

## Gender Equality in the Irish Labour Market 1966-2016: Unfinished Business?

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**Abstract:** This paper formed part of the conference to mark 50 years of social research at the ESRI. It provides an overview of gender equality in the labour market in Ireland over a 50-year period. It takes as its starting point two studies published by ESRI researchers in the early 1970s including a survey of women carried out in 1973. Five themes are identified in these early studies, which are then carried through to the current period. These are: patterns of female labour force participation; gender segregation; sectoral labour demand; attitudes; and appropriate policy responses. The study then outlines how many of the normative, legislative and institutional constraints to women's employment were removed during the following decades and discusses key educational and fertility trends that influenced labour force participation. Policy responses have also shifted over the period. We find that while there has been distinct change in the normative culture, a major upward shift in the scale of female employment, and a decline in gender segregation, women's and men's employment remains strongly gendered.

### I INTRODUCTION

One of the most profound changes in western societies over the last 50 years has been the change in women's roles in relation to paid employment. Macro-historical theories, be they inspired by modernisation or Marxist approaches,

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suggest that industrialisation leads to long-term increases in women's employment rates. However, comparative research suggests that these relationships are rather more complex, and that female labour force participation is shaped not just by economic development, but also by national labour market structures, education systems, state policies, and family systems (Tilly and Scott, 1978; Hegewisch and Gornick, 2011).

In this paper, tracing research on trends in gender equality in the Irish labour market over the past five decades, we show how the growth in women's labour force participation, the nature of the jobs that women filled, and the terms and conditions of their employment were influenced by a range of factors. These included delayed industrialisation and the expansion of the services sector; increased educational attainment among women; the changing normative culture in relation to women's roles in the economy and the family; and shifts in state policy, from discriminatory employment policies through changes in taxation and welfare policies that altered opportunities and incentives for women's employment.

The issue of gender and the labour market was on the research agenda of the ESRI from its earliest days. Two studies of female employment were published in the early 1970s, which addressed a very significant gap in research on women's economic role in Ireland. The first was a paper by Brendan Walsh read to the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland (SISSI) in 1971 entitled *Aspects of labour supply and demand with special reference to the employment of women in Ireland*. The second was a report on a national survey of women by Walsh and O'Toole, *Women and Employment in Ireland*, which was published by the ESRI in 1973.<sup>1</sup> This research is also important as it provided important evidence for the deliberations of the first Commission on the Status of Women. The Commission report, published in 1973, was highly significant in the history of gender relations in Ireland (Daly, 1997; Finnegan and Wiles, 2005).

These papers identify five themes that were important to the question of women in the labour market in the early 1970s and which, we argue, were important features in the subsequent evolution of women's employment in Ireland: patterns of participation and the marked differences in participation rates of married versus single women; sectoral demand and the increased importance of the services sector; the extent to which many women were employed in typically female occupations (so-called occupational sex segregation); the normative climate toward working mothers and the extent to which such attitudes shifted over time; and shifts in state policy from discriminatory practices against women's employment through changes in taxation and welfare policy that enhanced incentives for women's participation and varying, though consistently grudging, support for childcare.

<sup>1</sup> The sample was taken from the electoral register. The response rate was 62 per cent and the final achieved sample was 5,000.

Increasing female labour force participation took place in a context of far-reaching social and demographic changes. Over the period in question educational attainment of women surged and by the mid-1990s women overtook men in rates of completion of third-level education, with the result that they were particularly well prepared to take advantage of growing opportunities for high skilled employment in the expanding services sector. The period also coincides with a marked decline in fertility rates, particularly between 1960 and 1980.

The paper begins with a brief overview of theoretical approaches used to explain gender equality in labour markets (Section II), followed by a “view from the late 1960s/early 1970s” in Section III, reflecting the time when social research was established at the ESRI. Section IV then outlines briefly the substantial social and economic change in the period, before moving on to examine more recent trends (boom, recession and recovery) in Section V. Section VI concludes with some reflections on these changes in gender equality and future challenges.

## II THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER DIFFERENCES IN EMPLOYMENT

Why should we expect men’s and women’s labour market engagement to differ? A range of theoretical approaches have sought to explain the gendering of the labour market: these are also useful in understanding change over time.

Supply-side theories focus on the characteristics of individuals as workers or potential workers. Dominant among these is human capital theory (Becker, 1975). Human capital is the knowledge, skills and experience that increase an individual’s productivity in their job. It is usually measured as educational qualifications, training and experience.

Early explanations of gender inequality in the labour market focused on lower educational participation and attainment of women, but this has radically changed in recent decades with women now outperforming men in education in many countries (Buchmann *et al.*, 2008). Thus, educational attainment alone has become increasingly untenable as an explanation for gender inequality in the labour market. Research attention has shifted to the field of study – how boys and girls choose different subjects at second- and third level and this has an important role to play in channelling young people towards gender-typical careers and hence to gender segregation (Smyth, 2005). These careers may be associated with different rewards. This is highly relevant to the Irish labour market in the last 50 years because of rapid changes in educational attainment.

Work experience is another key component of human capital. In contrast to overall education levels, women tend to have less labour market experience, linked to their greater levels of involvement in domestic tasks and childcare. Longitudinal research highlights how previous breaks in employment for childcare and part-time work can impact later employment careers (Connolly and Gregory, 2009).

But it is not only in terms of experience that women's greater responsibility for domestic labour plays a role: the presence and number of children influences both whether they engage in paid work at all, for how many hours, and when they do work, which jobs they do (England, 2006; McGinnity and Russell, 2008). The demands from home, in particular the age and number of children, has a key impact on whether and how a woman will participate in the labour market. Family size is particularly relevant in the Irish context given that it was unusually large at the beginning of the period: thus changes in fertility and family size may be relevant for long-term trends in women's labour market engagement.

The influence of childbearing on labour market engagement may be related to the normative climate, attitudes to mothers' working and how they divide their time between work and care (Pfau-Effinger, 2004). In countries where there is a high level of support for mothers' employment, there tend to be more mothers working. While it is difficult to disentangle to what extent attitudes influence behaviour or are a response to actual labour market participation levels, they are still revealing, particularly if these attitudes change over time.

Of course, individual women may differ in the importance they attach to work and working conditions, and thus the jobs they choose, or whether they work at all (Hakim, 2002). It is difficult to assess how much weight to give preferences, given that they may be strongly influenced by constraints – like financial constraints and childcare costs – but the idea that individual tastes and preferences play a role in employment, given these constraints, is plausible, although of course individual preferences will also be related to the normative climate in society around gender roles and mothers' employment.

A key issue in debates on combining work and family life is working time (McGinnity and Whelan, 2009). Part-time or reduced hours work can allow mothers to combine work and caring commitments and is associated with lower work-family conflict but there can be a trade-off between flexibility and other aspects of job quality, such as pay and promotion prospects.

Demand-side explanations focus on the actions of employers and labour market structures and the policy environment. One element is the way in which men and women are sorted or segregated into different occupations. This approach attributes gender inequalities in working conditions to the concentration of men and women into sex-typed occupations that are valued and rewarded differently (horizontal segregation) and to the exclusion of women from higher level positions within occupations (vertical segregation) (Charles and Grusky, 2004).

