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## Place and space for women in a rural area in Iceland.

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The aim of this article is to explore what happens when women in Iceland try to reinhabit their 'place' in the community by undertaking university studies through distance learning. The research builds on interviews with eight women from the remote Westfjords area in Iceland. They had all taken a higher educational degree through distance learning while living in their hometown, and were still living there on completion of their studies.

My argument is that women use education to strengthen their status, place and space in a rural community. The findings show however, that because their study is mostly in the field of the private sphere of life, they only strengthen their status inside that field, not extending their action space within the community. On the surface it looks as if they are studying for themselves, but under the surface, it becomes clear that the area they choose to study fits the needs of the community; that is, a profession that is lacking.

**Keywords:** *place-based approach, rural areas, women, university education, eco-feminism*

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### Introduction

Since the 1960s, higher education development in the Nordic countries has been presented as a policy tool which could boost regional development. It has been suggested that several good practices have to be in place for optimal benefits of higher education institutions for regional development purposes (Hedin, 2009):

- a match between the education offered and the regional labour force demand,
- an emphasis on project or problem based learning and student outplacement,
- the availability of entrepreneurship programmes, and
- adaption of an up-skilling and life-long learning approach.

Iceland has evolved rapidly from a primary production society to a knowledge-based society. At the same time there has been a decrease in agricultural and fisheries occupations in Iceland, as in other market societies. Such evolution is mostly observed in urban areas and the growth of cities is a main characteristic of market societies. Migration from rural to urban areas is an observable phenomenon worldwide. Research in Iceland has shown that people prefer to reside in urban areas because they value the diverse opportunities available there (Icelandic Regional Development Institute, 2006, Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006).

In the last 20 years, several regional development plans have been produced by the Icelandic government where a political discourse about rural area reinforcement can be found. The three main goals in the government's regional development plan for 2006 – 2009 concerned the development of higher education, research activities and innovation in rural areas. Efforts were made to build a knowledge society system that would strengthen the economy of rural areas (Icelandic Regional Development Institute, 2006). The same goals appeared again in the development plan from 2011, called "Iceland 20/20 – an advance for the economy and community" that is for the whole of Iceland until 2020 with an emphasis on

knowledge, sustainability and welfare (Prime Minister's Office, 2011). The discussion does not revolve around any intrinsic value of educational development or knowledge creation, but rather the direct connection between such development and the jobs it can create. In this article I intend to consider the role of gender in promoting higher education in rural areas, and in particular, the choices that women in rural areas make when new educational opportunities become accessible.

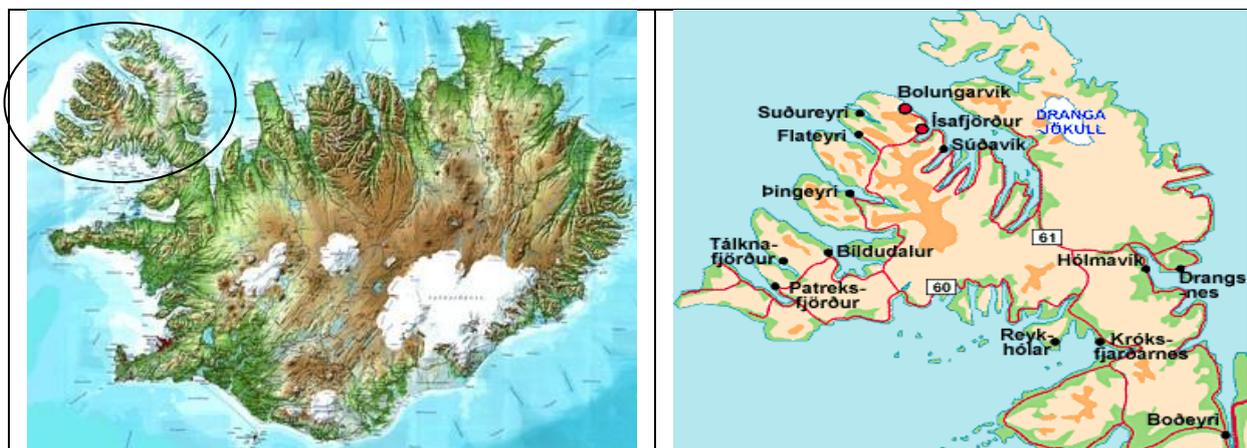
According to the Act no. 63/2006 (p.1) on higher education institutions, a university is "an independent educational institution which conducts teaching, research, preservation and search for knowledge, and creativity in the fields of science, education, technology or arts." It continues, "The role of Higher Education Institutions is contributing to the creation and dissemination of knowledge and skills to students as well as society in general." (Act no. 63/2006, p.1) In order to serve the higher educational needs of rural areas, universities have developed distance learning options and today most Icelandic universities offer all or part of their studies through distance learning (Eðvarðsson and Óskarsson, 2010). What is relevant is that at first such programmes were considered a solution for individuals living in rural areas, but today any individual, irrespective of place of residence has a choice to pursue an education through distance learning or traditional methods (Jóhannsdóttir, 2010).

