

What does putting 'rural' in front of women tell us?

Professor Sally Shortall, School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, BT7 1NN s.shortall@qub.ac.uk

Introduction

This purpose of this submission is to demonstrate that 'rural' women are not a uniform category; in many parts of western Europe there are now few differences between rural and urban women; to presume a global set of needs for rural women is unhelpful. The evidence in this submission is drawn from European research.

Huge strides have been made in gender equality over the last forty years. The lifting of the ban on married women having paid work in the 1970s in European countries paved the way for more complete participation of women in the labour market, and with it economic independence. In the UK there have been significant changes in women's employment aspirations, attachment to the labour market, and contribution to the family economy (Rubery and Rafferty, 2013). Nonetheless, there is still a way to go. Across the European Union generally, gender segregation of the labour market means that women are more likely to be concentrated in lower paid employment, and less senior roles. Of course, education, age and life cycle stage are also factors affecting women's labour market situation. Women are also more likely to work part-time (European Commission, 2009; Eurostat, 2010; Rubery and Rafferty, 2013). Culture matters. The employment position of women in the liberal Nordic countries is better than that in the conservative Mediterranean countries where there are few structures supporting the combination of work and family roles (Bock, 2010). This is also true for women's representation in politics and decision making; women are much more represented in the Nordic countries of the EU than in the Mediterranean countries.

This general sweeping overview of gender equality shows a general social pattern of progress towards equality in Europe, although obstacles and barriers remain. It also shows that there is variation across Europe depending on cultural values and norms. The central question I want to question in this submission is what do we learn when we put 'rural' in front of women. Many sociologists, geographers, anthropologists and historians have spent considerable time exploring the question of rural women¹. In this instance I am not including farm women, as patterns of land ownership and the farming industry presents particular gender issues within the occupation. This article focuses on the use of 'rural' as place, and as an explanatory variable about women.

Place, space and location matter. Social relations are constructed in places and spaces. Society always has a spatial and temporal referent, some physical location in time (Brewer, 2013). What is 'rural' telling us about women? While a great deal of research highlights the sociological limitations of binaries (Saraceno, 2013; Alexander, 2006), rural women is even more problematic than usual; is the binary opposite urban women, or rural men? In her analysis of the position of rural women across Europe commissioned by the European Parliament, Bock (2010) compares rural women with both urban women and rural men at different points. This is generally true of the literature; sometimes the binary opposite is urban women (salary differences, employment differences) and other times it is rural men (representation in rural governance structures, travel distances to work).

In a lot of the literature, in many policy documents and publications by rural women's lobby groups, being rural and a woman is presented as a double negative. Some of the classical stereotypes about rural women are that childcare pose particular problems, access to transport is mediated by gender, women are isolated and have more difficulties accessing labour markets (presumably here the binary opposite is urban women).

This submission follows on from ESRC funded research to examine how to effectively gender mainstream the European Union Rural Development Programme (RDC). It was motivated by policy documents in Northern Ireland that had noted that the current programme had not actively targeted women, and recommended that the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development engage more with Rural Women's Network, the Rural Network, and other implementing bodies to use their expertise to reach this target group to promote the programme. We decided to update previous research and to consider how the rural development programme might be mainstreamed, and whether there are tensions between the EU commitment to gender mainstreaming and the EU commitment to a viable agricultural industry (this is not the focus of this article). We also examine if the RDP is adopted in ways that reflect existing gender imbalances. In other words, it may be the case that gender mainstreaming is circumvented by cultural norms and established patterns of practice, and this normative knowledge shapes how the programme is implemented.

As we conducted the research, we were often met by blank faces. Many people interviewed did not see gender as a particular problem in the programme. The rural women's lobby group, and a particular group of women formed by the Rural Network, had very strong views about the disadvantage of rural women. Other focus groups with women not connected to the Rural Development Programme, gave very different interpretations of rural life. While the under-representation of women on the Local Action Groups and on the Programme Monitoring Committee was frequently quoted, our calculations did not bear this out.

