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Joanna Bourke

Working Women: The Domestic Labor Market in Rural Ireland, 1890–1914 Historians and economists generally (and prudently) choose narrowly to define “labor” as paid employment, ignoring the largest sector of work: unpaid work within the home. It is no longer sufficient to regard women who work in the home as “surplus” or “unproductive” workers. Rather, the movement of women out of the paid employment market and into the unpaid domestic market is linked to the increased value of labor within the home. Although certain shifts in the economy pushed Irish women out of employment, there were equally powerful economic forces drawing women into unpaid domestic production.

According to Irish censuses, from the last few decades of the nineteenth century to 1911 paid employment for men remained stable. By contrast, female employment declined rapidly. Between 1891 and 1911, the percentage of all rural men with designated occupations remained steady at 64 percent, whereas the proportion of rural women with designated occupations dropped from 23 to 15 percent. In 1891, 641,000 women were employed, compared with only 430,000 twenty years later. The decline in female participation was steepest between the ages of twenty and forty-five, and affected single, married, and widowed women to similar degrees.

The census is not helpful in regard to the labor of women on family farms. Clearly, their unpaid labor on farms was substantial, but, as it is difficult to get precise information about how this labor force changed, we must rely on contemporary comment. Fortunately, there is a great deal of information on farm labor between 1890 and 1914 (in the form of reports of Royal Commissions; annual regional reports from the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, the Congested Districts Board, and the Irish Agriculture Organisation Society; agricultural pamphlets of an instructive as well as a descriptive nature; massive

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oral history collections; and newspaper reports). These sources universally affirm that the daughters and wives of male farmers had moved out of agricultural work on the family farm.

Such shifts were occurring at a time of rapid agricultural development and investment. My detailed examination of capital formation and current inputs has shown that there was a rapid acceleration of investment in Irish agriculture in this period.¹ Important factors were the quality of seed and fertilizer, weed eradication, mechanization, improvements in drainage, intensification of crop rotation patterns, improvements of livestock, farm buildings, and dairy machinery, and the extension of credit facilities. Changes in systems of land tenure (and improved access to information about farming techniques for laborers and farmers) also affected agricultural investment in Ireland.

Given these changes, what caused the rapid acceleration of female unemployment? Labor historians generally answer this question in terms of changes in demand for female labor or changes in the supply of female labor. For instance, the assumption behind many of the arguments is that there was a change in tastes: that women no longer wanted to perform heavy agricultural labor and/or that it was no longer considered appropriate for women to do so. A more plausible version of this argument introduces the notion of “income effect.” In this view, people had always opposed the employment of women in agriculture, and, when average household income reached a certain level, it was possible for them to follow their preference; or, people at a certain income level had always disliked female labor in agriculture and, as more and more households reached that level, more and more women withdrew from agriculture.

Demand-based arguments include the shift from tillage to pastoral agriculture and changes in farm technology. However, these arguments require an explanation of why female laborers were more liable than male laborers to be made redundant. A useful demand-based argument in the context of late nineteenth-century Ireland is the effect of legislation in restricting female

1 A detailed analysis of the changes in agriculture in this period, and the changing role of women on the family farm, can be found in Bourke, “Husbandry to Housewifery: Rural Women and Development in Ireland, 1890–1914,” unpub. Ph.D. diss. (Australian National Univ., 1989).

employment in certain jobs and the establishment of new “men-only” institutions to educate and monitor rural labor. An example is the development of creameries. The replacement of home dairying with creameries (either cooperatively run or privately owned) dramatically reduced the need for women in what had been a (female) labor intensive operation. The cream of 100 farms was churned in 2 churns instead of 100. The restriction of hours of work for women and children in the factory legislation between 1891 and 1909 also encouraged the substitution of male workers for female workers.² In Ireland, however, the occupations that were affected by such policies were few and localized.

All of these arguments are important but they ignore the booming economic importance of female labor in another sector of the economy—the household. There are two sides to this issue. First, in communities experiencing a contraction of employment, women might choose to maximize their economic contribution by focusing their energies on familial domestic work (this aspect is not discussed in this research note). Second, and more significant, there was simply more housework to do. The agricultural changes released capital (as well as labor) for investment in the household sector.

The theoretical stimulus for this type of analysis comes from debates in economic theory. In 1930, Robbins made a significant contribution to the modern theory of labor supply when he noted that labor decisions were made by individuals rationally allocating their time between market work and leisure. Thirty years later, Mincer extended the argument to encompass female decision-making. Mincer argued that, for women, the choice was not simply between work and leisure but between work in the home, work in the market, and leisure. In the 1970s, Leibowitz argued that the relative productivity of a woman’s labor in the home and in the market determines where a woman works. Becker integrated housework into neoclassic economics by applying to families economic concepts such as comparative advantage, maximizing behavior, and equilibrium markets. His crucial proposition was that males and females were relatively more efficient in their

2 *Idem*, “Dairymaids and Housewives: The Dairy Industry in Ireland 1890–1914,” *Agricultural History Review*, XXX (1990), forthcoming; *idem*, “Women and Poultry in Ireland, 1891–1914,” *Irish Historical Studies*, XXV (1987), 293–310.

respective spheres of labor.³ Whatever we think about the assumptions central to the new economics of the family, they incorporated housewifery as an essential element in an analysis of labor.

