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Sally Shortall

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# Changing gender roles in Irish farm households: continuity and change

\***Professor Sally Shortall**, Duke of Northumberland Professor of Rural Economy, Centre for Rural Economy, School of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU, United Kingdom

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**Abstract:** Focusing on gender roles in farm households during the period 1987-2012, this paper draws on four discrete qualitative studies to identify and chart selected continuities and changes shaping contemporary farm households. In Ireland, there are roughly 140,000 farm enterprises with the vast majority managed and operated by farm households. As a social unit, the farm household has been subjected to substantial change over time. Whilst some of these changes represent distinct breaks from the past, others are continuations of trends that have been at work within farm households over decades. These developments have impacted on the micro-interactions within the family, resulting in significant structural changes in broad social relations and, to a lesser extent, impacted on gender roles in farm households. The paper explores these developments by focusing on four aspects of gender relations that reflect continuity and change: women's employment on and off the farm; how farming institutions have viewed and interacted with men and women over time; inheritance, the transfer of property and the question of divorce; and gender identities within the family farm. The paper establishes that, whilst there were substantial changes in gender roles within the farm family, we conclude that these are not reflective of the dramatic change in broader social relations. This, in part, reflects the co-option of women's identities in order that the work identity of the male farmer, as the decision-maker and the person in charge, be maintained.

**Keywords:** *family farm, farm household, Ireland, gender, qualitative research*

## Introduction

In Ireland, the farm household remains the social unit that manages the farm enterprise(s) (DAFM, 2015). Whilst this is a persistent social institution, it is subject to both continuities and changes that impact on, and are reshaped through, micro-interactions within the family. These developments are important in terms of understanding the continuation of

family farms despite significant structural changes that have reshaped farming practices, farm enterprises and their economic viability; roughly 50% of all farm households depend, to varying degrees, on off-farm income with 33% of spouses (women) having off-farm employment and 30% of farmers also working off-farm (Hennessy and Moran, 2016). These developments are associated with broad social processes, e.g. feminisation of the workforce, that are related to improved access to education and a greater number and variety of employment opportunities for women, changes to accepted use of contraception and the right to divorce. Collectively these processes have contributed to a reconfiguring of women's roles and position within Irish society. For 'farm women' these processes have been mediated by the social institution that is the farm household which is, in turn, part of a wider set of socio-political institutions, e.g. farming representative organisations and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The values of these institutions, e.g. ensuring that the farm is transferred to the next generation (that the family name is retained on the land) or transfer of the enterprise to a male heir, we contend, are a dominant influence on how women construct their roles and elements of their identities.

This paper describes, through an analysis of data collected as part of four discrete qualitative studies over two decades, the impacts of a number of aspects of gender relations that reflect continuity and change amongst farm households, i.e. changes in women's employment on and off the farm over time, how farming institutions have viewed and interacted with men and women over time, and the issues of inheritance, the transfer of property and the question of divorce. Given the extent and import of these changes, we examine the question of why, to date, they have not given rise to other, more fundamental or dramatic changes in social relations within farm households.

The paper begins with a very brief overview of the changed position of women in society generally, focusing particularly on the labour market, before considering the changed nature of agriculture. Both of these issues have an impact on gender relations within the farm family. Next, change and continuity in gender roles in the farm family are considered. The paper concludes by reflecting upon changes in gender roles in the farm family and why these are not as dramatic as developments in broader social relations.

## **Social change and changed gender stereotypes**

The most powerful discourses in society are those that have an institutional basis, for instance in law or in the family. They can give meaning to the social world that appears natural and taken for granted (Brandth, 2002). This is the case with the socially accepted gender frame in any given society. Gender stereotypes and expectations are not just individual beliefs. They are also culturally hegemonic beliefs because they are institutionalised in various ways such as images of men and women implied in laws, and taken for granted organisational practices (Ridgeway, 2009; 149). The rapid changes in Irish society have led to changed culturally hegemonic beliefs about women's role in the workplace and the family. These changes are, of course, symptomatic of the changed

situation of women internationally. Nonetheless, the relatively rapid speed of change in Ireland is remarkable. Membership of the European Union and the women's movement internationally and in Ireland were key catalysts for change. Over the last forty years, significant legislative changes have embedded greater gender equality. The marriage bar, which prohibited the majority of women continuing to work after marriage, was removed. Legislation was introduced to advance equal pay and equal opportunities in the labour market. In addition, contraception has become more widely available, facilitating women's ability to participate in the labour market. Divorce was legalised in 1996. These were significant developments that impacted on gender equality (Fine-Davis, 2015).