In the context of segregation, the growth or decline in certain occupations or industrial sectors will influence job opportunities for men and women differently. For example, a shift from manufacturing to services may favour women, to the extent that clerical and service occupations are seen as more suitable for women.

Ireland provides a useful example of the complexity of the supposed relationship between industrialisation and women's labour force participation.

Industrialisation arrived late in Ireland. At the outset of political independence in 1922 the economy was highly specialised in agricultural production for the British market and its small industrial sector remained underdeveloped (O'Connell, 1999). There was very limited industrial growth during the decade after independence in the absence of state policy to promote industrialisation. A policy shift to protectionist policies generated some industrial growth during the 1930s and 1940s, but this came to a halt in the 1950s, when the incapacity of the economy to generate employment became manifest in high unemployment and mass emigration (Breen *et al.*, 1990). These structural factors also severely limited the opportunities open to women. The development of policies to encourage export-oriented foreign-owned manufacturing was a response to the crisis of the 1950s. At the outset of industrialisation in the 1960s women's labour force participation in Ireland was below the European average, but the increase in participation that might have been expected from industrialisation or modernisation did not in fact materialise in the first two decades of the process, although it did increase very rapidly after the mid-1980s (O'Connell, 1999).

Of course any secular change in the number and nature of jobs may be interrupted by shorter term fluctuations in labour market demand, particularly relevant in a small open economy such as Ireland. One perspective argues that women, particularly married women, may act as a "labour market reserve" or "reserve army of labour" – called out when labour demand is high and pushed back when demand is low (Holst, 2000). This implies that in recession when unemployment is high, female labour market participation will be low, but in a booming economy, women will be drawn into the labour market.

Another major demand-side perspective stresses discrimination as an explanation for gender inequality. Perspectives differ as to what drives discrimination and whether it is employer or institutional discrimination. Employer discrimination may be based on stereotypes that women excel in caring and interpersonal interaction with people, while men are better suited for positions of authority. Institutional approaches to discrimination highlight how gender stereotypes are embedded in personnel practices and promotion systems, education systems and trade unions (Charles and Grusky, 2004). Discrimination can also lead to a devaluation of female-dominated work (England, 2006) which means segregation is also linked to outcomes such as the gender wage gap. Discrimination can also be embedded in law, for example restrictions on married women's employment.

And of course the policy context will influence gender differences in the extent and nature of work. Policies to support the combination of working and caring have been shown to influence women's participation in a range of countries (Hegewisch and Gornick, 2011). Industrial policy may influence the kind of jobs that are created: tax systems and welfare policy may influence financial returns and therefore thereby incentives to work for both men and women (Callan *et al.*, 2009). In the discussion

that follows we highlight some of the important policy changes that frame individual employment decisions.

### III WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT – A VIEW FROM THE LATE 1960S/EARLY 1970S

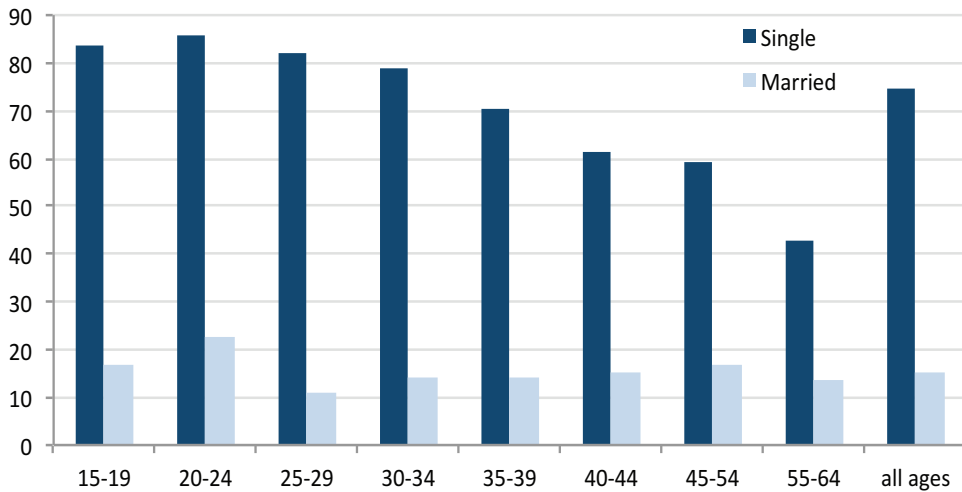
Drawing on the 1966 Census results Walsh (1971) reported that 34 per cent of women aged 15-64 years were in “gainful employment” but with a major divide between single women (75 per cent employed), and married women (6 per cent employed). This is not surprising in the context of the marriage bar, which required women to leave civil service and many other public sector posts on marriage. But even at the time, it was acknowledged that these figures seriously underestimated women’s economic activity. Firstly, women’s work on family farms was undercounted. Walsh and O’Toole (1973) illustrate this point by comparing Irish and UK census data. In 1966 in Ireland only 11 per cent of recorded family farm workers were female, compared to 46 per cent in the UK. Secondly, part-time employment was undercounted because of the definition of Principle Economic Status used in the census. Women who combined paid work with caring for children were likely to define their *main* status as home duties (Fahey, 1990). The boundary between “gainful” and “non-gainful” activities is particularly blurred when market activities take place in the home, as in the case of farm-work (see also Fahey, 1990).

The 1973 ESRI survey deliberately set out to take a fuller measure of women’s economic activity that picked up shorter working hours or piecework, often carried out in the home. However, women’s farm work continued to be excluded from the definition of employment.<sup>2</sup> Using this measure, the authors estimated that 75 per cent of all single women and 15 per cent of married women were employed, leading to a total employment rate of 52 per cent. The youngest age groups had higher employment rates but marital status remained the chief distinguishing factor for women’s employment levels (see Figure 1). The rising marriage rates and decreasing age of marriage in Ireland during the 1960s was therefore seen as a threat to labour supply, and there was concern that this would lead to labour shortages in certain sectors (Walsh, 1971).

#### 3.1 Sex Segregation: Sector and Occupation

During the late 1960s and early 1970s Ireland was in transition from an agrarian economy to an industrial and service economy, as noted in Section II. These changes in the sectoral/occupational structure led to new employment opportunities for

<sup>2</sup> Farm women were only defined as working if they were the head of household or if they were doing “non-farm work” (Walsh and O’Toole, 1973, p.19).

**Figure 1: Female Employment (%) by Marital Status and Age Group (1973)**

Source: Walsh and O'Toole, 1973.

women. The expansion of manufacturing jobs in the textile, clothing and food industries which traditionally employed women saw a significant source of growth in female employment between 1961 and 1966, but growth in the services sector accounted for the greatest part of the increase (Walsh, 1971).

In 1966, women accounted for 25 per cent of the total labour force and 35 per cent of the non-agricultural labour force. The female share of manufacturing jobs was 37 per cent, which was even higher than in the UK (32 per cent) where there was a greater prevalence of heavy engineering (Walsh, 1971). The responses to Walsh's paper at SISSI, which are recorded with the paper, highlight that there was a concern that the Industrial Development Authority was attracting too many female industrial jobs at the expense of male jobs.

