

## The International Corner

### Work and Family in Ireland

By Jane Grey



Jane Grey

**Bio:** Jane Grey is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology, and a Research Associate of the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis at NUI Maynooth, where she is the programme leader for the Irish Qualitative Data Archive. Her research and teaching interests centre on questions relating to families, households and social change. She recently completed research for the Combat Poverty Agency on 'Poverty and the Life Cycle in 20th Century Ireland,' drawing on life story interviews collected as part of the 'Life Histories and Social Change Project' that she co-directed with Professor Sean O'Riain. She is co-author, with Professor Mary P. Corcoran and Professor Michel Peillon, of the book *Suburban Affiliations*, published by Syracuse University Press in 2010.

Ireland has experienced rapid levels of socioeconomic change that have altered the environment for work-family issues within a comparatively short time frame. Female labour force participation began to increase in the 1980s and grew dramatically during the period of economic boom that lasted from the mid-1990s through 2007. Dual-earner households had become more common than male breadwinner households by 2000. Social attitudes have also changed significantly within a short time period: Surveys show considerable decline in support for "traditional" gender roles (Russell, McGinnity, Callan, & Keane, 2009).

However, in contrast with some other European countries, there has been a continuing pattern of women withdrawing from paid employment following the birth of children, despite the increased labour force participation of mothers. In part, this may be attributable to the absence of affordable childcare. The majority of working parents rely on informal childcare arrangements. Grandparents are the most common providers of nonparental care to infants, according to recent data from the National Longitudinal Study of Children (Williams, Greene, McNally, Murray, & Quail, 2010).

The growing participation of women—especially of mothers—in the labour force might have been expected to lead to increased levels of work-family conflict. However, survey evidence indicates that the great majority of people feel their working hours fit well with their commitments outside work, although there has been some decline in satisfaction amongst men (Russell et al., 2009; McGinnity & Russell, 2007). During the economic boom, there were frequent media reports that extensive suburbanization had led to long commuting hours and the separation of young families from extended family networks. This impression was not well supported by the evidence, however. Although travel times to work did increase, the most recent Census data showed that average commuting time was under half an hour (Central Statistics Office, 2007). Most Irish families, including those living in new suburban areas, continue to have regular contact with, and support from, extended family members (Corcoran, Gray, & Peillon, 2010).

In response to pressure to assist families with meeting their childcare requirements, the Irish state adopted policies that did not differentiate amongst families according to their work-family arrangements. These included the addition of an Early Childcare Supplement to the universal child benefit payment (abolished in 2009) and the provision of a year of pre-school Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). Women are

entitled to 26 weeks of paid maternity leave, and both men and women can take 14 weeks of unpaid parental leave.

In addition to the challenges associated with caring for children, working families also struggle to provide care for elderly, sick, and disabled relatives. State provision in this area is widely believed to be under-resourced and inequitable. Flexible working arrangements, such as job-sharing, are at the discretion of employers and are more frequently available to higher-earning employees and those working in the public sector (Russell, O'Connell, & McGinnity, 2007).

Sadly, the recent economic crash has taken work-family issues off the public agenda in Ireland. Rising unemployment has hit working-class men most severely; therefore, it seems likely that increasing proportions of households will depend on women's earnings. Existing supports to families are likely to be greatly curtailed under an extended series of austerity measures. Where they can, Irish families will be obliged to continue to rely on extended family members to get by.

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