### The research area

The Westfjords, 22.271 square km, (Figure 1) are the northwest part of Iceland, which is 103.000 square km (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westfjords>). The area has many deep fjords, steep mountains, a harsh landscape, diverse birdlife and rich fishing grounds. The villages are based in the fjords and rely mostly on fisheries and services that are linked to the fishing industry (<http://www.vestfiridir.is/index.php?page=baindex&web=1>).

Figure 1 Iceland ([www.extremeiceland.is](http://www.extremeiceland.is))

The Westfjords ([www.travelnet.is](http://www.travelnet.is))



The population in the Westfjords has been decreasing from 10.000 inhabitants in 1971, 10.500 in 1981, 9.722 in 1991 and 6.955 in 2011 (Statistics Iceland, 2012). The main reasons for this decrease are the introduction of the quota system legislation on fisheries, the quota ownership change with associated difficulties, bankruptcy of companies in the fishing industry and major natural disasters (The Association of the Municipalities in Westfjords, 2007).

In recent years there have been changes in the fishing industry because of new technology and transfers of quota ownership. Fishing quotas moved from one community to another and

new technology was introduced into the fishing plants, creating a job loss in the industry, especially for women. In the Westfjords area, people moved away when they lost their jobs, because there were no other job opportunities (Jóhannesson, Jóhannsson, Heiðarsson, Ólafsson, Jóelsdóttir, and Sigurbjarnarson, 2010; Heiðarsson, Jóhannesson, and Ólafsson, 2007).

In Iceland, about 20.000 students are registered in universities every year of which 60% are women. About 3.000 of them are registered as distance learning students and about 120 live in the Westfjords area with the majority, 80 of them, women, or 67% (Statistics Iceland, 2012).

### **The theoretical framework**

The theoretical approaches that I use in the research are place-based education; especially theories about dimensions of place, eco-feminism, with emphasis on the eco-feminist political economy and theories about “the good life” which is linked to the social dimension of sustainability.

According to several educators, place is pedagogical (Gruenewald, 2003; Somerville, 2010; Stevenson, 2008; Bowers, 2008) and by introducing such pedagogies, place-based education “will address such questions as how to develop sustainable communities and places” (Somerville, 2010, p.362). Gruenewald (2003) states that “places make us”, (p.621) where our identity and our possibilities are shaped and “places teach us how the world works and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy” (Gruenewald, 2003, p.621). It could be helpful to look at the ecological dimension of place, especially the discourse of eco-feminism which says “that historical patterns of domination and control over women are connected to the patterns of domination over the land” (Gruenewald, 2003, p.635) or in the case of fishing communities in Iceland, the sea (Gruenewald, 2003; Shiva, 1993; Twine, 2001; Manion, n.d; Williams and Millington, 2004; Buckingham, 2004; Leach, 2007). The perspective of the eco-feminist political economy reveal women’s status in a male-dominated economic systems, which values men’s works more than women’s (Mellor, 2006; Langley and Mellor, 2002; Buckingham, 2004; Leach, 2007) The sociological and political dimensions of ‘place’ which emphasise power relations and acceptance of the social space can be helpful in understanding these relations at the political level (Gruenewald, 2003; Mellor, 2006; Langley and Mellor, 2002; Leach 2007). How can education address this dilemma? As more women than men attend university studies, gender perspectives concerning women as place makers become an important factor in rural development.