We considered whether there was just a lack of awareness or reflection on the gendered processes through which the rural development programme is constructed. Or might it be an insidious form of power that is not recognised? Then we considered that maybe we are uncritically accepting a set of assumptions about rural women that no longer reflect the real world. Following Burawoy's (2013) reflections on his ethnographic fallacies resulting from a lack of theoretical reflection, this submission tries to undertake such a theoretical reflection about the concept of rural women. Burawoy reflects that he ignored the world (global changes), reified the world (by ignoring changes that were happening and holding onto earlier theoretical assumptions), and homogenised the world (by presuming uniform categories). His article is a call to ethnographers to critically reflect on their methodological and theoretical assumptions over time. It offers much by way of reflecting on what we mean by 'rural women'. Massey (2004) argues that rather than claiming 'rights' for pre-given identities based on assumptions of authenticity, it is important to challenge the identities themselves, and thus the relationships through which these identities have been established (p.2). This is the purpose of this submission.

Place and gender

Distinguishing between urban and rural areas based on population density does not help us understand real differences in living conditions and quality of life (Shucksmith et al, 2006). In her very comprehensive overview of the position of rural women in Europe, Bock (2010) found that living in a rural area does not explain women's employment position in Europe. There are differences in earning capacities between urban and rural areas, but she notes that this is true for both men and women in rural areas. Bock also comments that rural residents have often factored lower salaries into their choice to live in rural areas. Bock (2010) shows variation across Europe, with rural women participating in the labour market where cultural norms and values support or encourage women's employment. This was highest in the Nordic countries and lowest in the Mediterranean countries, but this is true for both urban and rural women. Bock concludes that there is no evidence that the situation in rural areas is generally disadvantageous for women (p. 29). It is unhelpful to think of a uniform group of rural women and a uniform group of urban women.

Some urban literature has also looked at how gender identity is formed in a more nuanced way through the interconnection between place and space flows. Early literature reflected on how women's changing gender roles and gender relations meant their spatial patterns

changed. While men's role had previously been public and economic, and women's role private and social, women's move into the labour market meant they appropriated new spaces. They were also appropriating new resources by purchasing goods rather than making them at home, and purchasing childcare (MacKenzie, 1989). More recent research has considered how spatial scales that women move in shape their gendered identity (Vaiou and Lykogianni, 2006); how migrant women exist in one space and carry cultural norms and values from another and negotiate these in different spaces such as the home, the neighbourhood of their new location and their workplace (Listerborn, 2013; Vaiou and Lykogianni, 2006). This is not presented as a local global binary, but one where there are many spatial interactions (new country of residence, workplace, neighbourhood, family, and old country of residence). Other urban studies have focused on how commodified domestic services shapes the spatial arrangements and flows of both professional and less-skilled women, and the connections between migration and women's low-waged work (McDowell et al, 2006). McDowell et al's discussion of how women manage spatial flows between childcare, home and the workplace and how women negotiate the time issues involved, is just as relevant to women in other places beyond There is a sense in the urban literature of what Massey identified as time marching on, recognition that women's roles and spatial interactions have changed more profoundly than is recognised in rural analysis. Rural is seen more as stasis. When the European Parliament commissioned two reviews of women in rural areas in Europe, one looking at rural women generally, the other at women in farming, their starting premise was that women occupy a disadvantaged position and rural makes that position of disadvantage worse (See Bock, 2010; Shortall, 2010).

Our research

Our research was conducted in 2012. The aim of this research was to update a study carried out in 2001 which was still being used in policy and government documents, despite being out of date. The objective was to assess how to increase the impact of the Rural Development Programme (RDP) on rural women. The European Commission and the European Parliament have specifically expressed concern about the differential gender impact of the rural development programmes across Europe.

We conducted thirty six interviews, and with consent, taped and transcribed interviews. Twenty five interviews were taped and transcribed. Interviews were purposive and semi-structured and were conducted with people in Divisions within the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development as the managing authority for the RDP, the Rural Network in the region, women's sector organisations, Local Action Groups who manage delivery, NISRA who conducted the mid-term evaluation, the Equality Commission, and farming groups. While NVivo was used to manage interview data, we found that the interview data needed considerable manual interpretation and coding, as interview schedules are not the same for the interviews we conducted.

We conducted seven focus groups, one more than originally planned, but we had to change the groups we planned to interview, as in one case the organisation who had promised help in organising focus groups did not do so, and in another case, the organisation was unable to mobilise participants. This meant that we conducted focus group work with rural men and women not always attached to the rural development network or process. This actually generated important data that we analyse in this article; we found that there is a 'project class' or groups schooled in rural development language and mantra, and groups outside of these networks see very different priorities for rural areas and needs for rural men and women. We conducted two focus groups with women on farms, two with women involved in rural development, one with a rural women's group not attached to the rural development programme, one with men on farms, and one with a Men's Sheds group. Focus groups had between eight and fourteen participants. The focus groups allowed us to update normative knowledge about the needs of rural areas, the needs of family farms, how these are addressed by the RDP, to what extent they are aware of and engage with the RDP and what

might make them more likely to engage with the RDP, and gender differences. Notes were taken during focus group interviews as taping them did not prove successful.

