

**Irish Women at Work 1930–1960. By Elizabeth Kiely and Máire Leane. Pp xix, 220. Dublin: Irish Academic Press. 2012. €60 hardback. €24.95 paperback.**

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This exploration of Munster women's experience in the workplace is based on the stories of forty-two women, representing a broad spectrum of generational, social and employment backgrounds. It is one of two linked outcomes of a major H.E.A.-funded project completed in 2002–03 at U.C.C.'s School of Applied Social Studies, the major outcome being the online audio and pictorial archive of the women's interviews, available at <http://www.ucc.ie/acad/appsoc/OralHistoryProject/>.

The approach of the authors, both lecturers in Social Policy, is decidedly feminist, something clearly explained in the book's introduction and which sometimes leads to an over-emphasis on the feminist contribution to oral history. The view of the oral history interview as 'the product of a dialogue' (p. 8) is not confined to feminist historical or social research: it has long been recognised as best practice in oral history. Neither is the 'focus on meaning' and an awareness of the construction and re-construction of identity over time (p. 9) confined to feminist scholars: it underlies all legitimate research, whether using oral personal testimony or documentary sources. On the other hand, Kiely and Leane's consciously feminist emphasis gives some salutary reminders to all practitioners of oral history regarding the need for on-going reciprocity between researcher and participant. This emphasis on reciprocity underpins the format and presentation of *Irish women at work*. Written in a lucid and flowing style, the

text concentrates largely on the interviews, with detailed contextual material relegated to the endnotes. While this proves frustrating for the academic reader forced to turn constantly to the back of the book to explore evidence other than that of the interviews, it undoubtedly increases the book's readability as well as its accessibility to a broader audience. This researcher-participant reciprocity is even more evident in the online archive, designed to 'give back' to the participants the histories they shared with academia. Here the interviews are available in an unmediated form, rich with the elements that the printed word can less easily provide, and vital to any real understanding of individuals' memories and experiences – accent, intonation and emotion.

While this publication focuses primarily on the world of work, like all valuable research based on the personal testimony of individuals, it explores many aspects of women's lives – family expectations, authority, status, the nature of sociability, as well as the subjectivity of memory – both a weakness and (as Portelli has convincingly argued) a strength of oral history research. One of the most valuable aspects of the work is that Kiely and Leane have succeeded in 'standing back', allowing the past (or imagined past) to emerge from the stories told. Refreshingly, they have not become entrapped in the 'Oh, wasn't it awful!' version of the past that frequently infuses even professional historical interpretations of pre-sixties Ireland. They have succeeded in this regard because they have let individuals (female in this case) speak for themselves, and especially because they have made these stories available on the web-based archive, an exploration of which is a must for all readers of the book.

As a result of this 'standing back', there are really useful insights (retrospective though they may be) into many factors shaping women's lives, expectations and experiences in the pre-

sixties decades. There is a particularly sympathetic treatment of the role of familial expectations and ideology in determining the employment path taken by young women in both the rural and urban contexts. Closeness to parents (especially mothers); the need to ‘stand in’ as replacement mothers in the context of maternal overwork, illness or death; and the personal belief that a ‘good’ mother ‘turned out clean children and kept a tidy house’ (p. 111) all provide insights into women’s concentration on family. For those who inhabited this world as either adults or children (the present reviewer being in the latter category), such reminders may be superfluous. But for younger researchers and readers for whom this past is definitely ‘another country’, the book provides an insight into women’s perceived nurturing role not as a deprivation but their destination of choice. It also provides the equally valuable insight into how the life experience of many women took the gloss off this vision, while maintaining it as a very powerful factor in shaping identity and outlook.

The importance of social class (a particularly elusive but very real phenomenon in the Irish context) as a determinant or at least shaper of attitudes is also successfully addressed in this work. This is especially well presented in relation to expectations regarding education and employment, where economic necessity frequently led to a ‘fatalistic acceptance’ of any work available (p. 21) and discouraged young women from entering occupations involving apprenticeship and its expense. Probably even more useful than the discussion of class is that regarding status, a concept captured in ways as diverse as identifying memories of shopping habits (p. 32) and exploring individuals’ attitudes to respectability, whether in the context of factory-based employment or in expectations regarding the behaviour and outlook of teachers.

The nature of a gendered authority structure and the importance of supportive networks are also given considerable attention through all six chapters of this work. Women's interaction with other women through both formal networks like trade unions and informal interaction with siblings, friends, and kinsfolk is highlighted as a major survival mechanism. While the existence of such networks is hardly surprising, the women's narratives also reveal less expected cross-gender networks (especially in the workplace), preventing simplistic conclusions regarding what (in real life if not in the law) were complex social relationships between men and women. Gendered interpretations of hierarchy are similarly modified in the treatment of women's labour activism. The women's stories suggest how patriarchal attitudes on the part of both employers and union officials were sometimes used by women to their own advantage, while stressing that some labour-related tensions were clearly between woman and woman rather than between male and female. Equally useful as a balance to an excessively gendered view of society are the elements of individual stories that give a more nuanced interpretation to authority structures within marriage. The importance of the marriage gratuity as a potential equaliser between marriage partners is particularly well examined and perhaps some comparisons might have been made with the then still surviving dowry system. Anecdotes about husbands pressurised into supporting their wives' supplementary income generation – 'I made him get a chicken hatch' (p. 99) – are equally revealing in undermining any unquestioning acceptance of the exclusively male breadwinner model of economic survival and familial hierarchy.

*Irish women at work* is a really valuable publication. It combines scholarship, empathy and accessibility and provides a model of how such research might be carried out in the future, especially in its emphasis on reciprocity between researchers and participants and in its ability to provide a nuanced interpretation of very complicated issues.