Formal education often neglects to take into the account the importance of how place affects our lives, our culture and how we value things and see the world. It is the knowledge that each place has created, that inhabitants in a place have about various things of that place; “the local knowledge”, which normally is questioned and not valued by outsiders (Gruenewald, 2003; Greenwood, 2009; Shiva, 1993; Somerville 2010; Bowers, 2008; Gough, 2012). Gruenewald describes five dimensions of place that shape the development of a socio-ecological, place-conscious education. Those dimensions are: the perceptual, the sociological, the ideological, the political and the ecological. In order to address the issue of knowledge development in rural areas I will focus on the ecological, sociological and political dimensions of place (Gruenewald, 2003).

Theories of well-being concerning individuals and communities can shed some light on how local knowledge, along with scientific knowledge, can create sustainable and relevant knowledge of a particular place. Well-being of people and communities, or “the good life”, has often focused on economic welfare, linking economic growth in a place or a community to the well-being of people (Dodds, 1997; Hopwood, Mellor and O’Brien; 2005). This is the

way the Western societies have evaluated how sustainable life is best met. That kind of lifestyle has also been sought after elsewhere by other nations. Sustainable life emphasises the balance among economy, environment and well-being, which is not in place when the focus is only on the economic growth (Sampford, 2010; Shiva, 1993; Langley and Mellor, 2002).

#### *The ecological dimension of place*

The ecological dimension of place focuses on the relationship among the environment, economy and well-being of people living in a certain place. This dimension asks questions about the modern economy and how it might damage and destroy the ecological system of human and non-human communities. Universities and educational institutions have emphasised growth in the global economy and environment, and the well-being of a place and its people comes second. In order to work towards and maintain some equilibrium among the environment, economy and social factors in a place, it is necessary to focus locally; meaning to act in a sustainable way in the place you live in and take into account the local knowledge that can be found there (Gruenewald, 2003; Greenwood, 2009; Shiva, 1993; Twine, 2001; Manion, n.d; Williams and Millington, 2004; Buckingham, 2004; Leach, 2007).

Universities and higher educational institutions must create a balance between scientific knowledge and local knowledge of a place in order to educate and serve people in that particular place. They should not only be providers of knowledge, but also learners of that 'place' knowledge. In a system of educational provision and institutional learning, sustainable knowledge can be created.

#### *The sociological and political dimension of place*

People live in a place, which holds their culture and their identity. Humans usually fail to recognise that and tend to take the social space they live in for granted, not thinking about why things are as they are or whether they can be changed. Humans often do not think of a place as a cultural product which represents their choices, values, beliefs and decisions. The relationships among place, identity and culture emerge in the culture, ideology and politics of the place. By saying that people are place makers, then people must become conscious of themselves as place makers and as participants in the socio-political process of place making (Gruenewald, 2003; Mellor, 2006; Langley and Mellor, 2002; Leach, 2007).

Education in a place provides opportunities for learners to participate meaningfully in the process of place-making; meaning that place-based education can make learners more conscious of the spatial dimension of social justice issues, such as democracy, equity, race and gender (Somerville, 2010; Stevenson, 2008; Bowers, 2008). Education should not be such that it "...limits the possibilities for democracy (and for places) because it diverts the attention of citizens, educators and students from the social, cultural and political patterns involved in place making" (Gruenewald, 2003, p.628).

The focus on the economy in 'place' has been related to male perspectives (Proppé, 2004; Mellor, 2006; Langley and Mellor, 2002; Leach 2007) and to understand better how it can affect the women's status and space in a place, I will consider theories of eco-feminism.

#### *Eco-feminism*

Eco-feminism has been defined as a movement "...which argues that patriarchal oppression destroys Nature in the name of profit and progress" (Humm, 1995, p.73) Those who favour that want "...a paradigmatic shift in patriarchal science, knowledge and technology, to a sustainable global economy...." (Humm, 1995, p.73).