The last four decades have seen considerable changes in women's employment aspirations, attachment to the labour market, and contribution to the family economy (Rubery and Rafferty, 2013; Russell *et al.*, 2014). Despite this, gender segregation is still a pervasive feature of the labour market, and there are differences in men and women's employment by sector, workplace and occupation. Nonetheless, women have become more permanently attached to the labour market, and the presumption that women are carers first and workers second is no longer true (Rubery and Rafferty, 2013; Russell *et al.*, 2014).

## Farming and change

It is widely acknowledged that, in line with European agriculture generally, Irish agriculture has gone through tremendous change (Crowley *et al.*, 2008). The agricultural workforce is a declining part of the overall workforce (CSO, 2017). Many farms now need additional sources of income to survive, and for all but the very large farms, farming is increasingly becoming a part-time activity (Meredith, 2011; Hennessy and Moran, 2016). In many cases, the farmer is no longer the primary breadwinner on the basis of the farm. The off-farm income of the farm couple is necessary for the survival of the family farm. Agriculture has had to realign to meet the economic, political and environmental concerns of the European Union and global society more generally (Dessein and Nevens, 2007). In tandem with these structural changes, the social and cultural understanding of farming and being a farmer has changed. Farming and farmers no longer command the social status that they once did (Villa, 1999). Whereas it was the privileged son who was seen to inherit the farm, more recently the heir is seen as receiving 'the poisoned chalice' (Kelly and Shortall, 2002).

## The farm couple and employment

Women on Irish farms have always been employed, but this employment has not always been paid or counted in official statistics. It has been argued that the seemingly low participation rate of women in paid employment throughout the twentieth century masked the amount of unpaid employment of women in family farms (Fahey, 1990). While Arensberg and Kimball (1940) recounted the long and onerous work days of

women, it was in the latter half of the 1900s that researchers became concerned with properly recording women's farm work. Matthews (1981) was incensed at the blatant discrimination in the practice of counting a woman's agricultural work unit as .67 of a man's, even if she ran the farm entirely on her own. This practice was changed in 1984. In Northern Ireland, until the late 1990s, women were defined as assisting spouses, their position on the farm defined through their married relationship, not as workers in their own right.

Agricultural statistics have never fully accounted for women's farm work. In 1987, my sample of twenty farm wives was very active in the farm. They were exclusively responsible for farm accounts and paperwork, calves, taking samples of grain to the creamery, feeding seasonal farm labourers, and providing all day cover if needed when her husband went to the mart, and generally, being on hand. In addition, her farm household work was intertwined with the farm. Nearly thirty years ago, home produce was an important means of reducing farm outgoings on household costs:

Sure, I have to make cakes really, you just couldn't afford to buy biscuits and cakes for this lot, they would go nowhere and they are so expensive. #1

...there are seven children here so there has to be more home produced things with so many of us. #2

I produce as much of the food as possible in order to keep costs down. #3

Though the question of accurately recording women's farm labour has never satisfactorily been resolved, it is no longer the central question. It is women's relationship with the labour market outside of the farm which is now crucial for many farms; Teagasc estimates that 29% of farms are 'sustainable' due to the presence of an off-farm income, i.e. in the absence of this income they would be 'vulnerable' given that the farm enterprise does not generate sufficient income. Interestingly, the production of home produce as a way of family economising, which was prevalent in the 1987 sample, may be a thing of the past. Rubery and Rafferty (2013: 417) argue that domestic labour may no longer be able to act as an effective supplement to wage income where mass-produced commodities have become cheaper than home production. This points to changes in the meaning of women's off-farm work for the family farm. In the 1987 sample, five women had employment. There was still a sense at that time that it was not the norm for a woman on a farm to have off-farm employment. Three of the women were very part-time and informal; (jam and cake making, children's farm summer holidays on the farm and part-time secretarial work with flexible hours). Two were full-time; one was a secretary; and the other was president of an agricultural organisation, which allowed her to work from home. There was some renegotiation of household responsibilities, but nothing significant and the women were not seeking any change in work roles. Despite this, women spoke about the increased independence or freedom their employment, and the associated income, gave them:

Before women had, no money and they were kept in the house all the time. They were only given so much money to do the household shopping, but all of that

has changed now. Women are more independent, they have their own money because they have their own jobs. They are able to do their own thing, and they are able to spend more on themselves because they are not answerable for that money – you can buy a dress without asking. #1

I like the independence of being responsible for my own venture. #2

In spite of the presence of off-farm income, farm men were very much the breadwinners, and were seen as the financial providers. This also embodies a certain power, and women's off-farm work was seen as their additional income, which increased their financial freedom. This income was not necessarily needed for the family farm. One woman recounted how her husband was strongly opposed to the suggestions she would have a job:

I wanted to earn extra money for myself. But he wouldn't agree. He told me that if I get a job, I can keep on going. I needn't come back. I would love to have a job, then I could have my bit of style without having to ask him for it. #3

The dynamic between this couple was more fractious than for other women I interviewed. But nonetheless, the fact that women's ability to participate in the labour market was so recent, men's power as the financial controller, combined with the lack of divorce, allowed for this very unequal gender dynamic to occur.

In my 2001 and 2012 studies, women's relationship to farm employment and off-farm employment had changed significantly. The 2001 research methods included six focus groups with women on farms, and four with men on farms (see Kelly and Shortall, 2002; Shortall, 2002; Shortall, 2006). The 2012 study included two focus groups with men and women on farms (see Shortall, 2014). In 2001, women were still regularly doing farm work such as farm collections and deliveries, feeding farm labourers, doing farm accounts, milking and relief labour. But by then, 51% also reported working off the farm. The nature of this work had also changed; off-farm employment was presented as necessary for the survival of the family farm:

I would love to give up working out but it is necessary. It helps towards the children's education and is needed for farm income. # focus group 9

My husband likes me there for company. But he also likes me out earning money. # focus group 8

Men were also very aware of women's off-farm work as an economic necessity:

Many farmers' wives have to have an independent income. They have to work. This is less bad on her because she is out. He is at home, stressed, knowing he is working for very little. # focus group 1

My wife is a full-time teacher. I am very lucky. # focus group 6

The role of the breadwinner in a couple is an exceptionally durable part of male identity (Schneider, 2012; Ciabattari, 2001). Men continue to expect to be the primary breadwinner in married couples and masculinity is produced in part through fulfilling that expectation. It is further argued that the threat to masculine identity has a more

profound impact on men than a threat to feminine identity has on women (Schneider, 2012: 1066). One farmer actually articulated it very clearly in the 2001 study:

Without the off-farm work of women, it would be impossible to continue farming. It is hard you know, knowing you are not the breadwinner any more.

*# Focus group men 1*

In 2012, the changed status of their work as farmers was reported even more strongly by men:

The status of farmers has changed – there are so many stereotypes now. It makes us look like we are special needs; not very smart and not able to make a go of it.

*# Focus group men 1*

If you counted all the work we do properly, we are doing at least eighty hours work a week. And you can barely make a living. We should get more respect.

*# Focus group men 2.*

In the 2012 sample, as in 2001, women's off-farm work is part of the accepted hegemonic gender cultural belief system for both men and women. This is linked both to the changed nature of farming, i.e. farm income – household income, and women's changed relationship with the labour market. It appears to be a less traumatic transition for women than for men (Shortall, 2014a). Men in the focus groups spoke in a matter-of-fact way about women's off-farm work. Men saw it as contributing to their isolation on the farm, but they also acknowledged that the farm would be in trouble if off-farm income was not generated:

My wife works out. If she didn't I might. *#1*

My wife works out. It is crucial. If she didn't, I don't know where we would be. *#2*

Farming is a very lonely life now. It would be great if women were able to be more involved, but it isn't possible any more. It is a lonely life. *#1*

While women's off-farm income in many instances now maintains the farm (Kelly and Shortall, 2002; Shortall, 2006), women working off the farm did not discuss their off-farm work in any detail, even though many had professional jobs (Shortall, 2014a). This may, as we outline later, be to protect men's identity as farmers and breadwinners. What is clear is that off-farm employment is now a key component of a survival strategy for the family farm.

