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Gender and Rural Ageing in Ireland: Profile and Key Issues

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**RURAL AGEING
OBSERVATORY
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Introduction

This paper is the fourth in a series that explores various aspects of ageing in rural Ireland. It draws on newly-available data to provide a gender profile of older Irish people in rural areas and discusses some of the important issues associated with gender and rural ageing. While previous research suggests that certain aspects of growing older in Ireland are experienced in gender-differentiated ways, there has not yet been a specific research focus on gender and ageing in rural Ireland (Duvvury et al., 2012; Ní Léime et al., 2012). This paper draws both on Irish evidence, where available and otherwise on international research.

Why is it important to explore the gender dimensions of ageing in rural Ireland? Social gerontologists, as well as feminist and masculinities studies scholars, have identified important gender differences in the experience of ageing in terms of living arrangements, income, health, occupation, asset ownership, norms related to caring, social networks and access to services (Price & Ginn, 2003; Dobbs & Strain, 2008). Some of the earlier international research on gender and ageing from a feminist perspective has highlighted the disadvantaged position of older women in relation to income, assets and providing and receiving care (Peggs & Davies, 2001; Arber et al., 2003). Researchers have also discussed ways in which older men may be disadvantaged in terms of having fewer social networks than women and may be at greater risk of social isolation (Arber et al., 2003; De Jong Gierveld, 1998). A small number of international studies have considered some of the gender dimensions of ageing in a rural context in relation to volunteering and attachment to place (Droogleeveer Fiortuijn & Van der Meer, 2006; Chapman & Peace, 2008). To date, there has been a relatively limited research focus on gender in rural Ireland (McNerney & Gillmor, 2005); existing studies have tended to focus initially on the role of women on farms and in farm organisations and, later, on the role of women in off-farm employment, rural development and sustainability (O'Hara, 1998; Byrne & Owens, 1998; Shortall & Byrne, 2009). More recent research (using a masculinities approach) has explored the effects of changing gender roles for (mostly younger) men in rural areas, focussing on the impact of this and of increasing urbanisation and the decline

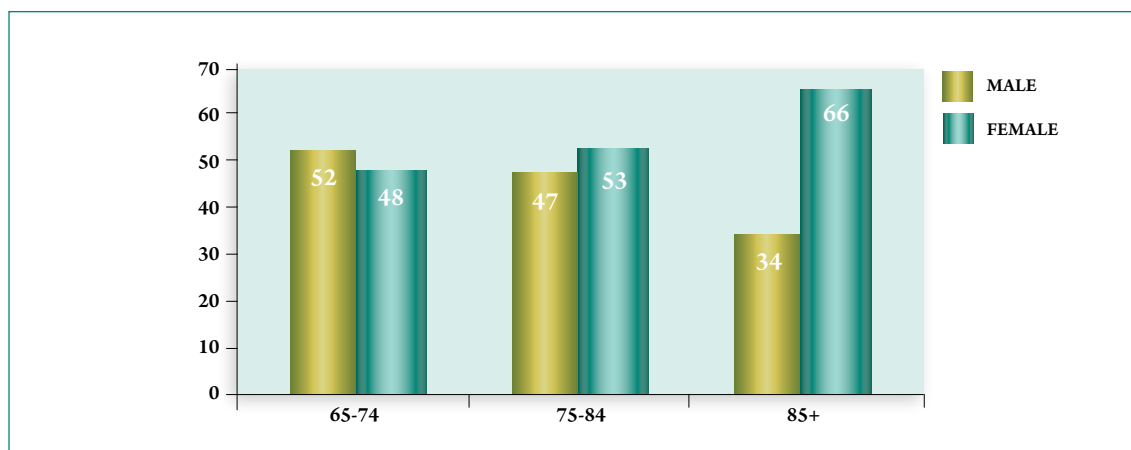
in farming activity on the identity of men in rural areas (Ní Laoire, 2002; 2005; Shortall & Byrne, 2009).