The discourse of eco-feminism is helpful when one wants to understand the relationship between humans and place, focusing on the historical pattern of domination and control over women and how that is connected to the domination of natural resources, both on land and

at sea (Shiva, 1993, Manion, n.d, Twine, 2001) and women's status in a society of a male-dominated economy (Proppé, 2004; Mellor, 2006; Langley and Mellor, 2002; Leach 2007). Women and nature have been constructed by patriarchal, capitalistic societies as something to have "power over". Looking at a place through an eco-feminist perspective offers a broad range of "social and ecological issues, including local economic livelihood, equity and social justice, resource depletion, ecological limits, cultural and biological diversity, marginalization and resistance, phenomenological experience....." (Gruenewald, 2003, p.635).

Both men and women use the discourse of biological gender when rationalising gender segregation in the community or place; the discourse about "having power over". The stronger this male dominated discourse, the more difficult it is for women to change the place they live in (Proppé, 2004; Mellor, 2006; Langley and Mellor, 2002; Leach 2007; Shiva, 1993; Manion, n.d, ).

### *The 'good life'*

A key issue in discussions of sustainability is to find a balance between the 'good life' and respecting environmental integrity (Giddings, Hopwood and O'Brien, 2002; Hopwood, Mellor and Brien, 2005). Dodds (1997) talks about four approaches to well-being; well-being as a state of mind, well-being as a human capability, well-being as a state of the world and well-being as the satisfaction of underlying needs. The first two approaches refer to the individual himself/herself; what he/she can do, if he/she is given the freedom within the place he/she occupies, to live the life he/she chooses and is satisfied with in general. The latter two refer more to the place itself or the community and how it can create an environment of well-being for all inhabitants. Both inhabitants in a place and the place itself must have a mutual understanding what basic needs the place should be responsible for and provide. To find out if well-being is achieved within the place, measurable indicators are used. Such indicators are the same worldwide and are used to compare welfare and well-being of people (Dodds, 1997).

Three different perspectives can be found on what "the good life" or the "well-being" means for women (Skålnes, 2004). Those perspectives are: conservative, modern and alternative. The conservative perspective focuses on family and child raising and women who have this perspective shape their life projects on the basis of that vision. Work and leisure are secondary to this family focus. They do get educated but they tend to study child care work, social work or teaching (Skålens, 2004). When asked about their choice; they stress the possibility of combining job, family and children. They also tend to have a traditional vision towards the labour between men and women. The modern perspective focuses on career goals and women who have that vision, model their life projects on social success, career and family in that order. Such women tend to study economy or management, tourism and social science. They believe that higher education is a must and their choice is based on that view that education will prepare them for the career they want to pursue. They want everything and to manage everything; full-time career, children and an active life. The third perspective is the alternative, which focuses on open-minded environment and women who have that perspective shape their life projects on choosing their life style, even though it is not the traditional way of living. Their choice of career lies in tourism, museum management, arts and crafts and social work. Career is not number one, but to have a job that allows them to live a good life without work and/or family, controlling their every move (Skålnes, 2004).

The conceptual framework that I use in the research is place-based in order to understand the women's educational choice and whether it changes their status in the communities. I use an eco-feminist perspective to reveal the male perspective dominance of the rural community's economy, especially in the field of natural resource management.

## **Methodology**

The aim of the study is to find out whether and how women's status and place in a community changes by completing a university degree through distance learning. The research question is: *How does university education change women's status and place in a rural area in Iceland?* For that purpose, I interviewed eight women who all had taken a university degree through distance learning, continuing to live in their hometown while studying and then staying on. My focus is on the women that stayed on after finishing a university degree and whether their status has in any way changed after getting that degree within their communities. What happens to the women who finished their university study and then left is another story and will not be addressed here.

The interviews were taken from November 2009 to June 2010 and the participants were from all over the Westfjords area. I got the information about the women from the University Centre of the Westfjords in Ísafjörður, which gave me a list of women in the region who had graduated with a higher educational degree. From that list I choose those eight women. I wanted my choice to reflect the variety of women that live in the Westfjords area; a broad age range, distribution across the area and different study lines in different universities as well as that some of them had taken part of their studies in a class-based setting.

