

REVIEW: WOMEN AND ACCESS IN RURAL AREAS

Barbara Illsley

Pollyanna Chapman and Siobhan Lloyd (1996) (eds), **Women and Access in Rural Areas**, Aldershot, Avebury, hb, £32.50, ISBN 1859722911, 96pp.

Until comparatively recently, very little research had been carried out into the particular problems associated with living in rural Scotland. This volume represents a welcome addition to the growing literature focusing on this arena. The book consists of a collection of papers initially presented at a conference held in Aberdeen University in March 1995 entitled 'What makes the difference? What difference does it make? Women and access in rural Scotland'. What makes this volume different is its particular concern with the gender dimension, a perspective often ignored in past discussions.

As Chapman and Lloyd acknowledge, an important characteristic of rural issues is the network of the inter-relationships which exist between different features of daily life. It is of little surprise, therefore, that certain themes arise time and again throughout the book: geographic isolation, limited employment opportunities, poor service provision and inadequate childcare facilities. The impact of these on women in rural areas is to severely restrict the choice they have over their own lives.

The issue of rural disadvantage and, in particular, the question of employment opportunities for women in rural areas, is addressed in two contributions, which demonstrate the diversity of experience across Scotland. Pollyanna Chapman, exploring rural disadvantage in its widest sense, draws

Barbara Illsley is a lecturer in the School of Town and Regional Planning, University of Dundee.

Scottish Affairs

on the findings of major research carried out at the University of Aberdeen for Rural Forum (Scotland) in 1994. The research looked at four rural areas, in Harris, Wester Ross, lowland Angus and North Ayrshire. It becomes clear from the analysis that women in these areas face considerable disadvantage, both in relation to the labour market and in access to key services. The results confirm the picture found elsewhere of comparatively low female activity rates, significant unemployment levels amongst well qualified women and out-migration of women in pursuit of further education. A lack of public transport, childcare provision and educational opportunities all act as hurdles to women's further participation in employment, themes which re-emerge later in the book. Despite changes in recent years, Chapman highlights the importance that community facilities play in the 'healthy functioning of the community', notably the local shop, the school and the doctor, often facilitating social contact and hence reducing the potential for isolation. There continue to be distinctions made between men's and women's roles in the four areas, unlike the situation found in most towns, although many of the women questioned felt restricted and constrained by such attitudes. The chapter emphasises many of the negative issues of rural areas and it is perhaps disappointing that more attention is not given to the interesting proposition, raised by residents of Harris and Wester Ross, that rural life gave them freedom, both freedom from the problems of urban life and freedom to participate in the opportunities available in towns and cities.

Similar issues are presented in the chapter by Marjorie Bain, in which she reviews the findings of three studies carried out in Shetland between 1981 and 1995. Following a period of population loss during the 1950s and 1960s, Shetland's economy was dramatically changed by the arrival of oil. Labour shortages encouraged many women to re-enter the labour market but, despite the apparent contrast with rural communities in mainland Scotland, Bain concludes that women in Shetland experienced many of the same barriers to their participation, such as poor transport, inadequate childcare provision and a lack of skills.

Julia Nelson picks up the theme of childcare provision in rural areas. A recent report published by the European Union (Cohen 1995) clearly illustrates that rural areas across the continent have been undergoing substantial change in recent years, characterised by economic restructuring, changes in family structures and rising social and educational expectations. These changes have led, almost for the first time, to thought being given to the services needed to enable women to participate in all aspects of community life, and the importance of adequate childcare is now recognised.

Review: Women and Access in Rural Areas

Somewhat distressingly, Nelson reveals that the UK has the lowest level of publicly funded pre-school daycare in the EU and that provision is lower in rural areas than in urban ones. To illustrate the problems facing rural women, in a very real way, Nelson sets out a case study of 'Marie' who tries in vain to organise appropriate childcare for her two children to allow her to take up a job as a care assistant at a local residential centre for the elderly. Future prospects are brighter according to Nelson, as efforts are being made to develop models for childcare provision which are designed specifically for rural areas, and projects in Ullapool, Portree and Orkney are identified as examples of good practice. This paper provides a further illustration of the inter-related nature of the problems facing those in rural areas. Not only does inadequate childcare limit the possibilities for work, but even where places are found, transport costs can exacerbate access.