Both international and Irish studies have interrogated earlier stereotypical portrayals of rural areas as “idyllic” and, adopting a critical gerontology or a feminist perspective, have identified processes that may negatively affect the quality of life of both older women and men in rural areas (Keating, 2008; Little, 2009; McNerney & Gillmor, 2005). These include rural de-population, the withdrawal of services such as pubs, shops, post-offices and Garda stations, lack of transport and distance from services such as hospitals; research also points to positive aspects of rural ageing such as attachment to place, community spirit, scenic beauty and tranquillity (Chapman & Peace, 2008; Walsh et al., 2012a). It has been pointed out that the impacts of such factors vary depending on the location (remote or near a large town or city), type of community, level of services and family supports available. It also varies depending on the characteristics of older people themselves, including gender. Although some gender differences in ageing experience have been identified from studies conducted on specific issues, such as social exclusion, pensions and social participation, there has been no specific research focussing on the gender dimensions of ageing in rural Ireland (HARC, 2010; Walsh et al., 2012a; Duvvury et al., 2012; Ní Léime et al., 2012).

This briefing paper begins to address this gap, drawing on recently-available data from the Census, and conducting analysis of data from the TILDA and EU-SILC surveys; it provides a gender profile of older rural dwellers in relation to age distribution, marital status, living arrangements, education and occupation. It goes on to discuss and provide descriptive statistics on issues that have been identified as important from a gender perspective, including the gender dimensions of farming, differences in terms of income and poverty, loneliness, social isolation and self-rated health. Finally, shifting the focus from the ‘problematic’ aspects of rural ageing, it considers gender differences in the contributions that older rural men and women make to society in the form of paid employment, informal care, volunteering and social participation.

Gender Profile of Older People in Rural Ireland

Figure 1: Older males and females living in rural areas by age group



Source: Central Statistics Office, 2011

The 2011 census reveals that 58 per cent of older adults (aged 65 or over) live in urban areas while 42 per cent reside in rural areas (Central Statistics Office, 2012a); this is part of an increasing trend for older people to live in urban areas (Connolly et al., 2012b).

The proportion of older people in rural areas who are female increases from 48 per cent in the 65-74 age-group to 66 per cent in the 85+ age-group (Figure 1). In the “oldest old” age group of 85 and over in rural areas, women outnumber men by almost two to one.

Marital Status

Table 1 outlines the marital status of older adults in rural areas by gender and age-group. In total, a higher proportion of men (65%) than women (46%) are married, while a higher proportion of women (42%) than men (11%) are widowed. The latter proportion increases with age; the percentage of rural-dwelling women who are widowed in the 65-74 age-group is 26 per cent (as compared to only 7% of men) and this increases to 76 per cent (compared to 32% of men) for those aged 85 and over. More than double

the proportion of rural-dwelling males (20%) compared to females (9%) are single (Table 1). This may be partly attributed to historical norms of out-migration of women from rural areas (Kamiya & Sofroniou, 2011). Relatively low proportions of both men and women are separated or divorced and the proportion is lower in older age-groups, perhaps partly reflecting the relatively recent introduction of divorce in Ireland and partly reflecting conservative social norms among the 85+ cohort in rural Ireland.

Living Arrangements

Analysis of data from Wave 1 of The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) indicates that living arrangements of older rural-dwellers vary by gender¹; the main differences are that a higher proportion of men (than of women) live with a spouse only or live with relatives or unrelated people. A higher proportion of women than men live alone or with their children (Table 2).

¹ In TILDA data “urban” means living in a dwelling located in Dublin city or county, or in a city or town in the Republic of Ireland other than Dublin; “rural” means living in a dwelling located in a rural part of the Republic of Ireland.

Table 1: Gender and marital status of older adults in rural areas by age-group

	MALE				FEMALE			
Age Group	65-74	75-84	85+	All (65+)	65-74	75-84	85+	All (65+)
Number	67,655	33,897	8,592	110,144	62,491	38,148	16,630	117,269
Single (%)	18	23	24	20	7	11	13	9
Married (%)	70	59	43	65	63	31	10	46
Separated/ divorced (%)	5	2	1	4	4	1	1	3
Widowed (%)	7	16	32	11	26	57	76	42
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Central Statistics Office, 2011. (Rounded to the nearest percentage)

Table 2: Living arrangements of men and women aged 65 and over in rural areas

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS	MALE %	FEMALE %
Living alone	28	38
Living with a spouse only	53	41
Living with children (including stepchildren and adopted children)	15	18
Living with other relatives or unrelated people	4	3
Total	100	100

Source: Tabulation based on Wave 1, 2009 TILDA data ²

² TILDA is The Irish Longitudinal Study of Ageing (referred to in this document as TILDA).