For historians, the term “housework” is complex. Housework suggests work inside the house, but child care takes place both outside and inside houses. If mothers enjoy taking their children for walks, is their activity “work” or “leisure”? Housework is not clearly different from other economic tasks carried out by rural women. Are Irish women looking after their chickens in the backyard performing housework—that is, if the eggs will be consumed by their households rather than sold? The Marxist terminology which distinguishes between exchange-value (production for the market) and use-value (production for household consumption) cannot be easily applied to small farming economies where much of what is produced “in the fields” is consumed at home.

Casual alternation between the terms “housework” and “housewife” also confuses the issue. Much unpaid housework is performed by single women (such as daughters and nieces) or by women not married to the “male head of the household” (such as mothers, sisters, and female in-laws).⁴ Men also perform housework. The word “housekeeper” has ideological overtones drawn from a later period. The term “domestic worker” is liable to be confused with “domestic servant.” Paid domestic servants and piece-workers need to be excluded. It is more appropriate to call people who perform housework “houseworkers,” irrespective of marital or familial status.

For the purposes of my article, housework is defined as uses of household time aimed at the production of goods and services which can be purchased in the marketplace. Unlike leisure activ-

3 L. Robbins, “On the Elasticity of Demand for Income in Terms of Effect,” *Economica*, X (1930), 123–129; Jacob Mincer, “Labor Force Participation of Married Women: A Study in Labor Supply,” *Aspects of Labor Economics* (Princeton, 1962), 63–105; Arlene S. Leibowitz, “Education and Home Production,” *American Economic Review*, LXIV (1974), 243–250; Gary Becker, “A Theory of Marriage,” *Journal of Political Economy*, LXXX (1973), 813–846.

4 For instance, in the 1926 census, between 11 and 31 percent of unmarried women over the age of twelve declared that they were “engaged in domestic duties.” My analysis of eight rural District Electoral Divisions in 1901 and 1911 shows that only one third of the women who called themselves “housewives” were wives.

ities, housework can be performed by a “third person” without any reduction in its usefulness.

These definitional problems hide a basic consensus about what houseworkers do. They work for “family.” They prepare food, take charge of preconsumption services, and ensure some degree of postconsumption cleaning. The home and the ground immediately around the home are their responsibility. Clothing and furnishings are often produced by homeworkers, and are generally maintained by them. Homeworkers are managers of capital investment and human resources. Their role as mediators between the patriarchal “head” and the “children” cannot be ignored. In each of these areas, significant changes were occurring between 1890 and 1914. Most of these shifts have a longer history, but the central alteration is firmly centered within this period.⁵

Before examining these changes, what can we say about the number and sex of houseworkers? Most were women. In 1926 (the only year for which an Irish census counted the number of people “engaged in domestic duties”), the 550,147 female houseworkers in the Republic of Ireland easily outnumbered the 1,593 male houseworkers. Just under 40 percent of all females over twelve years old were said to be “engaged in home duties.”⁶ Higher proportions of houseworkers lived in the counties of Meath, Longford, Cavan, Roscommon, and Leitrim, and lower proportions lived in Dublin and the three Munster counties of Kerry, Limerick, and Waterford. Rural women were more likely to be classed as houseworkers than urban women. Of all married women, 90 percent claimed to be houseworkers. The highest proportions of unmarried women were houseworkers in the province of Connaught, in the counties of Donegal, Meath, Kings, Longford, and Cavan, and in the city of Limerick. In the cities and in county Dublin, where there were more opportunities for paid employment, fewer unmarried women depended for their livelihood on the performance of unpaid domestic work. Wid-

5 For a broader analysis of changes in the household, see Bourke, “Husbandry to Housewifery.”

6 These estimates understate the number of houseworkers. When more than one person in a family of six or less was described as being “engaged in home duties,” census enumerators counted only one person, with the other person/s given no occupation. *Census of Population, 1926. II. Occupations of Males and Females in Each Province, County, County Borough, Urban and Rural District* (Dublin, 1926), 13.

owed women were less likely to claim unpaid domestic work as their occupation in Connaught and in the western counties and much more likely to designate themselves houseworkers in the southeast and in cities (especially the county boroughs of Dublin and Cork).

It is more difficult to estimate the number of houseworkers in Ireland before 1926. I have assumed that (1) only women between the ages of twenty and sixty-five years did housework, (2) women listed in the census without a designated occupation were full-time houseworkers, (3) “unoccupied” women doing full-time housework relieved “occupied” women from doing housework, (4) “occupied” women who did not have “unoccupied” women to substitute for their labor did half of the housework of “unoccupied” women, and (5) the presence of a domestic servant in the household supplemented rather than substituted for the work of at least one other houseworker.⁷ Based on these assumptions, a clear transition from paid domestic work to unpaid domestic work can be seen in tables 1 and 2.

In 1861 nearly 29 percent of women doing housework were being paid. This percentage increased slightly to over 30 percent in 1871 and 1881, before dropping dramatically to 18 percent in 1891. In 1901 nearly 16 percent of women doing housework were paid workers, and in 1911, 12 percent. The number of “full-time equivalent” unpaid houseworkers increased from 993,000 to 1,082,000 between 1891 and 1911. Put another way, if we ignored part-time houseworkers and concentrated on the two full-time groups, in 1891 there was 1 paid domestic servant to every 21 people in the population, compared with 1 to 30 in 1911. In 1891, there was 1 full-time houseworker for every 6 people in the population, compared to only 5 people 20 years later.

