

## CHAPTER 16

### 'YOU'RE NOT A MAN AT ALL!': MASCULINITY, RESPONSIBILITY, AND STAYING ON THE LAND IN CONTEMPORARY IRELAND

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#### **Introduction**

Rural Ireland, and in particular the agricultural sector, is undergoing significant restructuring, within the context of a rapidly urbanising society that has been radically transformed economically and socially in the past ten to twenty years. The decade since the mid-1990s in Ireland has witnessed an economic transformation, the reversal of emigration and unemployment, rapid urbanisation and suburbanisation, and the continued concentration of population in the urbanised East (Central Statistics Office, 2003). The importance of agriculture as an employer has declined and the rural economy has become more diversified (Frawley and O'Meara, 2004).

Young farmers are at the centre of these rural restructuring processes, making decisions to become farmers or not in the context of competing pressures. The economic and social landscape of farming is undergoing transformation, in which the viability of farming as an occupation and as a lifestyle in modern Ireland is being reduced. This means that some of the central pillars upon which Irish farm masculinities have been built are under threat, which has implications for the construction of masculine identities. However, at the same time, family farming carries with it certain responsibilities and retains a very strong socio-cultural meaning and importance, bound up closely with masculine identities. These competing pressures are in tension with one another and are lived out through the lives of farmers and their families. They are particularly apparent in the lives of young farmers and farm successors, who are the individuals who are facing or have recently faced, decisions regarding farm succession, inheritance or transfer of holdings, and their own futures.

This paper explores the ways in which these tensions are worked out through the lives of young farmers, unravelling the complex relationships between responsibility, risk, control and masculinity. The paper draws upon initial analysis of in-depth interviews with young farmers in different types of farming regions across Ireland. First, existing literature on the construction of masculinities in rural Ireland is discussed. Drawing on interviews with young farmers, the paper goes on to explore the implications of the changing economic and social landscapes of farming for farmer identities and farmers' lives, and sets this in the

context of the persistence of the high socio-cultural importance attached to the notion of the family farm in Irish rural society. Work by others such as McDowell (2000, 2002), Connell (1995) and Collinson and Heam (1996), on the ways in which masculine identities are negotiated at times of economic transformation, is useful in understanding some of the ways in which these issues are worked out in rural Ireland.

The research involved conducting semi-structured interviews during 2002-3 with farmers between the ages of 20 and 46, in three different types of farming region in Ireland. Two different commercial dairy, beef and tillage farming regions were chosen (the Clonakilty district in south-west Co. Cork, and the western part of Co. Meath), and one area of marginal sheep and beef farming in north Co. Mayo. Contact was made with young farmers through a variety of avenues, including local Teagasc advisers, farming organisations and agricultural colleges. The snowballing method was used with farmers to broaden the network of contacts. Interviews were also conducted with other key informants in the farming community at the local and regional levels.

A total of 33 young farmers were interviewed. Interviews were usually one-to-one, generally lasting between one and two hours, and were usually conducted in a quiet room in their own homes. All but one of the young farmers interviewed were male; one was a young female farmer. In addition, in two of the interviews, a female also sat in and made a significant contribution - one was a mother who shared the farm-work with her young son, and one was a farmer's wife. The interview topics included attitudes to farming as an occupation and lifestyle, farming methods and policies, and agriculture and rural life in general. These served in part to explore more hidden themes such as values and identities, gender relations, economic power relations and social well-being. The 33 participants were not intended to represent the entire spectrum of the young farm labour force in Ireland, but between them they reflect a range of particular situations within specific regional contexts. They were all young people working in farming at a time of agricultural change, whether they were successful commercial farmers or small part-time farmers, farm holders or future successors, young men in their twenties or family men in their thirties. As such their stories and their discourses provide insights into the many diverse implications of changes in the farming world for the construction of farming masculinities in the twenty-first century.

### **Farming masculinities**

This work is situated in the context of a growing body of literature on masculine identities, and in particular the emerging research on geographies of masculinity (Berg and Longhurst, 2003) and rural masculinities (Brandth, 2002; Little, 2002). Research by geographers, sociologists and others, from feminist or post-feminist perspectives, has emphasised the need to explore the ways in which masculinity is

constructed, in order to understand how masculinism is created and reinforced. Connell's (2000) notion of hegemonic masculinities, defined as 'the most powerful in a given situation', is useful in understanding how particular masculine identities work to marginalise women and less powerful masculinities. Hegemonic masculinities are reproduced through the association of signs and symbols of masculinity with power and authority. A wealth of research has explored the reproduction, negotiation and representation of masculine identities in a wide range of contexts (see for example, collections by Cornwall and Lindisfarne, 1994, Pease and Pringle, 2001). It has become clear that hegemonic and subordinate masculinities are highly contingent, both spatially and temporally, reflecting different sets of practices, performances and values in different gendered contexts (Berg and Longhurst, 2003).