Table 3: Living alone in rural areas in Ireland by gender and age-group

AGE-GROUP	MALE %	FEMALE %
65-74	47	53
75-84	32	68
85+	28	72
All 65 and over	38	62

Source: Tabulation based on Wave 1, 2009 TILDA data

There are no published census data on the gender distribution of those living alone in rural areas. However, EU-SILC data indicate that 44 per cent of rural women as opposed to 32 per cent of rural men live alone (Source: EU-SILC data, 2010³).

If we look at the gender distribution of those living alone by age group in the TILDA data-set, it is clear that women account for almost three quarters (72%) of those in the oldest age-group (85 and over) who live alone in rural areas while they form just over half (53%) of those living alone in the 65-74 age-group (Table 3). Previous research has found that living alone may have important implications for the quality of life of older adults. If people live alone in rural areas and do not have access to transport or are unable to drive (typically the case for older women), this may restrict their level of social interaction and their access to services (Dobbs & Strain, 2008). Of course, the impact of living alone varies according to where people live (village or countryside), their level of mobility, the availability of services, such as home helps, and their level of health and social support (Wenger, 2009). This is an area that warrants further research attention in Ireland.

Self-rated Physical and Mental Health

According to TILDA data, there are few gender differences in relation to self-rated physical health for older rural-dwellers. The main exception is that, a smaller proportion of women (compared to men) rate their health as “excellent” or “good”, while a higher proportion rate it as “very good” (Table 4).

The main gender differences in relation to self-rated mental and emotional health are that a smaller proportion of older rural women than of older rural men rate this as excellent and a higher proportion of women rate their mental and emotional health as fair or poor (Table 5).⁴ Again, this result may be linked to the higher proportion of women in the “oldest old” (85+) age group in rural Ireland.

It may also be related to the greater likelihood of older women being involved in caring for dependent family members, with consequent impacts on their mental and emotional health due to stress, lack of sleep and isolation (Post, 2005, O’Sullivan, 2008).

3 In Ireland the SILC survey has been conducted by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) since 2003. It is an annual survey of a representative random sample of different types of households in Ireland. In 2010, the survey included data from 4,727 households and 11,587 interviewed individuals – 5,683 (49%) men; 5,904 (51%) women. 2,046 (17.66% of) participants were aged 65 years and older: - 941 men (46%); 1,105 women (54%). Of these, 485 males (44.8%) and 597 females (55.2%) lived in urban areas; 456 males (47.3%) and 508 females (52.7%) lived in rural areas.

4 A statistically significant relationship exists between urban/rural location and self-rated emotional health as well as between gender and self-rated emotional health; the effect is stronger for urban/rural location and self-rated emotional health.

Table 4: Self-rated physical health for rural men and women aged 65 and over

	MALE %	FEMALE %
Excellent	9.62	8.64
Very Good	21.87	24.0
Good	36.04	34.9
Fair	25.97	25.91
Poor	6.5	6.55

Source: Tabulation based on Wave 1, 2009 TILDA data.

Table 5: Self-rated mental and emotional health for rural men and women aged 65 and over

	MALE %	FEMALE %
Excellent	20.7	18.3
Very Good	36.6	37.0
Good	33.4	33.1
Fair	8.3	9.9
Poor	1.0	1.7

Source: Tabulation based on Wave 1, 2009 TILDA data

Education and Occupation

Table 6 presents the gender breakdown of educational attainment for older people in rural areas taken from EU-SILC data. The highest level of education for a majority of older rural people is primary education. This partly reflects the fact that free secondary level education was not introduced in Ireland until 1967. The higher proportion of men than women with primary education only is partly attributable to prevailing cultural norms at the time when this group were young adults; farms were typically inherited by sons, who were not, at that time, thought to require high levels of education for farming (Shortall, 1999). Girls were more likely to be educated to lower or upper secondary level in order to equip them to seek work. Similarly low proportions

of men and women received a third-level education (Table 6). Census data indicate that older rural dwellers were only half as likely as urban dwellers to have a third-level education (Connolly et al, 2012a).

Lower levels of education have been associated with poorer self-rated health and with less likelihood of reporting ill-health for older people generally and for older women in particular (Grundy & Slogett, 2003). It is recognised that there are links between lower levels of education and poorer employment prospects and that this, in turn, may be linked to lower income in later life (Arber & Ginn, 2003). Previous studies have found that, typically, people with a higher level of education tend to have more social engagement than those with a lower level of education (Agahi & Parker, 2005; Timonen et al, 2011).