## Farming organisations and the farming media

Women are not well represented in farming organisations in any country. Indeed, farming organisations could accurately be called men's organisations. This is not unusual, as farming is such a male occupation. When the 1987 research was undertaken, women were not really involved in the Irish Farmer's Association. The National Ploughing Association (NPA) had at that time, the unusual distinction of being the only farming organisation in Europe with a woman president. In the North of Ireland, the representation of women in

farming organisations is similar, and it was only in 1996 that the Ulster Farmer's Union (UFU) appointed a woman to their executive committee, which has 80 members. With respect to the NPA, the exceptional, and hence unusual, role of a woman as president of an agricultural organisation was constantly reinforced by the media, which continually focused on her gender. A provincial newspaper featured the president with the following headline: 'Anna is a lady in a man's world' (*The Nationalist*, 1989). The article went on to report: 'they say it is a man's world...but not down Ballylinan way. Anna-May McHugh holds one of the most important posts in the country, one usually associated with men'. In 1997, a feature on the organising committee was titled: 'The women who run the ploughing' (*The Farmers' Journal, Journal Plus*, September 1997). In the same edition, a feature on the woman development officer was titled: 'Ploughing her own furrow'. In each case, the media focuses on the gender of the women.

This very much continues to be the case. In 1987, two women I interviewed spoke of how they had attended an ACOT<sup>1</sup> course and in both cases; they had been 'tricked' into it by the local ACOT adviser. One woman said:

I only did it because the ACOT instructor really pushed me into it. He told me it would be really useful and that a lot of women were going to do it...there was only me and one other woman that he has also specifically recruited and 25 men. When I mentioned it, he told me that if he hadn't lied to me I wouldn't have gone, and sure he was right.

This woman spoke at length at how much she had enjoyed the training and how much she had learnt.

In 1995, research was undertaken with a small number of women agricultural advisers in Northern Ireland who decided to form 'Farm Ladies Groups' to provide farm education and training (see Shortall, 1996). While the 'Ladies' groups specify their gender in the title of the group, the mainstream training groups are all men even though they are not called 'men's' training groups. Speakers gave the exact same talk to both groups, demonstrating the absurdity of gender segregated training provision. The women I interviewed loved this exposure to training and education. In some cases, they said they learned a lot, and some women said it gave them confidence because it validated what they knew. One of the focus groups interviewed in 2012 was one of the 'Farm Ladies Groups' established in the early 1990s. They continue to organise speakers for themselves on farm security, farm safety, talks with tax inspectors and farm visits. One woman said:

For women to go to some meetings is quite intimidating. It hasn't changed – it is hard to ask questions.

This comment started a broad conversation in which the women were in general agreement. Then to much laughter, one woman said:

Could you ever see the Ulster Farmer's Union have a woman President or Vice-President?!

Similarly, in 2001, women said:

I like to go to things at Greenmount, but women aren't encouraged, and I don't want to be the only woman there. # 8 women's group

Women are not well received in some circles...men are conscious of being the only men there with their wives. # 8 women's group

Since 1987 to the present, there is evidence of some farm advisers trying to encourage women to participate. They are the minority and women still feel conspicuous. In some senses, this is hardly unusual given the persistent male nature of farming and associated representative organisations. Also, it may be the case that with the increased importance of off-farm employment and consequent time restraints, it is less feasible now for women to participate in agricultural training.

## Inheritance and ownership of land: continuity and change

The patriarchal transfer from father to son in Ireland is remarkably resilient, some might argue impervious, to change. It is a well-established and socially, economically and politically accepted practice since the famine. It is an unusual practice in that Ireland and Britain are the only European countries where it is legal to disinherit children. It very powerfully creates a male occupation and reinforces the normative understanding of farmers as men. In many respects, it is the most enduring feature of gender relations within the farm family; sons inherit land.

In the 1987 data set, the family farm seemed less problematically patriarchal. The male farmer was the head of the farm family and the family farm and made the relevant decisions. His masculine identity was defined by being the owner of the farm and head of the family workforce and farm business. Of the twenty women I interviewed, nineteen said that one of their sons would inherit the farm. The one exceptional case was a couple who had no children of their own. The woman was an only child and she had inherited a farm, while her husband had bought another farm. She said that one of his nephews would inherit his farm and she said:

I will wait and see if my Godchild gets married. If she married somebody who is interested in farming then I will leave it to her, otherwise I will sell it and divide it between my nephews and nieces.