Since the late 1990s, there has been a proliferation of research on masculine identities in a rural context (for example, the special issue of *Rural Sociology*, 2000; Brandth, 2002), contributing to heightened understandings of the gendered nature of rural society and space, by highlighting the visible and invisible ways in which masculine practices and preferences are normalised and legitimised. The sphere of the farm is a highly significant space in the construction of rural masculinities. For example, Brandth (1995), Liepins (2000) and Saugeres (2002a, 2002b), working in different farming contexts, explore representations of masculinity in popular imagery of farmers. Conventional farming masculinities involve constructions of the farmer as a hard worker battling against environmental and economic obstacles and exerting 'his' authority over the natural landscape (Liepins, 2000, Peter et al., 2000). These conventional representations are replicated in many different agricultural contexts, from rural Ireland (NíLaoire, 2002) to southern France (Saugeres, 2002a, 2002b). Despite this apparent coherence, rural masculine identities are unstable and shifting, reflecting changing gender relations and rural change. For example, Brandth (1995), in her research on changing constructions of masculinity and femininity in rural Norway, found that constructions of masculinity are adapting to changing circumstances, emphasising business skills and a growing disconnection from nature. In rural Ireland also, it is evident that conventional hegemonic farming masculinities are being adapted in response to the demands of the marketplace and contemporary society, although the core values of tenacity and independence persist (NíLaoire, 2002).

In Ireland, traditional farming masculinities have been rooted in idealised notions of family life, morality, landownership and farm work. Farming has been seen as a male occupation, and landownership as a male preserve, one that confers status and prestige on the landowner (Shortall, 1997). From the nineteenth century onwards, the establishment of patterns of impartible and patrilineal inheritance, and gendered divisions of labour in agriculture meant the construction of an Irish rural masculinity that was closely associated with land-ownership, control of

property and the authority of a powerful father figure (Martin, 1997). Tenacity, self-reliance, autonomy and breadwinning status were important elements of this construction. Although the social structures of rural Ireland have changed since the nineteenth century, these values are still important in popular constructions of masculine identity in a farming context (NíLaoire, 2004). They are closely interrelated in the sense that masculine pride is vested in the ability to provide for one's family without external aid. The ability to work the land and to provide for their families or themselves is a source of pride and status. As in many other sectors of society, 'breadwinning' status and hard work are potent symbols of masculinity (Goodwin, 2002). However, traditional masculine identities are coming into conflict with changing social and economic structures in modern Ireland. Gender divisions of labour are changing and breadwinning status is no longer a male preserve. Goodwin's (2002) research outlines the implications of this for employed and unemployed men in north Dublin, highlighting the negative implications of not working for men's identities. Given that rural areas and the farming sector in particular are undergoing structural change, it is important to set the analysis of farming masculinities in the context of wider economic and social restructuring processes. McDowell's (2002) materialist and deconstructionist perspective is useful. She focuses on changing labour market structures in urban Britain and provides an analysis of the implications of the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism for the identities of young working class men. She argues that in the shift from manufacturing to service sector employment, working class masculinities are caught in a contradictory situation, whereby masculine identity is associated with physical work, but opportunities for earning a living from such work are disappearing. Drawing on the work of McDowell (2000, 2002) and similar work by Connell (1995), this paper explores some of the implications of economic and social transformation for masculine identities in an Irish farming context.

### **Agricultural change in Ireland**

McDowell's (2000, 2002) research provides a useful framework, as restructuring processes in the agricultural sector are also characterised by a reduced reliance on manual labour, associated with rationalisation processes, increased technological inputs and concentration of production. Associated with the continued rationalisation of agriculture and a declining farming population, agricultural society in Ireland is undergoing significant restructuring. As is the case across the EU, the trend in agriculture in Ireland is towards declining farm employment and the specialisation and concentration of farm production (Frawley and Commins, 1996), as many farms go out of production and those who remain become more specialised. Agricultural employment in the Republic of Ireland declined by 63 per cent between 1961 and 1995 (Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, 1999). The most recent figures show a fall of 17.0 and 17.5 per cent respectively in the total number of farms and number of farmers in the state between

1991 and 2000 (Central Statistics Office, 2004). This process of rationalisation varies regionally in intensity, with the decline in the number of holdings greatest in the north and north-west, such as for example, north Mayo, and less marked in the south and east, for example, Cork and Meath, but all areas have shown a gradual process of enlargement of holdings (Crowley and Meredith, 2004). Pluriactivity, another reflection of declining farm labour, has increased considerably (Kinsella et al., 2000). The number of farmers with farming as their sole occupation declined from 73.4 per cent in 1991 to only 55.7 per cent in 2000 (CSO, 2004).

The western part of Co. Meath is an area of intensive dairying and tillage, although pluriactivity is high and rising. Situated just within the commuter belt of the greater Dublin region, the influence of urbanisation provides off-farm employment for farmers and also attracts away farm labourers and young farmers. This is traditionally an area of relatively large holdings and good quality farmland by national standards, but the pressures of a highly commercialised sector, which is suffering from falling profit margins and external pressures, are evident now, and the result is a high transition to non-agricultural employment. Although average farm holdings are smaller in the Clonakilty district, average economic size of farms is higher (see maps in Crowley and Meredith, 2004), and there is also a strong tradition of farm diversification and tourism in the area. The main enterprise type is dairying, with some mixed tillage and dairying. In comparison to Co. Meath, there are a higher proportion of young full-time farmers, although pluriactivity is rising, and to facilitate this, there is evidence of a certain shift from dairying to drystock.

