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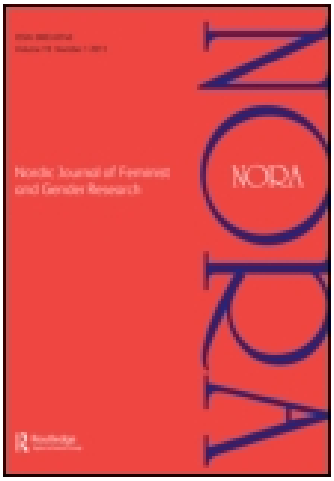

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Gendered Outcomes of Socio-economic Restructuring: A Tale from a Rural Village in Iceland

Anna Karlsdóttir [a] & Auður H. Ingólfsdóttir [b]

[a] Department of Geography and Tourism Studies , University of Iceland , Reykjavik, Iceland

[b] Faculty of Social Sciences , Bifrost University , Borgarnes, Iceland

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Gendered Outcomes of Socio-economic Restructuring: A Tale from a Rural Village in Iceland

ANNA KARLSDÓTTIR & AUÐUR H. INGÓLFSDÓTTIR

Department of Geography and Tourism Studies, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland; Faculty of Social Sciences, Bifrost University, Borgarnes, Iceland

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ABSTRACT *Demographic dynamics are immanent in societal changes. However, recent research on work-related mobility and regional development indicate that translocal commodity chains have changed the formation of class and gender to such an extent that spatial constructions of belonging have not only become more complex in local communities but are also, to an increased extent, the main deciding factor in women's reflective decision-making processes on where to live. This article explores the reasoning behind women's choices about how to live and work, across functional occupations, age, and educational background, in a small peripheral village in north-east Iceland. The community aspect is crucial in this respect. How do they perceive their own function and embeddedness in the community? The findings indicate that the key reason for staying and living in a community with few occupational opportunities is the existence of family and social ties, although jobs suited to their educational backgrounds and economic needs are also of crucial importance.*

Introduction

Economic and occupational restructuring has been a continuous process in many coastal communities around the Atlantic Ocean for decades. During the last two decades, changes in coastal communities have also been closely tied to their exclusion from rights to access fishing resources, which have led to a radical change in living conditions in some of those fishery districts (Neis et al. 2005; Lowe & Carothers 2008). This exclusion operates through the denial of essential services, such as road maintenance and schools, and families are pressured to relocate to other areas (Davis & Gerrard 2000). In post-collapse Iceland, fishery communities, although less

Correspondence Address: Anna Karlsdóttir, Department of Geography and Tourism Studies, School of Engineering and Natural Sciences, University of Iceland, Askja, N-334, Reykjavik 101, Iceland. Email: annakar@hi.is

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affected by the boom period, are experiencing the grim aftermath of the financial crisis through the loss of jobs as an effect of major cutbacks in public expenditure on health and education. How are these processes impacting on regional and gendered social structure and mobility patterns?

McDowell (2008) and Dicken (2011) point out that, during the era of neo-liberal economic policies, the state's social welfare role has been reduced and an optimistic discourse on the "strength" of the individual governs. Many scholars have emphasized an emerging fluidity in the way in which individuals have developed the ability to think and reflect on the social conditions of existence and to change them accordingly (e.g. Beck et al. 1994; Bauman 2000). Thus, new opportunities for social and physical mobility were claimed to have become the defining feature of society (Urry 2000). However, this view neglected the perspective of labourers who were trapped in place-based forms of "body work" that depend on co-presence and physical work and where working hours are increasing. Furthermore, the class and gender reconfigurations emerging in the service economies are ignored. This optimistic discourse results in women, as usual, having to undertake emotional labour in different spheres, despite their large-scale entry into the social relations of waged work and thus subordinates women in gender relations (McDowell 2008). In an article on the new economy, class condescension, and caring labour as formations of class and gender, McDowell gives a remarkably extensive account of research paradigms on work-related mobility as an effect of the new globalized economy and its polarization impacts. One of her main findings is that the material conditions of many women's lives may have changed, but the traditional moral associations between femininity, domesticity, and maternity remain strong. Many overstretched mothers, including middle-class women in professional and managerial jobs, are not entering into detraditionalized mobile social relations but rather into retraditionalized gender relations. Women still dominate employment in the public sector and the caring professions as well as remaining the main providers of domestic services. An Icelandic study on gender equality and work cultures, analysed within the framework of hegemonic masculinity during the economic boom, supports the stand that work within the home and care-taking are still primarily done by women alone, while they also participate fully in different socially stratified jobs in Icelandic society (Pétursdóttir 2009). The prevailing emphasis on mobility, fluidity, and detachment impacts on the spatial development of modern society in ways that are not always beneficial to women. Using mobility as a welfare indicator is therefore of doubtful utility, especially in the case of mothers, whose children's free-time activities have become more planned and institutionalized, even in rural areas, as shown in a Swedish study on children's (in)dependent mobility and parents' chauffeuring in the town and the countryside (Mattsson 2002). Thus, social science discourse has been blind to an equal need and demand for stationariness and for continuity in day-to-day life. The overemphasis on mobility renders gender-related reproductive tasks subordinate to society's productive tasks (Mattsson 2002). Therefore, the impact of globalized neo-liberal ideologies on gendered power relations, especially in the context of the Icelandic work culture, needs to be taken into account when studying gendered life-styles in rural Iceland, which is the focus of our study.