As can be seen from Table 1, occupations were also highly segregated by sex. In 1966, over a quarter of women were employed in occupations that were at least 90 per cent female. These were concentrated in seven occupations – sewers, typists, boarding housekeepers, housekeepers, maids, nurses, probation nurses. Similarly, and reflecting the predominantly male profile of the workforce as a whole, just under 80 per cent of men were employed in highly male-dominated occupations (where 90 per cent or more of the workers were men). However, male-dominated occupations covered a much broader range of positions than women's: 99 of 191 occupations were over 90 per cent male. Therefore sex segregation did not restrict men to such a limited set of options as it did women.

**Table 1: Sex Segregation of Employment in Ireland (1966)**

<i>Sex composition of Job</i>	<i>% of all women employed</i>	<i>% of all employed</i>
90% + female	25.2	6.7
70% + female	42.9	12.8
<i>Sex composition of Job</i>	<i>% of all men employed</i>	<i>% of all employed</i>
90%+ male	79.1	62.2
70%+ male	84.8	67.4

Source: Adapted from Walsh 1971, based on Census 1966.

### 3.2 Attitudes to Female Employment

While the proportions of women participating in paid employment were increasing in the 1960s and early 1970s, the prevailing gender role attitudes were still strongly traditional. A survey in 1968 (Behrend *et al.*, 1970) found that 87 per cent of male employees felt that married women should have a lower minimum rate of pay than married women and 78 per cent felt that single women should have a lower minimum rate of pay than single men. This idea of the male family wage and the traditional division of labour in which men should take primary responsibility for earning and women for caring and unpaid domestic work, was also institutionalised into pay agreements and into tax and welfare policy.

A similar sentiment can be observed for the ESRI survey in 1973 (see Table 2) where only 15 per cent of women approved unconditionally of married women working. A further 58 per cent approved only under certain conditions. In 29 per cent of cases, respondents only approved if the woman had no children, 14 per cent approved on condition that the household needed income, 12 per cent approved in the case of flexible hours and 13 per cent approved if the woman had help with her children (13 per cent), and 2 per cent only approved if the woman was not taking a man's job, which was unlikely given the gender segregation described above. Outright disapproval of married women's employment was expressed by 20 per cent of the women.

**Table 2: Women's Attitudes to Married Women Working (ESRI Survey 1973)**

	<i>All women</i> %	<i>Married Women</i> %
Approve unconditionally	15.2	14.4
Approve conditionally	58.6	62.0
No strong feelings	5.7	5.2
In general disapprove	10.9	10.2
Strongly disapprove	9.5	8.3
	100.0	100.0
N	5,061	3,303

Source: Based on figures in Walsh and O'Toole, 1973.



In summing up women's attitudes in the survey Walsh and O'Toole (1973, p.81) note that

*...paid employment is generally regarded as a potential threat to the correct discharge of the duties of mother and wife[...]. Apart from a small minority, with high educational attainment and extensive previous work experience, the urgency of working (even to supplement family income) was not considered great enough to risk any serious curtailment of existing roles in marriage.*

### 3.3 What's Missing?

While these two particular studies did not address the issues of pay inequality, it was part of the broader political discourse of the time. The evidence base was however very limited. The report Commission of the Status of Women (1972) documented the institutionalised gender pay gap that existed at the time. For example, within the civil service and the teaching profession there was one pay rate for married men and another, 20 per cent lower, for women and single men. Similarly in the private sector, trade union agreements sanctioned pay rates for women that were a fraction of the male rates for the same jobs. A further SISSI paper by Geary and Walsh in 1972 addressed the issue of the equal pay and was part of the symposium on the Commission on the Status of Women's Interim Report on Equal Pay. They reported results from the Census of Industrial Production, which showed that in 1969 the gender pay gap ranged between 33 to 59 per cent in different manufacturing sectors. Both Geary and Walsh (1972) and the Commission report asserted that there were productivity differences between men and women, though these are not quantified. The observation that jobs in which men and women were doing the same work had not been totally feminised was used as proof of women's lower productivity. Geary and Walsh went on to argue that if equal pay legislation was introduced, employers should be subsidised to compensate for this unequal productivity (*ibid.*, p.113).

Other dimensions of work experience that were absent from the research in the 1970s but have since become prominent are those of precarious work, discrimination and workplace harassment. Work-family conflict concerns were also less prominent in the context of very low participation rates of married women.

### 3.4 Policy Issues in the 1970s

Attitudes and policy positions that sanctioned inequalities between men and women were, however, beginning to change. The *Interim Report of the first Commission on the Status of Women* was published in 1971, between the ESRI studies, and recommended the removal of the marriage bar and the introduction of equal pay legislation. The final report was published in 1973.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>17 of the Commission's 49 recommendations related to equal pay and women in the labour market, including the provision of maternity leave.

While the recommendations of the Interim report were noted in a footnote in the Walsh and O'Toole study (1973, p. 12), they were not included in the policy options considered in the study. Instead, the authors concluded that tax reform to address the high marginal tax rates faced by married women was the most effective policy to increase female labour supply. The neglect of anti-discrimination policies may in part have been a response to the survey results in which the female respondents seldom mentioned these factors. When asked what would be the most helpful policy, the most commonly mentioned policy was more flexible hours (19 per cent), followed by the change in tax laws (16 per cent), state provided daycare (10 per cent), and equal pay (8 per cent).

The study also considered the implications of improving childcare provision. The childcare landscape in 1973 was very different to the current situation. The majority of working women, including those with pre-school age children, said that they had no special childcare arrangements, and for those with childcare, live-in arrangements played a much more prominent role than they do today (Murray *et al.*, 2016). The analysis of the patterning of these answers suggests that having no childcare arrangements reflects a pattern of combining work and childcare (e.g. through piecework in the home), older siblings caring for younger siblings, or scheduling working during older children's school hours (see also Murray *et al.*, 2016). Walsh and O'Toole (1973; p. 129) concluded that, given the reservations a significant proportion of married women had to childcare, and the advantage of tax reforms in "allowing the working mother to arrive at her own solution to the problem of childcare", the latter policy was favoured. An important caveat was also added to the conclusion that increasing female labour supply in a period of low labour demand would be likely to aggravate the male unemployment problem (and gender segregation) and that policies to improve economic growth were therefore necessary.

The period immediately following the publication of the Walsh and O'Toole report in the early 1970s was one of intense legislative development (Finnegan and Wiles, 2005). Responding to the pressure for change from sources such as the Commission on the Status of Women, the requirements of EU membership and ILO recommendations, the marriage bar was removed in 1973, and the Equal Pay Act was introduced in 1974, which prohibited gender discrimination in pay for the first time. In 1977 the Employment Equality Act was introduced, which outlawed discrimination in recruitment and promotion based on gender. In the same year, the Unfair Dismissals Act 1977 introduced new protections against dismissal for reasons of pregnancy. In 1981 paid maternity leave was introduced.<sup>4</sup> Significant policy change also occurred in the family arena for example the legalisation of contraception for married women in 1979 (Kennedy, 2001).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Previously there had been maternity allowance payable to insured workers but no protected leave.

<sup>5</sup> A comprehensive review of the social, economic and legislative change over the period is outside the scope of the paper. For more in depth historical analyses of this period, see Daly, 1997; O'Connor and Shortall, 2000; Finnegan and Wiles, 2005; Kennedy, 2001.