Table 6: Highest level of education attained for rural men and women aged 65 and over

EDUCATION LEVEL	MALE %	FEMALE %
Primary (including no formal education)	69.5	59.1
Lower secondary	12.3	16.5
Upper secondary	5.9	10.8
Post leaving Certificate	0.9	3.9
Third Level – non degree	0.9	0.6
Third level – degree or above	9.6	8.5
Other/Not stated	0.9	0.6
Total	100	100

Source: Tabulation based on EU SILC data, 2010

Employment

There is increasing recognition that older men and women contribute substantially to society. One of the ways in which they do so is through participating in the labour force. In 2011 in Ireland, 13.8% of men and 4.8% of women aged 65 and over were in the labour force (Central Statistics Office, 2012a, p. 18). According to TILDA data, 12 per cent of those aged between 65 and 74 and 5% of those aged 75 and over were in employment (Mosca & Barrett, 2011)⁵.

Table 7 shows the gender distribution of rural dwellers by occupational status⁶. As may be expected, given gendered social norms, a large proportion (approximately 45%) of women and only a very small proportion of men (0.3%) identify themselves as home-makers. By contrast, over three-quarters of men (77%) and less than half (47%) of women identify themselves as retired. A much lower proportion of older rural women (5%) than of men (20%) are in paid employment, including both employed and self-employed (Table 7). Much of the gender difference in employment rates is due to the relatively high proportion of men engaged in agriculture; 16 per cent of men as compared to only two per

cent of women identify themselves as being self-employed (this category includes farming which is discussed further in the following pages).

EU-SILC data provide a more detailed indication of the types of economic activity engaged in by rural men and women aged 65 and over who are in paid employment (Table 8). The proportion of people involved in farming in Ireland has decreased in recent years and there is a greater dependence on off-farm employment in rural areas (Shortall & Byrne, 2009). Nevertheless, for older rural men, by far the most common occupational sector is still agriculture, fisheries and forestry (37.8%), followed by construction (13.6%) manufacturing (10.7%) and public administration, defence and social security (8%). By contrast, the highest proportion of women were employed in the health sector (16.8%), followed by other (including cleaning) (15.6%), and wholesale and retail (12%). This is followed by agriculture, fisheries and forestry and manufacturing, both at 10.2 per cent, reflecting women's greater involvement (than men) in diverse sectors of employment, particularly in the services sector in rural areas.

Despite the relatively low levels of education of older rural men and women, very few are engaged in full-time education. This might reflect the relatively poor provision of opportunities for lifelong learning and/or the difficulties of attending courses in nearby large urban centres due to the poor availability of transport in many rural areas.

⁵ This figure incorporates any older adult (aged 65+) who completed at least one hour of paid work a week.

⁶ The numbers involved are low, so percentages should be interpreted with caution; however, the data give an insight into the occupational status of older rural-dwellers.

Table 7: Employment status for females and males aged 65 and over in Ireland

Status	RURAL		URBAN	
	Male %	Female %	Male %	Female %
Retired	77.2	46.5	90.4	61.0
Employed	4.0	3.2	3.2	3.0
Self-Employed (including farming)	16.0	2.0	5.0	1.0
Unemployed	0.5	0	0.1	0
Sick	1.0	1.8	1.0	3.0
Homemaker	0.3	44.5	0.1	31.0
Education	0	.1	0.1	0
Other	1.0	1.9	0.1	1.0
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: Tabulation based on Wave 1, 2009 TILDA data ⁷

Table 8: NACE Economic Sector of Employment for rural-dwellers aged 65 and over, by gender

	MALE %	FEMALE %
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing	37.8	10.2
Mining and Quarrying	2.2	0
Manufacturing	10.7	10.2
Electricity, Gas, Water supply	0.9	0
Construction	13.6	1.2
Wholesale and Retail	6.2	12.0
Hotels and Restaurants	2.4	9.9
Transport, Storage, Communication	5.1	3.3
Financial Intermediation	0.9	1.2
Real Estate, Renting and Business Activities	1.6	4.2
Public Administration, defence, social security	8.0	8.8
Education	5.1	6.6
Health	1.3	16.8
Other	4.2	15.6
Total	100 (n=450)	100 (n=333)

Source: Tabulation based on EU SILC data, 2010

⁷ Chi-square tests were used to test for the relationship between employment status and gender and employment status and urban/rural location respectively. Both tests gave highly significant results ($p=0.000$).