What explains these changes? Forces pushing women out of employment are important, but equally important are the other

7 For a survey of the empirical literature showing that the presence of servants does not reduce the amount of time that the employing houseworkers spend on housework, see Heidi Irmgard Hartmann, *Capitalism and Women's Work in the Home, 1900–1930* (Ann Arbor, 1975), 249–253. Estimates could not be made for 1841 and 1851 because the age data are inadequate. The data for 1861 and 1871 should be used with caution since the occupational tables are not strictly comparable with the tables for later years. In 1881, the figures exclude 206 women on board ship for which no information was available save their sex and number. The estimate for “full-time equivalent” was based on the assumption that “part-time” houseworkers worked half time.

Table 1 Estimated Number of Unpaid Houseworkers and Paid Domestic Servants, Ireland, 1861–1911 (1,000s)

YEAR	FULL-TIME HOUSEWORKERS	FULL-TIME EQUIVALENT HOUSEWORKERS ^a	PAID DOMESTIC SERVANTS
1861	394.7	769.1	309.0
1871	504.8	695.5	356.7
1881	748.7	846.5	392.1
1891	798.1	993.1	220.7
1901	818.5	1030.7	193.3
1911	819.1	1081.5	144.9

^a A “full-time equivalent houseworker” is two women who each do approximately half the housework of a full-time houseworker. They are between the ages of 20–65 and do not have a full-time houseworker to substitute for their labor.

Table 2 Estimated Number of Unpaid Houseworkers and Paid Domestic Servants, Ireland, 1861–1911 (Per Capita)

YEAR	FULL-TIME HOUSEWORKERS	FULL-TIME EQUIVALENT HOUSEWORKERS ^a	PAID DOMESTIC SERVANTS
1861	14.7	7.5	18.8
1871	10.7	7.8	15.2
1881	6.9	6.1	13.2
1891	5.9	4.7	21.3
1901	5.4	4.3	23.1
1911	5.3	4.0	30.3

forces that drew women into housework. Economic progress not only changes aspirations. It also changes the material and labor requirements of households. It is misleading to focus solely upon increasing consumption, since households do not consume unprocessed products. Potatoes are washed; cabbages are cut. Consumption does not start when the pig is slaughtered. Increased consumption requires increased production. The following section examines areas where expansion occurred, focusing particularly on housing, diet, health requirements, and child care.

Improvements in the housing of rural households radically affected labor requirements inside houses. In the nineteenth century, Irish houses were reputed to be the worst in the United

Kingdom. A description in 1884 by Stuart indicates that there were “Floors of mud; roofs of rotten thatch; one wretched chamber often doing duty as a kitchen by day, and as a bedroom, pigstye and stable by night; one bed, or a truss of straw having often to accommodate the whole family of all ages and both sexes.”⁸

Housing was, however, improving. For each decade from 1841 to 1911, data were collected on the “class” of inhabited housing in rural and urban areas. The condition of housing was judged by the number of rooms, the number of windows, and the materials from which the house was built. Four categories were used. Fourth-class housing consisted mainly of tiny mud huts. Third-class houses had from one to four rooms and a few windows, and were made of sturdier materials. Second-class houses were good farm houses, having five to nine rooms, and more windows. First-class houses were generally “gentleman’s houses.” Whereas in 1891 nearly half of all rural homes were third- or fourth-class houses, within twenty years nearly three quarters were first- or second-class houses. An examination of nearly 1,000 households in 1901 compared with the same households in 1911 allows us to break down the components of the change.⁹ In 1901, 36 percent of the roofs were made of durable materials, compared with 46 percent in 1911, and houses were 8 percent more likely to have windows. The percentage of houses with three or more rooms increased from 22 percent in 1901 to 25 percent over that same decade.

8 H. Villiers Stuart, *Observations and Statistics Concerning the Question of Irish Agricultural Labourers* (London, 1884), 2–3.

9 The data are taken from the original census manuscripts for 1901 and 1911. I have examined eight District Electoral Divisions (chosen randomly, with the stipulation that they be rural districts). In total, 1069 households in 1901 and 924 households in 1911 were examined. These data provide individual-level data on the relationship of the members of the household to the person designated “head of household,” religion, degree of literacy, sex, occupation, marital status, and place of birth. In 1911, married women were asked how long they had been married, how many children they had borne, and how many of those children were alive at the time of the census. In both census years, certain information was provided at the household level, including the number of outhouses and farm buildings on the property occupied by the household, the materials from which the roof and walls were made, the number of rooms and windows in the house, and the exact type of outhouse(s) on the property. These data were supplemented by matching the households with the valuation records held at the Dublin Valuation office, revealing the acreage held by the household and the valuation of the land, outhouses, and houses on the land.

Housing reform has been seen by reformers in many different countries as one of the most effective instruments of social change. In 1856, 1860, 1870, and 1881 laws were enacted to encourage landlords and Poor Law authorities to improve the housing of laborers. By and large, they were ineffectual. Since 1883, local authorities had been empowered to provide dwellings and gardens for laborers, but in 1888 Sir C. Lewis was still able to call the attention of the House of Commons to the failure of the Labourers' acts.¹⁰ Until 1892, the Labourers' acts had been applied only in Leinster and Munster, where 4,464 and 7,242 cottages had been built, respectively. Less than 90 cottages had been built in each of the provinces of Ulster and Connaught.