This article explores the reasoning behind women's choices about living and working, across functional occupations, age, and educational background, in a small

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peripheral village in north-east Iceland. The discussion draws on information from a field study that was conducted in one village in the area in the autumn of 2009, one year after the Icelandic financial collapse. A total of 16 women were interviewed, with the aim of exploring which factors are most important for women in rural areas in Iceland when they decide where to live, and if they should move away. The research was inspired by the observable trend that young women, more than men, tend to move away from rural communities to urban areas.

Having studied women's labour in aquaculture and fish processing in rural areas for several years (Karlsdóttir 2004, 2006, 2009), we became increasingly curious about the extent to which the marginal role of female workers in the fishery sector related to the positioning of women in other sectors in small Icelandic villages. The motivation became even greater when we realized that no studies have so far been conducted in Iceland highlighting how gender relations are shaped locally. Here we are inspired by Doreen Massey (2005), who has been a constant advocate of the view that there is a political necessity to tease out the mutual implications of the spatial and the political. Space (here in the sense of the construction of place) should not be seen as an ordered surface in relation to which the observer is positioned outside and above, but rather as the product of interrelations and a sphere of possibility in which distinct trajectories coexist. By going beyond the accounts of gender in modernity, which have been marked by distance and otherness, as Massey has criticized, and without ignoring embedded and gender-related power relations in these interrelations (Massey 2005), we want to investigate the choices of women in terms of mobility. Thus, our main aim in this field study was to explore the key reasons why women stay and continue living in a community with few occupational opportunities, given the previously described view of a shift in social organization leading to increased individual opportunities for social and physical mobility and the repeated claim that moving from a stagnant region is always a plausible step.

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The village of Húsavík

Húsavík is a village with about 2300 inhabitants, located in north-east Iceland (Figure 1). It is an example of a rural community experiencing a transformation process, from a resource-based to a service-based economy. Traditionally, Húsavík was a fishing village but also a service centre for the agricultural sector. About a decade ago, both the fisheries sector and the main service provider for farmers in the area (the co-operative) were faced with a number of challenges, leading to the loss of jobs and livelihoods for many people in the area. Over the last few years, the tourist sector has been growing during the summer-time, especially in connection with a booming whale-watching business. For example, in 2007, just over 40,000 tourists took whale-watching trips from Húsavík, out of a total of 104,000 whale-watching tourists visiting Iceland as a whole (Einarsson 2009: 3). There have also been negotiations between local municipalities and a foreign investor to build an aluminium smelter, taking advantage of energy sources in the area. Besides being contested, these plans have been delayed due to the economic crisis that hit Iceland in the autumn of 2008.

Even though there has only been a small decline in the total number of inhabitants in Húsavík during the last decade, this decline is mostly due to the migration of young

