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Gender Equality in Agriculture: Examining State Intervention in Australia and Northern Ireland

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This paper is concerned with the extent to which the state offers potential for furthering farm women's status and rights. Using case studies of Australia and Northern Ireland, it examines the extent to which the state has intervened to address gender inequality in the agricultural sector. These two locations provide a particularly rich scope for analysis because while Australia has a long history of state feminism and an extensive legislative framework for pursing gender equity, this is not the case with Northern Ireland. At the same time, the restructuring of the state in Northern Ireland, following on from the Belfast Agreement of 1998 and the Northern Ireland Act of 1998, has generated new opportunities for state intervention regarding gender equality. Moreover, while gender is now for the first time being placed on the state agenda in Northern Ireland, gender reform is being wound back in Australia, as equity discourses are subsumed by the hegemonic discourses of neo-liberalism.

Introduction

For feminists, a critical question for debate and investigation remains the extent to which the state can be engaged to transform the economic, social and political position of women (McBridge-Stetson and Mazur, 1995; Miller and Razavi, 1998; Mazey, 2000; Staeheli, 2004). In order to examine such a question a range of authors have engaged the notion of 'political opportunity structures', that is, the ideological/political environment and institutional arrangements which exist to facilitate or limit state action on gender equity (Phillips, 1992; Sawer, 1998; Rankin and Vickers, 2001; Chappell, 2000, 2002). This type of analysis recognises the need, as Chappell (2000: 248) argues, to 'disaggregate the state'. That is, to move away from binary representations of the state as either gender neutral or patriarchal, and, instead, focus on the way in which different political contexts and political institutions provide opportunities or obstacles for advancing equity claims. Equivalently important is the need to disaggregate the category women, and recognise that political opportunities will be open to, and realised by, different groups of women within a single state at the same time. Differences between particular groups of women, such as sexuality, race, cultural background, class and geographic location, may mean that the opportunities enjoyed by others are not shared by them. This will, of course, shift and change, as political and institutional contexts are not static but dynamic and fluid. Thus, the capacity of feminist activists to engage a particular state will shift across space and place, depending upon the degree of receptivity.

This paper examines the way in which the state has been utilised to advance the claims of farm women in Australia and Northern Ireland.[1] What is significant about the

two case study sites is that an agenda for farm women has developed in a very similar time period, but emerged from quite disparate political contexts, and is being advanced through very different political institutions. An analysis of these sites therefore opens up the potential for examining gender activism and the state[2] in terms of the framework of political opportunity structures.

The paper is divided into four sections. To begin, we provide an overview of the position of farming women in Australia and Northern Ireland highlighting their experiences of inequality. In the following two sections of the paper we trace state engagement with gender equity in agriculture in the case study nations. In the concluding discussion that follows, we highlight key differences and similarities in the case studies, and assess the way in which these represent opportunities for advancing the position of women in agriculture.

Gender inequality and agriculture

Despite significant differences in the geographical, social, cultural and political contexts of Australia and Northern Ireland, there is a marked similarity in the nature of gender inequality that farm women experience in both countries. In the following discussion we highlight three key aspects of this inequality: visibility, access to agricultural resources, and involvement in decision making.

The first shared experience of inequality for farm women in Australia and Northern Ireland is that of invisibility. Studies in both countries have revealed the way in which historically, agricultural statistics have under-reported women's farm work (Alston, 1995; Shortall, 1999). Even a relatively recent attempt in Australia to redress the balance (Gooday, 1995) continues the methodological errors of the past in not reporting women's domestic duties or their unpaid voluntary contributions as work (Alston, 1998). Women's contributions have been similarly overlooked in Northern Ireland, where agricultural census reporting has not allowed the reporting of more than one principal partner. This meant that, in the 2000 census, 35 per cent of women who were working more than 30 hours a week on their farms were classified only as 'farmer's spouses' (Shortall and Kelly, 2001).

