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Feminist and gender geographies in Ireland

Mary Gilmartin, Claire McGing and Kath Browne

Department of Geography, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland

ABSTRACT

This report discusses feminist and gender geographies in Ireland. We first focus on the ways in which gender constructs Irish geographies, updating numbers of women in academic positions across Ireland. This shows that women are increasingly in secure positions, but remain under-represented in more senior positions. We then turn to research. We discuss how femininities and women, and masculinities and men, have been addressed in Irish geographies. The focus on femininities and women is crucial given recent strides towards gender and reproductive justice. We then briefly summarise sexualities work. The report concludes by arguing that Ireland not only has vibrant gender/feminist geographical scholarship, it also has significant potential for emerging research and developing new theorisations and research agendas.

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Introduction

This paper first offers a broad outline of the context of feminisms, gender and Irish geography. It then turns to research. Our focus is on Irish feminist and gender research undertaken by geographers and/or within geography journals between 1992 and 2018. We highlight in particular work on femininities, masculinities and sexualities, and identify areas that have garnered both considerable and limited attention.

Locating feminist and gender geographies in Ireland

The island of Ireland, which includes the Republic of Ireland and the contested territory of Northern Ireland, has 27 degree-granting institutions: 9 Universities, 2 of which are in Northern Ireland; 14 Institutes of Technology; and 4 Colleges of Education. In total, 10 of these institutions offer geography degrees, and there are 9 geography departments/schools. Geography is a particularly popular undergraduate degree subject in the Republic of Ireland,

where the key professional body is the Geographical Society of Ireland (GSI). While the GSI has an all-island remit, in practice geography departments in Northern Ireland are more oriented towards the Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers, and to the UK funding and assessment structure.

While the discipline of geography has a strong institutional presence in Ireland, the position of women is less secure. Opening a special issue of the journal *Irish Geography* on gender and sexuality geographies in 2002, Ní Laoire and Linehan conclude that women “are still severely under-represented in academic posts within Irish geography” (Ní Laoire and Linehan 2002, p. 3). At that point, there was a majority of female undergraduates, and equal numbers of women and men in temporary teaching posts. However, men were dominant at senior and permanent grades. By 2018, a survey of geography department websites in Ireland shows that the number of women employed in academic posts has increased. More appear to be in secure employment yet the proportion of women declines at more senior academic positions. Across the nine geography departments, women account for approximately 28% of academic staff (up from 18% in 2002). 46% of those at Lecturer level or below, 32% of Senior Lecturers and 25% of Professors (or equivalent academic grades) are female. As of July 2018, there are just 6 female geography Professors in Ireland, all of whom conduct research in human geography. The dominance of men may have historically contributed to a dearth of gender and sexuality teaching in Ireland (Ní Laoire and Linehan 2002), though this is now beginning to change. In addition, formal support for women and gender minorities in geography in Ireland is now provided by the Supporting Women in Geography (SWG) group. Inspired by the example of similar groups in the US and some European countries, SWG Ireland was set up at the Conference of Irish Geographers in 2016. It is run by postgraduates through an ethos of collectivity, organizes events and roundtables throughout the year and at the annual Conference, and has an active social media presence (see @SWG Ireland).

The formal position of women in geography in Ireland is likely to be affected by the advent of Athena SWAN in the Republic of Ireland. The Athena SWAN charter, which originated in the UK, aims to advance gender equality in higher education and research (<https://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan/>). It is planned that, research funding in Ireland will be tied to having Athena SWAN recognition at institutional level. While there are critiques of Athena SWAN, including its struggles to address structural failings and its UK-centric approach, its implementation in the Republic of Ireland offers the opportunity for greater gender equality in departments of geography in the near future.

Research foci

Research that we consider feminist and/or concerned with gender must be placed in the context of considerable and recent social change in Ireland, towards what some have termed a 'new Ireland'. Legislative changes have moved away from a constitution written in 1937, which placed women in the home, towards legislative gender equalities and, most recently, reproductive justice. Central to these shifts has been the loss of control of the Catholic church through increasing secularisation, child abuse scandals and economic growth. In response, Irish gender geographies have had two broad areas of focus. The first and most prominent area focuses on femininities and, to a lesser extent, masculinities. There have been some studies that examine gender roles more broadly (Ní Laoire 2011; Donkersloot 2012), though there is a dearth of research on lives, identities and subjectivities that transgress male/female boundaries. This research prioritizes gender roles, gendered mobilities, gendered landscapes, and gendered work. The second, burgeoning area focuses on the geographies of sexualities, paying particular attention to everyday spaces and kinships, with scope for further development given recent socio-legal transformations in Ireland.