We have all read about the negative caricatures of incomers to Scotland's rural areas, so called 'white settlers', typified as being 'educated, middle-class and professional' and who are likely to 'take from' the community. Kathryn Burnett considers the impact of incomers on one community on the island of Uist in the Outer Hebrides. Through the use of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews she seeks to discover whether incomers, and specifically women incomers, pose a threat or present an opportunity to rural communities. Burnett found from her study that the women incomers not only had skills to offer, but that they aimed to make a positive contribution to community life. She discusses what constitutes boundaries of 'difference' between incomers and locals, finding that in Uist important factors include the presence of family connections, the degree of permanence of residence in the area and the extent of familiarity with local language. Finally, Burnett explores the concept of belonging and the extent to which incomers negotiate their access to the community.

Linda McKie examines women's attitudes and experiences of health issues in the Western Isles, drawing on two recent research projects. McKie begins by setting the research in context and she concludes that the Western Isles displays all of the characteristics of rural communities discussed above. Examining the role of women in the unpaid health sector, McKie found a continuing commitment to informal caring in the island communities. Women react in different ways to men, for example showing a greater interest in finding out about health issues, and they take on more of the responsibility for the care of others, notably through the concept of 'visiting'. McKie then considered whether these attitudes influence or permeate the actions of paid health professionals. A clear distinction is made by health

Scottish Affairs

workers between illness, that is caring for the sick, and healthcare work, which is primarily health promotion and prevention, but despite the fact that most women are employed in the latter type of work, they felt that this was a professional rather than a gender divide. Most women health workers involved in the study did not recognise a boundary between paid and non-paid work.

Fiona Raitt investigates the impact that the law has on women's everyday lives, identifies the challenges facing women who need to use legal services and considers the specific problems encountered by women in rural areas. Raitt looks at these factors with reference to three key aspects of the legal process: the delivery of legal services by solicitors and the availability of legal aid; the work of the courts, the police and social services; and the role of the voluntary sector. The strong conclusion to emerge from the discussion of these issues is that the system in general discourages women's effective participation. What about the rural dimension? Raitt argues that rural women experience a range of additional problems, for example in accessing an appropriate and acceptable solicitor. Not only is there a limited number of solicitors in rural areas from which to choose, but not many of them specialise in social welfare law, a field of concern to many women, and few of them are female. Raitt concludes that changes should be made in the legal system, suggesting the development of a more user-friendly service, with improved advice and crèche facilities, and with greater financial backing, to help overcome the unmet legal needs of women in rural areas.

Research in recent years into the understanding of 'rurality' presents the image of a rural idyll, based on notions of 'a close-knit community, living close to the natural environment, and a happy and healthy lifestyle' (Cloke et al 1994). Siobhan Lloyd looks behind this picture postcard to reveal and examine domestic violence in rural areas. The impact of domestic violence on the lives of women and children cannot be underestimated: physical injury, psychological effects and isolation from family and friends. While the incidence of domestic violence in rural areas is comparable with urban settings, Lloyd identifies additional complications for women suffering abuse in rural communities. As with so many other issues raised in this book, geographical isolation reinforces the problem. Women find it difficult to contact others for help or support. As one woman noted: 'there's nobody around, there's nobody to talk to, it's a long distance from anywhere'. Problems are made more difficult by poor access to other services; public transport is often infrequent and expensive, police and social services are remote and thinly spread, and access to accommodation, particularly in an

Review: Women and Access in Rural Areas

emergency, can be difficult. The message of this chapter is not entirely negative, however. Lloyd suggests that some of these problems can be overcome if a multi-agency approach is adopted, a theme which echoes the stance currently being advocated by the Scottish Office. This will not be easy as it will require the resolution of issues such as competing interests, professional rivalry, and resource allocation. The very important point is also made that there is a need to raise awareness of the issue of domestic violence in rural areas, to allow the true problems facing many women to be tackled.

In conclusion, this book provides a useful overview for those wanting an introduction to this under-represented subject. It succeeds in highlighting the range of issues facing women in rural areas and provides a good starting point for further research.

REFERENCES

- Cohen B (1995) **Childcare Services for Rural Families**, Brussels, Commission Network on Childcare.
- Cloke P, Milbourne P, and Thomas C (1994) **Lifestyles in Rural England**, London, Rural Development Commission.

February 1997