Analysis

Conflicting worlds: current life versus pre-modern normative assumptions

Many of the interviews show people struggling with conflicting interpretations of the position of rural women. On the one hand there is a tendency to cling to the 'mantra' of the traditional barriers to rural women, based on place (rural) that inhibit their ability to occupy various public spaces; childcare, transport, resources. On the other hand, there is recognition that women are more visible in public spaces. For example, the interview with Nora, from a Rural Women's Organisation, displays this tension.

Childcare and transportation would be the two biggest barriers...if there's only one car in the household and you're in a rural area that means you're effectively stuck in that area until your car becomes available, and that's presuming you can drive. The other thing that is a major issue is timings of meetings and things like that so, you know, if there's a meeting from 2-4 of their Local Action Group, they maybe have to organise somebody to collect their children, look after their children, you know, there's a lot of issues to just even getting to a two hour meeting.

This suggests that rural women are based at home full-time caring for their children and this prevents them occupying the public space of the Local Action Groups. Yet elsewhere in the same interview, Nora says firstly that women are occupying positions of leadership in communities, but these are separate to the rural development programme, and secondly that women actually are represented on Local Action Groups;

I suppose women are doing the vast amount of leadership in community groups, you know, they're more or less, you know, primarily run by women or at least a large percentage of most community groups are made up of women and their not seeing that connection to the programme and what benefit it can have for them.

This suggests that women occupy a 'private' public space. But elsewhere Nora says;

*In an ideal world it would be that women have 50% representation on the governance of it...in representation I think, in maybe, equally successful, but I think, you know, some of that is achievable quickly and some of it not so quickly, I think the Local Action Groups and the fact that that stipulation came from Europe. If that hadn't have come from Europe we would still be...everybody would still be going 'ah but women are just not interested in sitting on committees', sure that's....we were told that all the time, **yet, there they are, they have it, as best...I know its not all totally perfect 50/50 but it's pretty good and I think, you know, that's bound to be making an impact, particularly in scoring projects and when people are saying what works, I think it's bound to help** (emphasis added).*

What Nora says in this last quote, that women are well represented in the Local Action Groups (37% of LAGs are women) is at odds with her earlier statement that childcare, transport and timing of meetings prevents women's participation. The reality is that women are occupying public space, but the normative assumptions about rural women are that place prevents women's participation in public activity. This was evident in many other interviews. John, from a rural development organisation who sits on the Monitoring Committee and is very involved with the Local Action Groups said;

There are very few women on the Monitoring Committee, very very few. This is replicated again though the Local Action Groups.

Similarly Mary, from another rural development organisation, who also sits on the Monitoring Committee said;

The monitoring committee, yeah, oh no I've been at most of them are there isn't a lot of women at it, you know, and I know theyⁱⁱ have taken proactive steps...but the organisations that are nominated to the Monitoring Committee have a tendency to send maybe their Chief Executive...and in the majority of cases that's a man. But apart from Karen (from the Department of Agriculture) and myself and Nora and maybe one other woman, the rest would all be men.

These quotes are very hard to interpret. The reality is that there are nineteen people on the Monitoring Committee and nine are women – 47% of the committee members are women. I asked the secretariat if women were less likely to attend Monitoring Committee meetings and they said this was not the case. Is it that we do not 'see' women in a public space where they are not expected? Are normative assumptions shaping how we interpret reality?

Keeping rural women on the agenda

One interesting feature of the interviews is the struggle between a temporal social view of women that is at odds with current social interactions. The Mid-Term Evaluation (NISRA, 2010) stated repeatedly that The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development needs to target women in the current Rural Development Programme 'who have historically had low representation in related activities' (p.86). The evidence on which this claim is made is not clear, and NISRA does offer caveats stating available data was not robust, and this was supplemented with interviews with key stakeholders, including the Rural Women's Organisation. In almost all the interviews, people found it hard to identify what an equality agenda was trying to achieve for rural women. For Nora, from the Rural Women's Organisation, 'success' was keeping rural women on the agenda.