Under the Labourers' Act of 1906, the powers of local authorities were extended, and £4,250,000 were set aside for loans to rural authorities for housing operations.¹¹ The act empowered local councils to provide cottages for all manual workers earning under 15s. a week. The average agricultural wage in Ireland was 10s. 7d.

Other state bodies invested heavily in housing. The Congested Districts Board claimed that the improvement of houses constituted their most "productive" schemes. The four schemes which were part of this attempt (the parish committee, house improvement, migrant, and estates) involved 36,300 houses and cost approximately £225,000.¹²

What did reformers expect from improved housing? Housing was a moral and social question. Its political content was understated. At the very least, improved houses would mean improved housewifery. Human surroundings either "elevate or degrade." The "bright, cheery appearance" of the new laborers' cottages would uplift children both morally and socially. If the Irish were to be a "moral, sober, intelligent, healthy and industrious people," they must have improved homes.¹³

10 Lewis, "The Labourers' Cottages Failure," *Kings' County Chronicle*, 15 Mar. 1888, 4.

11 These loans were repayable in 68.5 years by annual installments of 3.25%, covering principal and interest.

12 Congested Districts Board for Ireland, *Eighteenth Report of the Congested Districts Board for Ireland . . . for the Year Ending 31st March 1909* (Parliamentary Papers [hereafter PP], 1909, XVI), 12.

13 Royal Commission on Labour, *The Agricultural Labourer. IV. Ireland. Pt. III. Reports by Roger C. Richards (Assistant Commissioner), Upon Certain Districts in the Counties of Cavan, Dublin, Galway, and Tipperary, With Summary Report Prefixed* (PP, 1893-94, XXXVII, pt.

Improved houses would (and were expected to) increase the workloads of women. Poor planning and construction had a similar effect. Housing built by the government did not always meet the requirements of prospective residents. Certainly, ideas of “respectability” were integrated into the designs. In the Lisburn Union, for example, cottages were built with a closed paneled front door (complete with knocker) and had varnished sheeting on the ceiling. But laborers’ cottages aroused “bitter complaints” from laborers’ wives, whose domestic labor requirements were ignored. Women complained about smoking chimneys, damp walls, the “want of rendering in the slating,” the absence of a loft, the coldness of the houses, and kitchen grates which were too narrow for pots. Poorly planned cottages caused “much domestic worry and unnecessary labour.”¹⁴

Another prevalent complaint about the new cottages concerned their distance from an adequate water supply. With increasing standards in housecleaning, more water was required. Mrs. Harold Lett, the president of the United Irishwomen, pointed out that an “ordinary family” would require about nine gallons of water a day, with an extra nine gallons on washing day.¹⁵ By washing once every nine days, she would be required to use an average of ten gallons a day. If a woman could carry two gallons of water at a time (weighing about twenty-four pounds) laborers’ wives living half a mile from a water supply would have to walk at least five miles a day just for water.

Even the floors in improved houses were a topic of discussion. In 1884 a disagreement between Charles Phillip Cotton, the

1), 40, report on Roscrea; “Women Workers’ Column,” *Irish Worker*, 19 Aug. 1911, 2; Mary Fogarty, “Influences of Home on Life,” *Irish Educational Review*, III (1910), 604; “The Provision of Labourers’ Cottages in Ireland,” *Irish Builder*, XXVI (1884), 155–156.

14 Francis Joseph Biggar, *Labourers’ Cottages for Ireland* (Dublin, 1907), 5. Royal Commission on Labour, *The Agricultural Labourer, IV. Ireland, Pt. II. Reports by W. P. O’Brien, C.B. (Assistant Commissioner), Upon Certain Selected Districts in Counties Carlow, Cork, Clare, Kerry, Kildare, Kilkenny, Kings, Limerick, Queens, Tipperary, Waterford, Wexford, and Wicklow, With Summary Report Prefixed* (pp. 1893–94, XXXVII, p. 1), 65, report on Cashel; 85, 105, 126, 44, reports on Lismore, Kilmallock, Carlow, and Naas. See also Newtownards Rural District Council, 1901–1911, reports of the Committees on Public Health, Water Supply, Finance and Lighting, meeting of 12 Mar. 1910, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast (hereafter PRONI), LA 61/3c/1. *Irish Citizen*, 11 Apr. 1914, 1, Mrs. Cloudesley Brereton debating before the Institute of Civil Engineers.

15 Paper read by Mrs. Harold Lett (president of the United Irishwomen) at the first annual general meeting of the United Irishwomen on 15 Nov. 1911, Irish Countrywoman’s Association (Dublin) papers, Minutes.

engineering inspector for the Local Government Board of Ireland, and the Commissioner Colonel King-Harmen centered around the type of floors that the new cottages should have. No one doubted that the floors must be sealed in some way: unsealed floors were cleaned too infrequently. King-Harmen recommended concrete floors, so that women could slish them down with water. Cotton opposed concrete floors on the grounds that women found them difficult and time-consuming to clean. He recommended timber or tile floors, because they were easily cleaned.¹⁶

Later reformers followed Cotton's tradition. In plans for laborers' cottages, one of the seven "essential requirements" was "strong smooth floors which can be thoroughly cleaned by washing, with boarding in bedrooms." Floors were being sealed in older houses as well. Brendan MacCarthy, medical inspector under the Local Government Board for the northwestern quarter of Ireland, noted that, although earth floors were still "fairly common," their numbers were declining rapidly as "public opinion was being formed against the use of these floors to a very remarkable extent."¹⁷ Since sealed floors showed dirt more clearly, they created additional work for the laborers' wives.

