

## **WHERE THERE IS A COW, THERE IS A WOMAN**

*Mairi MacArthur*

This article takes a look at some aspects of the work and status of women in the Highlands, both in the past and in the present, and at the level of their participation in decisions that affect their lives. It deals with cows at a tangent only but the odd title will be explained in due course. Gaelic speakers may already have recognised the reference.

Neglected issues, or those which stagnate for a while, have a way of gathering momentum all of a sudden and surging forward. During 1993 several independent initiatives found themselves on the same track, turning a spotlight on women in rural areas and particularly in the Highlands and Islands.

In the course of the year the Equal Opportunities Unit of the European Commission undertook a Community-wide study into women in the rural economy. In September SEAD (Scottish Education and Action for Development) included a rural development study tour of the Highlands in their ongoing 3-year project 'Shoulder to Shoulder: Women Organising in Scotland and the Third World'. At the end of October the EOC held their first major conference outside of the central belt, in Inverness, focusing on 'Equal Opportunities for Rural Women in Scotland'.

On 14th December, which happened to be 75 years to the day when women first voted in a General Election in this country, there were two events in Skye. The fourth Sabhal Mòr Ostaig Lecture, held annually at the business

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college in Sleat and televised by STV, was given by Dr Una Maclean and was the first in the series to deal with a women's theme. And BARAIL, the independent think-tank based at Sabhal Mòr, launched their first piece of commissioned research entitled **Public Policy and Participation: the Role of Women in the Highlands**.

It has seemed a long haul. All economies were predominantly rural for longer than they have been industrial. Why have we been so slow to get some practical movement behind a notion that is universal and longstanding, namely that women contribute enormously to rural life and work and should therefore be expected and encouraged to contribute in equal measure to the decisions which govern that life?

Does part of the answer lie in the past - or in the way that past has been documented? In the introduction to Elspeth King's remarkable book (1993), whose declared aim is to draw Glasgow's women out of the shadows, she quotes an observation by Hugh MacDiarmid: 'Scottish women of any historical interest are curiously rare'. A flick through the pages of Highland history confirms the same impression. But 'rare' has two senses and, though strangely absent for much of the time, when Highland women do make an appearance they are clearly regarded as of inestimable value.

**'THEY ARE OBLIGED TO LABOUR'**

'Their women are in general hardy and robust and can bear immense burdens.' These burdens included fishing tackle, a hundredweight of wet fish and even the fishermen themselves, whose feet were thus kept dry between boat and shore. The year was 1795 and the place Avoch on the Cromarty coast. The writer, who was contributing to that great compendium of social and local history **The Statistical Account of Scotland**, also paid tribute to the bait-gathering, fish-selling, net-mending and household chores undertaken by the parish women. Another account, from Kincardine, painted a similar picture and added: 'During winter the subsistence of the family has depended much on the work of the female'.

Despite the ring of truth to that sentence, valid in more contexts than fishing alone, such allusions to the specific contribution of women are few even in a work so comprehensive as **The Statistical Account**. Elsewhere too the picture is patchy and deeper questions are left hanging. Nineteenth century reports of resistance to eviction, in pamphlets and newspapers, indicate that

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women were frequently to the fore. Severe injury for their pains was also recorded. Yet analysis of why women were so militant has rarely been attempted, as Hamish Henderson mused in a 1992 collection of his writings. (His own tentative theory was of a throwback to the warrior prowess and status of women in early Celtic society.)

When Leah Leneman was researching land settlement for ex-servicemen after 1918, she found only one recorded example of action by women on the land question. It occurred in Harris when the wives of men raiding some disputed holdings attacked those officially allocated the land as they began to plough. In a subsequent article (1991) Leah notes that the work of women, and often of children too, was clearly crucial to the success of these new holdings but that this seldom comes through in the official source material.

Even particular forms of work prove elusive to pin down. From at least the mid-18th century a predominantly female workforce from the southern and eastern Highlands went each year to the lowland harvest. The cash they brought back was vital to the local economy. But these labourers merely flit in and out of written records, as a footnote to Census returns perhaps or mentioned in passing by others on the road - such as Sarah Murray, who wrote in 1800:

A traveller in June will continually meet groups of Highlanders trudging south; the women with cloth cloaks on, bare feet and legs, their petticoats pinned up, their sickle on their arm... thus they march on, for perhaps a hundred miles to the earliest harvest districts.

