appropriate behaviour for women and men. The issues that I concentrate on here include those of loneliness, visibility/invisibility as single parents, the cost of support, strategies utilised to meet needs, confidence building and issues of dependence/independence in the context of their role as primary carers.

Loneliness was an issue that arose for many of those who were single parents. It must be re-emphasised here that all those with whom I spoke had been in long-term relationships, and had chosen to care for the children of this relationship on its break-up, whether or not they instigated this break-up. The circumstances of these relationships differed and obviously choices were made in individual contexts. However, for all concerned there followed a period of adjustment which could be characterised as a period of grieving for the lost relationship, whether or not this was
their chosen or preferred option. At this time motivation and self-esteem may have been low. The requirement that they care for their children placed a structure on them which was often perceived to have refocused attention very much to practical matters and to dealing with daily routines and future concerns.

Ireland is known the world over as a country that has a bar culture and Irishness, along with focus on alcohol consumption, is associated with good-humoured company. However, it would seem that access to socialising is mediated by one’s gender and general status. As lone parents women’s access to socialising was mediated through their ability to source and pay for childcare, further to that which facilitated their involvement in employment and income generating activities. As has been mentioned already, where possible extended family support was the preferred option for childcare, minimising on costs and concentrating on dealing with known and trusted people. The women are facilitated to access income and to care for their children, but this support grows weaker with regard to socialising in public areas, where the focus is on enjoyment and there is potential to form new friendships. In fact women were sometimes actively discouraged from continuing with or forming new social contacts. Such discouragement was discernible through advise given to them on friends possible wariness of them as single women and mothers; through the relaying of views that they would now be perceived of looking on men primarily as potential fathers for their children; and in keeping a close watch on the details of their social lives, and at times simply refusing to childcare for social occasions.

State interaction is interesting here. Those women with whom I spoke discussed their initial interactions with state welfare support agencies in negative terms. In applying for welfare support, the institutions were found to be ‘terrible’ to deal with. Feelings of guilt, sometimes exacerbated by ‘snotty’ attitudes of officials, were expressed in claiming One-Parent Family benefit. Getting on a public housing list and finding out information on the likely outcome for them in terms of being housed was often also fraught with frustration, and was expressed in terms of being a constant battle to chase officials for information. There was also a level of ignorance of eligibility for state assistance and some confusion on eligibility criteria, for instance for Family Income Supplement (FIS) and/or One-Parent Family Payment. Local politicians were sometimes a source of assistance in this as were friends and family members. However, even having qualified for payments, feelings of vulnerability remained around the continuation of payments, especially in consideration of employment and other potential income-earning opportunities. Basically, the payments were low and it was sometimes necessary to supplement income, in order to meet household expenses. This increased feelings of vulnerability and fed on feelings of guilt and insecurities regarding lone-parenting and in particular on the possible negative effects it may have on children.

Court cases involving child custody and details of separation were invasive and deeply disturbing to those in already tremulous personal circumstances. At the initial stages of becoming one-parent families, having to deal with state institutions reinforced feelings of guilt and vulnerability, even where eligibility criteria was met. Lack of clarity on eligibility criteria and low thresholds posed further dilemmas in meeting household expenditures. They came together to negate some of the more positive decisions that had been made not to remain in unsupportive and/or abusive relationships and to take on full responsibility for caring and rearing of children.

Becoming lone parents, establishing and maintaining independent households was often a difficult and lonely experience. However, the process of decision-making and involvement in primary care for their children sometimes led to a budding critical analysis of accepted norms and practice and a growing self-awareness and self-esteem. The actions and thought processes involved in adjusting household patterns to their preferences and seeing the pieces come together
in a fashion that worked for them was often a positive one in the longer term. While initial misgivings regarding ending a relationship and deciding to lone parent brought tensions and insecurities to the fore, the knowledge that their children were happy, that they were outside the control of abusive/unsupportive partners contributed to legitimating choices made. Their growing capabilities in caring, in dealing with state bureaucracies, and in negotiating nuances of extended family support, added further to a growing independence and a questioning of the hegemony of long-term couple relationships. This is significant in that it calls into question one of the organising principles of gendered power based on difference, and organised in the context of unequal exchange, heterosexuality and couples⁴. Growing self-esteem and awareness, as well as time available for reflection in a context of limited opportunities for socialising, contributed to a perspective where their own views, tastes, actions and opinions became to be viewed as more worthwhile. Involvement in further relationships would be approached cautiously and in the light of their experiences of having become accustomed to routinely suiting themselves.

Conclusion

The interaction of state, familial and local influences in the formation of gender roles and behaviour is evident from the above. Choices are being made that question traditional norms, such as co-habitation rather than marriage, single sex households and lone parenthood. Available resources are drawn upon to increase the legitimacy of choices made, and in the doing of their lives women are both challenging and reinforcing gender norms. Digression from traditional norms has prices, which vary depending on the digression, and the cultural capital one has to call upon to assist in legitimating diverse lifestyles and choices. Women are encapsulated into an adapted ideology of womanhood and motherhood, which views general social involvement as unimportant. Subtle signals as to appropriate gender role behaviours circulate so that once one leaves the comfort zone of acceptable behaviour their character and message becomes clear. The woman who is lone parenting faces a variety of prejudices, biases and supports. Strategies are developed to counteract labels that do not suit women’s everyday lives, which at times do not comply with expectations. In developing strategies of resistance, self esteem, and confidence and in negotiating the complexity of diverse and conflicting commitments, women are challenging and negotiating the boundaries of traditional gender norms and behaviour, to suit their own lives and circumstances. These circumstances both facilitate and challenge on traditional roles.
References


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For a fuller discussion of the range of consequences this exclusion carries with it, see *Partnership Rights of Same Sex Couples*, John Mee and Kaye Ronayne, Equality Authority, Dublin 2000.