It was clear from the data collected that the decision to transfer land to a son was not based on ability or interest, but on gender. In four cases, the heirs were under twelve years of age, in three cases, they were under five years, and in one case, the future heir was two years old. One woman, who had a twenty-year-old son and an eighteen-year-old daughter, spoke of how much her daughter loved farming and had a real aptitude for it. She said:

Pat will inherit the farm, but I hope Fiona marries a farmer because she loves it too.

Remarkably, despite the passage of 25 years, a very similar quote to the one above was made by a young woman who was almost nineteen at the time and doing her A Levels. She adored farming. She saved to buy a car and did relief dairy work for farmers in the area. She also worked part time with the farmers' union. She said:

I really love farming but I have two brothers. I hope to marry into land.

Twenty-five years later, the reality is that the most likely way for women to enter farming is through marriage.

Though patriarchal transfer from father to son remains a dominant practice, the meaning ascribed to this has changed. In 1987, it was the 'privileged' son who inherited the farm, and with it a source of status, income and a respected livelihood. In the 2001 and 2012 data sets, this had changed. While the transfer of land from father to son remains intact, men and women now worry about the future for their sons who will take over the farm. They are concerned about declining farm incomes. In 2001, the following comments were made:

It is hard to encourage the next generation. Farmers want sons to have a trade now as well as the farm. # *women's focus group 9*

It is hard in conscience to encourage your son to take over when you know that in the future he might not be in a position to afford a pair of shoes for the children. # *women's focus group 5*

It will be a hobby if things keep going downhill. I hope that I have a farm for my son. # *men's focus group 1*

How many young lads are there in the mart? We are going to lose a generation of farmers. # *men's focus group 4*

Notwithstanding these views, which recognise the increasing challenges to farm viability, the patrilineal line was just as strong in 2012 as in preceding decades. Men participants in the research talked about the importance of keeping the name on the land and passing on the farm to the next generation. In one of the focus groups with women, we asked if it mattered who owns the land. One woman commented:

It really matters to the men!

In the other focus group, a woman said:

It would kill him if one of the boys did not keep it on.

While the patrilineal line remains intact, there was discussion of daughters possibly being given 'something' from the farm. This was discussed in one of the women's focus groups and there was general agreement that it is best, if possible, but only if possible, to give something to daughters.

When we were growing up girls got nothing out of the farm. But now you would try to help them out if you can by giving them a site if they get married locally.

For the first time, an interesting discussion occurred in the first of the men and women's focus groups in 2012 about pre-nuptial agreements. Subsequently, this topic became a theme that was explored in greater detail with two additional focus groups. While men and women talked with delight if their son was marrying a woman with a profession:

Oh we are delighted! He is engaged to a teacher!

... they also voiced concern saying:

You need to be sure who he is marrying. # *women's focus group 2*.

The conversations concerning pre-nuptials were careful and hesitant. Women were more overt about being in favour of such agreements. However, in one of the women's focus groups a recent case was recounted where a young man and heir had asked his fiancée to sign a pre-nuptial agreement. She refused, and he subsequently committed suicide. Men were worried about the break-up of the farm but thought that pre-nuptial agreements were difficult to broach. However, the women had a much more vociferous discussion on the topic and thought that while women should be entitled to some compensation in the case of divorce, they should not be entitled to the family farm:

Now you worry about it being broken up if there is a divorce. It is fair to get half of what you built up together, but it is not fair to get half of what was not yours to begin with. # *women's focus group 2*.

How property is divided in the case of divorce varies across Europe and what this woman describes is the legal situation in the Czech Republic (see Shortall, 2010; 2014a). We spoke to some local solicitors and they reported an increased interest in pre-nuptial agreements within the farming community. The patrilineal inheritance system has allowed the economic transfer of assets between men in an unproblematic way. In the case of divorce, pre-nuptial agreements may be pursued as a means of trying to ensure that the economic transfer of assets between men cannot be disrupted. What this means for women marrying into a farm needs further consideration<sup>2</sup>. If it is the case, it represents a significant new turn in gender relations in family farms.