Gender and Farming

In the 1980s and 1990s, research from a feminist perspective explored the gendered nature of farming in Ireland. Such studies focussed on the patriarchal organisation of farming and highlighted the invisibility of women's work on the farm in official statistics (O'Hara, 1998; Shortall, 1999). They identified that although the work women performed on farms formed a major contribution to farm output and sustainability, it was largely unrecognised and unrewarded. Research pointed to the low levels of female farm ownership, and the lack of reward for women's work in terms of having wages or pensions in their own right (O'Hara, 1998; Shortall, 1999). Despite the introduction of protections, such as rights to an interest in the family home, recent research has highlighted the continuing financial vulnerability of older farm women in the event of divorce (Duvvury et al., 2012).

It appears that there is still a relatively low level of female farm ownership. Almost 88 per cent of farm owners are male with only 12.4 per cent of farms in female ownership (increased from 10.7% in 2000 (Central Statistics Office, 2012c)). Female owners tend to be concentrated in the 65 years and over age group with the average age of a female owner being 58 years compared to 54 years for males (Central Statistics Office, 2012c). Overall, 27 per cent (n=74,092) of the farming workforce in Ireland are women; only 17,345 women are farm owners (Central

Statistics Office, 2012c). For those aged 65 and over, 83% per cent of all farmholders are men and 17% are women (Central Statistics Office, 2012c). Research also points to the very low proportion of women in prominent positions in farming and rural development organisations (Shortall, 1999).

An issue previously identified as important in the literature was the fact that many women working on the family farm were treated as 'relatives assisting' and as such had no social insurance contributions entitling them to an old age contributory pension in their own right. This left these women financially dependent on their husbands who received a state pension on their wife's behalf (approximately 70% of the full amount) paid as part of their (husband's) pension payment. If a woman reached the age of 65 before her husband, she would not receive a pension until he reached pension age (Duvvury et al., 2012). However, since 2009, proof of farm partnership and subsequent opportunities to claim farm partnership status retrospectively were approved. While this has improved the status of some older women who are able to produce documentary proof that they were farm partners, it is not true for all farm women – there is evidence that some women remain unrecognised as farm partners, contributing to their economic vulnerability (Duvvury et al., 2012).

Poverty and Pensions

When compared with urban older people, rural older people have double the risk of experiencing relative income poverty (i.e. their income falls below the poverty line which is set at 60% of median income) (Connolly et al., 2012a). Older women in general have traditionally been at greater risk than older men of experiencing income poverty; this has been attributed to their lack of involvement in the formal paid labour market and/or interrupted work trajectories due to the traditional gendered caring norm whereby women are expected to be the primary carers for dependant family members (Prunty, 2007; Duvvury et al., 2012). Older women are therefore more likely to be reliant on the state non-contributory pension than men who are more likely to receive contributory or occupational pensions. The evidence shows that older women in Ireland are more reliant on social transfers and less likely to have an occupational pension than older males (Duvvury et al., 2012).

In Ireland, there is a lack of gender analysis of poverty which disaggregates findings by rural and urban location. From the TILDA data, it appears that a lower proportion of women than men have an occupational pension; in total 40 per cent of urban residents are in receipt of a pension from a previous employer compared to 22 per cent of rural dwellers (Source: TILDA, Wave 1, 2009). There are clear differences in terms of both location and gender with a higher proportion of urban dwellers in receipt of an occupational pension for both males (59%) and females

(25%). A higher proportion of males (30%) compared to females (16%) in rural areas have an occupational pension. This confirms previous findings in relation to the financial vulnerability of older women and indicates that older rural women are even less likely than older urban women to have an occupational pension (Central Statistics Office, 2011, Wanless et al., 2010).

Income

The gross weekly income of older women in Ireland is, on average, 13 per cent less than that of older men (Central Statistics Office, 2011). It appears that in rural areas, older women form the majority (53%) of those with a household income of €20,000 or less; similarly a lower proportion of older rural women (19%) than of their male counterparts (33%) have savings of €10,000 or more (Source: TILDA, Wave 1, 2009). Given this, it is not surprising that of those rural older people who agree with the statement that “money stops me from doing the things I want to do (often or sometimes)”, 56 per cent are women and 44 per cent are men. This supports previous research findings which indicated that the income of older women generally, is less than that of older men (Central Statistics Office, 2011). Moreover, having fewer material resources may result in having impeded access to other resources in society such as attending social activities, or even being able to have access to essential services including health (Scharf & Bartlam, 2008).