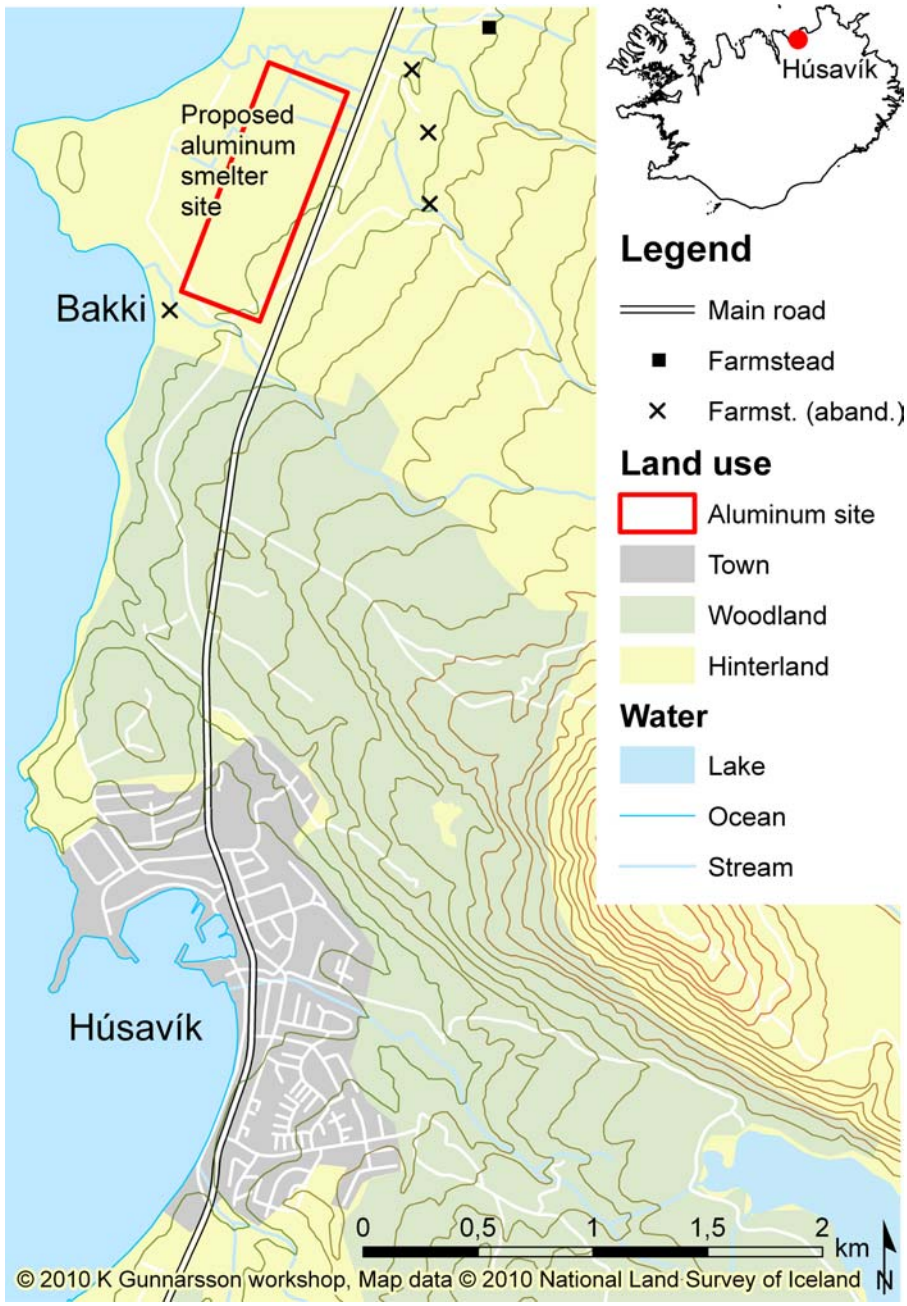

Figure 1. Map showing where Húsavík is located in north-east Iceland.

people. As Figure 2 demonstrates, there is an obvious fall in numbers among women in the age-group 20–40 years, whereas the men tend to stay longer in their home

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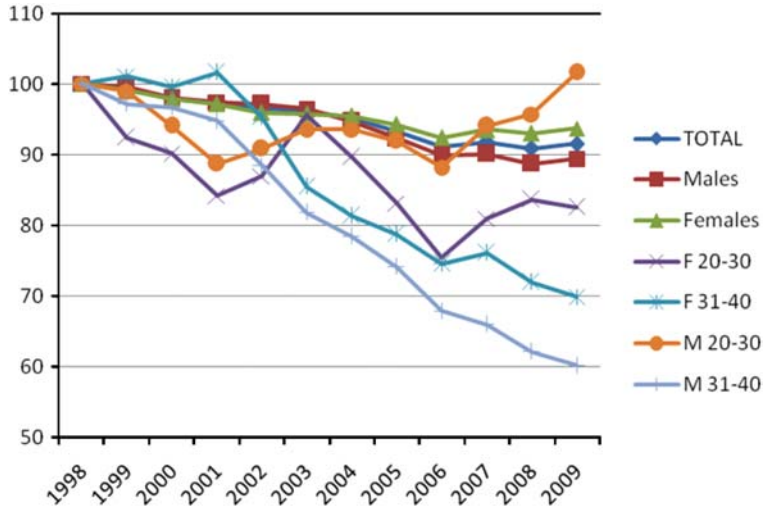

Figure 2. Proportional changes in certain age-groups in Húsavík: 1998–2009 (Source: Statistics Iceland 2009).

village, with no decline in the number of males in the age-group 20–30 years, but a sharp fall in the age-group 30–40 years (Statistics Iceland 2009).

Húsavík is an example of a community that can be considered to be in transition. As a fishing community, Húsavík belongs to the group of coastal communities that have been deeply affected by the consolidation of ownership of fishing rights and fishing companies that closed down, which has had profound effects on many fishing villages along the coast (Karlsdóttir 2008). The transfer of fishing licences has meant that inhabitants have more limited access to the resource they have historically relied on as a key source of employment, and they have also lost processing capacity as local plants have been shut down.

The community in Húsavík is a peripheral place in terms of settlement structure and patterns in Iceland. As already explained, it has suffered a significant loss of jobs in traditional sectors, related to the large-scale restructuring of the local economy over recent years. Furthermore, as demonstrated in Figure 2, it is suffering from a deficit in the number of young people, which is not uncommon in other rural villages in the North. Out-migration of young people from rural areas has been observed in several studies in different areas of the Nordic countries. For example, Foss and Juvkam (2005) found that, although one of the issues causing a problematic demographic situation in the Nordic peripheries was a very low fertility rate, the major cause was the out-migration of relatively young people. This out-migration creates a biased age structure and, as a consequence of young females migrating, the fertility rate drops. The result is that the regional population base in the periphery becomes narrower. While low fertility rates are not the most striking feature in Icelandic society overall, the biased age structure in some rural communities limits the possibilities for the creation of new employment opportunities and can have an influence on whether those communities will survive in the long run.