## IV SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE 1970S AND 1980S

In concert with these legislative developments, there were very substantial changes in educational attainment, fertility and attitudes that were all important levers of women's increasing labour market participation (Fahey *et al.*, 2000).

### 4.1 Education

As discussed earlier, educational qualifications play a significant role in labour market engagement. There was a marked and steady increase in the educational attainment of the Irish population from the 1960s to the twenty-first century, and women made greater gains than men (see Figure A.1 in the Appendix). There was a steady fall in the share of the population with just primary level education, and at this level men have predominated throughout the period. In 1966, almost 70 per cent of the male population had this level of education, while this was true of 62 per cent of women. By 2011, just 17 per cent of men had primary education, compared to less than 15 per cent of women. In 1966, 26 per cent of the male population had secondary education, compared to 35 per cent of women. This female predominance in secondary education continued through 1991, but by 2011 this had been overturned when 56 per cent of men and 52 per cent of women had secondary attainment. In 1966, tertiary education was the preserve of a small elite, accounting for 5 per cent of men and 3 per cent of women. The male advantage in higher educational attainment prevailed through 1991, when 14 per cent of men but 13 per cent of women had third-level education. However, with the dramatic expansion of third-level education over the past quarter century the male advantage has been overturned: in 2011 less than 28 per cent of men had third-level qualifications, compared to almost 34 per cent of women.

While rising female education attainment at secondary level *preceded* the growth in female labour market participation (Smyth, 1999), the strong rise in the proportion of women with third-level qualifications provided a pool of educated women who entered employment when demand increased and when legislative and other socio-cultural constraints weakened.

### 4.2 Fertility

Further significant legislative change in the late 1970s came in the form of the Health (Family Planning) Act 1979, which legalised contraception. In the 1960s, marriage rates in Ireland were increasing, a trend that was noted as a block to female labour supply, though they were still low by international standards (Fahey *et al.*, 2000). Fertility was almost entirely confined to marriage, and married women in Ireland had exceptionally high fertility rates. This led to the distinctive position where total fertility rates (TFR) in Ireland were substantially higher than elsewhere in Europe and the US throughout the 1960s and 1970s (see Figure A.2 in the Appendix). From the mid-1970s fertility began to fall and gradually converged on

European fertility norms. Nevertheless, Ireland still has one of the highest TFRs in Europe (Lunn *et al.*, 2009) and average family size among those with children is still considerably higher than elsewhere in neighbouring countries (Fahey *et al.*, 2012).

### **4.3 Changing Employment Structure: The Move to Services**

The period from the early 1970s was also one of continued transformation in the structure of employment and the sectoral composition. Census data show that the agricultural sector continued its long-term decline, shrinking from 25 per cent of employment in 1971 to less than 5 per cent in 2011.<sup>6</sup> The share of manufacturing employment also declined, from 23 per cent to 13 per cent over the same period. Employment in construction, predominantly male, expanded during the boom to 12 per cent of total employment, this was followed by contraction (to less than 6 per cent) in the recession. Most of the employment growth took place in the services sector. Initially, from 1971 to 1991, the greater part of the increase was in non-market services: mainly public sector activities and particularly in education and health. The more recent growth has been in market services, particularly in sales, finance, scientific and technical and administrative support activities. This transformation in the structure of employment coincided with the removal of at least some of the impediments to women's participation in the labour market. The expanding sectors have given rise to greater demand for education and skills, with the result that many of the emerging opportunities have been taken by women with the educational credentials to compete for such positions.

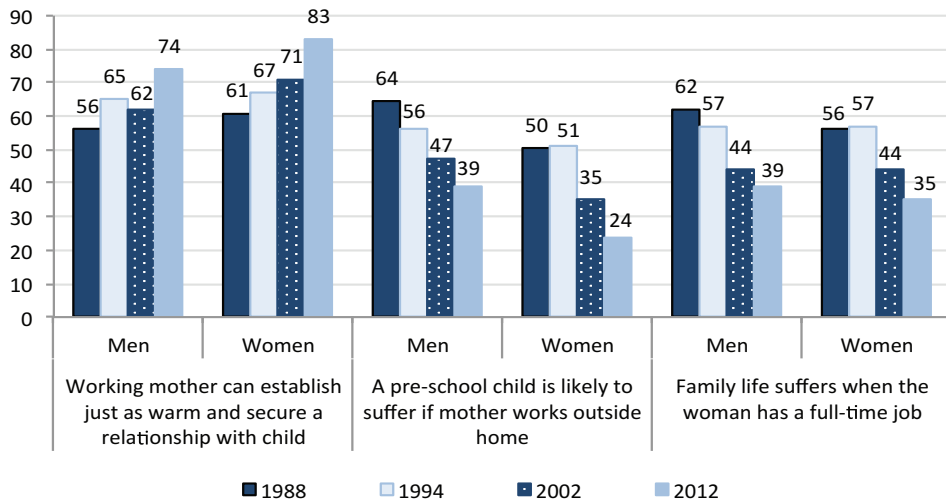
### **4.4 Changing Normative Gender Culture**

As noted in Section II, the normative gender culture plays a role in understanding women's employment patterns. A significant change in attitudes to women's employment, and particularly to the employment of mothers, is evident in the series of data from the International Social Survey Programme. Questions on gender role attitudes were included in 1988, 1994, 2002 and 2012, and over this time there was a clear increase in support for the employment of mothers among both women and men on all the three measures reported here (Figure 2). For example, in 1988, almost two-thirds of men and half of all women felt that a pre-school child suffered if the mother works outside the home, but this had fallen to 39 per cent of men and 24 per cent of women 24 years later. There were also substantial shifts in opinions on the impact of women's work on their relationships with their children. In 1988, 56 per cent of men and 61 per cent of women considered that a working mother could establish just as warm a relationship with a child as a mother in the home; by 2012, 74 per cent of men and 83 per cent of women held this view. Interestingly, the item on which the highest proportion of women expresses reservations is the

<sup>6</sup> The figures in this section are based on census surveys see Figure A.3 in the Appendix.

view that “family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job”. This is consistent with the growing concern regarding work-family conflict, when both partners have longer work hours (McGinnity and Whelan, 2009; see below).

**Figure 2: Attitudes to Employment of Mothers: Per Cent Agreeing with Statement 1988, 1994, 2002 and 2012**



Source: Authors' analysis of ISSP data 1988, 1994, 2002 and 2012. Figures exclude don't knows and neither agree nor disagree.

#### 4.5 Taxation Reforms

Section II discusses how the policy context can frame participation decisions, and one relevant policy is tax policy. Walsh and O'Toole (1973) stressed the need for tax reform to address the high marginal tax rates faced by married women. In the 1970s the Irish tax system treated married couples as one unit for tax purposes, so the income of both husband and wife was aggregated. Compared to two cohabiting single persons, a married couple received a subsidy if one person (usually the wife) was not earning, or earning a very low income. If the wife's earnings were greater, she, and the couple, faced a substantial tax penalty – much higher than an unmarried cohabiting couple in identical circumstances. This was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1980. The government response was to allow doubled rate bands and doubled allowances to all married couples, with flexibility for couples to assign bands and allowances to minimise their tax liability (Russell *et al.*, 2009). This imposed a high effective tax rate for married women.