## Identity, gender and farming

The concept of identity deals with who we are and who others are (Brandth, 2002: 182). It is knowing who we are, who others are, and us knowing who they think they are (Jenkins, 2008). Identities are formed through doing, through social relations. They are not a static trait, and will be verified or changed depending on social interaction with significant others. A considerable amount of work has focused on how the farm shapes the farm family gender roles, and the identity of family members (Cassidy and McGrath, 2015; McMillan Lequieu, 2015; Shortall, 2014a; Whatmore, 2016). The farmer is typically understood to be male (Shortall, 2014a). It defines his role identity, his group identity, and his gender identity (Shortall, 2014b). In the 1987 dataset, gender roles and identities appear unambiguous or rigid. Four women referred to their husbands as 'the boss':

Either the boss or Brian (son) would deal with the vet. # *1 woman interviewee*

The boss man outside. # *various interviewees (italics)*

When one woman was asked if she would be interested in attending any courses or demonstrations, her husband interpreted and answered for her, stating:

You wouldn't want to go to things on farming; it would only be things to do with the housework like jam-making and things. # *2 woman interviewee*

Even though these women did a considerable amount of farm work, they saw housework as their primary domain:

Of course housework is my responsibility. It is good for any woman. *#1 woman interviewee*

It is traditional that men don't do housework. *#2 woman interviewee*

Men's primary role was as a farmer and breadwinner:

He just looked after the financial end – provided the food, paid the bills, tells me how much I can spend on what. *#1 woman interviewee*

I did it all, he was out all the time, well of course he paid all the bills and that. *#2 woman interviewee*

Oh he is very good. He would never ask me how much I spend on the shopping, but, Sally, I always make sure that I am terrible responsible with the household money *#3 woman interviewee*

In the more recent datasets in 2001 and 2012, it is clear that these rigid gender identities have been questioned and diluted. Men struggle with the fact that they are no longer the breadwinner. Women's identity does not seem compromised in the same way and they seem to focus more on protecting their husband's identity as the farmer. In 2001, men specifically commented on how hard it was to no longer be the breadwinner. They also said:

Sometimes now I think men are house-husbands. We do the school run because our wives are working out full time. *# men's focus group 1*

Without the off-farm work of women, it would be impossible to continue farming. It is hard you know, knowing you are not the breadwinner any more. *# men's focus group 1*

Farmers had no status before the Second World War, but after the War, their status increased. Now again that status is very low. *# men's focus group 4*

In 2012, men talked with even more resentment about the changes in their circumstance that have impacted not only on their ability to generate sufficient income from the farm and, by extension, their role as the 'breadwinner', but also on their status in society:

My wife works out. It is crucial. If she didn't, I don't know where we would be. *# men's focus group 2*

How the single farm payment is put out in the media gives off the wrong impression. It looks like farmers are getting hand-outs, like we are scroungers. Nobody takes any notice of all the work we do. It is consumers who are being subsidised, not us. *# men's focus group 1*

In the 2001 and 2012 studies, women spoke about the difficulties for their men given the changed economic situation of farming and changing economic roles within the family farm. The reluctance of the research participants to discuss their professional roles

and occupations suggests that women are protecting men's status as breadwinner by downplaying their own contributions (Kelly and Shortall, 2002; Shortall, 2006; Shortall, 2014a). This is reflected in the fact that women tended not to discuss their off-farm work in any detail, even when they had professional jobs. Instead, they would reinforce their husband's identity as the farmer and as being in charge:

I would be involved in decisions but I would defer to him. At the end of the day he is the farmer and he has to see it as his decision. # *women's focus group 1 (2012)*

Women in the focus groups discussed how important farming is to their husbands and how it 'is their way of life'. In adopting this strategy, women are reinforcing farming as a central part of men's identity.