The majority of farms in the north Mayo study area are smallholdings with commonage rights, involved in beef and/or sheep enterprises, with relatively low gross margins. As such, there is a high dependence on direct payments. The proportion of young farmers in the farm labour force is low in county Mayo as a whole in comparison to the national average (Leonard, 1999). Pluriactivity is high, with farming as the sole occupation of only 53 per cent of farm-holders in the county. This compares to 56 per cent in Co. Meath, 61 per cent in Co. Cork, and a national average of 56 per cent (CSO, 2004).

#### *Transformation in the economic landscape of farming*

At the farm level, agricultural restructuring processes mean the necessity to expand in order to survive, regardless of farm size or type. 'The pressure to maintain economic viability in farming obliges farm operators to enlarge the scale of their farm business by acquiring extra land and/or intensifying the scale of their farm operations' (Commins, 1999: 6). The ability to expand can mean the difference between survival and loss in farming. Clearly, economic success in these terms relies very heavily on purchasing or borrowing power. This invariably means taking

on considerable debt and repayments, which can make future expansion or acquiring a mortgage difficult or impossible. An additional pressure comes from the highly unstable economic environment, where in the short-term, annual profitability depends very heavily on the weather, while in the longer term, the policy environment changes regularly, making planning ahead quite difficult. This is compounded by the restrictions of production quotas, which means that a farmer must first purchase 'quota', which is not always available, before being able to expand production.

These types of pressures are felt strongly by those farmers working in the commercial farming sector in Meath and Cork, in particular those who rely on farming as their primary source of income. Some of the farmers in this sector talk about the difficulties in remaining viable in the context of falling prices and rising costs.

[The main challenge is] trying to survive. Like, costs have gone through the roof, trying to control costs is a big factor; also the price drop, although we're fortunate here in this area, the drop hasn't been as much as in other coops. Trying to get more quota is impossible, it's impossible, especially around here, because dairying is very intensive around here and everybody is trying to get more quota ... Inflation is a big issue that is eating into our pockets every year, like you know every year you need a few more cows just to maintain your living standard, you know; you've to run faster to stand still (Mike,<sup>258</sup> age 34, full-time, Co. Cork).

This notion of 'running faster to stand still' was mentioned by a number of farmers, which indicates an accumulation of pressure in their lives. There is a strong economic imperative to expand, but the constraints preventing expansion are considerable – production quotas, the immobility of the land market and lack of finance.

There's land coming up there, I know I need to buy it, not to remain viable this year, but to remain viable in the future, and like you're talking the guts of €400,000. Now I went into the bank manager to talk to him, just to have a chat with him, and he says he thinks I'd be mad to buy it (Andy, age 25, part-time, Co. Meath).

There is significant pressure to accumulate debt, but in an increasingly risky economic environment. The strong tension between the imperative to expand and the opposing constraints makes farm planning and development very difficult and unpredictable, and therefore very risky.

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<sup>258</sup> All names have been changed to protect participants' anonymity.

Research shows that rapid changes in farming are associated with depression and psychological stress among farmers, often associated with feelings of hopelessness (Gallagher and Sheehy, 1994, Monk and Thorogood, 1996). This may be related to a belief in the external control of one's financial situation, through factors such as constantly changing EU legislation, social isolation and bad weather (Boulanger et al., 1999). A number of studies of farmer stress in Britain have found the major cause of stress for farmers is adjusting to new government policies and regulations (Institute of Rural Health, 1998). This belief in external control, or sense of powerlessness, is particularly significant because of the important role of power in defining masculine identities (Connell, 2000). It is clear that the economic power of agriculture is declining, and as a result this traditional source of masculine pride is under threat.

#### *Transformation in the social landscape of farming*

Related to this, the social context of being a farmer is changing rapidly. Ongoing commercialisation and rationalisation of agriculture are resulting in a declining agricultural labour force, while simultaneously, an economic boom in other sectors of the Irish economy contributes to a certain devaluation of farming as an occupation. This means that young people have other opportunities available to them, and the number of farmers in any locality, especially young farmers, declines. Some of the implications of these processes for farmers include a decline in farming networks and social support structures, as there are fewer farmers in any locality. Some spoke of neighbours moving out of dairying for these reasons and because their sons are not interested, for economic and social reasons, in taking over.

There's a number of [farmers] around [who have moved out of dairying]. There's two, three, four, now within a mile of my house. There are yeah, because it's squeezing on them now really like (Mike, age 34, full-time, Co. Cork).

This contributes to isolation, which is compounded by the increased mechanisation of farming, bulk milk collections and more transactions taking place inside the farm gate.

[You] become very isolated. You could go out in the morning you mightn't see anyone till you go back into the house there for dinner there and see me mother, working all day on me own ... If it wasn't for the radio in the parlour and the tractor I wouldn't know what was going on in the world. You're living in your own little world ... Can be very boring, very frustrating ... can make life boring ... (Andy, age 25, part-time, Co. Meath).

