

WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?
SOME THOUGHTS ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN IRISH GEOGRAPHY

David Storey and Catherine Ketch

"I certainly do not want to see the day when a woman's knowledge of the earth equals that of man"
(M.de Vaumorière, 1701, quoted in Zelinsky, 1973).

In more recent times Roder (1977) quotes an anonymous Professor of Geography as stating that he would never employ a female in his department. While academics holding such a view may now be few, so too are females employed as geographers. The purpose of this paper is to assess the status of women in Geography in Ireland as an example of a discipline where women 'go so far' and no further. Some suggestions are advanced as to the reasons why women are so grossly under-represented within this profession. The paper aims essentially to raise questions and provoke discussion and is not intended as a definitive study.

While the legal status of women within western societies has improved enormously over the years, the greatest advances would appear to have resulted from constant pressure applied by various interest groups within what has been termed the 'Womens Movement'. Thus, in Ireland women, in theory, have achieved equal pay for equal work and equality of opportunity vis-a-vis men, and a minority of women have attained senior positions. There are those, therefore, who would argue that women have achieved equality and fail to see the need for the continuing debate. It is a mistake, however, to think that a minority of women in positions of power (and it is a minority) constitutes reform.

One argument which is central to this paper is that equality in legislation does not always translate into equality per se. There are those who would argue that little has changed. Progress is slow with regard to the employment of women, the majority of whom are still associated with traditional roles, while discriminatory attitudes towards women remain deeply embedded. While this paper is concerned with vocational equality, this is not to overlook the fact that sexual inequality permeates all aspects of life. The Irish Constitution gives credibility to the sexist idea that 'a woman's place is in the home'. The employment of women in areas which are traditionally male preserves often amounts to no more than token gestures, while women are still regarded as the 'weaker sex', valued more for their physical appearance

than for their mental abilities. Equality of the sexes is a long way off when males and females are evaluated by different moral standards.

Zelinsky (1973a) observed that "the lot of the female geographer is, and has been, a discouraging one" (p.101). Zelinsky has been one of the most persistent voices calling for equality for women within the discipline. In the early 1970s, he observed that female geographers in the United States were paid less, occupied lower positions and published less frequently than their male counterparts (Zelinsky, 1973a). He has also pointed to women's low representation within the Association of American Geographers (Zelinsky, 1973b). Bermen (1974) has highlighted the salary discrimination suffered by Ellen Churchill Semple, one of the few eminent female geographers. Zelinsky and Bermen have published frequently on the subject of women in Geography in the Professional Geographer, provoking occasional debate within its pages (see articles by Roder, Zelinsky and Bermen, 1977).

Since Zelinsky's work in the early 1970s, subsequent writings have shown that the progress of women in gaining academic positions in the United States has been slow (Rubin, 1979), while their achievements in the area of publishing appear to be improving, albeit slowly. Articles written by women in selected journals in the period from 1972 to 1980 constitute less than ten percent of the total. (Zelinsky, Monk and Hanson, 1982). The lack of achievement by female geographers in Canada has also been noted (Momsen, 1980). In Britain, McDowell (1979) found that in the late 1970s, only 7.3 percent of academic staff in 34 Geography Departments were female and that they had a relatively low publication rate, judged by the numbers of articles in TIBG and Area. The same author has contributed to the debate on females in Geography in the journal Area (see articles by Tivers, 1978 and by Foord, McDowell and McKenzie, 1980).

In Ireland the present situation is not encouraging. Out of a total of 50 current full-time academic teaching staff only 2 are female.* At postgraduate level, males also predominate. Out of a total of 63 current full-time postgraduates, 36 are male and 27 female.

* Based on information in College Calendars and personal knowledge of Geography Departments in University College, Cork; University College, Galway; University College, Dublin; St. Patrick's College, Maynooth; Trinity College, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast.