The Mid Term Evaluation has highlighted women as a target group and we have, in addition to being on the steering group for the Mid Term Evaluation, and trying to ensure that women stayed (laughs)and stayed on that report as a target group, we have also been very instrumental in keeping, arguing and advocating for the fact that there needs to a mechanism for targeting, it's not enough to say that women are a target group, and they are not accessing it, you know that's not sufficient.

Nora believes in separate measures, but it is not clear to what end. Interestingly, throughout the interview, she also quotes the Mid Term Evaluation as evidence that gender inequality needs to be a policy priority;

Otherwise the Mid Term Evaluation wouldn't have been saying women are a target group

Mary, from a rural development organisation, really struggled with the questions around gender equality. It was clear that she did not believe it is as serious an issue as suggested in some circles, but seemed to lack the confidence to say this. She also suggested it was an issue that was being kept on an agenda, but one that did not necessarily match reality;

in terms of what's based on, I mean, I'm wondering to what extent the Mid Term Evaluation....what data they had. So just wondering.....you know....whether there was enough data to be able to make that judgement, you know around women's participation or not.... I don't have the figures right in my head, but I would have thought that there was an increase in terms of women's participation on LAGs. From the previous programme.....I would have thought that you probably have a fair representation of women on the decision making side

It's hard to what what is the prohibit....what is prohibiting other than maybe confidence, or capacity, so maybe there's something around that but... there's nothing obvious to me that would say a woman can't apply (laughs) to the programme, or a woman can't get on to a LAG or you know...⁵ I suppose, I mean, it's a difficult one to say because if you, if you don't identify any... that there are no barriers to people's participation (laughs) then your target, you know, if there's nothing to prevent them from applying... you know it's, it's... you can set targets...

But when Mary was specifically asked if there were actually barriers to women's participation in rural development, she reverted to giving the 'expected' answer, one that relies on normative assumptions;

There maybe are, I mean, there could be barriers certainly in terms of personal circumstance and childcare and transport and stuff like that, you know, I mean I'm not saying there's no barriers to... that sort of... people's thought process of participating, but I'm thinking... I was thinking more of like, you know, if you've made your mind up that you want to be on a LAG, there's not a particular barrier stopping you going, you know, getting on to it, or if you want to make an application there's nothing saying 'you can't make an application', but certainly, I would say yes.

Emily, from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, also questioned the data to support the idea that rural women are disadvantaged and need special measures. She comments on how policy priorities are created and maintained;

Is it because it's just kept in the public, you know if this research is needed to say if there is or isn't a problem, is it a historical issue that was there and you have lobby groups there that keep it in the public domain and without proving one way or the other whether it's an issue or not and that's difficult so until we find out for sure it is an issue I would say like any lobby group will keep any aspect of the programme as an issue but you won't necessarily have the facts behind that, I mean it's not just women, it's disability, the environmentalist, the NGOs would be the same, any of them have their own interests within the programme and their lobbying will keep it as an interest unless something can prove that it's not actually an issue.

Public policy is socially constructed. Elsewhere I have considered knowledge power struggles in the formation of public policy (Shortall, 2012). There are power struggles between normative and empirical knowledge, and differences in how providers of knowledge assert legitimacy for their truth claims. Normative knowledge becomes embedded over time. Here we have an example of a rural women's organisation shaping the space of public policy through successfully influencing the policy process.

Reifying normative assumptions

Three focus groups were conducted with women in rural areas. Two were with women connected to the rural development programme and one was women not connected to the rural development programme. One focus group was with women who attended a seminar organised by a rural development organisation titled 'Yes, we're worth it'. The invitation had a pink ribbon on it, and it was organised to showcase a range of business women who 'have capitalized on their rural roots and are now successful entrepreneurs'. While the tone of this is positive, it reinforces some idea of successful women entrepreneurs as an aberration, not the norm. The three women presenters all stressed their marital status, children and spoke at length about their husbands. In the discussion afterwards, women stressed childcare, transport and traditional roles and responsibilities as barriers to women's participation in paid employment. There was some dissent from two women who, referring to their own experience, said that it depended on age, and noted gendered attitudes differed by age group. However, the uniformity of the 'mantra' of the situation of rural women, in both focus groups attached to the rural development organisation, meant there was little scope to

discuss social change over time. It is possible that the views and normative assumptions of the rural development organisation shaped the views of the women in these focus groups.