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According to a typology adopted from the European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion (ESPON), Húsavík is located in a region that could be categorized as falling in between a declining region with natural increase and a high traditional fertility rate, and a double negative region with continuous out-migration and lop-sided age structure with an ageing population (Edvardsson et al. 2007; The Icelandic Regional Development Institute 2010; Statistics Iceland 2010).

Earlier research on demographic development

Results from several prior research projects exploring migration patterns in the Nordic countries indicate that people's mobility varies during different periods in their life-span, but in areas where significant economic down-turns have triggered out-migration in large numbers the problem is that emigrants tend not to move back after the economy recovers.

In an extensive survey conducted among migrants in the Nordic region, focusing on non-economic conditions in relation to migration outcomes, the majority of migrants reported that services and facilities, living environment, livelihood, and social life were all better after the move (Lundholm & Malmberg 2006). Thus, moving from a stagnant region is a plausible step for many people. However, the region left behind, struggling with regional imbalances in the population structure, will be in a situation of reinforced chain effects (Edvardsson et al. 2007). This finding has been supported by demographic studies from coastal villages in north Iceland (Bjarnason et al. 2009). Thus, looking into the motives and perceptions of women who remain living against all the odds in declining regions with depopulation tendencies, like Húsavík, is important. Furthermore, although studies of urban–rural migration have been numerous in both British and Nordic studies, both in terms of explaining counter-urbanization and contributing to the dialogue on the reasons for moving from rural to urban settings (Berg & Forsberg 2003), very few studies have so far tried to explain the meanings of staying in a rural area from a gender perspective.

Comparative research from a number of northern regions (Alaska, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, Newfoundland, and Iceland) indicates the patterns mentioned above regarding affinity to rural community life. Compared to men, more women consider migrating and also eventually do migrate permanently away from their home community and region, first of all to look for job opportunities that better fit their qualifications, and second to provide opportunities outside the traditional economic activities of these communities (Hamilton & Seyfrit 1994; Rasmussen 2005). Diversity in employment opportunities plays an important role in attracting talent or human capital and thus is important to regional economic performance (Florida 2002; Júlíusdóttir & Gunnarsdotter 2007; Karlsson & Eyþórsson 2009). Family structures also seem to influence migration patterns. According to a recent Icelandic study that focused on which factors are important to people when they decide where to live, the careers of women who are in some form of cohabitation (including marriage) are more affected than men's careers in the sense that the women are more likely than men to respond to the responsibilities of home and child-care by minimizing travelling time between home, work, shopping, and school (Karlsson & Eyþórsson 2009).

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Also, education has been known to affect migration. The transfer of jobs from primary and secondary industries to occupations in the tertiary sector within a society can push people to move, and this also indicates that associated amenity values are indirect pull factors in migration (Anjomani 2002). These findings are of interest for the case study presented in this article. Are the women in Húsavík also affected by similar push and pull factors and wish to seek better economic opportunities elsewhere? Does a wider degree of social and cultural plurality elsewhere seem attractive to them when they decide whether to stay or to move away for a short period, or more permanently?

Previous research has also focused on the impact that the out-migration of young women has on the communities they leave behind. From this perspective, the types of changes experienced in Húsavík contribute to the continuing out-migration of young and well trained people from other regions that are predominantly rural. As the majority of those who leave are women, there are negative effects on social life and on the rural economy, e.g. through fewer opportunities for marriage, the maintenance of family life, and family structures (see e.g. Hamilton & Seyfrit 1993; Rasmussen 2005). Furthermore, such changes contribute to a deterioration of the social infrastructure and a decline in public services, eventually leading to a diminishing population. Lower fertility rates thus contribute to endangering the medium- to long-term development of these regions.

Despite the recognition that migration-related decision-making involves both economic and non-economic considerations, migration theories continue to be framed in economic terms (Walsh 2009). The discourse on out-migration from rural areas is thus framed in a negative light suggesting failure and rural decline. But what about those who stay behind? Are they passive victims, lacking the initiative to adapt to societal changes, or individuals who choose to stay and use their resources to reinvent themselves without migrating out of the region? The stories of the women we interviewed in Húsavík demonstrate that, while changes taking place at the community level have sometimes restricted their choices and created tension between their desire to be close to friends and family and their search for more diverse economic opportunities, many have also shown a high level of resilience and ability to cope with changes and have created new opportunities for themselves without moving away.