The second major shift in taxation policy regarding couples came in Budget 2000, which introduced a move towards greater independence by means of “individualisation”. This involved reducing the extent to which tax bands were transferable between spouses. By December 2001 the proportion of the band which

was transferable had fallen to about one-third. Callan *et al.* (2009) analysed a change similar to this “individualisation” process and estimated it could add 2 to 3 percentage points to the participation rate of married women, though this has to be seen in the context of increases in married women’s participation of more than one percentage point per year over a 30-year period.

#### **4.6 Changes in Labour Market Participation during the 1970s and 1980s**

Despite these far-reaching social changes and the flurry of policy development, women’s participation in the labour force only grew slowly, from 28 per cent the early 1970s to 32 per cent in 1990, among those aged 15 and over. However, this small change in overall rates hides diverging trends for married and single women. Fine-Davis (2017) reports that married women’s participation increased from 7.5 per cent in 1971 to 17 per cent in 1981, and to 24 per cent in 1989 (with the caveats listed earlier on the underestimation of female employment in the earliest data). Even with this rise, married women’s participation was still very low, and some doubted that female disadvantage was fundamentally reduced (O’Connor, 2000).

Fahey *et al.* (2000) show that while married women’s participation increased significantly during the 1980s, labour force participation rates for single women declined. While the social and legislative changes outlined above may have led to increased married women’s participation from a very low base, countervailing trends – including increased participation in education – combined with the deep recession in the 1980s, served to reduce participation among younger single women. Over the same time period, participation declined for men aged 15 years and over from 81 per cent in 1971 to 76 per cent in 1981, and to 71 per cent in 1990.

At the beginning of the 1990s, while there had been a substantial increase in participation among married women, there was still a large potential pool of female labour outside the labour force. In 1990, the participation rate for women aged 15-64 years in the EU15 was 55 per cent compared to 42 per cent in Ireland. In the following section we examine how the subsequent economic boom and recession influenced women’s position in the labour market in Ireland since then.

## **V WOMEN IN THE IRISH LABOUR MARKET IN THE 1990s AND 2000s**

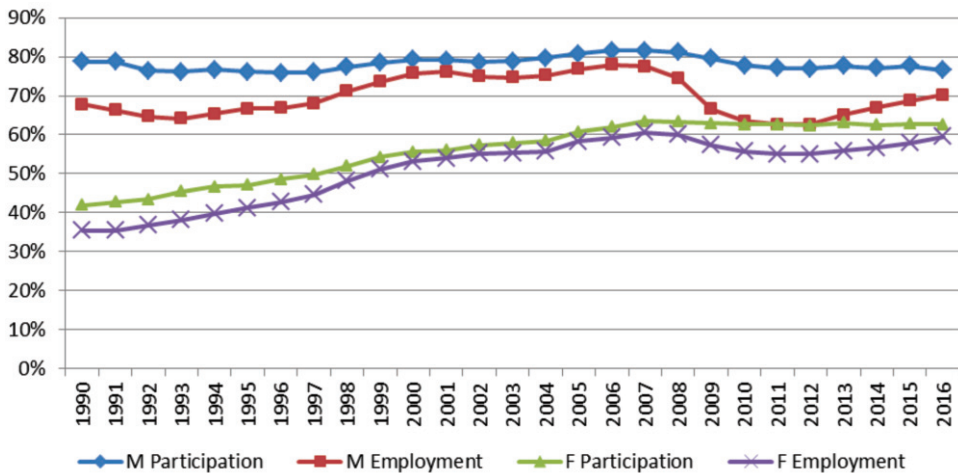
This section considers more recent developments – the overall development of women’s and men’s labour market participation, and how this varies by education and family status. It also discusses employment rates and the impact of the economic recession on gender differences in employment and participation rates.

It also considers how changing labour market participation rates influenced occupational segregation, that is the extent to which men and women are found in different jobs, part-time work and the gender pay gap.

The period 1994 to 2007 was one of exceptional and sustained economic growth in Ireland. By 2007, Gross National Product (GNP) per capita was among the highest in the European Union, having more than doubled over the previous 12 years. The numbers employed almost doubled, from 1.2 million in 1994 to 2.1 million by 2007, and unemployment declined rapidly, from 16 per cent in 1994 to around 4 per cent in the period 2000-2007.

Female participation rates rose rapidly during the economic boom, from 42 per cent in 1990 to over 63 per cent in 2007, and then stabilised at this level. By 2007 the participation rate of women had converged with the EU average (see Russell *et al.*, 2009). This rise in participation for women in less than 20 years (1990-2007) – similar to what other western European countries experienced over a much longer period since World War II – led some authors to coin the phrase “Celtic Tiger” when referring to the economic boom in Ireland (O’Connell, 1999).

**Figure 3: Labour Market Participation and Employment Rates (15-64 Years) in Ireland, 1990-2016.**



Source: Eurostat employment rate data taken from equality data: <https://goo.gl/Ts2YP9>.

Note: Participation measures the proportion of the working-age population either employed or unemployed. Employment rates are the proportion of the working age population employed.

Which women were now participating in the labour market? Educational qualifications were a powerful predictor of women’s participation, consistent with earlier participation patterns in Ireland (Barrett *et al.*, 2000). In 2007, participation rates were 35 per cent for those with primary education and 51 per cent for those with intermediate/Junior Certificate qualifications compared to 82 per cent for those with third-level qualifications (Russell *et al.*, 2009 using QNHS data). This suggests that the remarkable rise in educational qualifications for women (see Figure A.1) facilitated the rise in participation. That said, Berholz and FitzGerald (2016) find

a large rise in participation even after controlling for educational change, especially between 1992 and 2000, suggesting that the rapid expansion in the Irish labour market and increased demand for labour also played a significant role. This suggests that women in Ireland were a substantial “reserve army of labour” in the early 1990s, and were pulled into the Irish labour market in the economic boom.

Women’s labour market engagement also varies with family status. Building on earlier work by Doris (2001), Russell *et al.* (2009) found that having young children had a strong impact on participation, as it did in the 1990s, but partners’ wages were no longer significant. The participation of women with children also varied strongly with earnings potential. For a woman aged 35 with two children earning half the average wage the probability of participation was 25 per cent, compared to a woman earning twice the average wage where it was 96 per cent (*ibid.*, Table 3.5, p.39). In tandem with the changing participation rates, the focus of social and economic analysis shifted from discussing “married” and “single” women in the 1970s to women with and without children in the 1990s and 2000s. This reflects the decoupling of childbirth from marriage, and also that it was childbirth not marriage *per se* that was now salient for women’s participation.<sup>7</sup>

The labour market participation of lone mothers remained stable between 1998 and 2007 (58 per cent in both years), while rates for married mothers increased from 52 per cent to 64 per cent (Russell *et al.*, 2009). In fact, the participation rate of lone mothers with pre-school children declined during the period 1998-2007, though participation did increase for lone mothers with school-age children (youngest child aged 5-15). Russell *et al.* (2009) argue that part of the decline in participation for lone mothers with pre-school children may be linked to a reduction in the Community Employment Scheme in the period, as supported employment was an important source of employment for this group. Gaps in provision and the expense of market-based childcare in Ireland are also likely to play a particularly salient role for lone parents of pre-school children.<sup>8</sup>

### 5.1 The Crisis Years

The Irish economy went into crisis in 2008. The crisis was triggered by the global financial crisis and bursting of the property bubble, which led to a banking crisis and a subsequent fiscal crisis for the State. The labour market consequences were severe. Job losses were particularly heavy in the early years of the crisis. Unemployment rose from 4 per cent in 2007 to 15 per cent in 2012.

