



# Book Reviews

***The Good Old Rule: Gender and other power relationships in a rural community***

by Gretchen Poiner

Sydney University Press, 1990

***Smalltown: A study of social inequality, cohesion and belonging***

by Ken Dempsey

Oxford University Press, Melbourne 1990

## Gender, Inequality and Rural women<sup>†</sup>

Margaret Alston

Gender relations and the lives of rural women are becoming the focus of serious attention in sociological research as evidenced by two books published in Australia in 1990: *The Good Old Rule* by Gretchen Poiner, and *Smalltown* by Ken Dempsey. Both are valuable contributions to the body of published Australian sociological research and are the result of extensive and longitudinal study of small Australian rural towns. Poiner's research was in Marulan, NSW, while Dempsey's was in an unidentified Victorian town he refers to as Smalltown. Poiner's book concentrates largely on power relations and, in particular, on gender issues. Dempsey, on the other hand, has devoted a chapter to gender inequality, but indicates that gender has such a profound effect on every aspect of public and private life in Small town that he is at present working on a second monograph entitled *Patriarchal Community* which will focus entirely on gender relations in Smalltown. This book is anticipated with great relish by students interested in gender analysis in an Australian context.

This review will focus on Poiner's work and chapter fourteen of Dempsey's book, a chapter entitled "Gender Inequality in Public and Private Life". It is a useful coincidence that both books were published in the same

year; this allows us to compare the findings in two distant rural areas of Australia. Both works reveal an alarming similarity in their discussions of rural women's lives and disadvantages, their powerlessness and limited opportunities. Neither offers cause for optimism unless sweeping changes occur in the sexual division of labour, labour market opportunities and the control of resources such as land.

### Cultural Domination and Ideology

Poiner suggests that cultural domination by Australian males is supported by ideological beliefs that maintain certain social positions. People in subordinate positions support this ideology and thereby serve to legitimate and contribute to the hegemonic process. The exercise of power by the dominant sector is viewed as legitimate by the community and not seen as inequitable.

People may be aware of their unequal position but accept it as part of the natural order which is not only acceptable but right and proper. That is, they do not interpret their inequality as inequitable. (Poiner, 1990:23)

Poiner found that conservatism is very strong in the country and sees it as a result of the wish for unchanging continuity by those in positions of power, and as a consequence of apathy by those in subordinate positions. The rural ideology, with its focus on the rural idyll, acts to main-

tain existing lifestyles. The importance of property in this rural ideology should not be underestimated. Its importance is

...in defining access to, and benefit from the crucial economic resources, and in being one of the major institutions that secures the reproduction of the rural class structure on an intergenerational basis. (Poiner, 1990:52)

Both Poiner and Dempsey stress the importance of gender relations in understanding class relations and, conversely, the importance of class in understanding gender. Poiner sees gender inequalities as a consequence of the interaction of the autonomous systems of patriarchy and capitalism.

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Class and gender have a material basis which advantages men. She describes patrimonial transmissions and capital accumulation as favouring men and disadvantaging women. It is mainly men who own productive property, especially in farming. The large landowners in Marulan are seen by Poiner as the most economically advantaged, not so much in financial terms, but by their education, social position and lifestyle.

Poiner describes a very low level of class consciousness in Marulan. Own-

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ing and working the land is esteemed by all and bourgeois ideology is pervasive. Homogeneity of the community is maintained by stressing the countrymindedness of community members and their egalitarian orientation. Both Poiner and Dempsey see women as being of vital importance in reproducing the bourgeois hegemony and the ideology of male domination.

### Shadowy Figures and Social Standing

Poiner sees Marulan women as shadowy figures in the relations of production. They do, nonetheless, create public images of social class for themselves and all their family members. Here Poiner differs somewhat from Dempsey who sees a woman's social standing as usually determined by her husband's standing, based on his occupational class position. While Dempsey does note exceptions to this general rule, Poiner is more forthright in identifying women as the status makers in Marulan despite their husband's occupational status.

Poiner describes two prevalent views of women's place in society, both of which she sees as having minimal explanatory value. The first sees women's social position as derived from their family (this is, in fact, Dempsey's stated view) and the second is the feminist view which identifies women as a gender class sharing a position of oppression. Poiner refutes the first position; she suggests that women's social presence may be greater than their husbands', and it therefore cannot be seen as derived. She found that women in Marulan act independently in district affairs. Poiner gives no credence to the rigid division between public and private spheres; she feels this has contributed to women's position in society being viewed as secondary and derived. This idea has, she asserts, encouraged a further devaluation of their position.

The second, feminist, view of women as a 'sex class', Poiner finds difficult to sustain; the crosscutting effects of class and race act against women developing a shared consciousness.

Marulan women do not see themselves as a united class. Their own backgrounds, allegiances and experiences are too disparate to allow a transcendent unity based on gender. They are more inclined to ally themselves with men in the same social class and have a weak perception of female subordination. Feminists would argue, in reply, that all women, whether aware of the fact or not, are oppressed; patriarchal society precludes or inhibits their access to resources. This shared oppression is the basis of the notion of a 'sex class' espoused by feminists and is not reliant on the development of a shared consciousness. Dempsey's work reinforces the view of the shared oppression of women which transcends class backgrounds and experiences.