Later, other reasons for seasonal migration by Highland girls developed, notably domestic service and fish-gutting. The latter is well documented by Norman MacDonald in his book on the herring girls (1987), where he uses their own memories in addition to written sources. Oral tradition, including story and song, may indeed be an important key. The large body of Gaelic work-songs, for example, mainly composed by women, reflects a wide range of personal and community experience over several centuries.

While Flora MacDonald is enshrined as the Highland heroine, at least in the shortbread tin version of our history, the hardships of her later life are less well known. A fuller picture is now being spread to a wider audience, however, through a song by Brian MacNeill of The Battlefield Band. It forms part of his 'Back o' the North Wind' show, a well-researched and

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eloquent tribute to the lives of several Scots using slides, music and narrative.

Mary MacPherson did more directly for crofting folk than Flora MacDonald, through her active support for the land reform movement of the late 19th century. Yet many outside Gaeldom will not have heard of Màiri Mhòr nan Oran (big Mary of the songs), as she was known, until 7.84 toured with a play devoted to her in the mid-1980s. More will have a chance to do so when a new film about her life comes to the television screens. In the same way, and jumping to the other end of the country, Sue Glover's acclaimed play **Bondagers** has powerfully recreated on stage the lives of female farm workers in the Borders.

So is it perhaps to the creative arts, rather than the history books, we should look to learn more about some aspects of our past? After all, in a society where stories of the people, and events that shaped them, were passed on primarily by word of mouth, it is perhaps of limited use to scour official documents for the day-to-day domestic round. Still less might we expect the experience of women to emerge from the pages.

When the crofting community of the Highlands and Islands did find a public voice for the first time, through the hearings and subsequent published evidence of the 1883 Napier Commission, only three witnesses were women. But many of the men stressed the traditional division of labour on the land, where the women generally dealt with textiles and clothing, hand-milling of grain, poultry and dairy work. It was also common for them to carry peats, potatoes or seaweed on their backs and even, in the absence of a horse, to drag a harrow by a rope around the shoulders. This, in the stark admission of one Skye man, was no better than 'slavery'.

The Commissioners specifically questioned a doctor about the amount of work undertaken by women and the effects of this on their health. Dr Donald Black, who was from Iona but by then practicing in South Uist, agreed that these were indeed harmful. But he did not think their burden unduly abnormal, nor was it just due to men's idleness: 'It is in the nature of things. They are obliged to labour'.

## **DIFFERENT THEREFORE EQUAL?**

It is easy to bristle at the fatalistic undertone there. Something seen as 'in the nature of things' is not likely to change very fast. We should perhaps not be too rigorous, however, in applying modern values to another time and another culture. When a living had to be won from sheer hard labour a share of that burden fell on everyone, women and children included. Life from the land and sea had to operate by a division of the necessary tasks, and it cannot necessarily be assumed that those allotted to women were regarded as inferior or dispensable. (On the contrary, the frequency with which sisters used to stay on with an unmarried brother, or other male relative, may indicate that crofting was never easily a male-only occupation.) One informant in a fascinating study into rural childhood by Lynn Jamieson and Claire Toynbee (1992) was indignant at suggestions that the men of her island were lazy. The rhythms of their working life were different but in her view they worked just as hard as the women.

And in those areas where women were responsible, they also took the decisions and handled any money. A striking example once fell into my hands while sifting through estate papers. It was all the more noticeable in that kind of archive where, amid the reams of writing from or to or about landlords, factors, ministers, ground-officers and tenants, there is indeed an impression that half the population were 'curiously rare'. But this crofter's wife had taken it upon herself to complain directly to the estate about a neighbour's non-payment of one piglet from a litter sired by her boar, as was the customary rule. It was clearly her business: 'The boar belongs to me and my husband has nothing to do with it' but the recalcitrant crofter's excuse revealed, perhaps, a significant attitude: 'He says he does not deal with women'. On the other hand, she praised another neighbour who had paid up in a correct and gentlemanly manner. As ever, it is risky to draw hard generalisations from fleeting bits of evidence.

