

# More than a century of female pioneers

## Women in the Advisory Service

Mícheál Ó Fathartaigh

Unlike in many other professions, women have always been to the forefront of the Irish agricultural advisory service, which was inaugurated in 1901. Initially, women had a defined role in the advisory service. They were the poultry-keeping and butter-making instructresses. In the latter half of the 20th century, though, they would become agricultural educators and advisors and ultimately CAOs and area managers.

Advisors, or instructors as they were called originally, have operated in Ireland since the 1700s. Up until 1901, they were agents of individual landlords or organisations such as the RDS. They were also all men. In 1899, an Irish department of agriculture was established and together with the newly formed county councils and their committees of agriculture it created a national advisory service.

From 1901, every county in Ireland would typically have at least one agricultural instructor and two horticultural and beekeeping instructors, who were men, and two poultry-keeping and butter-making instructors, who were women.

Poultry-keeping and butter-making were farm enterprises that were undertaken traditionally by farmers' wives and daughters. Consequently, the role of poultry-keeping and butter-making instructor was reserved exclusively for women.

The Munster Institute in Cork was where the instructresses were trained from 1905. Before then, they were trained at the Reading College Poultry School. The Munster Institute's course would be better, be less theoretical and more practical. The quality of its education and the value of the instructresses became evident quickly. The instructresses had a starting salary of £150 (about €15,000 in today's terms.).

### Poultry keeping

Focusing on poultry-keeping, in 1901 there were 18,811,000 poultry birds kept in Ireland; by 1914, the year that the first world war began, there were 26,919,000. The period of the early 1900s was a buoyant one for Irish agriculture generally. High prices drove expansion across the spectrum. Nevertheless, the performance of the other agricultural sectors came nowhere close to that of the poultry sector. Since the first world war, the growth in poultry-keeping had slowed as a result of the European economic slump following the war and the global Great Depression from 1929. However, it was not reversed thanks in large measure to the efforts of the female instructors.



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### High quality

As well as continuing to promote the expansion of poultry-keeping, the instructresses also promoted the importance of high-quality produce. After independence, Irish agricultural products were losing ground to continental competition in the vital British market. This was especially the case with butter.

Butter exported from Ireland was increasingly creamery butter, which was good-quality. Homemade "farmers' butter" was also being sold in Britain and its quality varied wildly. The instructresses had to ensure that the farming women who made butter adhered to the most rigorous standards because they literally held in their hands the reputation of Ireland's precious dairy industry.

Around the middle of the 20th century, the role of poultry-keeping and butter-making instructresses started to become obsolete. Creamery butter was entirely displacing farmers' butter and poultry-keeping was being practised on a bigger scale but on a smaller number of farms. An aspect of the latter trend also was that poultry-keeping was becoming a male enterprise, and instruction in it was no longer seen as a role reserved for females. In the early 1970s, men, in small numbers, trained in a new course as poultry technicians, a role which supported large-scale production.

Around the middle of the 20th century, too, though, seismic changes were afoot in Irish agriculture and a new prominent role would soon open up for women in the advisory service. Many of the changes were prompted by the prospect of EEC membership.

In 1957, the EEC was founded and Ireland shortly became keen to obtain access to its large common market, particularly for Irish agriculture, and to its financial supports, again particularly for Irish agriculture. Yet if Ireland were to be allowed join, and then to prosper once inside the EEC, Irish agriculture in particular would need to be modernised.

This modernisation did not just need to happen on Irish farms themselves, it needed to happen in Irish farmhouses. Rural electrification and improvements in rural water supply had and would bring potential benefits to Irish farmhouses. If time, energy and money were all managed efficiently in Irish farmhouses, this would make a huge contribution to modernising Irish agriculture.

Irish farmhouses remained the jurisdiction of farming women and it was they who had to be helped to manage them. In response, and continuing to deem that only women could help other women, the Government instituted the role of farm home advisor and reserved it exclusively

## Mary Walsh

“At the end of the 60s, things were starting to change,” says Mary. “The marriage ban ended which gave women the choice to pursue a career. I was inspired and encouraged to be ambitious by a number of visionary people, for example Paddy Donnelly, the CAO in Kildare.”

Mary was always convinced of the value of education and pursued courses, she completed the PG in agricultural extension at UCD, followed by public management majoring in human resources, at the Institute for Public Administration in Dublin. She also was a driving force behind short courses, and 100-hour courses supported by the EU, for farmers after 1973. “The period after we joined was very positive because there was money available from the EEC to run the courses,” says Mary. “We were able to achieve a lot.”

In 1983, Mary Walsh (then Mary Kerr) was appointed as CAO for Co Meath (although she did not take up the role). She became the first female CAO. Walsh had also been appointed the first female deputy CAO, this time in Monaghan, in 1976, later served as Deputy CAO in Meath having begun her career as a farm home advisor six years earlier. Mary served on the Teagasc Authority for nine years from 1989.

Mary resigned once her children arrived. “I decided with my training and experience that there were other opportunities out there.”

Today, Mary acts a consultant, coaching people preparing for job interviews. Have we reached equality? “In a lot of workplaces, yes we have,” says Mary. “The women I meet are being treated the same as men in the workplace as I myself was. Women are at a disadvantage, however, in that they usually have to take time out of the workforce to have family, that means they have less time to gain experience and to build evidence of their competence.”



for women. It would succeed the role of poultry-keeping and butter-making instructress. The Farm Home Management Course at the MI was never actually closed to men, but it did not attract young men.

### Course

Like their predecessors, the farm home advisors were trained in the Munster Institute. Their course was developed incrementally from 1962 under the guidance of senior practitioners in home economics from the USA, Germany and Austria.

