

Politics, Gender and the Farmyard

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La recherche sur les agricultrices a tendance à souligner les caractéristiques de leur vie sur la ferme et la structure du fermage quand il s'agit de promouvoir l'égalité à l'intérieur de cette fonction. Cet article assure que le climat politique exerce un impact considérable sur l'égalité des femmes en agriculture comme ce fut le cas en Irlande du Nord dans le contexte d'un changement politique radical. L'auteure se demande si ce changement pourrait servir de modèle pour faire avancer la place des femmes dans le contexte de la démocratie canadienne plus stable et plus évoluée.

Research on farm women has greatly advanced our understanding of women's farm work (Gasson; Reimer), their involvement, or lack thereof, in farming organizations, (Teather 1994; Shortall 1999), and their low participation in agricultural education and training (Liepins and Schick; Schmitt; Shortall 1996). This research has tended to focus on farm women, the characteristics of their farming lives and the structure of farming when considering how to advance equality for women within this occupation. With the notable exception of some Norwegian research (Haugen and Brandth; Brandth and Haugen), and work comparing Norway, Canada and Northern Ireland (Shortall 1999) there was little consideration given to the impact of political context on farm women's equality. More recently, Canadian political science research has examined the reasons why rural women are under-represented in politics, and how the general political context contributes to this situation (Carbert; Matland and Studler). This article will examine the radically changed political context in Northern Ireland and how it has created an opportunity to advance gender equality. The article begins with a brief overview of the Canadian context before outlining the Northern Ireland case study. This is followed by conclusions and some consideration of whether the case study demonstrates any transferable insights relevant to the Canadian context on how to advance gender equality.

Equality and Stability in Canada

There is a debate within Canadian political science concerning the limited presence of women in politics. This debate has considered many angles of women's under-representation and why it is problematic. Some scholars have argued the debate rests on two conceptions of political representation; the descriptive and the substantive. The descriptive model calls for an increase in the political representation of women in political institutions until it better reflects their proportion in the population. The substantive model is more concerned with the reasons why it is important to increase the number of women in politics, and primarily argues it is because women bring a unique perspective and women act to support women's issues (Tremblay and Pelletier). There is no dispute that Canadian women are under-represented in politics generally, and that rural Canadian women are disproportionately under-represented (Matland and Studler; Carbert). While there are few women elected to public offices in rural areas generally, this is particularly the case for Atlantic Canada.

Previous research considered the Canadian Farm Women's Network and its provincial Networks and investigated the empowering nature of this social movement (Shortall 1993; MacKenzie; Teather 1996). While the Canadian Farm Women's Network was a significant social and political development and did instigate political change, it did not substantially change the number of women in powerful positions within farming organizations, or within more generally within rural politics. Recent research has considered the effect of the "electoral opportunity structure" on who runs for office (Matland and Studler). The electoral opportunity structure refers to those long-term conditions external to individuals that affect the demand for candidates and their ability to achieve official positions. They include party context, political context, and the social context. The social con-

text refers to the political culture, social values and attitudes that affect the demands for various characteristics of candidates.

It is argued that the electoral opportunity structure, and its components; party context, political context and social context, are fairly stable in an advanced industrial democracy such as Canada, even though it is recognised that change can and has occurred (Matland and Studler). This is a very different context to the relatively unstable political context in Northern Ireland, where the electoral opportunity structure has altered radically. Whether the

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radical political changes in Northern Ireland contain lessons for the Canadian context will now be explored.

Equality and Change in Northern Ireland

The Belfast Agreement of 1998 on which the people of Ireland voted by referendum, is believed to offer the opportunity for Northern Ireland to embark on a political trajectory free from political violence (O'Leary; Wilford; Cox). The Agreement places a premium on consent, pluralism, consensus and accommodation. Its signatories committed themselves to "partnership, equality and mutual respect" (Wilford). Of crucial importance for the subsequent climate of equality legislation, was the fact that the previously separate debate on equality now became entwined with constitutional negotiations (McCrudden 1998). What was different was the inclusion this time round of political parties that had not participated previously and that viewed equality and human rights issues as particularly salient. Once human rights were identified as an area important particularly to Sinn Fein, it then became important for those that wanted to keep Sinn Fein engaged to include it for reasons of strategy as well as for reasons of principle (McCrudden 1999). The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) also pushed to keep equality issues, particularly *gender* equality issues, to the fore. The political restructuring facilitated greater consultation with a range of civic groups, and various women's groups mobilized and formed alliances with community groups to maximize their influence in the consultation process.

Given the suspicion and lack of trust, and the perception of previous commitments to tackle equality as empty rhetorical measures, it was imperative that whatever the Agreement offered was not considered in the same vein.

To be credible, the measures it proposed had to have weight. Strand One of the Agreement is concerned with institutional arrangements within Northern Ireland. One element of this deals with equality, and is underpinned by *The Northern Ireland Act* (1998). Within this Act, the mainstreaming of equality is broad based, covering a wide range of categories. The relevant categories between which equality of opportunity is to be promoted are between persons of: different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status, sexual orientation, men and women generally, persons with a disability and persons without, and persons with dependants and persons without.