## The breadwinner, masculinity and farming

Sociological research on identity shows that when the signs and symbols in any situation reinforce identity, then identity is confirmed and positive emotions result. However, when our identity is threatened, it leads to negative feelings and distress (Jenkins, 2008; Burke, 1991; Burke and Harrod, 2005; Stets and Burke, 2005). This occurs when our sense of self is not verified by those with whom we socially interact. The impact of non-identity verification depends on who it is that provides the feedback. Greater distress is caused when the source of the feedback is a significant other. Spouses are increasingly significant sources of identity verification. This reflects one of the major changes over the 27 years covered by these data sets, namely the reduced circle of significant others to reinforce farming and gender identities. In 1987, women spoke a great deal about their mothers-in-law and, in three cases, women had shared houses with their mothers-in-law until their deaths. Women reported a certain pressure to perform as good wives and mothers for the approval of their mothers-in-law. In all cases where their husbands' fathers were alive, the father was active on the farm on a daily basis. In three cases where the heirs were old enough, they were also farming full-time with their fathers. This milieu provided constant or on-going verification of the identity of the man as 'farmer'. The status of women was also reinforced through their role of providing all meals, including meals for seasonal workers; fourteen farms hired additional seasonal labour. The status of the men was also reinforced through interactions between farmers and farm advisory services. Prior to 1988, ACOT/Teagasc did not charge for farm visits. Similarly, in Northern Ireland, charges were introduced in the early 1990s after which the frequency of advisors visiting the farm declined. In the 2001 and 2012 data sets, these changes were reflected in the discussion of both women and men about the increased isolation of farmers. Women said:

I would like to give up working out but it is necessary...It can be a long lonely day for the farmer on his own. His wife being there helps maintain good mental health. # *women's focus group 9 (2001)*

My husband likes me there for company. But he also likes me to be out earning money. # *women's focus group 8 (2001)*

Farmers have lost so much autonomy. Really they are no longer their own boss, they are working for the supermarket. It is very difficult on them. # *women's focus group 1 (2012)*

The point regarding the supermarket is significant as it speaks to the changed status of farmers in society from food producers to suppliers of larger retailers.

In the 2012 data set, men spoke openly about feeling isolated:

Farming is a very lonely life now. It would be great if women were able to be more involved, but it isn't possible any more. It is a lonely life. # *men's focus group 1*

Now everyone of working age is gone. Everyone is working out. Before, whoever was going to take it on would have been working with you. # *men's focus group 2*

It is lonely being on the farm. You have to deal with cattle dying on your own. It is not just women being out all day, it is also that there is no-one...previously the parents were at home too, your mother and father. But that's gone now too. # *men's focus group 1*

For this generation of men, their position in farming has gone through a considerable transition. They do not live in the same house as their farming father, and their heir does not work full-time on the farm with them. Indeed, when they spoke about heirs, they were pleased that he had other work, and that his fiancée/ spouse or girlfriend also did, as they see the future of the farm as part-time. Combined with women's off-farm work, there is a decrease in the daily interaction with significant others who can verify their identity as farmers.

## The importance of the farming identity for men and women

In 1987, being a member of a farm family was a source of prestige and status. Research has shown that owning land is a source of status and prestige regardless of the income earned from the land (Hannan and Commins, 1992). While farming has changed, and is stressful because of lower financial returns and the uncertain future for heirs, men and women see it as a powerful part of their identity, and a positive one. In 2001 and 2012, women said:

*It is not easy to get out of farming. How would my husband feel having to take orders from somebody else? What about his pride? # women's focus group 2 (2001)*

It is difficult for men from farming backgrounds, used to being independent, to work for another person # *women's focus group 10 (2001)*

In 2012, the research found a strong farming identity amongst the farm women interviewed. However, unlike the men interviewed, women's farming identity was not stressed or compromised. It was presented in a more straightforward fashion:

We meet up once a month and have a chat and a cup of tea. You hear what is happening. And we all have the one thing in common (farming) and we can talk about that, and we can unburden. # *women's focus group 2 (2012)*

This established group organised both social and farming activities for themselves. They organised farm visits with speakers on various aspects of farming: topics included tax inspectors, improving farm security, crime and preventing theft of farm machinery. They also organised social events, often including an overnight stay.

Women's farming identity seems less compromised than men's. In general, women were not the breadwinning farmer, so changes in the occupation represent less of a changed farming identity for them. They focus on the positive lifestyle associated with farming.