Simultaneously, the recent economic boom has meant that there are now more off-farm opportunities than in the past, and expectations regarding

disposable income and consumption have risen. The new rural lifestyles do not necessarily fit with the unsociable hours of the farmer. Full-time farming, especially in the dairying sector, involves being on the farm twice a day every day for milking, and at busy times such as calving or lambing, involves very long and unsociable working hours. This kind of lifestyle is becoming less attractive or even acceptable to young people, who compare it to the lifestyles of their peers. 'Where it *really* used to stick out a mile was, we'd go to a match in Croke Park, we'd have to be home for milking, and the lads'd be there outside the pub drinking away till all hours' (Tim, age 35, full-time, Co. Meath).

As opportunities for socialising are limited, and farming lifestyles are deemed unattractive, it is felt by some young farmers that prospects for developing relationships or even marriage are limited. One farmer who gave up full-time farming mentioned that a turning point in his decision to do so was his realisation that he was never going to be able to provide his girlfriend with the lifestyle to which she was accustomed:

It put a few things in motion for me at the time in that I decided I'd had enough of this game anyway like. And I knew ... I was looking at another person's life [his ex-girlfriend's], in another context, great life, car, holidays, trips abroad, couple of times a year, time off, VHI, shares, none of which I had, because that's the way it is with farming, on that scale anyway (Ian, age 37, part-time, Co. Cork).

It could be argued that this distinction between farming lifestyles and others is not a new one. What has brought it into sharp relief however is the rapid rate of change in general levels of consumption and lifestyle expectations in Ireland in recent years.

I suppose that was influenced by the lifestyle that some of our friends had. It's not the work end of it you'd be afraid of, as long as you get something for the input. I mean, they have money every weekend, but you could be working fourteen hours a day on a farm and still you'd be doing well to scrape £4,000 or £5,000 a year back then, you know, which was nothing compared to what they were earning, and they seemed to be working half the time (Kieran, age 36, part-time, Co. Cork).

It is also related to a growing gender divide, where young rural men tend to have fewer educational qualifications and lower social mobility than women (NíLaoire, 1999). Many of the interviewed farmers in the three study areas mentioned that their sisters went away to university, in a way which implied an acceptance that girls' transitions to adulthood involve further education, while hoys have different priorities.

My parents said it was alright [that I gave up college], I would always get a job. But for my sisters it was different; they were told if they didn't go to college they would end up packing shelves ... They did degrees. My parents paid for college, they never had to work, that was their hit; the boys got the land. (Cormac, age 26, part-time, Co. Mayo).

There seems to be a strong association between femininity and education, while masculinity is still closely associated with landownership and manual/physical work. Farmers' children are among the highest attainers in both second and third-level education in Ireland, with farmers' daughters having particularly high levels of achievement (O'Hara, 1997).

McDowell (2000), in her research in urban Britain, suggests that as the gender divide in educational achievement is being reversed, young working class men's opportunities for entering traditional family life as breadwinners are limited. In Ireland, farmers' sons also have relatively high levels of educational achievement, but according to O'Hara (1997), this represents a long established tradition of securing educational opportunities for non-inheriting sons and daughters on farms (and increasingly also on smaller farms, for inheriting sons, in order to provide some off-farm options for them). It is probable that the tendency to associate farm-work with manual work persists however, restricting inheriting sons' access to third-level education.

As a result of these processes, prospects for reproducing family structures based on traditional gender roles are under threat as expectations of men and women diverge, and farming and non-farming lifestyles diverge. As Little (2003) shows in her research in rural Britain, the ideal of a normative heterosexuality based on traditional masculine and feminine identities and on the nuclear family is central to notions of continuity in family farming. This is particularly significant in Ireland, where farm viability continues to be defined in terms of the demographic viability of the farm family, in other words the presence of a nuclear family with a relatively young age structure (O'Hara, 1997). Current processes of change in the social landscape of farming in Ireland are threatening the hegemony of a traditional masculinity built on traditional gender roles, breadwinning status and a normative heterosexuality. This, together with the problems of growing isolation and financial pressures, means that it becomes increasingly difficult for young men to justify farming as an occupational and lifestyle choice.

### **Responsibility and duty**

This begs the question, why do young people enter farming? The answer lies partly in the historical importance of the family farm in Irish society. The strong tradition of family farming and patrilineal impartible inheritance has meant that passing on the farm in a complete and intact state has been and continues to be seen as an important responsibility of

the farmer. Therefore farming carries with it certain responsibilities and duties. The economic pressures at work in agriculture are similar, clearly, to those operating elsewhere in the capitalist free market economy. However, the social and cultural framework in which these processes are set is quite distinctive. In this historical and cultural context, the loss of a farm is more than the loss of a business enterprise, but instead, can represent the loss of a way of life and of a family inheritance, and thus can be represented as a failure in upholding one's responsibilities.

*Responsibility 1: The breadwinner*

In the conventional construction of Irish farming masculinity, the responsibilities of the farm successor are two-fold. First, according to the set of values upon which this is based, 'he' is expected to be the breadwinner and to fulfil the good provider role. The role of the male as breadwinner is central to the construction of conventional masculine identities in a wide range of contexts (Connell, 1995; McDowell, 2000; Goodwin, 2002). As a result, work, employment and/or income generation become perceived as a man's duty. This is related to a clear separation of male and female roles in the household. Ferguson (2001) suggests that the ideal and hegemonic Irish masculinity has been constructed as heterosexual, a good family man, and a male breadwinner, in opposition to the ideal female roles of mother and domestic servant. He argues that high levels of emigration in the twentieth century reflect the extremes to which Irish men have gone in order to fulfil the duties associated with the breadwinner role.