The patterns of mobility and migration can be seen as connected to a number of gender-related differences in aspirations and approaches to change. To begin with, in relation to the question of work and work-related activities, the perception of activities related to renewable resource exploitation, customarily performed by men, seems to be "sticky", in the sense that the prevailing discourse with respect to men's employment has difficulty in moving on from what were once key economic activities but now constitute only a small percentage of the available jobs (Rauhut et al. 2008). In contrast to this, women are brought up and are socialized into collective activities, are more attentive to others' needs, and consequently are much more open to change (Rasmussen 2009). As a result of this, they are less limited by specific job activities. Meanwhile, according to Rauhut et al. (2008), men seem to be socialized into path-dependency, creating situations where adjustment and change are required, leaving them less prepared to move between job categories and job options. Only jobs related

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to (new) technology have become status-providing alternatives for men. Consequently, the adaptation to change through the educational system fits much better with the socialization of girls than boys, in spite of the fact that women are constantly under-rated and under-represented when it comes to filling high-ranking positions, both in academia and administrative positions. This generates the question of whether the gender-related differences in approaches to changes in a community are related to occupational or spatial mobility.

The methodology and material of the study

This study's point of departure, in common with many others dealing with migration, is that both structure and agency are important factors influencing both individuals' decisions about living in an area or leaving, and also the way in which those individuals perceive their decisions (Aure 2008). The approach used in our interviews with the women is grounded in the agency perspective, emphasizing their own power to make decisions about where to live. However, we are also aware that external circumstances/structures can influence the basis of decision-making about where to live and how positive and negative aspects of community life are perceived by the individual. Space is constructed out of social relations, as Massey (1994) has claimed. Furthermore we share Massey's understanding that identities (presented by second-wave feminism) are both material, determined by practice accompanying places, and relational, as well as being discursive (Massey 2004). We also draw on Berg and Forsberg's (2003) understanding of feminist rural geography, that not only are gendered identities within space social and cultural constructions, which are multiple, fluid, and contingent, but they are also as dynamic as space itself. However, contingency also has a structural aspect since ideologies and power geometries are created within that context. The local level is important because the dominant meaning (generated from power structures and social interaction) of the rural is negotiated on the local scale. The local scale, in this case Húsavík, is where different individuals' and groups' constructions are highlighted. We therefore rest on the understanding that structure and agency both affect the choice of living and are always in the background in people's lives in their decision-making. Behaviour and institutions are therefore affected by social relations and are always present, and actors are seen as being embedded in social contexts (Granovetter 1992).

Analysing the collected data involved thematizing the interview material according to our theoretical propositions on gender, space, and place. One of the predominant expressions led to a closer examination of how social relations are augmented by the informants as interpretations of the relative geography within Húsavík. The emerging emphasis on the importance of locally embedded social networks and institutions to some extent confirmed some of the propositions about sense of place as it relates to gender, as explained below.

The field study conducted in Húsavík utilized qualitative interpretive methods. Since the purpose of the field study was to explore, not behaviour, but rather the motivations behind decisions related to where to live, we considered this approach most useful. How the people who are affected by changes perceive them (the emic perspective) determines how they react to them (Csonka & Schweitzer 2004).

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As research so far has placed too little emphasis on local perceptions of changes, we feel this perspective is needed in our study.

The women invited to participate in the interviews were hand-picked, rather than chosen randomly, through a nomination method. This has been described as a method whereby the researcher asks a local "social gate-keeper", or intermediary, to help identify a group of people who meet the requirements for the relevant research (Pierce 2008: 91). In this case, the local academic centre[1] in the village played the role of a social gate-keeper, providing the initial recommendations of which women to invite for an interview. Most of the women were contacted after a recommendation from a staff member at the academic centre, but two were interviewed after being recommended by another person who was interviewed, and two were identified by the researchers themselves.

A total of 16 women were interviewed in the village during August 2009. The aim was to talk to women with diverse educational backgrounds and belonging to different age-groups. Also, women who had taken the initiative to start their own businesses were targeted. The interviews were semi-structured, all covering the same themes, but with open-ended questions, allowing for some flexibility depending on the background of the person being interviewed. The women were contacted by phone to set up the interview date, and each interview was taped and then transcribed.

All of the women had some family ties to Húsavík, either through their own family or the family of their spouses. The interviewees ranged in age from 20 to 60 years old. Two women were single and without children, but the remainder were all in a relationship and had children. Half of the women had a university degree, two were too young to have started university, but those who were older and without a university degree had in many cases added to their education by getting diplomas for specific jobs, even though they did not have a formal degree.

The purpose of the interviews was to find out which factors were most important for the women when determining where they preferred to live. In addition to questions related to economic opportunities, questions were also asked about other factors contributing to their decisions about where to live, e.g. family ties and social relations, educational opportunities, and access to public services. The women were also asked about their opinion on the status of women and men in their community more generally, how they evaluated the future prospects for economic development in the region, and to what degree they felt the community had been affected by the financial crises that hit Iceland in the second half of 2008.