Housing reform cannot be separated from these attempts to disseminate notions of health, based on rules regarding cleanliness. At the same time that "Brigid" of the *Irish Homestead* jested that "tidiness" was a grating Anglo-Saxon word, she was heavily engaged in the campaign to appropriate the word into Irish culture. The reports of sanitary officers can be used to document these changes. Initially, the officers celebrated their broadening legislative powers by rooting out offenders of housing laws. However, the long-term trend in sanitary offenses was one of steady decline. Most offenses never reached the courts, but of those between 1892 and 1911 which did, the number decreased by 75 percent.¹⁸

16 *Report from the Select Committee on Agricultural Labourers (Ireland), Together with the Proceedings of the Committee and Minutes of Evidence* (pp, 1884, VII), 32-3.

17 "Memorandum in Relation to the Model Plans and General Specification for Labourers' Cottages Issued by the Local Government for Ireland," 24 June 1907 (Public Record Office of Ireland, Dublin). *Committee of Inquiry into the Conditions of Employment and Other Making-Up Trades in the North of Ireland. Report and Evidence* (pp, 1912-13, XXXIV), 161.

18 "Brigid," "Household Hints: Tidiness," *Irish Homestead* (hereafter *IH*), 17 Jan. 1903,

The type of sanitary problem also changed, as can be seen in complaints made by sanitary officers in the Ballymoney Union between 1875 and 1877, and between 1905 and 1907.¹⁹ In the earlier period, 66 percent of all complaints concerned cesspools or foul drains close to (or inside) houses. Nearly 25 percent of the complaints concerned animals inside houses. Between 1905 and 1907, only 34 percent of the complaints concerned cesspools and foul drainage, and 5 percent concerned animals within houses. The new complaints about sanitation in homes had to do with issues of waste disposal (26 percent) and general uncleanliness (15 percent).

Although it is impossible to measure their effect, reforming organizations attempted to stimulate cleanliness more directly. For instance, private organizations such as the Faughanvale Gardening Society and the Irish Peasantry Society (which rewarded tidy householders with generous prizes) were replicated throughout rural Ireland. The Congested Districts Board (under the parish committee scheme) and the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction began awarding money to householders who removed animals or cleared away manure heaps, and to households which were clean and orderly. As the *Irish Homestead* advised, to win a prize, wooden floors must be white from scrubbing. Each year from 3,000 to 5,000 householders competed for the title “best kept cottage,” and between 1901 and 1914 nearly £54,000 was expended in prizes.²⁰

The purpose of cleaning changed. Sweeping the floor became less a ritual linked with visiting fairies and festivals and more a “scientific” dirt-control movement to combat disease. In the nine-

53. *Judicial Statistics, Ireland, 1911. Pt. 1. Criminal Statistics, Statistics Relating to Police—Crime and Its Distribution—Modes of Procedure for Punishment of Crime—Proceedings in Criminal Courts—Persons Under Detention in Prisons and Other Places of Confinement—for the Year 1911* (pp, 1912–13, CX), xxviii–xxix.

19 PRONI, LA 16/9d/1, Ballymoney Union, Executive Sanitary Officer's Report and Report Book, 1875–1940. In 1875–1877, 243 complaints were made, compared with 141 in 1905–1907.

20 Vice-Regal Commission on Irish Milk Supply, *Appendix to the Final Report of the Irish Milk Commission, 1911* (pp, 1914, XXXVI), 53 (evidence by Mrs. Steele Hanna, Hon. Sec. of the Eglinton Branch of the Women's National Health Association of County Derry). Royal Commission on Congestion in Ireland, *Final Report* (pp, 1908, XLII), 31–2. “Queries and Replies. The Best Kept Cottage,” *IH*, 10 Oct. 1903, 829. Annual reports of the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction for Ireland in the British Parliamentary Papers.

teenth century, before going to bed, an Irish peasant woman would sweep the hearth and arrange chairs in front of it for the comfort of the dead. In the twentieth century, the younger generation watched their elders perform these functions. Good fairies were still said to visit only clean houses, but it was more important that visiting good neighbors would be impressed.²¹

The improving economy saw increased investment in household goods, and this shift in the “material culture” of the home vitally affected housework. The improving economy saw increased investment in household goods. “Labor-saving” equipment was seen as the solution to the problem of female status: “Any farm that can afford modern labour-saving devices for outside farm work, can also afford modern conveniences for making the home a good place for women to live, work, rear children and develop a love for farm life.” By reducing the drudgery of housework through the introduction of equipment, the “courtesy given to women” would increase. What historical studies today show, however, is that the average time spent on housework did not decrease with technological advance.²² In fact, in the case of Ireland, investment in household goods substantially increased the amount of work that women performed in the home. It both altered society’s expectations of goods and services which houseworkers should supply and increased the amount of time spent doing housework since they had to maintain the new products.

One indicator of increased investment in the home can be found by looking at the importation of household goods from 1904, when the trade series for Ireland begins (see Table 3). The importation of household goods increased by 50 percent in the nine years between 1904 and 1913, and increased a further 23 percent in the years 1913 and 1914.

Implements were important in cookery: “there’s little use in talking about improving the cookery in [Ireland’s] small house-

21 Stephen Gwynn, *Today and Tomorrow in Ireland: Essays on Irish Subjects* (Dublin, 1903), 102. Conrad M. Arensburg, *The Irish Countryman—An Anthropological Study* (Gloucester, Mass., 1937), 188.

