

# Gendered Identities and Agricultural Sustainability

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Although the European Union provides policy supports to encourage the uptake of more sustainable farming systems<sup>1</sup> such as organics, 2005 Eurostat data reveal that only 4% of EU-27 farmland is organic, dropping to just 1% in Ireland, signalling an inertia among Irish farmers to adopt such alternative agricultural pathways. Farming in Ireland remains a male-dominated occupation and only 11% of farmers are female (Central Statistics Office 2002), a gender imbalance linked to the persistence of patriarchy and a patrilineal inheritance system whereby land ownership and thus power is usually conferred to a male successor (Ní Laoire 2002). This has implications for sustainable agriculture because as Peter et al. (2000:216) argue, “the conventional masculinity of most male farmers hinders the transition from industrial to sustainable agriculture”. Drawing from semi-structured interviews in 2008 with farm offspring (many of them farmers) in a commercial and a marginal farming

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area, this essay asks how are particular approaches to farming related to gendered identities and what is the potential for a shift to more sustainable forms of agriculture in the context of a masculinist agricultural sector?

#### GENDERED IDENTITIES AND APPROACHES TO FARMING

This essay adopts Peter et al.'s (2000) Bakhtinian approach to understanding agricultural masculinities through the use of monologic and dialogic masculinities. A monologic farmer is characterised by farming centred on the use of machinery and the control of nature. Monologic masculinity is conventional and bounded by rigid expectations of farming systems and gender roles. One man describes this narrow view as follows:

“Farming to an Irish person is cows or cattle, sheep, pigs, cereals, and maybe potatoes and carrots, nothing else, that’s farming, that’s it ...” (James<sup>2</sup>).

Gender roles are delineated from an early age:

“They grow up on the farm and there’s a boy and a girl, and the boy’s got kicked outside the door to go and do the farming, and the daughter is inside cleaning the house” (Evan).

In contrast, dialogic masculinity offers a broader understanding of what it is to be a man. It allows for more openness to change and criticism and a less controlling attitude to machines and the environment. Here, an organic farmer’s son explains this openness and environmental concern:

“...Dad’s very open-minded about farming, and willing to take on opinions...if he wasn’t that sort of a person, he wouldn’t be organic farming now...” (Dan).

“Dad would [have] always been very conscious of what he was doing to the land... Farming so close to the lake...you have to be cautious” (Dan).

A description of parents in a marginal farming area portrays their willingness to try new things and less rigid gender roles:

“They’d have gone into [the Irish agri-environmental scheme] anyway...they were always quick to go for something like that, they weren’t afraid to change, ever...My mother had a very big role to play in [the farm]” (Tom).

This gives rise to different measures of work and success such as a less individualistic approach to agriculture, an outlook that is more interactive and holistic and thus acknowledges the environment and the needs of others in society.

#### HEGEMONIC MASCULINITIES AND PRODUCTIVIST AGRICULTURE

The Irish agricultural sector takes a productivist approach to farm development via consolidation, specialisation and intensification. This encourages increasingly monologic masculinities among Irish farmers (e.g. Ní Laoire 2002) associated particularly with commercial farmers who have the capital and land resources to expand their farm, attract a spouse and secure a successor. Besides patriarchy and patrilineal inheritance, hegemonic masculinities are reproduced through symbols of power, especially farm machinery that represent hard work and domination over nature, both of which are key dimensions of monologic masculinities:

“You walk out into the field and there’s four machines streaking up and down the field and work is getting done...you’re taking a natural resource basically and manipulating it to do what you want to do” (James).

More sustainable forms of agriculture such as organic farming may fail to match up to these symbols in terms of the appearance of the output and even its farmers:

“I couldn’t look at something out there in the garden and it growing like a weed....it’s not for me....the whole image that people portray when they’re farming organically, absolutely [irritates me]....Going around with their clothes half worn” (Evan).

Therefore, hegemonic farming masculinities are allied with productivist agriculture and a distancing from more sustainable traditional farming practices. But farmers with economically-unviable farms are likely to find it harder to perform these dimensions of hegemonic masculinities. A majority of Irish farmers combine their unviable farm with an off-farm job that provides most of their income (Crowley et al. 2008). One young farmer describes the practice as follows:

“They had [farming] and they had their [construction] job and they didn’t really worry whether the farm was balancing the books or not” (Tom).