Social Exclusion and Social Connection

Social exclusion refers to “the dynamic processes of being excluded from key systems and institutions that can shape the economic and social integration of people within a society” (Walker & Walker, 1997). In rural areas, low population density in conjunction with reduced service provision and poor transport links can heighten the risk of experiencing social exclusion (Connolly et al., 2012a). Previous research on social exclusion in Ireland has identified older men living in rural areas as being particularly at risk of experiencing social exclusion. According to Walsh et al., (2012a), isolation is to some extent shaped by gendered social roles whereby rural men were socialised to be self-reliant; this exacerbates the difficulty for voluntary and statutory service providers of involving them in activities. Previous research has found that rural older men often can be reluctant to seek help or to accept offers of social provision or social support (Dwyer & Hardill, 2011). The reluctance of older rural men to participate in social or community activities is reflected in research on participation in volunteering, creative and social activities among older people in Ireland which indicates that male participation rates are extremely low (Ní Léime & O’Shea, 2009; McKenna, 2009; Ní Léime et al., 2012; Harvey, 2012). Older women appear more likely to remain socially connected than older men although this may vary according to mobility and other factors (Ní Léime et al., 2012; Dobbs & Strain, 2008).

TILDA data provide an insight into the frequency of social contact enjoyed by older rural men and women. It shows relatively high levels of social contact; 95 per cent of women and 89 per cent of men visit or receive visits from family or friends either in person or talk on the phone at least once a fortnight. This supports findings from previous Irish studies; however, the type and quality of contact is important, with contact with friends being a more important protection against social loneliness than contact with neighbours (Drennan et al., 2008). If we look at the TILDA statistics for daily visits, there is a large gender

difference. Sixty per cent of rural women as compared to only 37 per cent of rural men visit or receive visits from family and friends on a daily basis (Source: calculated from TILDA, Wave 1, 2009).

Loneliness

Loneliness is an important indicator of the psychological well-being of older adults and is defined as the subjective perceived experience of social isolation (De Jong Gierveld, 1987). It is recognised that an individual can experience social isolation but not feel lonely. Therefore loneliness is recognised to be a subjective experience for older adults and can be difficult to measure (Victor et al., 2005). Loneliness is associated with health status. It may derive from poor health, in that people with poor mobility or other conditions may be more likely to become isolated. On the other hand, loneliness has been found to adversely affect people’s self-rated health (Fees et al., 1999).

Research evidence on the prevalence of loneliness by gender is equivocal, with the stereotype being that older women are more likely to be lonely than older men. However, a UK study has found through statistical analysis that gender in itself is not a predictor of loneliness and that it is mediated by other factors such as marital status, age and living arrangements; since women are more inclined to be very old or widowed or to live alone (Victor et al., 2006). Drennan et al., (2008) examined the experience of social and emotional loneliness among older people in Ireland and found that living in a rural area was associated with social and emotional loneliness (“a condition arising out of the loss or absence of a close emotional attachment, and the ‘loneliness of social isolation’”). Widowed males were considerably more likely to experience emotional loneliness than widowed females. The authors suggest that this may be because men often rely on their spouse to initiate and maintain family connections. The frequency of such connections may decrease when men are widowed (Drennan et al., 2008).

The loneliness scores reported in Table 9 are drawn from the TILDA dataset. The scale used to measure loneliness is a replica of the modified University of California Los Angeles Loneliness Scale. The scores range from 0 to 10 where a score of 0 indicates an absence of loneliness and 10 is a feeling of being extremely lonely. A higher score indicates greater feelings of loneliness.

There are clear gender differences in the loneliness scores with both urban and rural women having higher

loneliness scores; rural women have the highest average scores on the loneliness scale. This may be partly due to the fact that a high proportion of women are in the oldest old age group and live alone, since greater age has been associated with social loneliness (Victor et al., 2006). It may also be due to the women's own failing health or loss of mobility and/or to the loss of partners and friends who are their age contemporaries (Drennan et al., 2008; Wenger, 2009; Ní Léime et al., 2012).