When the recent changes in Northern Ireland are situated within relevant theoretical literature on the state (Mann; McAdam; McAdam, McCarthy and Zald), it is obvious that the essence of the political system has fundamentally altered. The extension of citizenship rights embodied in the new equality legislation is testimony to this drive. In addition, the prevailing cultural climate is one of fostering mutual respect, equality, and parity of esteem. This has led to a restructuring and openness to the political system that is unprecedented. This process has generated an opportunity for a broader understanding of equality, beyond religious equality. This broader definition included gender equality.

The Research

This article developed from a study commissioned in 2000 which investigated the implications for farm households and people living in rural areas of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Reforms.¹ The research primarily focused on the gender implications of the restructuring of agriculture and rural development, and the further restructuring that will accompany additional CAP reforms. One consideration throughout the project was the type of recommendations that could be made to advance issues of gender equality in agriculture and rural development. Given the low priority previously accorded to gender equality in an environment where political stability was the primary concern, combined with the traditional nature of the farming industry and the relevant government Department, the context for making such recommendations seemed limited. However, it became clear that a very different political cultural climate existed, where it was possible, and encouraged, to raise policy related gender equality issues. Given the early stage of political restructuring in Northern Ireland, and the well documented hiccups that have occurred, the objective in this article is to illustrate the change in context and the increased scope to raise issues of gender equality. The conclusion is that the changed political climate has led to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) adopting a different approach towards women.

A mixture of research methods were used: qualitative

interviews with governmental, quasi governmental, voluntary and community organizations, group interviews with women and men who lived on farms, and men and women who did not live on farms in rural areas. Biographical information was gathered from participants in group interviews. A total of 107 people participated in twelve group interviews; 30 men on farms, 52 women on farms, and 25 women in rural areas.

The analysis of this data has to date focused on macro level and general changes in agriculture and globalization, as well as the detailed micro level ways in which CAP reforms are playing out on family farms and in rural development initiatives (for example, Shortall and Kelly; Kelly and Shortall; Shortall 2002; Donaghy and Kelly). This article however focuses on the mezzo-level: less on the gender implications of CAP reforms and more on the changed cultural climate that facilitates the advancement of gender equality in agriculture and rural development. It highlights the importance of the political context for the equality of women in agriculture and rural development. For the purposes of this article, the focus is primarily on the way in which DARD's behaviour towards women has changed as a result of the state's approach to equality. Throughout the following presentation of empirical findings, DARD's previous defiance of equality directives is presented to demonstrate changed practice. Given that the equality legislation is recent, the potential for change is also indicated where appropriate.

DARD and a Cultural Climate of Change

Accounting for Farm Women

Research has consistently illustrated that women do more work on farms than agricultural statistics indicate (Machum; Reimer). There are a number of reasons for this including the fact that women "marry in" to farms, are largely untrained and some of the work that women do on farms is difficult to quantify. It has long been argued however that if a broader definition of farm work was used and the possibility of returning more than one principal farmer existed, the situation could be somewhat rectified. With the exception of Canada (Shortall 1997) little policy change has occurred to improve the quality of information gathered.

Previous work has identified the ways in which the agricultural statistics for Northern Ireland under-report women's farm work (Equality Commission; Shortall 2002). In DARD's agricultural surveys, a limited definition of farm work is used, and it is only possible to name one principal partner. In the past DARD's response to relevant policy recommendations relating to gender statistics was at best resistant. In its reply to the Equality Commission, DARD's defensive response was to state that DARD gathered more information on farm labour than illustrated by the Equality Commission, but it was data that remained unanalyzed (Equality Commission

33). For a long time DARD held its hands up and said that it simply could not monitor by religion or gender, as it was problematic to relate these "social" concerns to the "business" of agriculture (Osborne, Gallagher, Cormack and Shortall).

In the preparation of its Equality Scheme to comply with the *Northern Ireland Act*, DARD noted that it was very difficult for the Department to identify policies that should be subject to Equality Impact Assessments² as they did not have sufficient baseline information from which to make an assessment. In order to meet its obli-

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gations under the new equality legislation, DARD had to provide comprehensive baseline information in order to monitor whether or not it was meeting its statutory duty. In light of this, DARD commissioned a Social Survey in 2000, which provides the most comprehensive information about women's work on and off the farm to date. Among other things it collects data on the age and gender of every member of the farm family. It adopted a very broad definition of work, including farm work (along the lines feminist scholars previously argued was necessary to accurately record women's farm work), farm diversification activity, and off farm work. For the first time detailed information is available about women's off-farm work, and the extent to which it subsidizes the farm. It also provides information on whether or not farmers' spouses are paid, although clearly receiving a salary is a complex issue within a family business where resources are often seen as household rather than individual resources. Nonetheless, it indicates a significant sea change for a Department that previously argued "social" concerns could not be related to the "business" of agriculture.