In the U.C.C. Geography Department, there are 11 full-time male M.A. students and only 3 female, with no new female being registered in the past three years. This is despite the fact that there was a female predominance in the Honours class in the past two years with 21 females to 12 males in 1987 and 19 females to 11 males in 1988. In fact from 1978 to 1988, there have only been two years in which the number of male Honours students exceeded that of females. Despite this, there have only been two years when the number of females continuing on to postgraduate work in the department exceeded the number of males. Over that period, there have been 156 female Honours students (61 percent of the total) and 99 male Honours students (39 percent). While 24 percent of the males went on to postgraduate work in Geography in U.C.C., only 7.6 percent of the females did so. It is interesting that of those M.A. Geography students who proceeded to Ph.D. level elsewhere, the majority have been female. This appears to suggest greater determination on the part of those females who opt for postgraduate study.

The picture with regard to publications is somewhat similar. Taking Irish Geography as an example, from the first edition in 1944 until the most recent in 1988, of a total of 256 articles only 18 were written by females. In the cases of three of these, the articles were co-written by males. In the most recent volume, 1988, there are no articles written by females. Within the "Changing Ireland" section of the Journal, only two females have contributed and in both cases the articles were co-authored with males. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that a woman has never edited Irish Geography.

It is obvious that, whether or not it may be argued that active discrimination is occurring within the discipline, women do not appear to be opting for careers in Geography and are certainly not as successful as their male counterparts in obtaining positions. Zelinsky (1973a) puts forward his views on why women do not persevere in the field of Geography:

"The weak showing of the female geographer does not necessarily reflect any inherent weakness of intellect or character. The immediate causes are the institutional rules, traditions and biases, usually unspoken and unwritten, of the organisation in which they are trained and employed. And the ultimate culprit is the sexist structure of the larger social system, with its very early, highly divergent socialization of the two sexes, a theme that would require several major volumes for adequate treatment. But there happens to be a considerable range of variation among the various academic disciplines in the degree of female participation" (p.104).

Zelinsky refers elsewhere to differential opportunities in the various professions with Geography occupying roughly a middle position (Zelinsky, 1973a). Geography probably owes this position to the fact that it is recognised as occupying a middle ground between the Arts and the Sciences which are traditionally female and male dominated respectively. Broad (1980) has discussed employment inequality with regard to the sexes in other disciplines. Within U.C.C. the vast majority of departments have considerably more male academic staff than female. Only two departments (both language departments) have a female predominance.* The existing imbalance with regard to numbers of males and females employed as geographers in Ireland is preserved in a climate where little expansion is occurring and few appointments are being made due to financial cut-backs.

While it may be argued that to regard certain issues as 'womens' issues' is sexist in itself, this does not alter the fact that in society as it exists certain issues are disproportionately the concern of women whether we like it or not. In a discipline where men predominate, these issues are bound to be regarded as less important.

"Women as individuals or as a class exist under much different conditions or constraints in a world quite different from, however closely linked with, that inhabited by males" (Zelinsky et al, 1982 p.353).

The same authors go on to say that the human geographer must view reality "stereoscopically" i.e. "through the eyes of both men and women, since to do otherwise is to remain half blind" (p.353). At present the view of the world, a world which is shaped and controlled predominantly by men in the first instance, is male dominated. Zelinsky refers to Geography as an impoverished discipline where the worlds of one half of humanity remain uncharted. Davis (1959) makes the point that it is commonly assumed that the greatest disregard of talent arises from class and racial inequality whereas it is probably closer to the truth that the loss due to sex inequality is more significant.

Zelinsky (1973a) points out that only the female geographer endowed with exceptional intellect and character (and luck!) has been able to realise anything close to her full potential, like the isolated 'superwomen' in other fields of endeavour, and that the creation, writing, teaching and administration of serious Geography has been overwhelmingly male.

* Information from U.C.C. College Calendar.

The evidence reveals the imbalance which exists. The intelligence is not lacking, what is lacking is the social environment conducive to enabling women to develop their true potential as geographers or other professionals in social or academic environments which are male dominated. Genuine equality of opportunity is impossible without a fundamental change in society in general and in the mores which govern the treatment and behaviour of the sexes. The balance must be redressed at all levels, otherwise the imbalance is perpetuated. In the meantime, Momsen (1980), in relation to Geography, hopes that "fair minded men at the commanding heights of the profession will take pains to redress the balance" (p.368). It is surely grossly unjust that the lives of women are so much under the control of men, fair minded or otherwise.

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