The divisions within the workload did appear to carry on into the wider field of discussing political, economic or theological affairs - strictly men only. In her Sabhal Mòr lecture Dr Una Maclean recalled her grandmother's household on Scarp, off Harris, in the 1930s and painted an affectionate picture of the women's constant round of chores while the menfolk withdrew to their 'parliament' at the sunny end of a particular house. The women, she said, 'were absolutely essential to the entire productive enterprise' yet they also 'knew their place'. An inkling of this slight ambivalence once came through in a conversation I had with an older woman, a daughter and now

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wife of a crofter. She had clearly been an equal contributor all her life to day-to-day business on the land but disapproved of the fact that a younger crofter's wife attended a Scottish Crofters' Union meeting: 'It was always for the men to go to that sort of thing.'

All these gleanings from the written history of the Highlands are no more than that, yet most of the scraps about women convey the same strong message - that they have always borne at least an equal share of the hard work. One of the oldest Gaelic sayings, still repeated today, is 'Far am bi bó bi bean agus far am bi bean bi buaireadh' (Where there is a cow there is a woman and where there is a woman there is mischief). It is attributed to St Columba and who knows what he really meant? But it is always quoted, in jocular or apologetic tone with emphasis on the second phrase, as an indication of his or others' misogynist tendencies. Never have I heard the eminent good sense of the first phrase highlighted. Of course cows and women go together, since milking and dairying have long been traditionally female occupations.

## **THE BARAIL STUDY**

That women are major partners in rural economies continues to hold true today, whether in crofting and fishing, in knitwear or the bed and breakfast trade. It is, naturally, 'Mrs. Campbell's guest house' which provides the punchline in Highlands and Islands Enterprise's current TV advert, luring would-be visitors to the Highlands.

This was the starting-point of BARAIL's discussions, along with the equally clear observation that this contribution by women was not mirrored by anything like the same degree of visible activity in public and political life in the Highlands. Why not? When asked by BARAIL to take the issue forward, it seemed to me that we first had to have hard data about the present situation and then pose that question. Our first plan, therefore, was to commission research across the whole Highlands and Islands area, as economic and cultural contrasts within it might have thrown up interesting comparisons. This proved too ambitious, however, and the eventual modest funding, raised from several local authorities and members of the Highlands and Islands Enterprise network, was for a pilot study based on Highland Region. A particular focus within that was Skye and Lochalsh, one of two places in Scotland with no female District Councillors at all. The other is Caithness. (It

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should perhaps be added that Highland Region also contains East Sutherland where the gender balance on the District Council is now 50:50.)

The study was carried out by Lorraine Mann Research and Analysis in Easter Ross. The remit was to identify the level of participation by women on Councils, Community Councils and a variety of Boards, and attempt to find out why they are not coming forward in greater numbers. The consultant combined a desk study of available statistics with a survey of personal views gained through questionnaires and interview. She found that women are indeed substantially under-represented on almost every elected or appointed policy-making body and that barriers include financial constraints, distances to travel, lack of childcare provision, traditional views of a woman's role and low self-confidence.

None of this is a big surprise. What we now have, however, albeit for one region only, is a systematic body of data which adds flesh to the bones of already familiar assumptions. There is much of interest in the detailed analysis of the questionnaires, for which the consultant reported a very good return rate, and the interviews. The views and feelings of real people fill in the background to what is quite a complex picture.

For example, clear divisions between men and women come through when asked if they agreed with the statement that 'Generally speaking, women's needs are being well catered for' by their local authorities; but the divergence is much less among Regional and District than among Community Councillors. Among the former, 30% of the female sample and 20% of the males disagreed with the statement, whereas 43% of female Community Councillors and 16% of their male colleagues did so. One could surmise that those who have never been elected to a Local Authority - the Community Councillors - may have unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved; or perhaps women who have been elected tend to convey a corporate view. On a more general point, only one man admitted a belief that women are simply not intelligent enough to stand for election, but a perception among some of the women interviewed that such an attitude is pervasive is sufficient to dent confidence still further.

It is the first time such a detailed exercise has been done for any part of Scotland. BARAIL hopes that it will make a contribution to the general debate about fuller participation by all citizens in local decision-making. As its own next small, but practical, step there are plans to initiate a data-bank of the names and interests of women who would be willing to serve on boards

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or advisory councils in the Highlands. For it is beyond doubt that women will continue to contribute to traditional rural industries and, because of education, in-migration or marriage, there are growing numbers of women in this area whose talents or experience or professional skills are currently underused.