Ní Laoire argues that such pluriactivity “does not necessarily involve a destabilisation of hegemonic rural masculinities” (2002:23). Thus, although many conventional farmers are not economically-viable, they use their off-farm job to subsidise low-income farms, allowing productivist farming and its monologic masculinities to go unchallenged. Yet, Ní Laoire (2005) notes differences between the farming masculinities of pluriactive and commercial farmers. Conventional gender identities and more conservative social structures persist in commercial farming areas, whereas the construction of gender identities may have adjusted to more flexible social structures that break from the traditional integration of farm work, men’s work and earning power

in marginal farming areas. This, she concludes, provides the seeds for alternative masculinities. Alternative dialogic forms of masculinity also seem to draw from the same traditional agrarian ideology as pluriactive farmers with unviable farms, as both value love of land, family farming and nature (Ní Laoire 2002). Taken together, the more flexible forms of masculinities in marginal farming areas and the ideological import of family, land and nature among pluriactive farmers suggest the potential to nurture those seeds of alternative masculinities towards more sustainable forms of agriculture, in ways with which Irish farmers can *identify*.

#### TOWARDS SOCIALLY-ACCEPTABLE PATHWAYS TO MORE SUSTAINABLE FORMS OF AGRICULTURE

Although Peter et al. (2000) suggest that the sustainable agricultural movement provides a space for farm men to practice dialogic masculinity, the low rate of conversion to organics by Irish farmers indicates countervailing factors. One factor is the perception that the movement is driven by outsiders. This is demonstrated subtly by the following farmer when asked about erecting wind turbines on his farm:

“If they weren’t environmentally-friendly, I wouldn’t be on for it at all now, not that I’m a do-gooder...but I’d like to think I’d be...reasonable” (Tom).

Although he expresses concern for the environment, he qualifies his concern to ensure he is not grouped with ‘do-gooders’, such as environmentalists.

Another factor that may inhibit a conversion to sustainable forms of agriculture relates to what Ní Laoire describes as the “performance of masculine identities...often grounded in material interests” (2002:17). The father’s authority in terms of how the farm is managed and who

might inherit the farm remains a powerful force in contemporary Irish farming circles:

“a lot of my friends who are working on farms... basically seem to be over the barrel of a gun by their fathers saying to them: ‘oh, you be a good boy for the next couple of years and I’ll give you the farm’” (James).

These factors underscore the need to ground the sustainable agriculture movement in an agrarian discourse with which farmers can identify or which farm offspring can adopt without fear of alienating land-owning patriarchs. A focus on social sustainability may be a key component of this discourse as it emerged in numerous interviews on discussions about planting farmland with forestry, especially in marginal farming areas:

“...if all the land was planted around here, you’d be just opening the door for the people to leave....When you plant the land, that land’s gone forever...gone as you know it...that’s why people leave, because there’s nothing left once you do that” (Tom).

The reluctance to plant forestry also reveals respect for family and ancestors:

“...if you’re reared on a farm along with your family...when you see people passing on, dying on, and you remember when they were there...all the effort they put in and all the work, that it’s sad...to put a tree in their work...to see it all ploughed up for the last time” (Sean).

This family farming narrative is predicated on the successful transfer of the farm to the next generation, at the core of which is sustainable management of farm resources:

“[Dad] was always of the opinion you should give the land down to the next generation in the same condition you got it, if not better, if you can do it” (Dan).

Thus, the more dialogic masculinities and the significance of family and ancestors in the narratives of those from low-income farms and in marginal farming areas suggest potential for a shift to more sustainable forms of agriculture in the context of a masculinist agricultural sector. It calls for research that explores the ecological and social sustainability of traditional farming practices as the basis for a sustainable farming discourse with which conventional farmers can identify and thus engage.

## NOTES

1. Sustainability is understood in this essay as the notion of inter-generational responsibility in approaches to resource utilisation, particularly land resources.
2. Names have been changed.

## LITERATURE

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