I sent them a letter by e-mail, asking for their participation, introducing the aim of the research and the research question. After they had agreed, I sent them some topics for discussion and gave them some time to prepare themselves for the interviews. The red thread in the interview schedule was the women's university study and whether getting a higher educational degree had changed their place and status in the community. Then I travelled to their hometowns and took the interviews, which were individual interviews, at their home or workplace, depending on the women's choice. The interviews were half-open, semi-structured; meaning that even though I placed emphasis on a relaxed atmosphere during the interviews, encouraging the women to feel free to say whatever they thought was relevant, I took the traditional role of interviewer by managing the interviews towards the topics I had sent them for consideration.

The discussion topics were the women's background, their higher educational studies, the communities they lived in, matters concerning equal rights, natural resource management, rural development and gender issues. Each interview took about one hour and was recorded and transcribed. I do not use the women's real names; and there is nothing in the data presented that shows who the women are. The university studies the women had undertaken were in business administration, teaching, nursing, natural science and tourism and they all had jobs in the field of their study.

I chose to use a grounded theory approach to analyse the interviews. Grounded theory is a method that seeks to find theories or frame theories based on the data that has been gathered. It is flexible and allows you to follow leads that come up. It can also help you to focus on what is going on in your data. A grounded theory approach is a tool that can enhance your seeing (Charmas, 2009).

The transcribed interviews were analysed by finding themes in each interview, group the themes in the interviews together in order to find theories that could answer the research question. The themes that could be identified in the interviews were: university studies, the communities, rural development, natural resource management and themes about social justice.

## **The findings**

### *Background information*

The women came all over the Westfjords area. They ranged in age from 27 to 57. Six were married, one was single. They had children and/or grandchildren and had worked in various professions, such as business owners, low paid workers or studying.

Dee: "I have also run a business..... Founded it, ran it and then sold it. I learned a lot during that time, yes; where money and values come from".

Some came to the area as young women to work in the fishing industry, to study or were looking for an adventure. There they had met their partners and stayed on because the partner didn't want to leave.

Ann: "I came here because my relatives lived here at that time, and I decided to study at the high school here, I met my husband in the school."

Others had met their partner in Reykjavík, while he was studying or working and moved with him to his hometown:

Carol: "Yes, I was born and brought up in Reykjavík and moved up here after finishing high school with my husband who was brought up here".

Some couples were both from the area and had decided to move back to the man's hometown:

Karen: "I think, because we are both from the area and our relationships had developed to the point that we talked about having children and wanted them to grow up in the countryside".

The women I interviewed were living in the area because they or their husbands had families there. Another important factor for choosing to live in rural areas is child raising and security. Those factors are valued by the women and is best seen when they compare the city life to the rural life.

Ann: "I haven't found myself in Reykjavík, even though I was brought up there, it's just good to be here. I just feel that every individual matters here... because I know what it's like to live in Reykjavík and the closeness to other people, which might bother some, but not me. I feel safe, I feel safe with my children and that other people know their parents and so on".

To live in a child friendly environment is more valued by these women than living near their blood family. They also talked about the importance of having a job one likes.

Gwen: ".....I decided to go into studying, so I wouldn't have to take a job, that I found boring", not having an education limits your choices."

and the main reason for moving from the area would be of a job loss, especially if it would be their husbands who would lose their jobs.

Karen: "Yes, it would entirely be related to my husband's work.... we would not move if I would lose my job".

The women gave different reasons for coming to the area but the reasons why they stayed on were related to their traditional view towards life, which value family matters, especially child raising and small communities in rural areas seem to fit those values.

*University studies*

The women had always nurtured a dream that one day they would be able to study.

Ann: "No, I just always wanted to go into that field and when the opportunity came, I grabbed it."

They didn't feel they could have done it earlier, because it would have meant moving away from the area and that was too complicated for them with family and children.

Carol: "If studying would have meant that I had to move away from the area, I would not have gone in to studying, that was never an option."