Table 9: Loneliness scores for men and women aged 65 and over from TILDA

	AVERAGE LONELINESS SCORE
Urban Males	1.91
Urban Females	2.00
Rural Males	1.80
Rural Females	2.30

Source: Tabulation based on Wave 1, 2009 TILDA data

Communication and Mobility: Access to Cars and Phones

Inappropriate or insufficient transport has been identified as a key concern for rural older people. Previous literature has highlighted the importance of access to private transport for people living in rural areas for maintaining a sense of social connection and reducing social exclusion (Walsh et al., 2012a; McNerney & Gillmor, 2005). With personal mobility allowing older people to live more independently, to access activities and services which enhance well-being, and to remain in their own homes and communities as they get older, access to transport contributes to people's overall sense of personal well-being (Prunty, 2007). Walsh et al., (2012a, p. 51) identified having a car as "indispensable in maintaining a sense of independence and social connection" for older rural persons. In line with this, those older people who do not drive and those who have no access to a network of family or friends who meet their transport needs are likely to be at a particular disadvantage. Crucially, older rural women have been found to be considerably less likely to drive than older rural men. This is of concern since previous research in Ireland has identified that restricted mobility greatly curtailed the ability of rural women to participate in the economic and social lives of their communities, their difficulties being accentuated by the centralisation of many services (McNerney & Gillmor, 2005). Analysis of EU-SILC data indicates that of those older rural dwellers who

own their own car, 58 per cent are men and 42 per cent are women (Source: EU-SILC data, 2010),⁸ supporting findings in the international literature (Dobbs & Strain, 2008). In addition to this, analysis of TILDA data shows that of those rural older people who regard public transport options as poor or very poor, 54 per cent are women and 46 per cent are men. In the case of private transport options, 51 per cent of those who regard it as poor or very poor are women, while 49 per cent are men. (Source: Wave 1, 2009 TILDA data) .

By contrast, older rural males are generally less likely to own a telephone (mobile or landline) than are older rural females: approximately 44 per cent of older rural men compared to 37 per cent of women do not own a mobile phone; similarly, a lower proportion of older rural men (80%) have a fixed telephone line than older rural women (99%) (Source: EU-SILC data, 2010). Given that men have a lower likelihood of remaining socially connected, the lack of a telephone may exacerbate their relative isolation.

8 As poverty is measured at a household level in Ireland, when using EU-SILC data, it is only possible to identify gender related differences in poverty and deprivation items through examining differences existing between one person male headed households and one person female headed households.

Social Participation and Contribution of Older People

There is a tendency in research and policy to focus on the problems and challenges faced by older people living in rural areas. However, older rural dwellers also contribute a great deal economically and socially to their families and communities.

Providing Informal Care

One way in which older people contribute to society is through providing care to dependent relatives (and friends). There is a clear gender difference in the number of hours of care per month provided by older women in Ireland for relatives. TILDA data reveal that rural women spend an average of 5.7 hours more per month than rural men in providing household care, personal care and/or assistance with paperwork for relatives (Table 10). They provide similar hours of care to urban women and considerably more on average (11.2 hours) than urban men. The male/female difference is probably attributable to gendered care norms: in Ireland, women are typically regarded as the primary providers of informal care (National Women's Council of Ireland, 2009).

There are important health and financial costs to providing long hours of care. There is evidence that providing long hours of care is associated with negative impacts on health and quality of life (O'Sullivan, 2008).

Volunteering

There is international and Irish evidence that older people in both rural and urban areas contribute substantially to society by volunteering their time to organisations in their communities (Droogleeve Fortuijn & van der Meer, 2006). Irish statistics indicate that 16.6 per cent of the population aged 15 and over take part in some form of voluntary activity (Central Statistics Office, 2007). A relatively large proportion (13.2%) of volunteers were aged 65 and over with women (15.4%) more likely than men (12.3%) to volunteer (Central Statistics Office, 2007). Volunteering is considered especially important for older rural-dwelling adults as it allows social contact and can act as a buffer against social isolation (Morrow-Howell, 2010). Volunteering by older adults is associated with enhanced wellbeing and quality of life (Haski-Leventhal, 2009). There has been relatively little Irish research focussing specifically on older volunteers and none detailing the gender profile of volunteers in rural areas. Research on older retirees in Ireland found that older men (60%) were more likely to volunteer than older women (53%) (Ní Léime et al., 2012). Men tend to be involved in the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), in cultural activities and Neighbourhood Watch, while women participate in community services such as Meals on Wheels and parish-based organisations (Ní Léime et al., 2012).