22 “Homely Wrinkles,” *Ark*, May 1915, 6. “Notes of the Week: Lines of Progress,” *IH*, 26 Mar. 1910, 251. Summaries of this literature are given by Christine Bose, “Technology and Changes in the Division of Labour in the American Home,” *Women’s Studies International Quarterly*, II (1979), 295–304; Sandos Szalai (ed.), *The Use of Time* (The Hague, 1972); Kathryn E. Walker and Margaret E. Woods, *Time Use: A Measure of Household Production of Family Goods and Services* (Washington D.C., 1976), 32.

Table 3 Value of Imports of Household Goods, 1904–1914

YEAR	VALUE (1,000 £s)	INDEX 1904=100
1904	1,068.3	100.0
1905	1,164.0	108.9
1906	1,258.0	117.7
1907	1,276.5	119.5
1908	1,291.4	120.9
1909	1,307.5	122.4
1910	1,439.6	134.7
1911	1,491.4	139.6
1912	1,606.4	150.4
1913	1,603.9	150.1
1914	1,852.4	173.4

NOTE The term household goods includes candles, lamps, electroplated ware, mats and matting, washboards, bedsteads, brushes and brooms, chinaware, clocks, ranges and ovens (including parts), pots, pans, and buckets, cutlery, polishes, carpets, mattresses, picture frames, and furniture.

SOURCE Annual Returns of the Board of Trade, British Parliamentary Papers.

holds, without first improving their facilities for cooking,” asserted the *Irish Homestead*. Minor cooking equipment, such as spatulas, mixing and serving spoons, and a variety of pots and bowls, undoubtedly increased. In 1913, Maguire and Gatchell, a Dublin company established just after the Famine, noted its rapidly increasing trade in cooking apparatus since the 1890s. Larger consumer goods (such as stoves) had smaller sales. Most women cooked over an open hearth fire. As late as 1944, 40 percent of households cooked over a range, another 40 percent over an open hearth fire, and the remaining 20 percent over an open grate. Since most of the ranges had been installed after 1920, cooking over open hearth fires was the most common method used prior to World War I.²³

23 “Le de K. K.,” “Household Hints: The Homestead and its Indwellers,” *IH*, 29 Apr. 1905, 348. *Illustrated Record. Maguire and Gatchell, Ltd., Dublin, September 1913* (Dublin, 1913), 118–157, 229–256. John M. Mogeey, *Rural Life in Northern Ireland: Five Regional Studies Made for the Northern Ireland Council of Social Services Inc.* (London, 1947), 208–209.

Stoves were a popular item for advertisements. Coal and anthracite stoves were marketed as efficient and durable; oil cooking stoves dispensed with “the kitchen fire and cookery”; gas stoves were clean; and electric stoves were “absolutely safe.” However, the number of warehouses for stoves and kitchen ranges remained at seven between 1906 and 1916, and it is unlikely that many of the appliances reached ordinary rural houses. However, knowledge of new technologies for the home reached poorer rural households, creating a demand which could not be fulfilled. In 1886, for instance, free classes to teach cookery on gas stoves attracted only a small number of women in Cork, but, by the turn of the century, girls and young women attending itinerant cookery classes were demanding to be taught to cook on ranges (which they did not possess in their own houses) rather than in the customary pot-oven.²⁴

Domestic instructresses realized that stoves meant more work for houseworkers. Ranges in the period cooked unevenly. The majority had to be cleaned daily with blacklead, and the grate had to be emptied of ash every day. Most important, they resulted in increased specialization of cooking and encouraged the shift to time-consuming baked foods.²⁵

Diet had been changing since the famine. Assuming that increased imports of food products meant increased consumption of these goods—rather than the substitution of imports for home production—there was an expansion in dietary possibilities. Between 1904 and 1911, imports of sugar (and sugar products), tea, and cheese increased by 6–10 percent, imports of fruit and vegetables by almost 20 percent, imports of spices and condensed milk by 40–50 percent, and luxury items such as chocolate by 132 percent.²⁶

24 “The Tortoise” slow combustion stove in *Daily Express*, 1 Dec. 1885, 1; kitchen ranges in *Cork Constitution*, 18 Jan. 1886, 1, 24 Feb. 1886, 4; fire kitchen ranges in *Warder*, 6 Aug. 1894, 4, 5 Jan. 1895, 8; Frank Rippingille’s oil cooking stove in *ibid.*, 12 Sept. 1896, 1; “Frugal” cooking range in *Dublin Trade and Labour Journal*, 1 (1909), 2; anthracite coal stove in *Irish Weekly Independent*, 5 Nov. 1910, 6; Salamandre stove in *ibid.*, 12 Nov. 1910, 12; gas stove in *ibid.*, 30 July 1910, 9; electric stove in *Leader*, 21 May 1910, 331. Data on warehouses from the annual *Thom’s Directory*. *Cork Constitution*, 3 May 1886, 1, classes by Miss E. Thorne.

25 Davidson, *Woman’s Work Is Never Done*, 60–63.

26 For the best discussion of long-term changes in diet, see Louis M. Cullen, *The Emergence of Modern Ireland, 1600–1900* (New York, 1981), 140–192. Statistics from the Annual Returns of the Board of Trade in the British Parliamentary Papers.