Consulting Women

DARD has previously argued that it is primarily an "agent" delivering United Kingdom and European Union policies. This role, it argued, limited its scope to engage in issues of equality (Osborne *et al.*).

The extensive consultation process that has emerged on policy documents is an attempt to illustrate the transparency of the political process and particularly to appease distrust of the civil service. Before submitting a Draft Equality Scheme to the Equality Commission, public authorities were obliged to consult with representatives of persons likely to be affected by the scheme. This obviously

included women. The first draft of DARD's Equality Scheme was sent to 245 organizations. One such body from which it invited a submission was the Rural Women's Forum. The Rural Women's Forum was an ad hoc body formed in 1996 to act as an umbrella group for rural women's development organizations and groups. It aimed to inform policy, but met with little enthusiasm from DARD. The Forum organized a well-attended conference in the middle of 1997, and had been moribund since that event. However, in 1999, following the publication of DARD's proposed plan for rural development, some of

cultural training needs. The women who participated in the group interviews for our research were very clear about the areas in which they needed training. More recently, in order to address the under-representation of women in training programs, Colleges are providing a limited amount of training for women rather than waiting to be approached by a group requesting training. In addition they are trying to accommodate women's participation through for example the timing of education and training provisions (Shortall and Kelly). DARD is also now obliged to monitor its lifelong training provisions.

DARD is now bound to provide more comprehensive information about the nature of women's work on farms, their training needs on the farm, and off the farm. It must also critically reflect on whether its policies discriminate against women in any way.

the organizers of the Rural Women's Forum were contacted and told that DARD would like the Forum to make a submission on the document. The Forum was resurrected, and in addition to previous members, additional rural women's groups were contacted. Three well-attended meetings were called before the Forum wrote up its submission. Most importantly, DARD sent two representatives to all the meetings. The prevailing atmosphere at the meetings was that what the Forum had to say would be taken seriously.

Education and Training for Farm Work and Off-farm Work

Women's under representation in agricultural education and training is well documented (Liepins and Schick; Shortall 2005). The reasons for this are many, including a culture whereby women perceive training provisions as exclusively for men and Department practices fostered this perception. To provide training for farm women requires acknowledging their farm labour in the first instance.

In the past, DARD argued that DARD Colleges respond to training requests from farming groups and organizations that approached them. They reported that they readily responded to training demands from women's groups. However, there are few farm women's groups, and most of the well established farming organizations that approach the Colleges for training do not have many women members.

However within the new political and cultural climate, DARD's policies and practices are changing and will change further in order to meet the requirements of the recent equality legislation. DARD's Social Survey now provides comprehensive information on women's agri-

Conclusions

The Belfast Agreement and the *Northern Ireland Act* underpin the political effort to move beyond a political impasse and create a state in which all social groups can have confidence. The result is a situation of openness in the structure of organizations that is unprecedented. The need to buy commitment for the Agreement necessitated a dedicated effort to address issues of inequality in a way that was transparent and had force. The result is a prevailing cultural climate of transparency, consultation, and a drive to guarantee extended citizenship rights. This has led to a restructuring and openness to the political system that is unprecedented. It also provided a unique opportunity to advance gender equality.

As a government department, DARD is bound by this prevailing cultural climate, and by the dictates of the equality legislation. For the first time, DARD was forced to reflect on how its institutional policies may discriminate against women. As this article demonstrates, DARD is now bound to provide more comprehensive information about the nature of women's work on farms, their training needs on the farm, and off the farm. It must also critically reflect on whether its organizational policies discriminate against women in any way. Towards this end, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is beginning to address women's training needs, increase training provisions for women, and to consult with women's groups on their policy documents.

There is a radically changed political climate in Northern Ireland. The key driver is equality legislation. Government departments, other public bodies and organizations simply must comply. This would seem to suggest that the answer to Louise Carbert's question about whether a more tightly regulated and transparent system would offer more

electoral opportunities for women in Atlantic Canada is; yes. Nordic countries are held up as an example on how to generate a more inclusive citizenship. It rests on the interaction between women's political activism "from below" and their political integration "from above" (Tremblay). Integration from above involves a concerted effort to ensure that civic structures are as inclusive as possible, and consciously aims to achieve gender equality. It is argued here that integration from above is a very powerful means of advancing gender equality, and there is considerable scope to improve integration from above in Northern Ireland and Canada through a more regulated system with clear quota systems for elected representatives, and transparent binding measures to ensure equitable gender inclusion in civic society.

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¹The CAP reforms are a result of the decision by Ministers in the European Union to sever the link between agricultural subsidies and volumes of production. The intention is to make EU farmers more competitive and market oriented, and remove the global trade inequalities generated by heavy subsidisation of European agriculture. Many European farms are unviable without subsidisation.
²The Equality Impact Assessment is the means of determining the differential impact of existing and new policies on the identified categories of people in the Northern Ireland Act. It is impossible to do this without adequate baseline information.

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