In the focus group not attached to a rural development organisation, the views of women were quite different. This group started because a group of women wanted to get together and organise activities. They have had pottery classes, jewellery making classes, and beauty evenings. They agree the activities they will organise. Women who had not worked outside the home talked about being isolated when their children were small. Most of the women had paid-employment. They said 'it is good to be out working'. They joked that even when you are out working you are still expected to do housework and childcare. They thought this was changing, with younger men doing more domestic and childcare work. Women did not think the situation would be different for urban women; 'what matters is if you can drive and have a car'. One of the nine women in the group could not drive, an older woman.

The focus group with women not attached to a rural development organisation was 'accidental' as was the one with men not attached to a rural development organisation. In the previous study all the focus groups were convened by organisations attached to the rural development programme. While we tried to replicate that in this study, one of the gate-keeper organisations could not get people to participate. However, in both cases, it indicated very different attitudes to rural living and made us question whether there is an accepted wisdom about the challenges facing rural women which is uncritically accepted.

Discussion

This article tries to follow Burawoy's (2013) reflections on his ethnographic fallacies. He reflects that he ignored the world, reified the world and homogenised the world. This came about because of a lack of theoretical reflection. This article seeks to reflect on the concept of 'rural women'. I suggest that academics, myself included, policy makers and rural women's lobby groups have reified a notion of 'rural women' as a double negative, where being a woman in a rural area presents particular challenges. In this line of argument, rural becomes an explanatory variable, which it is not. This ignores the world and how it has changed, and it also homogenises the world.

Brewer (2013) reminds us that society is always spatial and temporal. In some studies of rural women, it feels as if the temporal nature of society has been neglected. The lives of women have significantly changed in the last forty years. So too have the lives of rural people. Women have access to many more spaces than their mothers or grandmothers; the workplace, neighbourhoods, associations, and politics. Like their urban counterparts, rural women reside in a particular place, but they occupy multiple spaces. They share many of these spaces with urban women. This has changed significantly over time, and has changed gender identities, for both men and women.

Urban literature that considers the role of women in the city does not present a homogenised view of 'urban women'. Literature clearly defines the social class of women studied and rightly expects that social class limits or enhances the choices and spaces within which women exist (Smyth and McKnight, 2013; McDowell et al, 2006). Similarly religion, ethnicity and disability are seen as intersecting with gender to determine how space is lived. We did not distinguish between groups of women in our research proposal. We intended to see how the rural development programme includes or excludes 'rural women' as a homogeneous category.

The need to critically examine the concept of 'rural women' was evident in the interviews. There are conflicting interpretations in the interviews about what it means to be a rural woman. On the one hand, it continues to be presented as a double negative, limiting the spaces in which women can move and exist. On the other, it is acknowledged that women are now involved in the Local Action Groups managing the Rural Development Programme,

and are active on the Monitoring Committee. Most interesting is the account of those who sit on the Monitoring Committee and claim that there are very few women, even though 47% of the Committee are women. It begs the question – are women not seen in spaces where they are not expected? Keeping ‘rural women’ on the agenda was seen as the goal in some situations. This leads to further difficulties trying to identify the targets to address the problem of rural women, when what exactly the problem is has never been defined. The importance of culture and norms is evident in shaping the spaces women occupy. Women in rural and urban areas in our culture generally have more childcare and housework duties. They also negotiate space depending on religion. More nuanced research on how place and space intersect with gender, class, ethnicity and disability is necessary. Perhaps the reason I believe we need to critically reflect on the concept of ‘rural women’ is most evident in the differences between the focus groups attached to the rural development organisation and the one that was independent of the rural development programme. In the former, the traditional barriers to women were repeatedly expressed; childcare, transport, lack of self-confidence, and this was the case even when women were successful business people. In the latter, a very different interpretation, and a much more positive one, was given of being a woman and living in a rural area. Brewer (2013) argues that the public value of the social sciences is how it shapes social understanding. The social sciences permeate society’s understanding of itself and how it operates, shape policies and how a society tries to progress. The idea of rural women prevalent in policy documents and used by rural women’s lobby groups in many parts of the Western world needs critical reflection.

References:

Pini, B. and Leach, B. (eds). 2011. *Transforming Gender and Class in Rural Spaces*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

ⁱ The literature is vast, but see for example, Pini and Leach, 2011; special issue of *Signs* 2010; Bock and Shortall, 2006.

ⁱⁱ ‘they’ means the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development