Contemporaries noted rising levels of protein intake by rural households. Farming households ate more of their own eggs. Between 1904 and 1913, the estimated number of eggs produced increased by 32 percent, whereas exports of eggs increased by only 16 percent. Agricultural statistics show increased vegetable cultivation.²⁷ At the turn of the century, approximately 12,000 statute acres of land were planted in fruit, compared with 14,000 ten years later.

We can also get some idea of changes in dietary expectations by looking at the food of farm laborers, since they had to be fed well if farmers were to attract them. One large farmer in Cashel complained that, whereas in the past laborers were fed only potatoes and milk for breakfast and dinner and “oaten stirabout” for supper, in the 1890s laborers demanded eggs for breakfast, meat for dinner four or five days a week (with butter on the other days), and “very often” tea for supper. For employers who were expected to feed their workers, and for homeworkers who were cooking for the household, meat became a larger part of the diet, in part because of its declining relative cost.²⁸ As incomes increased, meat consumption increased. Meat required more time to cook and a more extensive array of cooking equipment.

As diet diversified, so did the degree of specialized knowledge required by houseworkers. No longer was cooking a job which could be “properly” performed by anyone in the household. A degree of elementary training was required. One of the things which gives status to certain types of food is preparation time, and offering a wider variety of foods increased the cost in terms of preparation.

27 “Notes of the Week: Poultry Keeping More Important Now to Ireland than the Butter Industry,” *IH*, 11 Feb. 1911, 105. Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction for Ireland, *Sixth Annual General Report of the Department, for 1905–1906* (pp. 1907, XVII), 289. Royal Commission on Congestion in Ireland, *First Appendix to the Seventh Report of the Commission, Minutes of Evidence (Taken in Ireland, 16th May to 11th June, 1907)*, and *Documents Relating Thereto* (pp. 1908, XL), 115, evidence by Peter McCullagh of Artaghgorta, representing the parish of Lower Badoney. Royal Commission on Labour, *The Agricultural Labourer, Vol. IV, Ireland, Part II, Reports by W. P. O'Brien, C.B. (Assistant Commissioner), Upon Certain Selected Districts in Counties Carlow, Cork, Clare, Kerry, Kildare, Kilkenny, Kings, Limerick, Queens, Tipperary, Waterford, Wexford, and Wicklow, With Summary Report Prefixed* (pp. 1893–94, XXXVII, pt. 1), 63, report on Cashel. *Abstract of Labour Statistics. Board of Trade (Department of Labour Statistics), Sixteenth Abstract of Labour Statistics of the United Kingdom* (pp. 1914, LXXX), 453.

28 Robert Andrew Anderson, *With Plunkett in Ireland: The Co-Operative Organiser's Story* (Dublin, 1983; orig. pub. 1935), 26–27.

The labor involved in food did not stop with its preparation. The ritual of eating also entailed responsibilities for the women. Hospitality was labor. Women were responsible for feeding all of the members of a household, including the increasing numbers of male farm servants.

The work involved in “entertaining” is illustrated in the memoirs of R. A. Anderson, a co-operative adviser. He reveled in the “unrestrained hospitality” of one of the homes that he visited on his travels. After a “gargantuan feast” of ham, geese, duck, mutton (one leg boiled and the other roasted), chickens, cabbage, and potatoes, the “host” turned to his wife and two daughters who had waited on them during the meal, commanding them to bring the whiskey, and sugar tumblers, and “be continually [sic] bringing hot water!” It was only after the men had finished eating and drinking that the wife and daughters were allowed to begin. The host’s wife or the “most senior woman” in the household was responsible for “managing” consumption.

Much less time was spent on child care than on cooking and cleaning. In part these activities were a function of the environment: in the countryside, children received less supervision. The labor of child care was undergoing change, however. Family size and the ages of children were significant factors in determining the amount of time spent in housework, as well as the marginal productivity of the labor of housekeepers. According to Kennedy, the number of legitimate births per 1,000 married women aged fifteen to forty-four years increased from 284 in 1881 to 305 in 1911. Between 1881 and 1891, marital fertility increased by 1 percent. It increased by 2 percent in the next decade, and then by over 4 percent between 1900 and 1911. Women living on smaller (rather than larger) farms were more likely to take care of more children during this period. Although families living on holdings of thirty to fifty acres in 1901 contained one more child under the age of fifteen years than families living on holdings of one to five acres, by 1911 the differential had decreased, with the average number of children under fifteen years decreasing on the larger farms and increasing on the smaller ones. Children were spaced closer together (see Table 4).²⁹

29 Robert E. Kennedy, *The Irish* (Berkeley, 1973), 176. Figures based on the analysis of eight District Electoral Divisions in 1901 and 1911.

Table 4 Number of Years Between Children (Age Fifteen and Younger) in Eight District Electoral Divisions, 1901 and 1911

YEARS BETWEEN CHILDREN	1901 (N=896 HOUSEHOLDS)	1911 (N=797 HOUSEHOLDS)
1	20.4	26.9
2	50.1	45.3
3	17.9	17.9
4	6.7	5.5
5	2.3	2.9
6	1.5	0.9
7 or more	1.1	0.6

Children were dependent for longer. This change can even be seen using the census samples for 1901 and 1911. Among boys ages twelve to fifteen, in 1901 nearly one third either had a designated occupation or were said to be occupied on the farm of a relative. By 1911, this figure had decreased to less than one fourth. Most of the change was due to boys remaining longer at school.³⁰

The movement of women into the household allowed more time to be devoted to child rearing. There are indications of increased child-care requirements and an intensification of child care. Imports of toys and other fancy goods grew from 11,890 cwts in 1904 to 18,249 cwts by 1911—an increase of over 50 percent in seven years. Expansion of domestic production of toys is suggested by the rise in the exportation of toys from only 99 cwts in 1904 to 701 cwts by 1911.