A key question was whether the crisis undermined the previous trends towards greater gender equality in participation and employment, or simply put these on

<sup>7</sup> The annual proportion of births outside of marriage increased from 14.6 per cent in 1990 to 32.7 per cent in 2006 (Lunn and Fahey, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> The OECD estimate that for a lone parent earning 50 per cent of the average wage, the costs of full-time childcare represent 40 per cent of the family’s net income, the highest in the EU (McGinnity *et al.*, 2015).



hold temporarily. How would we expect a recession to impact gender differences in employment? According to the “reserve army of labour” thesis discussed above, women would be more likely to withdraw from (or not enter) the labour market in recession. From this theory, we would expect the labour market participation of women to fall in recession to an even greater extent than that of men. An alternative perspective stresses the role of segregation. The concentration of men and women in different occupations and sectors is argued to shape the gendered impact of recession (Rubery and Rafferty, 2013). Job losses for men and women in recession are affected by sectoral employment losses. If women are working in protected sectors, they may be less likely to lose jobs than men.

Focusing on the period after 2007, Figure 3 shows that male employment fell sharply in the Great Recession, dropping from 77 per cent in 2007 to 62 per cent in 2010. Women’s employment rate fell, but not as sharply as the employment rate for men, so that between 2007 and 2010 the gender gap in employment fell from 16 per cent in 2007 to 7 per cent in 2010, the lowest gender gap in paid employment in Ireland ever recorded.<sup>9</sup>

Contrary to the predictions of the “reserve army thesis”, there was no evidence of large-scale withdrawal from the labour market during the recession. However, Bercholz and FitzGerald (2016), show that without the recession, the counterfactual would have been a continued increase in female participation due to increases in education. Therefore, the recession did stall the rise in female participation.

What about the role of segregation by sector in understanding gender differences in employment during the recession? Women were strongly over-represented in education, health and other services, and overall in the public sector. Conversely only 5 per cent of those employed in construction were female, and 11 per cent in agriculture (Russell *et al.*, 2014). Between 2007 and 2012, employment in construction declined by 61 per cent, compared to an overall fall in employment of 14 per cent during this period (Russell *et al.*, 2014). In contrast, the number employed in the education and health sectors actually grew during this period, albeit by a small proportion. Kelly *et al.* (2016) conducted a formal analysis of the role of sector in protecting women from unemployment. The model results showed that the increased risk of unemployment for men is fully accounted for by the fact that they were more likely to work in sectors more exposed to the downturn, especially construction.

This convergence in male and female employment rates is best described as a “levelling down”, given the deteriorating situation of both men and women, particularly of male employment (Russell *et al.*, 2014). And of course the overall employment rates mask considerable variation in the hours of work and job quality as discussed below.

<sup>9</sup> The gender gap in employment is calculated as the difference between employment rates of men and women. As the male employment rate increased, so too did the gender gap, so it was 8 per cent by 2012.

## 5.2 Job Quality

Overall participation rates hide considerable variation in both the quantity, in terms of working hours, and the quality of jobs for men and women. One very salient difference between men and women is the hours worked. While in the 1970s women's part-time work was just beginning to be properly measured and recognised, and 28 per cent of women worked part-time,<sup>10</sup> by 2016 one-third of women were working part-time. This compares to 13 per cent of men in 2016 (CSO, 2017). Part-time work has considerable implications for weekly pay and career progression, as noted in Section II (Fagan *et al.*, 2014).

Another important difference between male and female employment is the type of job, as shown in Table 1. Occupational segregation measures the extent to which women and men are overrepresented in certain occupations (Charles and Grusky, 2004). Increases in female participation may decrease occupational segregation if women take up jobs in male-dominated sectors, but increase segregation if these jobs are in already female-dominated sectors. International research in the US and Europe shows diverging trends. From the 1960s to the 1980s, the United States saw a trend towards increasing female labour force participation and declining segregation (England, 2005). In contrast Bettio (2002) shows that higher female employment rates are associated with higher occupational segregation for a range of European countries.

What kind of jobs did women move into in the 1990s and 2000s? Did occupational segregation persist in Ireland, or did the increase in participation lead to a decrease in segregation? Appendix Figure A.4 presents the female share of broad occupations in 1991 and 2006 using Census data. In line with the overall increase in participation, this Figure shows that women increased their share of all occupations, from 34 per cent to 42 per cent over the time period (1991 to 2006). Women increased their share considerably in previously male-dominated occupations like business and commerce jobs; managers and executives; and scientific and technical jobs. However, the female share also increased among female-dominated occupations such as clerical workers, social workers and related occupations, personal service and childcare workers, suggesting increased feminisation. In very few groups did the female share fall, for example the group "computer software occupations", which was male-dominated, and "textile workers", which was female-dominated (see Russell *et al.*, 2009 for further discussion).

Looking further back, how did segregation in 2006 compare with that in 1966, as presented in Table 1? In 2006 16 per cent of women were in highly segregated occupations; that is with over 90 per cent of that occupation female, compared to a

<sup>10</sup> Based on figures in Table 3.3 p.38 (Walsh and O'Toole, 1973). The definition of part-time is less than 35 hours per week which is a high cut-off and so is likely to overestimate part-time among groups such as teachers. The proportion working less than 25 hours was 16 per cent. Among married women, 35 per cent worked part-time compared to 13 per cent of single women.

quarter of women in 1966. However, there was a rise in the proportion of jobs that were 70 per cent female, from 43 per cent in 1966 to 56 per cent in 2006.

Given the complexity of the picture, and also that the occupations themselves were growing at different rates, we now turn to more a more formal measure of segregation which summarise these diverging trends. These measures are presented in Table 3, drawing on analysis from Keane *et al.* (2017). The Index of Association devised by Charles and Grusky (2004) is the factor by which males and females are overrepresented in the occupations being analysed, with a higher score indicating greater segregation of occupations (see Keane *et al.*, 2017, for more details of the measure).<sup>11</sup> For robustness, Keane *et al.* (2017) conducted the analysis at both the level of broad occupational groups (24) and more detailed groups (225), as broad occupational groups may hide movement between more detailed groups.

Both measures fall between 1991 and 2006, though the fall is sharper with more finely measured occupations (Table 3).

**Table 3: Changes in Measures of Occupation Segregation, Ireland, 1991-2006**

	1991	2006
<i>24 Occupations</i>		
Index of Association	5.17	4.46
<i>225 Occupations</i>		
Index of Association	12.38	7.26

Source: Keane *et al.*, 2017, Table 5.

Note: High score indicates more segregation.