The second factor, which has contributed to the shared secondary status of Irish and Australian farm women compared with their male counterparts, is the fact that women typically come to farming through marriage. Both this factor and a marked patrilineal line of inheritance means that women typically have less access to farming land than do men (Shortall, 1999; Alston, 1995). Land, of course, is not the only resource in farming, but it is a central resource, and one Shortall (1999) argues that enables men to gain prestige and access to other agricultural resources, such as knowledge, involvement in decision making and education and training. In terms of these additional agricultural resources, women also fare poorly compared with men, both in Northern Ireland and Australia (Shortall, 1996, 2004).

Given this invisibility and their limited access to agricultural resources, it is not surprising to find that farm women are also disadvantaged compared with farm men in terms of their participation in the public sphere of agriculture. As far as the agricultural media is concerned the public face of farming is masculine. Women are seldom represented in the farming press, and, if at all, typically in domestic roles or supportive positions (Liepins, 1996; Shortall, 1999). Moreover, farming organisations are, in both

Australia and Northern Ireland, men's organisations (Shortall, 2001; Pini, 2002). A range of discriminatory and exclusionary practices continues to limit women's involvement in the many producer groups in each of the nations, and, consequently, women hold few if any positions of agricultural leadership. The considerable political power that is enjoyed by the farming groups of Northern Ireland and Australia is thus the privilege of a very narrow group of men.

These substantial inequalities have, over the past decade, begun to be addressed by the state in Australia and Northern Ireland. It is to the nature of this intervention to which we now turn.

The state, gender equity and agriculture in Australia

In Australia there is no constitutional and only limited legislative impetus for state involvement in inequality in agriculture. There is, for example, no constitutional bill of rights. Further, while there is a strong legislative base for equality with 12 state and federal government acts relating to equal opportunity and anti-discrimination, these typically cover equity in public sector employment, or, in the case of the affirmative action act, large-scale organisations. There is, however, a long history of state feminism built on a political tradition of social liberalism and state intervention to address social justice (Sawer, 1994).

Specific infrastructure to address women's policy issues was first established by the Whitlam Labor Government in 1972. As well as a central women's unit within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, there emerged throughout the 1970s and 1980s a number of other specifically designated women's policy machinery across both state and federal government agencies. While women who took up bureaucratic positions – named femocrats – faced the difficult task of meeting the expectations of the outside women's movement while operating within the mainstream, they nevertheless achieved significant advances for women across a range of social policy issues, including health, domestic violence, child care, education and training and sport (Eisenstein, 1996; Sawer, 1999). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, however, there was no particular policy focus on rural and farm women. It was not until 1995 that a specific unit was established dedicated to addressing women's concerns in agriculture. This was the Rural Women's Unit (RWU) formed within the main federal agency responsible for agricultural policy in the nation, Australian Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (AFFA).

The genesis for such a unit owed much to the emergence of a number of new farm and rural women's groups in Australia in the first part of the decade (Teather, 1996). The downturn in agriculture, a frustration with men's dominance of agri-politics, and the success of the second-wave urban women's movement all contributed to the growth of two national groups as well as a range of state-based groups. These networks were important in creating a critical mass of activist women who could make claims on the state for gender equality.

The growth of the networks can be traced to the state of Victoria, where, in 1993, a sympathetic state labor government, with a specific commitment to social justice and equal opportunities, provided funding for the establishment of a Victorian Rural Women's Network (Fincher and Panelli, 2001). The following year a highly successful international conference for women in agriculture was held in the Victorian capital of Melbourne. This state-level activity in Victoria became a genesis for change in other states, as well as

nationally. This demonstrates the critical importance of the federal system of government for political activists who can use the most receptive levels of government to progress their agendas.

The foci of the RWU established in the federal bureaucracy have been on increasing farm women's profile as well as their participation in leadership. The commitment was articulated in the 1998 release of a 'National plan of action for women in agriculture and resource management' (Standing Committee on Agriculture and Resource Management, 1998). Strategies of the unit have included conducting leadership programs for women, producing tool kits to assist women in identifying and packaging their skills, providing gender training for agricultural bureaucrats, establishing specific women's registers for agricultural board appointments, sponsoring women to undertake directorship training, collecting data on women's participation in agricultural leadership and undertaking research documenting the contributions women make to Australian farming.