I do all the paperwork and I can drive a tractor. My husband is an engineer. He did work out for a long time but he just always felt he should be on the farm. I work part-time off the farm. But I love the farm, I love being outdoors.  
*# women's focus group 1*

I would know quite a lot about farming. I really enjoy living on a farm.  
*# women's focus group 1 2012*

Farming is a really good way of like. It keeps you healthy. The farming community is a good one. You wouldn't be in it for the money but for the love of it.  
*# women's focus group 2 2012*

For men, farming seems central to their identity. Quite an amount of research has considered how farming is tied up with men's gender and role identity. This relationship was evident throughout the interviews:

I got the family farm from my father and want to improve it and pass it on. I live for farming and don't farm for a living. There is a sense of pride.  
*# men's focus group 4 (2001)*

We are not making any money. It is very stressful. But it is not easy to get out of farming. It is our way of life. And farmers cling on to optimism. You always believe things will get better.  
*# men's focus group 2 (2012)*

It is very difficult to do it seven days a week with no support. But the economics of it are such that you have no option but to do it on your own. There is no alternative – it is what we do – we are farmers.  
*# men's focus group 1 (2012)*

The Irish people have a very particular relationship with the land. We had to fight for it, so you can't give it up.  
*# men's focus group 1 (2012)*

## Conclusion

There are some remarkable changes and continuities in gender relations within farm households over the last twenty-seven years. The backdrop to this is the significantly changed position of women in Irish society, and the changed economic and social context of farming. Women's financial independence and greater visibility in the public sphere of the labour market is a key component of this story. Yet, while the position of women in the

labour market and within the family farm has changed dramatically over the past forty years, scholars have questioned why new gender identities emerge so slowly for women. This is particularly true of farm households where discourses of the family farm remain very dominant.

The research findings suggest that women reinforce men's work identity as the farmer, the decision-maker and the person in charge. Women who participated in the research are seen to try to reinforce their husbands' position as breadwinner, even when their off-farm work is the primary source of income. Also, women are seen to actively support the continuation of both the farm and farming identities. Farming as an occupation was and remains fundamentally tied to gender and by reinforcing the male farmer's work identity, women also reinforce his masculinity. Despite this, men discussed their loneliness, and the absence of family that would previously have been on the farm; their parents, their wife, and their heir. There are now less people to positively reinforce their farming identity. This is evidence of the distress caused when our sense of identity is not confirmed by those around us. Whilst the women interviewed also had a strong farming identity, they did not express any distress about their identity. Instead, they talked about enjoying their lifestyle and living on the farm. Notwithstanding this, both women and men are committed to the survival of the family farm. To understand gender relations on the farm, the household is the most useful level of analysis. Previous research has argued that increased resources changes gender ideology or resource bargaining<sup>3</sup>. This presumes men and women behave as maximising individuals, which does not seem to be the case in farm families. Our research indicates that Irish farm women are committed to their families and their farms, and engage in strategies to maintain the survival and wellbeing of both. They add off-farm work to their other work roles in the face of falling farm incomes. In a peculiar sense, it is women's off-farm work that keeps farming male. In this respect, it can be argued that women are 'doing gender', and maintaining the occupation that is considered socially prestigious, even if economically marginal. They are also protecting the identity and emotional well-being of their husbands.

Counterbalancing these changes, there is also remarkable continuity. The patrilineal line of inheritance remains firmly in place. While parents may worry about the future for their son inheriting the farm, it is still a son they worry about. The extent to which pre-nuptial agreements are being entered by women marrying into farms, and what this means for gender relations, is a question that requires further research. It is not surprising that farming organisations and the farming media continue to be male dominated given that farming continues to be such a male industry. Its persistence is nonetheless striking in a world of greater gender equality. Looking to the future, we still have big gaps in our knowledge about the full contribution of men and women's off-farm employment and how it contributes to the survival of the family farm. Statistically, it no longer makes sense to view the farm as a nuclear economic activity.

In conclusion, whilst the cultural hegemonic beliefs about women in Irish society have changed significantly there has been less rapid change in the dominant beliefs, practice and culture concerning women's position in agriculture. In reviewing the evolution of

micro-interactions in gender relations within the farm household and enterprise over the course of 27 years, this research identifies both continuity and change. What is remarkable is the continued and extraordinary commitment to the survival of the family farm by the farm household, in the face of the challenges faced by farm enterprises to generate sufficient income. While gender roles have changed and continued, these have been reconstituted in ways that demonstrate the commitment to maintaining the institution of the family farm.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>A new semi-state organisation, the national advisory and training body (ACOT) was set up in 1980 to provide training and advisory services for farmers. It was replaced by Teagasc in 1988.

<sup>2</sup>Some research exists on this question. See Evans and Price (2006)

<sup>3</sup>See Kelly and Shortall, 2002, for an overview.

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