The case study—the importance of family and social relations

Family and other social relations clearly emerged as one of the most important factors influencing the women's decision to stay in the village in spite of economic decline. As mentioned before, all the women interviewed had some family ties to the area, either directly or through their spouse. Eleven of the women had been raised in the village or close by, and the remaining five were married to men who had been raised in the village. The latter were so-called in-movers (Walsh 2009)—in Icelandic village terminology, new-comers. Several of the women who were raised in the village

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went away in their 20s for education and most often cited family, and other social ties, as their main reason for moving back to the village. They shared an experience of having out-migrated temporarily (some with the purpose of returning, others with more vague time-related goals) and then moved back. The respondents therefore represent a group of people who, during different times in their life-span, have been mobile at least temporarily. One of the interviewees was standing at a cross-road in terms of having to move away from the village due to family and care issues.

A woman in her 30s who was raised in Húsavík, but moved to the city for a university education, gave the following reason for why she moved back to the village:

> We had a big group of friends in the village. Most of our friends had either done their education through distance learning or moved back after they finished university. I also have a family here. In Reykjavík we felt lonely, with no family around. There was always something missing.

Another woman (in her 40s) who came to the area as a young woman and stayed after she married a man from the village, describes how difficult it was to continue living there after her divorce, when she did not have such strong family ties as before:

> Everything is family-related here. It is very difficult to live here without a family. For example, when I divorced my husband I also divorced his family. I was not welcome any more in their homes. His siblings closed their door, and I belonged nowhere.

One woman in her late 20s, who was very happy with her job, was concerned about how she would feel living in the area now that some of her close relatives were moving away:

> I have a huge extended family and like being around my family members. The current economic situation is negatively affecting me since I want to keep all my relatives close to me. I wish everyone could have a job here. For me, getting a job is easy, but my father is a carpenter, and there was not enough work for him here. A relative in Norway offered him a good job, and he did not really have any choice but to leave.

These quotes are examples of how important family and social ties are in this community. This emphasis on family as a reason for why the women chose to live in the area came out very clearly in the interviews.

While social ties were frequently mentioned as a reason for living in the area, lack of appropriate jobs was the most frequently mentioned reason for why people were moving away. All of the women confirmed that the local economy had faced many challenges during the last decade and many people had lost their jobs. Some were quite pessimistic about the future, claiming that unless some big industry arrived the community would continue to decline. Others were more optimistic, pointing to the growth in the tourist sector and a number of small individual initiatives.

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Many recognized that plans to establish an aluminium smelter had created positive expectations about the job market, but now, since these plans had been put on hold, the future was much more uncertain.

All of the women interviewed held jobs locally, but a number of them had husbands, or other male family members, who were working away, either as fishermen or in the construction business. This trend came out very strongly in the interviews, and almost all of the women mentioned how it had become more common over the last few years for men to have to seek employment that required travelling considerable distances.

One 55-year-old woman made the link between this trend and earlier times, when fishing was one of the main occupations:

> When the children were small my husband was a fisherman and away for long periods of time. So I was used to being the fisherman's wife, taking care of the home. Now it is becoming like this again. The men are away for weeks due to their jobs.

Some women complained that it was more difficult for women than men to get well paid positions. One woman in her 40s, who had been working in a family business for years but then had to seek employment elsewhere, explained how this was the first time she had felt discriminated against as a woman:

> I started working in accounting for a local firm. The job was OK, but not something that greatly interested me. This was also the first time I felt it was worse to be a woman in the job market. My salary was quite a bit lower than those of any of my male colleagues. I knew this since I was responsible for paying salaries. I kept pointing this out, but nothing happened. I was given additional responsibilities but never a salary increase. All doors were closed.

While men who lost their jobs in the village sought similar jobs, either locally or further away, women have been more likely to change sectors. For example, according to the women interviewed, many women who previously worked in fish processing factories had begun working for the public sector, either at the hospital, in welfare services, at the kindergarten, or in the schools. Many have also sought further education to increase their options for employment. One woman we interviewed, working in adult education, noted a clear gender difference in the interest of people over 30 years old in seeking more education:

> I would say we get about 75% females and 25% males. The women show more initiative in asking for advice and are more open to the idea of adding to their education… Approaching the men is much more difficult. It is also more difficult to get access to firms run by men. It seems like, after a certain age, men are more afraid to leave their comfort zone.

Although most of the women interviewed stated that it was easier for women to find jobs if they had a good education, finding a job they perceived as appropriate,

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given their education and qualifications, was not always easy. One 60-year-old woman told us about her two daughters who both held university degrees but were working as secretaries in local firms. Both preferred to live in the village to be close to family, but neither was happy with her job. They wanted to be able to get more challenging, better paid positions more suited to their educational backgrounds.

Nevertheless, the community seemed to be open to the idea of women in leadership positions, and several women had been hired for influential positions in recent years. One 30-year-old woman who holds the position of executive manager in one of the key local companies considered herself very lucky, since opportunities for employment were scarce:

> First after I moved here I was on maternity leave, but in 2007 I started looking for employment. I was very ambitious, had spent many years studying, and was itching to start working. In the beginning the search did not go so well, and I was turned down for some positions. Then I was approached by the chair of the board of this company and offered the position of office manager … A year later I became the executive manager.