However, as labour market structures are changing, and traditional male sources of employment are declining in importance, the relevance of the breadwinner model in contemporary society is declining. As McKeown et al. (1998) outline, changes in social structures, such as the growth in dual-earner households, the high number of no-earner households, the increase in one-parent families, have meant that the viability of the traditional household structure based on a nuclear family with one male breadwinner is declining. Men respond in different ways to these changes, negotiating new masculine identities where possible. Goodwin's (2002) research for example shows that unemployed men in north Dublin construct masculine identities for themselves based on their ability to generate income rather than their employment status. The factors contributing to a shift away from the breadwinner social model are exacerbated in the agricultural sector by the reduced earning power of farming.

Almost half of all farm households (47 per cent in 1998) are 'pluriactive', where the farm is not the only source of income (Kinsella et al, 2000). In some farm households, the main income earner is a woman who works off the farm, while the farm provides a supplementary income, if any. It is clearly extremely difficult to maintain a hegemonic masculinity based on the identity of the man as breadwinner in this context. This means

that the social structures on which conventional masculinities are built are under threat. For some, this is a source of anxiety:

I only gave up working in June, and we do miss [the money]... it was only a little bit, but I still do part-time work. Minding me brother's child, my niece. You know it's sad that I would have to, it really is, like my mother, when they all got married, they gave up work (Ann, Tim's spouse, couple in their 30s, pluriactive farm household, Co. Meath).

But in north Mayo, pluriactivity is the norm. Cormac is a third-generation part-time farmer:

Farming was never a first choice thing in our house. You always had to have another job like. Especially where I come from, down [that direction], it's all mountainy area, so people would have sheep farming and you'd have maybe suckler cows, that'd be it. You wouldn't survive on it (Cormac, age 26, part-time, Co. Mayo).

Two women farmers were interviewed in the Mayo study area (one young female farmer, one older woman who shared the farm-work with her son), both from family farms where two generations were involved in farm work, but none were full-time farmers. The male farmers who were interviewed in Co. Mayo spoke about pluriactivity in an unproblematic way. It seems that in areas where farming is economically marginal, but culturally important, the construction of masculine and feminine identities may have adapted to less rigid social structures, where the link between farm work, men's work and breadwinning has been broken. Instead, farm work is part of a suite of strategies adopted by families in order to generate household income while also continuing to maintain the family farm. In fact, Jervell (1999) states that a traditional survival strategy for small farms in Norway is pluriactivity which involves significant female labour input to the family farm. O'Hara (1997) suggests that in Ireland, farm wives' contribution to farm-work is greatest on small farms where farm operators have off-farm sources of income. In contrast, it seems that in areas of commercial farming, conventional masculine and feminine identities have persisted for longer along with the social structures upon which they are built.

#### *Responsibility 2: Custodian of family farm*

The second responsibility of the farm successor is to the family farm itself. From the nineteenth century onward, Irish rural society was based on patrilineal and impartible inheritance patterns, whereby landownership and control of family resources were concentrated in the hands of the male head of household. Up until the end of the twentieth century, the position of farm successor therefore (by default the eldest son) was one

of some power. The understanding was that along with this power came the responsibility to pass on the family farm in an intact state to the next generation. Therefore, the sense of responsibility extended beyond the nuclear family to the extended family - to past and future generations. Kennedy (1999) conceptualises this as a complex web of exchange relationships involving different generations of the same family. He argues that there are economic, social and emotional costs and benefits accruing to both the successor and the owner in this system. The position of landowner is one of some power within the family and the community, associated with the control of property (Shortall, 1997), and the ability to confer bequests (Kennedy, 1999). One of the benefits for the successor is the economic value of the inheritance, but it also entails certain responsibilities and obligations to other family members (Shortall, 1997, Kennedy, 1999). By the twenty-first century, it could be argued that the economic power associated with farm-ownership has been reduced, but the sense of responsibility in relation to custodianship of the family farm persists.

This means that there is still a great reluctance to sell a family farm, regardless of the economic reasons for doing so. Ownership of land has traditionally held great value not just as a source of economic self-sufficiency but also a source of social status and power within rural communities (Shortall, 1997, Kennedy, 1999). Although the symbolism of the land has declined somewhat in recent decades, farmland still holds great value, well beyond its economic worth. The result is a great reluctance to sell agricultural land and therefore the very low mobility of the agricultural land market in Ireland, despite its high value.

We have thirty acres here now, and it wouldn't support anybody, but still it's worth 300,000 euros. I suppose the problem is then, how do you employ the asset? Do you sell sites off it? Or do you sell it or do you keep it?  
(Kieran, age 36, part-time, Co. Cork).

In addition to the traditional symbolism attached to the land and the family farm, land is not considered to be a sale-able asset as it must be kept to pass on to future generations. This is one effect of the kinship-based system of land transfer, which exists largely outside the marketplace and persists in Ireland (Kennedy, 1999). Therefore, according to this ideology, the farmer is under a certain obligation to his/her children and grandchildren to pass on the farm in as good a state as when s/he acquired it, and is also under a certain obligation to his/her parents, especially if they are still alive, for they may have worked all their lives in order to pass it on to him/her. Therefore farmers are under certain pressure to maintain the holding. Kieran said that others thought he was mad when he moved out of full-time farming, especially the older generation, to move out of farming, or change anything. They would be like 'His father had six kids and reared

them all, this guy is only in his mid-twenties and he's decided to up and go straight away' (Kieran, age 36, part-time, Co. Cork).