## **THE COMMUNITY DIMENSION**

Why is all this important? It is more than simply a numbers game, seeking mathematical balance for its own sake. As Margaret Macintosh has argued (**Scottish Affairs** No.5), in relation to the education system, women and men experience life differently and so may well bring distinct kinds of feelings and analyses to an issue or problem.

And in a wider context still the BARAIL study tackles only one side of the question about how to make our democratic systems work better. Right from the start of our discussions the very mention of 'women in the Highlands' sparked off references to local action against school closures or health care changes or environmental hazards and for swimming pools or arts centres or Gaelic playgroups. In other words, as elsewhere, women are highly visible and energetic in a whole range of community groups, voluntary organisations and single-issue campaigns. Many of them, and indeed many men, feel more comfortable and effective contributing at this level.

Why therefore cannot this 'participatory democracy', as it is sometimes termed, be considered a meaningful part of the political process, rather than so often dismissed as a worthy but largely irrelevant sort of hobby? Of course it is important to encourage, and create space for, those women who do wish to take part in 'representative democracy', that is electoral politics. But how can what many others are already engaged in be given its proper weight and value?

The problem is that our authorities and agencies, despite some recent improvements in 'community consultation', are still not entirely at ease with that whole business. Nor, it should in fairness be noted, are all of us always as aware of and receptive to such consultative processes that do exist as we might be. Looking at ourselves through others' eyes is often instructive. Angela Brown from the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, on the SEAD rural study tour in September, felt there was a distinct gap here between local

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decision-makers and the people living with the effects of those decisions. Her country has achieved, in a few short years, a system of popular consultation that simply leaves us standing. If it can be done there - from house to house, using different languages, initially with a war raging and about fairly heavyweight subjects such as regional autonomy or logging rights - then it is surely rather wimpish of us to sigh about how hard it is properly to consult or be consulted.

But those entrusted with the power and resources to do the consulting must have a grasp of what 'the community' can offer. SEAD's tour was followed by a conference on this precise point: 'Shifting the Balance: People, Power and Participation'. It attracted over 200 people, many active at community level and a majority of them women. The emphasis was on learning from each other, rather than listening to set speeches, and the mood was participatory and visionary. A few local councillors attended but there was not one council leader, public body head, MP or MEP and no coverage by the national press. Joyce MacMillan, who chaired the weekend, commented on this absence as 'highly significant'. A conference of 200 men in suits would have brought out a row of hacks with notepads poised, a keynote address by a Chief Executive and soundbites from a couple of politicians (probably attacking each other).

Ignoring new approaches to discussing democracy is one problem. Regarding them automatically as a threat, or as implied criticism, is another. Any attempt to raise issues of how our systems work, who is involved, why certain barriers exist and so on seems to get an edgy response from some already within those systems. And this can lead to reactions and counteractions that are plainly absurd. The first, admittedly longwinded, title of the BARAIL study proposal was 'Local democracy in the Highlands with particular reference to the participation of women'. This was because the fundamental aim was to look at decision-making and power-holding as it relates to the whole community, albeit doing so largely through the eyes of the female half. But a tip was passed on from within certain corridors of power, elected ones I might add, to the effect that our funding application there would stand a better chance under another title - one which omitted the words 'local democracy'. I rest my case!

All of the questions raised here, and in Lorraine Mann's study, need to be faced and debated widely and honestly. The perfect way to govern ourselves may yet elude the human race, of course, but there is lots of room for improvement. Involving half of us much more fully would be one good step.

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To return to one of the Highlands' basic resources, a quote chanced upon in a book about fishing communities leaps out from the page. Nearly 200 years after the minister praised the sturdy women of Avoch, Paul Thompson and colleagues collaborated on a study called **Living the Fishing**. Among the places they looked at were Barra, Lewis, Shetland, Aberdeen and the Moray Firth. They are quite emphatic that, though considered a man's trade, fishing remains 'an occupation peculiarly dependent on the work of women' and cite three reasons: the wide range of fishing-related tasks done by women, their extra responsibilities on the land while the men are at sea and their role in caring for and shaping the next generation. They draw from all this a much wider interpretation:

And our conclusions point beyond our particular subject to the future of all of us. For if we are right, economic and social development depend as much on the situation of women and children, and the history and consciousness of communities, as on matters of capital, cash and profit or of today's and tomorrow's market.

Women, children, communities: are these keywords for the future of us all?

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