Another woman, in her 40s, had less luck in finding appropriate employment when she returned after finishing a university degree abroad:

> I have been working in my field since I came back in 2002 but never had a steady job until now. It was always project-based. When I applied for long-term positions it was always a man who was hired instead.

As a reaction to the local economic challenges, local authorities have begun several initiatives whose aim is to encourage people to start their own small-scale businesses. This is a big difference from former times, when it was quite easy to get employment with the big companies in the village. Several women have responded to this call in recent years, opening their own shops or setting up other forms of business ventures.

One woman in her 40s, with no higher education, opened a shop selling her own designs:

> After four years of preparation, I opened the shop one year ago. I had no capital, no education, and little knowledge about whether I was doing the right thing. All I had was the encouragement of the people working at the Regional Development Agency. They helped me create a business plan and with that I was able to secure a loan from the bank … And it seems now that this is going to work out OK.

Since the interviews focused on women, little information was gathered about men establishing new businesses. Nevertheless, the information revealed that, while the men were more mobile in seeking employment far away, they were more hesitant about completely shifting sectors. A woman in her 40s, who had moved to the village 13 years previously and works in the health sector, provided the following analysis of how men and women have approached the challenges in the local economy in different ways:

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> The women deal with the situation differently. They start to study and add to their education. The men are left behind. I am more worried about them. They are breaking down; many are worried and filled with anxiety. The women fight more. They don't give up, but go on and find new ways. This is how I experience the situation.

After analysing the information from all 16 interviews, it can be stated that, overall, family ties and social relations seem to be the most influential factors in determining why the women chose to live in the village, while lack of appropriate jobs was the most common reason for why people were moving away. Our informants expressed the concern that, with more people moving away due to the lack of certain types of jobs, this could influence others to choose to move away as well, even if they have good jobs, since their social networks might weaken due to the out-migration of close friends and family members.

Another issue that emerged clearly from the interviews was a difference between how men and women dealt with the changes taking place in the local economy. Generally, according to the women interviewed, men seem to be much more mobile when it comes to seeking employment away from the home. This seems to be a natural extension of the fishing village culture, where the men were out at sea and the women took care of the home. However, women seem more flexible in changing employment sectors and engaging in tasks that require different skills from their previous jobs. This also seems related to the fact that more women than men are using the increasing number of educational opportunities available locally, e.g. through distance learning centres. But if the women cannot find work locally, in spite of this flexibility, they seem more likely to move away, rather than commute long distances for their jobs, as many of the men do.

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Mobility and flexibility: different reactions to change

Our research in the coastal fishing village of Húsavík has not confirmed previous findings that the on-going changes have led to a situation where the jobs generated as a result of the transition from a resource-based to a service-based economy are primarily being produced for men. Rather, the common concern in the village was the availability of jobs in general, especially jobs in the secondary and tertiary sectors. Our informants worked within various service sectors, ranging from tutoring to taking on managerial roles. Characteristic of their changed role was that they were using either education, or their own initiative as entrepreneurs, as means of creating new economic opportunities for themselves. The information provided by the women in the interviews indicates that the disappearance of jobs available in primary and secondary occupations has triggered changes in the community that are affecting men more negatively than women. Getting a job within the community that is on an annual basis and not seasonal is hard, and men respond by working in jobs that require considerable travelling, detaching themselves from conventional spatial family–job relationships. In this respect, men seem to be more mobile in seeking employment away from the home, but in terms of seeking alternative career paths they seem more path-dependent than the women. As one of the informants expressed

it, the men were less prone to seek available courses or training in order to redirect their competences to other fields of occupation. She added that, after a certain age, men seemed to be more afraid than women to leave their comfort zone. These findings support the theories put forward by Rasmussen (2009) and Rauhut et al. (2008), among others, that changes in the composition of the local labour market in communities in the North have had a direct impact on the gender composition of the community and indirectly in the way men and women respond differently. An analogy could be made that the shift involves a change in women's position from sea-wife to grass-widow as the shift leads to men seeking jobs over longer distances similarly to old times when they were out at sea. Now they are on the road. On the other hand, the transfer of jobs from primary sector functions to tertiary sector functions has also had a gendered impact due to the fact that, once again, women were shouldering the responsibility for child-care and taking care of the home, along with their formal work-related duties, since the men were so often away. In this respect, it can be argued that women in the village have become more tied to the home as care-takers, and for some of them it can be concluded that they are more likely to some extent to be trapped in place-based forms of "body work" (McDowell 2008), taking care of the emotional and physical needs of the family. However, further research is needed on whether such a situation will encourage families to move away if it prevails in the long run. Also, some of those interviewed mentioned that it was difficult for women to get well paid jobs in the village, and the threat of reduced social services being provided by the municipality in the future was causing some concern. These issues could create insecurity for some families, pressuring them to move away in the future.