Some mention that the stigma attached to moving out of farming is less now than it was ten years ago. Ian (age 36, part-time farmer, Co. Cork) distinguishes between sustainable and non-sustainable farms, suggesting that it is now considered acceptable to leave the family farm if it is not economically viable. Ian had taken over his uncle's 40-acre farm when he had fallen ill, and eventually the farm was transferred to his own name. In this situation, although the bachelor uncle did not have children, it was understood that the farm would be passed on to someone of the next generation from within the extended family. Ian recognised his own responsibility to the extended family when his uncle fell ill, and he took a year out of school, eventually taking up full-time farming, in order to meet this responsibility:

Well I kind of... I lost my colleagues because they moved on, on to their final year and then on to college then, so, I fell out of step with them in a way because I was a year behind them then when I did go back. That was a bit of a bummer alright for a while, 'twas kind of a nightmare alright like you know, but, it was, I knew it could be done like, and the fact that my uncle basically needed, 'twas sort of an emergency situation really for him you know ... and 'twas kind of plain, he made it kind of obvious to me, that he was going to be packing it in anyway you know ... (Ian, age 36, part-time farmer, Co. Cork).

His sense of duty to the family farm was maintained by the promise of eventual inheritance of the farm, an example of the power of the landowner in relation to the successor, as identified by Kennedy (1999). This sense of duty can be present whether the farm is 200 acres of prime agricultural land or 40 acres of marginal land. As Ian put it, when he eventually gave up dairying and sold the cows, this act to his uncle 'was seen like being Bill Gates' son and throwing away the business like! Y'know, like walking out of Microsoft - in his head! You'll appreciate the similarity like!' (Ian, age 36, part-time farmer, Co. Cork).

To his uncle, the value of the farm was not just its business worth, but its historical, cultural and familial worth. He believed it was his responsibility, and that of his successor, to maintain the farm and to pass it on intact to subsequent generations. This particular duty of the farmer is part of the construction of traditional Irish farming masculinity. If taken seriously, then it is clearly a very heavy responsibility as it involves multiple generations of an extended family, and is much more than a responsibility to one's dependents. For those farmers who are still in a position to earn a living from farming, or to maintain a farm while also working off the farm, it is possible to fulfil this responsibility, but for

others, the sense of duty comes into sharp conflict with the realities of farming.

#### *Tensions and contradictions*

These traditional 'masculine' responsibilities of the farm successor appear to be anomalous in the context of current changes occurring in agricultural society. Such changes can be conceptualised in terms of what Connell (1995) calls a crisis tendency in the prevailing gender order, associated with wider economic and social restructuring processes. In the agricultural sector, this means that the traditional gender order, based on patrilineal inheritance, patriarchal landownership and rigid gender roles, is being challenged as the labour demands of farming are changing. Connell (1995) argues that such crisis tendencies always implicate masculinities, even if they contribute to a reinforcement of traditional constructions of masculinity.

For young Irish farmers, the changing gender order means that there is a contradiction between, on the one hand, the persistence of a hegemonic masculine identity based on notions of responsibility for family and farm, and on the other, a degree of powerlessness in relation to fulfilling those responsibilities. The hegemony of a discourse of masculinity based on a strong sense of cultural and familial responsibility is in direct opposition to the sense of a lack of control over the current and future viability of the family farm. McDowell (2000) found a very similar situation with young working-class men in England, where they constructed masculine identities based on values of hard physical work, breadwinning ability and family values. However at the same time, their prospects for fulfilling the masculine ideal of the home-owning and hard-working family man seemed very slim, in the context of labour market restructuring in urban Britain. Similarly, farming masculinities in Ireland continue to be built on notions of the duties of the male farmer as custodian of the family farm, while the possibilities for viable family farming based on traditional gender roles are less and less. Therefore we see on the one hand, very strong pressures, economic and social, contributing to a movement out of farming, and other, equally strong forces tying young people to the land. Young farmers or farm successors are at the cutting edge of these tensions and have to make the decision to enter or stay in farming in the context of competing pressures, constraints and opportunities. These tensions are manifest in young farmers' lives in a myriad of different ways, related to their particular personal, household and agricultural circumstances. At their most extreme, they are manifest through a sense of culpability, related to feelings of guilt, stress and anxiety on the part of the young farmer. The weight of responsibility for maintaining the family farm is a heavy one, and there is a sense in which the successor is seen to be accountable for the emotional and financial investments of others in the farm. Ian describes the reaction of his uncle when he sold the cows:

Well you know, he actually cried the day I sold the cows. 'Twas very hard. A couple of lorries came and they were loaded up and he was inside and he was broken-hearted, crying, crying, crying, which was very hard to look at. And 'twas, you know I'd basically sold the family heirloom like, the crown jewels were gone, what he'd always worked for, his Dad had always worked for, all the generations before that (Ian, age 36, part-time farmer, Co. Cork).