A range of political opportunities emerged for farm women in Australia during the 1990s which facilitated their involvement with the state. The federal system of government, changes in the agricultural sector, the emergence of farm women's networks and the consequent mobilisation of farm women, all contributed to opening up the potential for engagement with the state (Panelli, 2002; Panelli and Pini, 2005). Supporting these political opportunities were a long history of social liberalism in Australia and three decades of femocracy. While this should be celebrated, it is important to highlight that this political opportunity has not been realised by all women living in non-metropolitan Australia, but largely by white, Anglo-Saxon and property owning women (Pini, Brown and Simpson, 2003). Whether such political opportunities have been opened to a broader population of women in Northern Ireland, and the nature of these opportunities, is discussed below.

The state, gender equity and agriculture in Northern Ireland

The opportunities which today exist for addressing inequality in agriculture in Northern Ireland had their genesis in the Belfast Agreement of 1998 on which the people of Ireland voted by referendum. The agreement is believed to offer the opportunity for Northern Ireland to embark on a political trajectory free from political violence and thus places a premium on consent, pluralism, consensus and accommodation (O'Leary, 1999; Wilford, 1999; Cox, 2000). Of crucial importance for the subsequent climate of equality legislation was the fact that the previously separate debate on equality now became entwined with constitutional negotiations (McCrudden, 1999). Included in the process were political parties that viewed equality and human rights issues as particularly salient. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) also advocated to keep equality issues, particularly *gender* equality issues, to the fore. The political restructuring facilitated greater consultation with a range of civic groups, and various women's and community groups mobilised and formed alliances to maximise their influence in the process.

Strand One of the Agreement is concerned with institutional arrangements within Northern Ireland. One element of this deals with equality, and is underpinned by The Northern Ireland Act (1998). Section 75 of the Act focuses on the mainstreaming of equality covering persons of: different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age,

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marital status, sexual orientation, men and women generally, persons with a disability and persons without and persons with dependants and persons without.

The implementation of Schedule 9 of the Act, which makes detailed provision for the enforcement of equality measures, began in 1999 with the establishment of the Equal Opportunity Commission. All public authorities are legally required to submit an equality scheme, and these were prepared and submitted in 2000. An equality scheme must show how the public authority proposes to fulfil the duties imposed by Section 75 in relation to the relevant functions. More is required than simply illustrating that the public authority does not unjustifiably discriminate directly or indirectly. Public authorities should also actively seek ways to encourage greater equality of opportunity. Before submitting a scheme, authorities are also required to consult with representatives of persons likely to be affected by the scheme (McCrudden, 1998).

These broad-based legislative changes have already wrought significant change for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), which has responsibility for agricultural and rural development policy in Northern Ireland, and subsequently for farm women. In the past the Department had attempted to circumvent addressing gender equity, arguing it was primarily an 'agent' delivering UK and EU policies (Osborne *et al*., 1996). Given the legislative shift in Northern Ireland this type of rationale is no longer acceptable. DARD has consequently had to change. Three manifestations of this change are outlined below.

The first is the collection of data by DARD on farm women. In the preparation of its Equality Scheme, DARD noted that it was very difficult for the Department to identify policies which should be subject to Equality Impact Assessments, as they did not have sufficient baseline information from which to make an assessment (DARD, 2000). However, in order to meet its obligations under the new equality legislation, DARD was required to provide comprehensive baseline information in order to monitor whether or not it is meeting its statutory duty. In light of this, DARD commissioned a Social Survey in 2000, which has now provided the most comprehensive information about women's work on and off the farm to date.

The second example of a more gender inclusive focus by DARD concerns consultation. DARD's proposed plan for rural development for 2000–2006 was sent to 245 organisations (Shortall and Kelly, 2001). One such body from which it invited a submission was the Rural Women's Forum (RWF), an *ad hoc* body formed in 1996 to act as an umbrella group for rural women's development organisations and groups. RWF aimed to inform policy, but had met with little enthusiasm from DARD. However, in 1999, following the legislative change, RWF was contacted by DARD and invited to make a submission.