In spite of the small size of the community, which provides closeness to family as well as the possibility of ease of movement between places in daily life (a factor many mentioned specifically as a positive feature), the community as such does not seem to be the primary factor that defines belonging. In general, the women referred to themselves in connection with their own family, spouses, their spouses' families, parents and siblings. The close-bound family relations are therefore the basis of the spatial construction of belonging in this case. This was quite vividly described in the case of the in-mover woman who had divorced her partner and in the aftermath experienced a total loss of network within the community. In order to stay, which she did, she had to replenish her network through the establishment of a new family, a new husband, in order to function equally in the community. While the grass-widow attribute indicates changing family and community characteristics, the patriarchal family is still the element that binds people to place. Taking the relativity of space into consideration, the patterns of actions explained by the informants in terms of path dependence, local tradition, and regional belonging support Forsberg's research (2001) that space and gender make sense. The people interviewed sometimes seem to have difficulties in placing themselves into these "hegemonic" gender relations that to some extent seem locally based but are as much a rejected as an agreed-upon reality. "That's just the way it is."

Our informants' perceptions of living in Húsavík do not support other research findings which show that women feel forced to out-migrate as a response to unacceptable options in mono-based communities in the North and Scandinavian

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countries (Hamilton & Seyfrit 1994; Rauhut et al. 2008; Edvardsson et al. 2007). In contrast, this study repeatedly confirms that rationales for staying, leaving, returning, or moving depend significantly on considerations of social relations (underpinning Massey's 2005 statements) within the community as well as practical circumstances. Some of the informants expressed a need to adapt to what is available among scarce place-based job opportunities, a condition that does not seem to be valid to the same extent for their male partners. In that perspective, the women can be interpreted as feeling responsible for taking on the body work and emotional labour that demands their presence in the community in the absence of their partners. Thus, gendered power relations, where men are mobile and women stay in place, become reinforced. This is one factor that supports the contention that studies like this cannot be framed only in economic terms. Another remaining question is how this new family construction in space and time needs to be viewed and approached or supplemented methodologically. The likelihood of canonical statistical approaches being able to grasp it is slim, and that alone indicates that other methodological and theoretical conceptualizations, such as biographical interview methods, are needed. The world does not speak, only we do (Rorty 1979). Therefore, the dynamics within a community spoken about by people (our informants) in this case reveal local perceptions of changes, hopefully adding some clarifying elements to the already-existing literature. In the case of the community, occupational mobility is not merely a question of moving about spatially but can also manifest through a shift in educational or career-related paths for the purpose of staying, as in the case of the men and women living in Húsavík. Keeping moving, in Massey's terminology (1994), is in our study not only a question of moving spatially from one place to another but also refers to moving within the social hierarchy of jobs. Though we see our informants to some extent settling into the patriarchal order as described above, we can only agree with her view that connecting masculinity to temporality and progress is wrong and presents an oversimplification that is not likely to benefit an explanatory approach to the complex phenomenon of gender and space, women and place in areas experiencing on-going transformations.

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Note

[1] The local academic centre is a hub providing services to both researchers visiting the area and university students enrolled in distance learning programmes in various universities.

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Anna Karlsdóttir is an Assistant Professor at the University of Iceland. Her field is social and economic geography and coastal community changes in the North Atlantic and the Circumpolar Arctic. Her recent publications include: "Are living fish better than dead fillets? The invisibility and power of Icelandic women in aquaculture and the fishery economy", in: J. Kafarowsky (Ed.) *Gender, Culture and Northern Fisheries*, pp. 67–85 (2009) Edmonton: Canadian Circumpolar Institute Press; "Not sure about the shore! Transformation effects of individual transferable quotas on Iceland's fishing economy and communities", in: Lowe and Carothers (Eds) *Enclosing the Fisheries: People, Places and Power*, pp. 99–119 (2008) Bethesda: American Fisheries Society; and "Women's role and situation in the fishery sector in the East fjords of Iceland", in: L. Sloan (Ed.) *Women and Natural Resource Management in the Rural North*, Arctic Council Sustainable Development Working Group 2004–2006, pp. 79–97 (2009) Nordland: Forlaget Nora.

Auður H. Ingólfsdóttir is an Assistant Professor at Bifrost University in Iceland. Her fields of research include climate change and human security, gender, and natural resource management. Her recent publications include: "Climate change and human security in the Arctic: The role of gender", in: Halldór Guðmundsson & Silja Bára Ómarsdóttir (Eds) *Rannsóknir í Félagsvísindum X—Erindi flutt á ráðstefnu í október 2009* [Research in Social Sciences X—papers presented at a conference in October 2009] (2009) Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands; and "Umhverfismál og utanríkisstefna: Stefna Íslands í samningum um loftslagsbreytingar" [Environment and foreign policy: Iceland's policy in negotiations on climate-related international agreements], in: Valur Ingimundarson (Ed.) *Uppbrot hugmyndakerfis: Endurmótun íslenkrar utanríkisstefnu 1991–2007* [a book about Icelandic foreign policy after the Cold War] (2008) Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag.

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