A decision to move out of farming, to sell or lease the land, even to sell a site for development, can imply the culpability of the farmer for what is seen as the loss of the family inheritance, even if it is an economically rational decision. Andy's defensiveness at being asked if he would consider moving out of farming reflects his feeling that he needs to justify that move:

And to be honest with you I'm not going to stay there for the rest of me life, slaving into the ground, just to keep the farm going. Well I don't see in all honesty why. Like would you stay at a job where your income is diminishing every year, in all honesty ...? (Andy, age 25, part-time, Co. Meath).

The tension between pressures to stay in farming and to look elsewhere can contribute to stress and anxiety.

Any young chap, would find that, it would nearly do his nut you know; he would feel that what he'd be going away to do would really want to be good you know; it would have to work out for him for it to be seen to be good for himself as well (Ian, age 36, part-time, Co. Cork).

This is bound up with the socio-cultural construction of farming as a masculine activity, with masculine responsibilities. Indeed, the close relationship between farm work and masculine identity means that the loss of the farm can have a devastating effect on the farmer's sense of self. After Ian sold the cows, his self-identity changed from that of the nephew who saved the family farm, to that of the 'failed son': 'So, I wouldn't say it was a rift, we never rightly fell out like, but it became difficult. I became the failed son then basically'.

In this sense, in areas of commercial farming, the pressures on farmers' sons are considerably greater than on daughters, as there are strong expectations of son(s) in relation to succession. Gendered divisions of labour are so rigid that agriculture is considered a masculine activity, and the principle of male inheritance is so strong that in cases where a son is not available to take over the family farm, it is often a nephew who does so instead. This close relationship between masculine identity and the

duty of family farming implies that one's masculine identity is challenged if the duties are not upheld. Ian talked about how he felt people reacted when he sold the cows: 'Oh, 'twas a total failure like, absolutely, total failure you know. "That "I could do it and you couldn't - you weren't a man at all"'

'Being a man' implied values of hard work, tenacity, duty and responsibility, reflected in a viable working farm. By not conforming to this ideal-type, Ian felt that his masculinity was being challenged. His sarcastic tone in re-telling this story a number of years later shows that he is critical of this discourse and has rejected it. Another farmer spoke about a certain loss of pride associated with going part-time: 'I know for a fact that [...] the brother, there's no way he'd do it. He's real proud you know. But Jesus at the end of the day, you've got to make a life too you know' (Justin, age 29, part-time, Co. Cork).

These notions of masculine pride being vested in full-time farming serve little obvious function in an agricultural sector where almost half of all farmers have another source of income (CSO, 2004). Its futility is even more evident in a region like north Mayo, where pluriactivity has been the norm for some time. Kinsella et al. (2000) identify the existence of many 'old pluriactive' family farms in the west of Ireland, where farms have been pluriactive for more than one generation. The high rate of pluriactivity in places like north Mayo, together with fewer off-farm employment opportunities for women, are likely to result in higher rates of female on-farm labour input. The poor economic viability of farms also means that patterns of inheritance may differ from those prevailing in regions of more commercial farming, as there are likely to be difficulties in recruiting heirs (Kennedy, 1999). The farmers who were interviewed in the Mayo study area displayed little of the obsession with full-time farming or male landownership that was evident among some farmers in Cork and Meath. Instead their farms were run more as family enterprises, from which usually no-one earned a full-time income, and gender roles were not necessarily rigidly or conventionally defined.

Even though I own about 70-75 per cent of the land now, I never look on it as my own farm, just as my father never looked on it as his. It's a family thing like. My brother helps out on it, he could have some of it he wanted but he's happy just doing a bit of work on it for me and me father and he's paid. Right down to my 12-year-old brother, he gets paid for work that he does on it (Cormac, age 26, part-time, Co. Mayo).

There is evidence that masculine identities were being constructed by these farmers in alternative ways to the ideal-type more commonly professed in the commercial agricultural sector in Cork and Meath. This has resulted from a long history of pluriactivity and reflects an openness

to acknowledge female involvement in farm work:

Me older sister now, she did an awful lot of work on the farm. Because me father used to go to England you know. He was a seasonal worker in England, everyone had to muck in (Alan, age 45, part-time, Co. Mayo).

In the following quote, where he refers a little contemptuously to a neighbouring family, Cormac shows that he does not idealise the hardworking farmer or the notion of full-time farming.

The lads in [that particular family] had no interest in school, and the parents didn't push them really hard to go, they just fell into farming. They just, they don't have much of another life besides that. I wouldn't go that particular route. And they work very hard, twice as hard as me. They're the only family that I know full-time farming (Cormac age 26, part-time, Co. Mayo).

For Alan, Cormac, and others like them, there is a strong tendency to construct farming as an interest or even a pastime, while still being an important part of the family heritage and identity.

[A good farmer] has to just love what he's doing, and, understand what he's doing, and understand that he's only there for a short time and it has to go on somewhere else after, and that he didn't just make it, he inherited it from someone else and he's just passing it on to the next one, you know - he has to understand that (Alan age 45, part-time, Co. Mayo).