Femininities and masculinities

Feminist analyses, in geography and in other disciplines, have paid particular attention to the role of the Irish state in the articulation and policing of gender roles, particularly for women. Crowley and Kitchin (2008) catalogue and analyse a series of interventions designed to regulate the sexual conduct of women in 20th century Ireland, which included the express association of women with the home, and the incarceration of women whose behaviour was considered 'immoral' (see also Earner-Byrne 2007). These practices continue to be evident through the role of the Irish state in limiting women's access to citizenship and abortion services (White and Gilmartin 2008). Within geography more broadly, Ireland has been a key focus of gender and feminist work on abortion because of the 1983 constitutional amendment which gave 'equal right of life' to the mother and her 'unborn' child, and the resultant decision in 1992 to constitutionally guarantee the right of women to travel outside the state to access abortion services (Side 2016). In May 2018, the constitutional ban on abortion was overturned in a referendum, following decades of feminist activism (O'Hara 2018. See also Connolly 2002).

Feminist approaches to place and landscape have played an important role in scholarship on Ireland. Nash uses the work of artist Kathy Prendergast to provide a feminist postcolonial remapping of the Irish landscape (Nash 1993). Her approach is usefully extended to Northern Ireland, particularly by

Reid who argues for a progressive understanding of space and place in a context riven by separation and sectarianism (Reid 2008). Meanwhile, feminist approaches emphasise how masculinist ideologies have been spatialized both during and after the conflict in Northern Ireland (Dowler 1998; McDowell 2008).

The changing roles of women at work have received attention in recent years. Earlier publications focus on gendered divisions of labour, and on women's marginalised position in particular employment sectors (e.g. Breathnach 1993; Barry and Brunt 2002). More recent publications highlight the complicated relationship between care work and employment/innovation, for example in rural areas (Gallagher 2014; Ní Fhlatharta and Farrell 2017), in urban areas (Quinn 2010), and amongst migrants (Gilmartin and Migge 2016). Despite the clearly gendered effects of austerity in Ireland, for example in relation to employment, this has not been a focus of recent geographic research.

Migration, and particularly the experiences of migrant women, have been a focus for feminist geographers. Bronwen Walter's landmark study of the experiences of Irish migrant women in Britain and the US considers questions of home and belonging from an intersectional feminist perspective (Walter 2001). As patterns of migration to and from Ireland began to change, attention shifted to the experiences of migrant women and men living in Ireland. Conlon (2011) and O'Reilly (2018) focus in particular on asylum seekers and refugees, and their marginalisation at the hands of the Irish state (see also Luibhéid 2013). More recently, a study of the relationship between gender and mobility in rural Ireland considers out-migration as a response to gender power relations (Donkersloot 2012).

There is a more limited range of research on masculinities in the context of Ireland. The spatialisation of this work tends to be crudely divided into rural and urban masculinities. Ní Laoire (2001), for example, focuses on the specific challenges faced by men who 'stay behind' in rural Ireland. Lysaght (2002) looks at dominant and subordinate masculinities in urban Belfast, complementing work on Northern Irish femininities, while Richardson (2013) discusses intergenerational masculinities among the urban Tyneside Irish community. In general, though, work on masculinities is limited or else incorporated into a broader gender analysis that, given Ireland's specific context, emphasises female marginalisation.

Sexualities

Although trans lives have not been explored in Irish Geographies, there is some engagement with sexualities. Kitchin and Lysaght (2004) examine how everyday spaces for lesbians and gay men in Belfast are affected by religion,

sexualities and nationalism. Browne (2007) explores Dublin's Pride parade as a 'Party with Politics', while Ryan (2016) discusses the spaces of male sex work for migrant sex workers in Dublin. Sexualities includes kinships and relationships, and investigations of Irish genealogies have been conceptualised through the geographies of relatedness (Nash 2008). In 2015 the Irish same sex marriage referendum was passed. The No vote emphasised an Irish nationalism that valued the place of the heterosexual family, without overtly vilifying homosexuality (Browne et al., 2018). There is a significant potential for research on and from Ireland that develops agendas in geographies of sexualities/queer geographies. For example, discussions of same sex marriage as homonormative (i.e. normalising gay men and lesbians. See Duggan 2002) fail to account for how the Same Sex Marriage victory had importance beyond normalising impulses (Mulhall 2015; Neary 2016; Silvera 2015).

Conclusion

Ireland has both a strong history of geographical feminist and gender research, and significant potential for developing these areas of work into the future. In our own department, with over 1,000 undergraduate and post-graduate students, we see clear interest in research on gender and sexualities, though this work has yet to be fully translated into PhD degree topics and academic careers. The Irish context is clearly significant for broader debates in the geographies of gender and sexualities, particularly because of recent social transformations such as the legalization of same sex marriage and abortion by popular vote as a consequence of feminist and intersectional activism. This has potentially far-reaching implications for other contexts where gender and sexuality rights are being claimed. The geographies of gender and sexuality that are developing in Ireland offer the potential for innovative thinking and practice that extends beyond the Anglo-American core (see for example Kulpa and Silva 2016).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Mary Gilmartin is a Professor in the Department of Geography, Maynooth University, with research interests in migration.

Claire McGing is Athena SWAN project officer, Geography university tutor and research student at Maynooth University. Her research focuses on feminist electoral geographies.

Kath Browne is a Professor of Geographies of Sexualities and Genders. Her research focuses on LGBTQ lives and liveabilities; Heteroactivism; women's spaces and feminist and queer methods and methodologies.

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