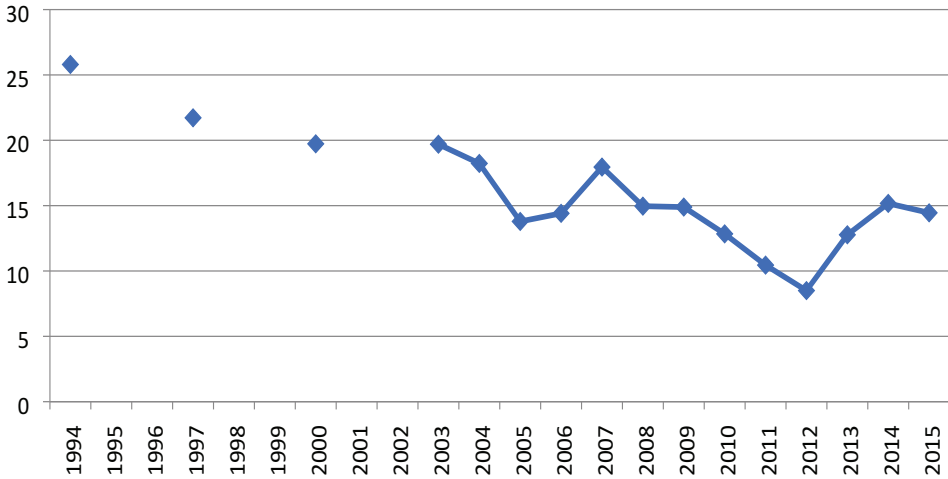
These results suggest countervailing trends – some movement into male-dominated occupations, some increased feminisation of occupations – but overall a small fall in segregation, suggesting that increased female participation was associated with a decline in segregation. Nevertheless, Keane *et al.* (2017) point out that segregation in Ireland, even after this fall, is high by international comparison. These measures of the extent of segregation have not been updated since 2006, but this is an obvious avenue for future research using more recent Censuses of Population (2011 and 2016).

What about the gender pay gap? A recent historical report from the Central Statistics Office (2017a) shows data on the gender pay gap in the industrial sector from 1942 to 2014. Average hourly wages earned by women in industry were more than 40 per cent lower than those of male industrial workers in the 1940s, and

<sup>11</sup> Unlike the dissimilarity index, the index of association is insensitive to size of occupation and changes in labour market participation rates, which is why it is presented here, given the changes in women's participation.

remained at or above this level until the mid-1970s. The hourly pay gap in industry fell below 30 per cent in the 1990s and averaged around 25 per cent during the boom. It stood at almost 23 per cent in 2014.

**Figure 4: Raw Gender Pay Gap for Full-Time Employees and Self-Employed in Ireland**



Source: OECD (2017), Gender wage gap (indicator). doi: 10.1787/7cee77aa-en. Based on median weekly earnings.

In the wider economy, as women's employment rates increased over the course of the 1990s and into the 2000s, and as women increased their share of previously male-dominated occupations and sectors, the pay gap between men and women fell. Figure 4 shows the raw gender pay gap, measured here as the difference between median earnings of men and women relative to median earnings of men and the data refer to full-time employees and to self-employed.<sup>12</sup> The average gender pay gap fell steadily from almost 26 per cent of male earnings in 1994 to just under 14 per cent in 2005. The gap then increased by 3 percentage points at the end of the boom. During the Great Recession, the gap fell sharply, to about 8 per cent in 2012, reflecting the deterioration in the male labour market with the collapse of construction, and perhaps the continued demand for highly-skilled women. However, with the economic recovery and growth in employment, the gender pay gap increased again, to around 15 per cent in 2014 and 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Part-time workers are not included in this measure of the gender pay gap, and given that a far greater share of women work part-time, and that part-timers tend to earn less than full-timers, this measure is likely to understate the wage gap. These data are not adjusted for compositional differences in, for example, education, age or experience.

## VI SUMMARY AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

Gender differences in paid employment rates have changed significantly over the past 50 years in Ireland. Notwithstanding some difficulties in accurately recording paid employment, the 1966 Census recorded one-third of working-age women in paid employment. By 2016, 60 per cent of women were in paid employment, compared to 71 per cent of men (CSO, 2017).

There are still marked gender differences in the nature of that engagement, with one-third of women working part-time, compared to 13 per cent of men in 2016 (*ibid.*, Table 1). Within female employment, participation rates also vary considerably according to education level and by the age of the woman's youngest child.

Increasing female labour market participation has been associated with some decline in occupational segregation. For example, in 1966, 25 per cent of women were working in occupations with 90 per cent or more female, compared to 16 per cent in 2006. However, the Irish labour market is still strongly gender segregated by international standards. Moreover differences in working conditions also persist. In 2015 the raw gender pay gap for full-time workers for was still around 15 per cent.<sup>13</sup>

As discussed in Section IV, some of the drivers of this change were increasing educational attainment of women and changes in the sectoral composition of employment, away from manufacturing and particularly agriculture towards services, jobs more traditionally associated with women. There has also been a sharp fall in fertility rates and a marked change in attitudes towards female employment in Ireland in the period. Policy issues that were prominent in the 1970s were tax reform, the removal of the marriage bar, the introduction of equal pay legislation and, to a lesser extent, the provision of childcare. The marriage bar was removed and equal pay legislation introduced in the 1970s, and there was a move towards tax individualisation in 2000, so some of these debates are no longer current, but the issue of childcare and family leave has received increasing prominence in recent decades. In the early 1970s there was little expectation that women with small children would be working, so the issue of affordable childcare and family leave were not salient. The challenge of reconciling the demands of paid work and care has become an increasing focus of research and of policy across Europe (McGinnity and Whelan, 2009; OECD 2007).

Female participation and demand for childcare places rose rapidly in the absence of substantial government investment in childcare. Childcare in Ireland is largely market-based and very expensive, one of the most expensive in the OECD: concerns have also been raised about the quality of provision (McGinnity *et al.*, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Gender differences in temporary employment, job insecurity, job control and work pressure are explored in Russell *et al.*, 2014.

Recent policy developments have included the introduction of a universal pre-school year in 2010 and, more recently an Affordable Childcare Scheme (2017), targeted at lower income families, in an attempt to address the affordability issue, though is targeted at lower income families, and the subsidy is small for most parents. The introduction of this scheme reignited the debate about whether the State should care for pre-school children outside the home, though as it currently stands, many women with pre-school children in Ireland are in paid employment anyway.

Of course, any analysis of gender inequality in paid work is incomplete without considering gender inequality in unpaid work, housework and caring. Caring work done in the home, of children or adults, and housework are not regularly recorded or valued in Ireland. As McGinnity and Russell (2008) show, there are very large differences between men and women in Ireland in the amount of unpaid work they do. Assessing the impact of work in the home on work in the labour market is very difficult without time use data, which are not routinely collected in Ireland. The issue of unrecorded farm work may be less salient than in the 1960s, but recording unpaid work and caring remains a challenge.