Farm masculinities in an area like north Mayo, then, where the social and economic structures of farming are different to those in area of more commercial agriculture, can be constructed more easily around notions of love of farming and custodianship of the land, without the heavy emphasis on breadwinning ability and farm viability. This reveals the spatial contingency of masculinity, reflecting local and regional geographies of gender. Indeed, there is evidence that values are undergoing change in the farming sector in general, as there is a growing realisation of the futility of traditional discourses of masculinity and femininity. In the Cork study area, there was a sense that the great stigma that had been attached to leaving dairying or going part-time in the mid-1990s, had already been modified by the time of the research in 2002-3. 'A lot of guys now are leaving and it's accepted that you can't survive on it, that you must have an outside income like' (Ian, age 36, part-time, Co. Cork). Most of the farmers interviewed, in all three areas under study, claimed that they would not put their own children under pressure to take over the farm; some that they would actively discourage it.

And depending on how the kids go, and what path in life they take, if they're interested and you could do something for them in regards to buying land to increase it to a workable farm. But I can't see me having it as a workable farm or a feasible farm for income in my time (Harry, age 35, part-time, Co. Meath).

This may represent something of a shift in farmer attitudes. Alternatively, it is possible that these farmers' own parents may have made similar claims in the past and that the construction of masculine identities around ideas of farm work and responsibility is something that goes much deeper than this. The farmers who spoke about pressure to maintain the farm talked about feelings of responsibility towards parents and a sense of guilt at disappointing them, rather than overt pressure from parents. The construction of masculinities around the central notions of breadwinning and custodianship of the family farm has been bound up closely with a particular gender order and social structure, and has been reinforced as much, if not more, by public discourse, local cultures of masculinity and peer group dynamics, as it has by family dynamics.

Local cultures and peer group dynamics are very important in shaping constructions of masculinity. For those farmers who have already moved out of full-time farming, they can reflect with hindsight on the strong influence of their peer groups on their own values and ideals in the past. 'Well I was into farming at fifteen, straight out of school. I suppose it depends on who you hung around with as well. If your social group was farming, I mean you didn't know anything else as such' (Kieran, age 36, part-time, Co. Cork). The comfort of the peer group meant that the difficult issues such as how to remain viable, the pressures of debt and changing farm lifestyles, could be avoided.

'twas a kind of a peer thing, you had colleagues around you doing the same thing, so the blatant obvious thing wasn't obvious to you, the fact that you obviously weren't making money... because you'd meet up in the evenings and at weekends and down the local and stuff (Ian, age 36, part-time, Co. Cork).

In a similar way to that of young working-class men in urban Britain (McDowell, 2002), a traditional masculine identity could be reinforced in a group situation, even if it is an extremely vulnerable identity when viewed in a wider context.

## **Conclusions**

Rural restructuring processes are contributing to a transformation in the economic and social landscape of farming in Ireland, involving something of a crisis in the existing gender order. For young farmers, the

changing gender order means that there is a contradiction between, on the one hand, the persistence of a hegemonic masculine identity based on notions of responsibility for family and farm, and on the other, a degree of powerlessness in relation to fulfilling those responsibilities. By the twenty-first century, it could be argued that although the economic power associated with farm-ownership has been reduced, the sense of responsibility in relation to the family provider role and custodianship of the family farm persists.

Young farmers and farm successors, then, are caught at the fulcrum of two different ways of life, where the 'Celtic Tiger' lifestyle and the values of commercial agriculture meet the traditional values and structures of family farming and landownership. In many ways, they embody the tensions of this encounter as they face the decision of whether or not to become farmers. There is an inherent contradiction in the persistence of a hegemonic masculinity identity based on certain responsibilities, in a context in which fulfilling those responsibilities becomes difficult or impossible.

This means that masculine and feminine identities are being re-negotiated as the traditional gendered structures of farm life are under threat. These processes of negotiation are spatially and temporally contingent, related to geographical and historical variations in rural restructuring. Thus, it appears that farm masculinities in an area of marginal agriculture like north Mayo have adapted in order to accept non-traditional gender roles. In contrast, masculine identities in areas of commercial agriculture, such as Cork and Meath, are more likely to be caught in a double bind. It seems that in areas where farming is economically marginal, but culturally important, the construction of masculine and feminine identities have adapted as the link between farm-work, men's work and breadwinning has been broken. In contrast, it may be that in areas of commercial farming, conventional masculine and feminine identities have persisted for longer along with the social structures upon which they are built. Therefore, the tension between the persistence of traditional masculine values of responsibility on the one hand, and the reduction in men's economic power on the other, is felt more keenly in this kind of geographical context. At their most extreme, these tensions are manifest in a sense of culpability, related to feelings of anxiety on the part of the young farmer. The close relationship between masculine identity and the duty of family farming implies that one's masculine identity is challenged if the duties are not upheld; in the words of one farmer: 'You're not a man at all!'

It is unclear if this represents a particular moment in a process of transition in the gender relations of commercial agriculture in Ireland, where there may be a shift towards a greater openness to non-traditional gender roles in farm households. What is clear is that Irish farm masculinities have been constructed around notions of responsibility,

which have traditionally been tied to economic power and the control of land and property. The separation of power from responsibility gives rise to anxieties around masculine identity, but in the less rigid gender relations of marginal farming and old pluriactive family farms can be found the seeds of alternative masculinities which are based less on patriarchal economic power.

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