Table 10: Number of hours per month older adults provided practical household help, personal care and assistance with paperwork for relatives in the last two years

	URBAN		RURAL	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Percentage who provide care *	26.0	27.0	23.2	24.9
Average hours per month*	21.0	32.4	26.5	32.2

**Based on observations in Wave 1, 2009 TILDA dataset*

The TILDA survey of adults aged 50 and over found that 42 per cent volunteered at least once a year, with those in the 65-74 age group the most likely to volunteer frequently (Timonen et al., 2011). There are clear differences by gender, with a higher proportion of women (59%) as opposed to men (42%) in rural areas saying that they “never” perform (formal) voluntary work (Source: Wave 1, TILDA data). This may partly be related to the higher proportion of rural women in the 85 + age group. These findings echo international research which has found that men are more likely to volunteer in formal organisations while women are more likely to help others informally with personal care, childcare and by visiting older people and those with disabilities (Droogelever Fortuijn & van der Meer, 2006).

Social and Recreational Participation

A higher proportion of older rural women (57%) than of older rural men (43%) participate in sports or social groups (Source: Wave 1, TILDA data). Participation in social groups is undertaken primarily for participants’ own benefit, rather than for the purpose of volunteering; however, there is likely to be some overlap between the two forms of engagement, since recent research has found that people participating in social groups often help to organise

activities for them (Ní Léime et al., 2012). Participating in social groups has been associated with enhanced quality of life and reduced loneliness for older people (Ní Léime et al., 2012; O’Shea & Ní Léime, 2012). Walsh et al. (2013) found that rural older people are less likely than their urban counterparts to participate in social activities. It seems too that there are variations in the types of social activities engaged in by older rural men and women (Table 11).

The proportion of older people in rural Ireland who participate in sports or exercise is slightly higher for men (44.1%) than for women (41.2%) and it appears that more than two-fifths of all older people in rural areas take exercise regularly. A considerably higher proportion of those who go to the pub are men (40% as opposed to just over 11% for women) (Table 11). This indicates that the introduction of drink-driving laws and the closure of many rural pubs in the past decade are likely to have a stronger negative impact on social interaction opportunities for men. Relatively low proportions of both men (3.7%) and women (4.3%) attend cultural activities, perhaps reflecting the relative lack of availability of such activities in rural areas and the difficulties of getting transport to attend them. Apart from cultural activities and pub visits for women, it appears that a relatively high proportion (over 40 per cent) of older rural men and women contribute to and actively participate in their communities.

Table 11: Social participation for rural male and female dwellers aged 65 and over

SOCIAL ACTIVITIES (twice a month or more)	MALE %	FEMALE %
Participate in sports activities or exercise*	44.1	41.2
Go to the pub*	40.0	11.2
Go out to films, plays and concerts*	3.7	4.3

*Significant difference between male and female responses at the 0.05 level (Chi-Square Statistic)

Source: Tabulation based on Wave 1, 2009 TILDA data

Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

In this briefing paper, we have analysed data-sets to outline aspects of the profile, experiences and practices of older men and women in rural Ireland, highlighting differences (and some similarities). The data presented indicate that, while men and women experience many of the challenges and rewards of rural living in common, there are discernible patterns of differentiation in relation to the demographic profile, living arrangements, income, engagement in informal care and volunteering, social participation and interaction that suggest that the experience of ageing varies by gender. They provide information for policy-makers that older women in rural areas are more economically vulnerable, are more likely to be in the oldest old age group, to live alone and to lack transport, but may be more socially connected than men. Older men in rural areas may be more socially isolated

and would benefit from the provision of appropriate opportunities for social interaction. Both men and women in rural areas contribute substantially (women more through providing informal care and men through formal volunteering) to society. These and other aspects of gender and rural ageing may be further explored using TILDA data. There is also a need for further contextualised qualitative research into the gendered experience of ageing in rural Ireland to explore how the differences identified impact on the quality of life of men and women and how they regard, act upon and respond to their rural environments. Such investigation will not only help to build a robust empirical picture of rural ageing, but will also inform policy-makers as to how services can best be shaped to meet the varying needs of older men and women in rural Ireland.

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