Like the young, elderly members of families began receiving special treatment. Indeed, the increased labor requirements of the home spread into most areas of housework, including the care of clothing, the demands of shopping, and new requirements of washing. However, the role of men in the performance of housework also needs to be considered. Economists today sometimes

³⁰ Figures based on the analysis of the eight District Electoral Divisions. Girls have been left out so that the issue of unemployment specific to females does not distort the trends. In 1901, there were 178 boys between 12 and 15 years of age, compared with 150 boys in 1911.

claim that men respond to the employment of their wives or daughters by doing more housework.³¹ Did the opposite happen when women moved out of paid employment? Did men perform any housework?

In 1958, the Irish Folklore Commission sent out a questionnaire entitled "The Social Aspects of Work." Question six read: "What part, if any, did men take in housework? Did men ever cook or wash dishes? Did men sweep, clean, or whitewash the house?" Thirty-seven people, mainly from the counties of Tipperary, Clare, Cork, and Galway, responded. Of them, 15 percent claimed that men did no housework. Over 50 percent said that men only whitewashed the house. Patrick Finn, of Loughrea (county Galway), commented that a man who did more than whitewashing "would inspire some local raftery." The only other jobs which more than one respondent claimed men performed were sweeping the yard, cleaning the chimney, and churning. Three respondents said that single men might be forced to cook.³²

Other comments in the Irish Folklore Commission's collection confirm that, excluding "outdoor" jobs such as whitewashing or sweeping the yard, men performed housework only when there were no adult women in the household.

If men performed housework only when a female was unavailable to do the work and the number of households without women increased, we would expect more men to be doing housework. In the sample of eight District Electoral Divisions, 5 percent of all households in 1901 had no resident female relative or female domestic servant. This figure had increased to 7 percent

31 For evidence of increased male participation in households that included females employed outside the home, see Lois Wladis Hoffman, "The Decision to Work," in F. Ivan Nye and Hoffman (eds.), *The Employed Mother in America* (Chicago, 1963), 81–100; Stephen J. Bahr, "Effects on Power and the Division of Labor in the Family," in Hoffman and Nye (eds.), *Working Mothers* (San Francisco, 1975), 167–185. This change has been greatly exaggerated, according to Richard A. Berk and Sarah F. Berk, *Labor and Leisure in the Home* (Beverly Hills, 1979); L. L. Holmstrom, *The Two-Career Family* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972); Walker, "Time Used by Husbands for Household Work," *Family Economic Review*, XIV (1970), 8–11; Walker and William H. Gauger, *The Dollar Value of Household Work* (New York, 1973).

32 Women also whitewashed the outside and inside of houses. See the transcript of a folklore interview with John Cullen, aged 71, a laborer of Bailieborough (county Cavan), Jan. 1948, 379, Irish Folklore Commission (University College Dublin), ms. 1024. Irish Folklore Commission, "The Social Aspects of Work" (1958). See also ms. 1523, 1669, 1670, 1828, 1829.

by 1911 (see Table 5). Much of the change was due to the decline in the number of female domestic servants resident in households with no female relative. Thus, 15 percent of households with no female relative had a resident domestic servant in 1901 compared with 8 percent in 1911. Men clearly considered housework predominantly a female occupation. In eight District Electoral Divisions, the lack of a wife in male-headed households was usually offset by the presence of another woman to perform the tasks required.³³

The extra labor within the household fell to women. It was mothers, sisters, and daughters (rather than domestic servants) who maintained and cleaned the larger houses. They invested more of their time preparing meals and cooking over fires or stoves. More intensive child care meant that women spent more

Table 5 Relationship of Primary Female Houseworkers to the Male Heads of Household in Eight District Electoral Divisions, 1901 and 1911

	Percent	
	1901 (N=744)	1911 (N=712)
One man only	4.3	5.6
More than one man, but no women	1.0	1.5
Wife	72.0	71.2
Unmarried adult daughter	6.7	5.3
Married daughter	1.1	1.0
Granddaughter	0.5	0.3
Unmarried sister	7.4	8.1
Married sister or sister-in-law	0.5	0.4
Niece or cousin	0.7	0.8
Daughter-in-law	0.9	2.0
Mother	1.6	0.7
Aunt	0.4	0.4
Domestic servant	1.6	1.1

NOTE In 1901, 4.3% of the households consisted of only one man and no women; in 1911, the figure was 5.6%. In 1901, 1% of the households consisted of more than one man and no women; in 1911, the figure was 1.5%.

33 See, for example, the comment by Peig Sayers that her sister could not get married until their brother brought a wife into the house to help with the housework. Sayers, *Peig: The Autobiography of Peig Sayers of the Great Basket Island* (Dublin, 1974), 24.

time indoors. The coincidence of declining demand for women in jobs customarily reserved for females and the increasing potential for productive labor within the home encouraged the movement of Irish women from paid employment (or work on the family farm) to unpaid production at home. The changes occurring in rural Irish society between 1890 and 1914 led to the development of a nonmarket household sector which demanded skilled labor—a demand that was met by women.