### Ideology of the Family

Smalltown and Marulan women endorse the ideology of the family. This ideology, with its support for the sexual division of labour, is critical in determining women's subordinate position. The sexual division of labour is a defining characteristic of capitalism. It serves, and is served by, the ideology of the family with material advantages for men. The ideology recreates the assumption of female dependency and perpetuates the unequal relations between men and women. There is little recognition of women's joint ownership and/or contribution. As Poiner (1990:122) suggests, "country women seldom earn economic freedom". They earn less than men because of their position in the family.

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Male control of the workforce forces them to enter jobs with low prestige and low pay, usually on a part-time basis. This situation was also found by Baxter, Gibson, Kingston and Western (1988) in their study of rural women in the New England area of NSW.

Poiner suggests that women still defer to males despite acting independently to improve their family status. A sense of dependency, which is the linchpin of the ideologies of male dominance and the family, makes women accept a secondary presentation of their social self. While she sees women's class position as not derived, she does see it as secondary.

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Twin ideologies of male dominance and the family tie women to a dependent position, a position they assent to and reproduce. Poiner found that farm women, who are making an enormous economic contribution to their enterprise, are not developing a feminist consciousness because they see themselves as FARM wives and identify with the farm. They are committed to the farm and their husband's work and see feminism opposing their interests.

Poiner suggests that male dominance will continue because men maintain traditional authority and women accept and endorse this. Bell and Newby (1976) declared that husbands not only hold more power but ought to: Poiner argues the reverse: women believe men ought to possess greater power and therefore allow them to do so.

Both Poiner and Dempsey found that the concept of family and marriage is strong in Marulan and Smalltown. There seems little alternative for rural women. Poiner suggests that Marulan women seek to escape the dilemma created by the fact that the more they play the 'women's role' the less individual freedom and responsibility they have. They escape by upholding the ideology of male dominance while seceding from it in many aspects of behaviour.

[In] their conservative endorsement of the ideology, by their experience of it and their presentation of it as the encompassing reality, even when they are wayward in its practice, they invest sex-role differentiation in the family and outside it with a self-sustaining force and the ideology of male dominance is legitimated in action. (Poiner, 1990:156).

## Men's Leisure

Both studies confirm that gender is a critical indicator in conferring and defending men's advantage in the class system, for example in land inheritance or employment. Women's experiences in the home and workplace are grounded in their economic disadvantage. In Marulan, Smalltown and Australia generally, men are culturally dominant and women subordinate. This is evident, as Dempsey point out, from their control of leisure facilities, the dominance given to men's sport in the newspapers, the 'pub' culture and women's contribution to men's leisure.

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As Dempsey explains, leisure, sporting, friendship activities, and the waged and unwaged work of men and women are segregated. Smalltown men use their power to exclude women from a wide range of recreational activities, as well as from the more prestigious clubs such as Lions and Rotary. Any challenges are sooner or later unsuccessful. There were instances of, particularly younger, women who resent their subordinate status, taking steps to do something to change this. However, such attempts are viewed highly critically by the community and the women stereotyped as deviant. They also run the

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The contributions women make to men's leisure and club activities is evident in Smalltown. Their fundraising and serving and use of domestic skills for men's club activities is widely evident. As Dempsey (1990:28) states, "the process of incorporating women as supporters and subordinates is highly institutionalised". Women are expected to attend men's sporting functions while the converse rarely occurs. The rural ideology is thus heavily dependent on women's contributions.

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Both Poiner and Dempsey see rural women as being important in legitimating men's advantages. Dempsey sees the key factors in the subordinate status of women as: the division of labour whereby women are expected to take major responsibility for housework and childcare; paid work, whereby men have greater access to wealth and paid employment and monopolise the more rewarding positions; have greater access to leisure activities unhampered by children; the marriage and social dependence of women on men; socialisation, ideology and male hegemony whereby women are socialised to expect a sexual division of labour and economic dependence. Women and their activities are successfully stereotyped as inferior, a position accepted by the community. Male activities are given more prominence and seen as superior. Both Poiner and Dempsey see rural women as being important in legitimating men's advantages. Most men and a substantial minority of women in Smalltown believed men's work was more demanding and responsible and entitled them to leisure. Men are judged on their occupations, women are viewed in their role of wives and mothers regardless of what else they do. They are judged accordingly.

## Conclusion

The two studies, which corroborate and reinforce each other, despite their originating from geographically distant towns in Australia, suggest that rural Australian women are greatly disadvantaged. Their disadvantage will remain while sexist ideology and the ideologies of male supremacy and the family are so pervasive, and while women continue to legitimate their inferior position by reinforcing the cultural dominance of men. Their disadvantage will remain unless there is a change in the labour market, in the sexual division of labour and in inheritance practices. Such changes would, however, attack the very heart of men's advantages and would be resisted strongly. As Dempsey (1990:294) states,

Unless such changes occur, a woman's choices about living her own life will be much more constrained than a man's choices about living his own life; the work and recreational lives of husbands will continue to impede those of their wives; and men collectively will continue to 'close out' women or incorporate them on their own terms in all major spheres of private and public life.

Both books are well worth reading and their tendency to corroborate each other - despite their separate origins - adds to their value. Dempsey's new book, *Patriarchal Community* is awaited with great interest. ♦

## References

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