It is hard to quantify the impact of the farm home advisors any more simply than to point to the visual transformation of many Irish farm-

houses between 1962 and 1983, when the role of farm home advisor was abolished.

The farm home advisors in service in 1983 were retrained as socio-economic advisors but by that stage there had already been women working as agricultural advisors and horticultural advisors for two decades, albeit in relatively small numbers.

This would become a growing trend as the gendered-associations of the various advisory roles continued to loosen at an accelerated rate.

Indeed, in 1983 it was, coincidentally, confirmed that there were no longer any reserved roles in the Irish advisory service, either for men or women.



## Siobhan Kavanagh

Siobhan qualified from UCD with a degree in Animal Science in 1994. Having spent a summer at the Pig Department in Moorepark in 1993 she proceeded to do a masters and PhD in pig nutrition at Teagasc Moorepark.

Upon graduation, she spent six months in the private sector selling pig minerals until the opportunity came up to do a post doc with UCD, based at Teagasc Moorepark, where she was responsible for the implementation of a new feed evaluation system.

Having worked for two years in that role, she was offered the position of national ruminant nutrition specialist for Teagasc at the end of 2000. "I had a blank canvas to build a nutrition support service," says Siobhan. "I lead the Teagasc Nutrition Programme for 14 years, working closely with advisors, researchers, farmers and industry personnel.

"Having spent 14 years in that role, I was anxious for a change in my career path and I applied and was successful in getting the regional manager's post in 2014, with responsibility for the advisory service in Wexford, Wicklow and Carlow. I am currently regional manager for Waterford and Kilkenny.

"As a woman, I have never been held back in anything I wanted to do. I think you have to be prepared to take on a new challenge or do something outside your comfort zone every year to build confidence and develop your skillset.

"Having a good mentor/coach is really important – someone who will give you guidance, be honest with you and push you. I have had good mentors/coaches since I graduated from UCD in 1994 and they have been instrumental in my career development.



## Majella Maloney

Majella Maloney is currently Teagasc regional manager for Kerry and Limerick. A native of Listowel in Co Kerry, where her family were farmers, Majella attended Aberystwyth University in Wales where she completed a bachelor of science in agriculture (animal science) degree. Prior to her current role, Majella has been a Teagasc advisor and Principal of the Teagasc College in Clonakilty.

"I think women having roles as farmers or managers is no longer seen as something out of the ordinary," says Majella.

"Women are not represented at all levels in equal numbers as men and that needs to change. But there has been huge progress and that is certainly due, in part, to the efforts and achievements of women who were pioneers and took on roles that had never been held by a woman before."

## Positive trends in family farming

The family farm has always depended on the work and support of all members of the family – men, women, sons and daughters. While research has shown that, commonly, all members of the family have not had equal access to farm ownership or equal influence on decisions made on farms, it is also the case that positive change is happening, according to the latest Teagasc research.

For family farming to survive, traditions that excluded women and offspring from having a meaningful stake in the farm have had to change. Teagasc re-

search has found that family farms are responding to the challenge.

For example, joint farming ventures, such as farm partnerships, allow husbands and wives; parents and offspring; other family members; and neighbours to jointly operate farms bringing together their knowledge and resources.

Research has shown that this boosts the success of the farm.

In Ireland, France, Norway and many other EU countries this trend is a vital part of the future survival strategy of family farms. For it to succeed, the

initial support of the – often male – farm owner is needed.

Our research has found that male owners of farms can be highly supportive and passionate advocates of greater contributions from women and offspring, as owners and co-owners of farm enterprises. This is necessary for old traditions to change, so that family farming survives into future generations.

– **Áine Macken-Walsh**, Department of Agri-Food Business and Spatial Analysis, Rural Economy Development Programme, Teagasc.



**Vanessa Kiely O'Connor, Cork; Imelda Kinsella from Kilkenny; Helen Brophy of the UCD Michael Smurfit Business School; and Emer Howard, Cork; at their graduation.**

### Teagasc/UCD Michael Smurfit School of Business course in strategy for farmers

The aim of this executive-level course is for participants to develop and enhance the skills needed to formulate a strategy for their family business taking into account the needs of all stakeholders.

This course is for farmers (full-time/part-time, male/female) who plan to identify where they want their business and their lives to be in three to five years' time and create a strategy to achieve their goals

Topics covered include:

- My personality/how I interact with others.
- Stakeholder identification.
- Goal setting.
- Negotiation skills.
- Investment analysis.
- Strategy formulation and more.

Successful participants receive a fully

accredited certificate at level 8 from UCD, which is presented at an academic conferring ceremony.

"I found it excellent and it really tuned me in to what I needed to do to move my business forward," says Peter Mongey, Co Meath.

"As well as gaining new skills and knowledge, I felt that doing the course gave me a greater sense of confidence when dealing with certain aspects of the business," said Vanessa Kiely O'Connor.

This premium course will run again in November and December and while interest has been strong, some places are still available.

#### Further information

For further information, please contact Mark.moore@teagasc.ie or phone 087-417 9131.

### Gender-SMART project puts the spotlight on equality

Nine European partners in the Gender-SMART project, including Teagasc, who all work in agricultural and life sciences, will be putting equality in the workplace at the forefront of their operations.

Each organisation, supported by two technical partners specialising in institutional change and appraisal, has committed to develop and implement a gender equality plan, centred on four shared issues:

- Building a gender equality culture.
- Developing equal career support measures.
- Reshaping decision-making and governance.
- Integrating gender in funding, research and teaching.

#### Funding

Gender-SMART is an H2020 project under the "Science with and for Society" programme. It has €3m of EU funding over four years.