A final changed outcome of state intervention in agricultural equality has been in relation to the provision of training. In the past, DARD's defence regarding training provisions for women was that DARD Colleges respond to training requests from farming groups and organisations that approach them. However, there are few farm women's groups, and most of the well-established farming organisations that approach the Colleges for training do not have many women members. More recently, Colleges are providing a limited amount of training for women rather than waiting to be approached by a group. They are also attempting to accommodate women's participation through, for example, the timing of these courses (Kelly and Shortall, 2002). Progress to date is limited, but it nonetheless represents changing practice.

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Conclusions

Farm women have been invisible figures in the agricultural landscape of both Australia and Northern Ireland. They have not had their contributions to the farming sector recognised, have been denied equal access to the resources of agriculture and have lacked a representative voice in the public farming sphere. This situation has changed, however, as new political opportunities have emerged for farm women in both countries. It is the different nature of these political opportunities in the two countries which has been the focus of this paper.

In seeking gender justice from the state, Australian farm women have focused on the establishment of bureaucratic machinery. This utilitarian concept of the state is consistent with Australia's political culture, and is held strongly by particular groups such as farmers and women (Chappell, 2000). There are, of course, limitations to this institutional approach. As the introductory discussion explained, political opportunities are fluid and changing. Currently, discourses of equity and equality in the Australian state have been surpassed by discourses of economic rationalism, and the notions of efficiency, individualism and competition. This has created a much more hostile environment for women seeking to make claims on the state. As economic discourses have strengthened in the federal political realm, farm women have sought to exploit them, arguing that they have an innate set of skills, such as the ability to think holistically and communicate effectively, which are critical to the future productivity of rural Australia. This reshaping of equality claims around the dominant economic agenda is also evident in the language of the RWU (Pini, 1998). This has, however, not been enough to resist some important changes to the RWU, which indicate that gender equity – dressed in whatever discursive script – is unpalatable to the current Australian government. The RWU has, for example, been renamed the Rural Leadership Unit and its brief extended to address the needs of young and indigenous people in agriculture without any increase in funding. Financial support for the rural women's networks has also ceased (Pini and Brown, 2004; Pini, Brown and Simpson, 2003).

In contrast to Australian farm women, their counterparts in Northern Ireland now have a legislative base for demanding equality. This may mean that the political opportunities that are opening up for equity in the latter are more sustaining and far-reaching. The Belfast Agreement and The Northern Ireland Act underpin the political effort to move beyond a political impasse and create a state in which all social groups can have confidence. The very fact that the equality measures were not left to local parties to manage but instead are governed by legislation indicates an enormous institutional and ideological shift by the British government (O'Leary, 1999; Wilford, 1999). The result is a situation of openness in the structure of organisations that is unprecedented. Today within Northern Ireland there is consequently a unique opportunity to advance gender equality in agriculture. The extent to which this opportunity will be realised remains to be seen. One factor that may limit the exploitation of this political opportunity may be the lack of strength in the farm women's movement in Northern Ireland. It is therefore critical that the RWF, energised by the legislative changes in Northern Ireland, receives the type and level of support from government that has been afforded to the Australian farm women's groups and that allowed them to flourish. The broader policy context is crucial to advance equality for women in agriculture, but a degree of mobilisation of women is necessary to exploit those opportunities that exist.

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This paper has examined the different ways in which farm women in two disparate contexts have utilised the state for gender justice. It has argued for a more fluid understanding of the notion of 'the state' in order to understand why and how, in particular circumstances, the state may be mobilised to foster equity for women. While the state has facilitated some tentative steps towards equality for farm women in both case study sites, there is still considerable distance to be travelled in order for gender equity to be realised in the agricultural sector.

Notes

1 The Northern Ireland Act relates specifically to Northern Ireland, and the gender equality framework discussed in this article has no legislative status in the Republic of Ireland.

2 We recognise the difficulties of referring to Northern Ireland as a State (see O'Dowd, 1991). Nonetheless, the Belfast Agreement 1998 and the Northern Ireland Act 1998 relate specifically to Northern Ireland and hence provides a discrete legislative unit with respect to gender equality.

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