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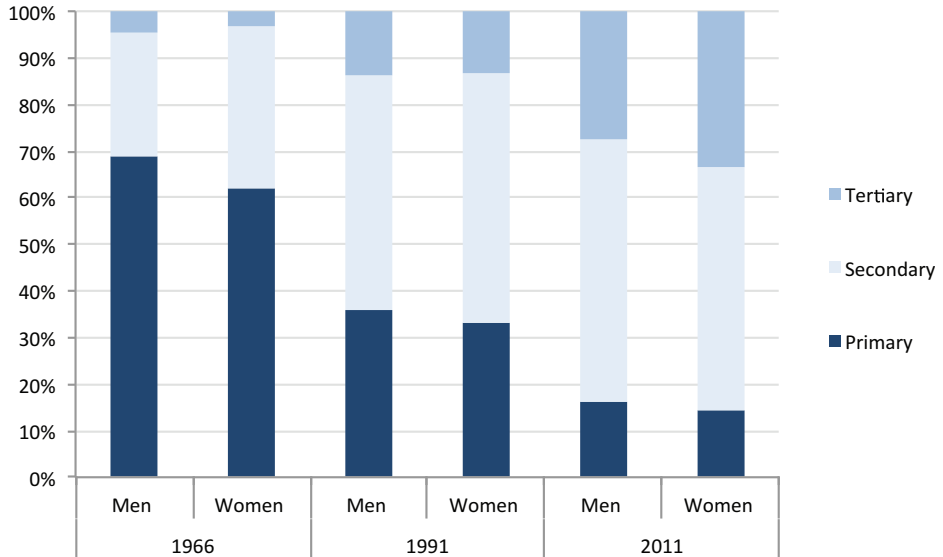
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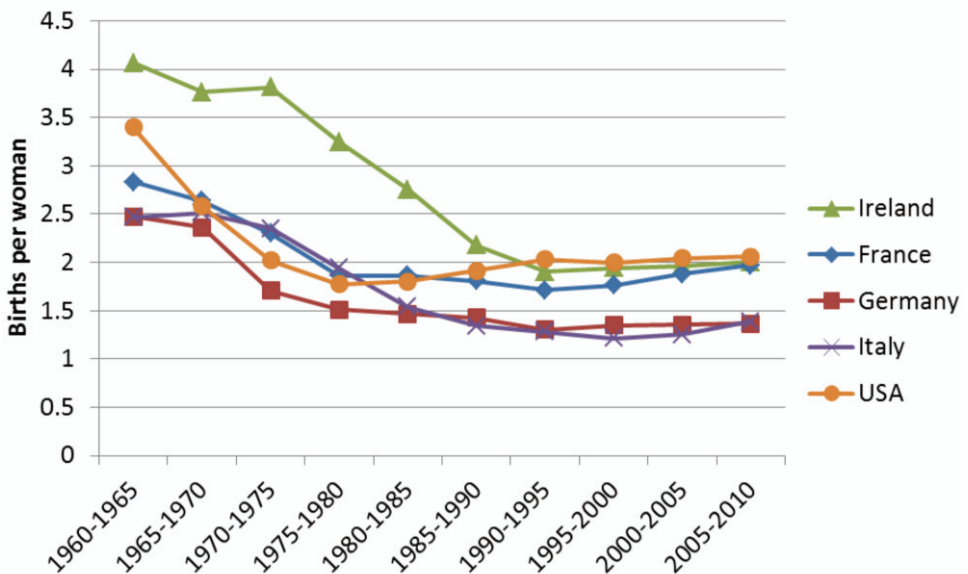
APPENDIX

Figure A.1: Changes in Educational Attainment



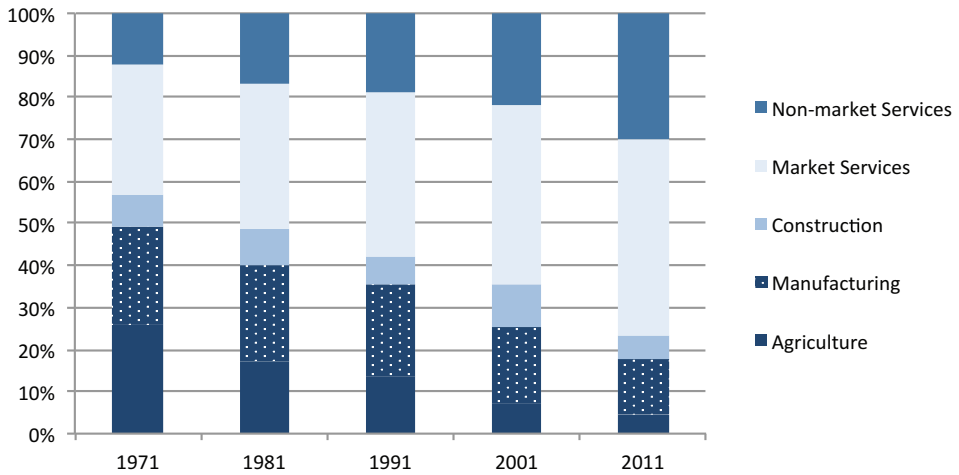
Source: Census of Population, 1966, 1991 and 2011.

Figure A.2: Total Fertility Rate Trends in Ireland, Europe and the US



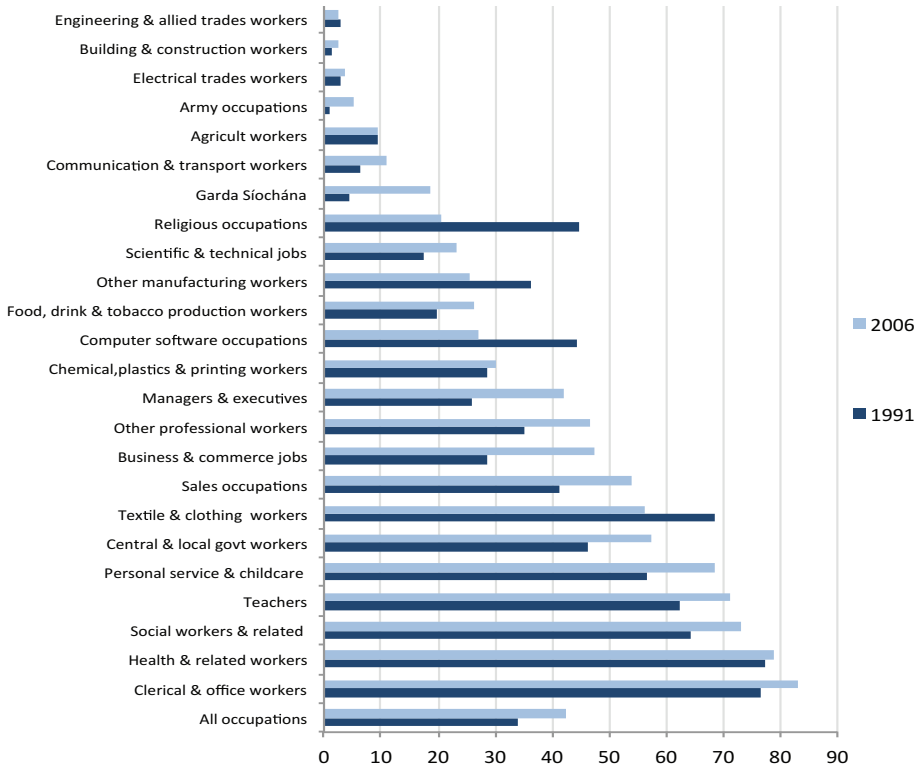
Source: <http://data.un.org>.

**Figure A.3: Changes in the Sectoral Composition of Employment 1971-2011**



Source: Census data.

**Figure A.4: Female Share, Broad Occupations Census 1991, 2006**



Source: Own calculations from census figures – Census of Population 1996, Vol. 7 Table 5 for 1991 and Census of Population 2006, Volume 8, Table 5 for 2006.