During their studies some women stayed in Reykjavík for a period to complete their studies or because they wanted to experience being in the school with other students.

Gwen: "If I could choose, I would choose class-based learning, but first when I entered the class-based learning, I found, because I had been in distance learning the previous year, that it was a waste of time, sitting in a classroom for a whole day....but then I realised that it was the fellow students, the teachers and the whole environment that mattered."

Their line of study is chosen because it is something that was offered through distance learning.

Karen: "See, my study was chosen because it could be studied through distance learning. Then the choice was limited".

or because they had been working as unskilled workers in that sector and wanted to receive qualifications.

Jane: "...and then I started to work here (in the school) and got good references from the principals and all that. I applied but was afraid that I would be rejected again, but I wanted to be a teacher"

Some of the women ended up learning what was not always their first choice, but rather something that can be studied through distance learning and was practical in the community they were living in.

Karen: "I chose this study line, because we had decided to move back home and we thought that my previous study line was not practical enough there and I knew that this was something that would be useful".

When asked about their studies, the women stressed that they had gained a lot by studying, e.g. they were more confident, open minded, organised, aware of their own abilities, had gotten a higher salary in their line of work, more job satisfaction and a better life standard.

Jane: "Well, I feel safer with my knowledge and stronger....I'm more organised and have learned other work methods; e.g. teamwork and better communication methods".

Karen: "Yes, the difference in salary from being an unskilled worker to a skilled worker was great".

The women all said that they had felt a lot of support while studying. They found family and friends supportive, but not always the community they live in.

Carol: "My family supported me 100%, but it seems that the community didn't understand what I was going to study, why and what I was going to do with it".

It seems that these women who enter into higher education are the ones that always had planned to study something someday, but for family matters and location, had not been able to do that. When the opportunity came, with distant learning options, they grabbed it, even though study lines options were limited so in some cases a study line was not what they wanted most. What to study is a consideration for the women and sometimes their decisions seems to be based on what is practical for them, their family and the community.

#### *The communities and natural resources*

The women said that the main industry in their communities was the fishing industry and that is where the Westfjords natural resources lie, mainly in the quota system, where there is a lot of money and investment. The women said that the fishing industry is male dominated; meaning that it is the men that own the boats, the quota, the companies, manage the business and sit on the companies' boards.

Dee: "Who runs the fishing industry? For me, it seems that it is the biggest male dominated industry in the country, women are not there".

Women work in the fish plants. The men manage the sector where the financial resources are, there is the real power.

Mary: "Women don't pursue to fishing, men don't pursue work in the fish plants at the processing line. A woman has to have physical strength to be a fisherman, to sail and to fish, I think".

Dee: "Yes, the male values and beliefs are naturally always dominated, even though we fight for female values and beliefs to be seen; it is somehow that male network is much stronger, and while men have all the financial powers, then women get no power, because money and power go hand in hand".

They all felt their communities to be male dominated, with male values and beliefs; the smaller the community, the more male dominated it was.

Carol: "Male chauvinist community.... just straight out".

The women felt that the economy in their communities was monotonous and that the labour market was gender biased, women worked in the fish factories or in unskilled, low-paid service jobs, men were fishermen, farmers, journeymen and contractors.

Sue: "Well, yes, sort of. Women tend to go into the service sector and caretaking works and then the men are more in the fishing sector and some kind of industry and running a company; if a woman is running a business, it is inside the women's sector".

When asked about the political sector none of the women had gone into local politics, had no interests in politics and no plans of taking part in political activities.

Gwen: "Well, I think that the political sector is male dominated. I say it, because once I was asked to sit in a political board, because they wanted a woman. They were looking for my gender, not my expertise; so I said no".

As seen above, the women identify the fishing industry as the largest industry and at the same time the most male dominated industry in the area, where money and power go hand in hand. They are excluded from that industry and therefore feel their community to be male dominated. That factor is one of the reasons women move to more urbanized areas, where they seem to feel better, more valued and a feeling of belonging. The women also feel that political activities are male dominated and don't want to go into that field of sphere.

#### *Urban versus rural*

When asked to define the differences between rural and urban areas the women had the same understanding. They didn't feel they were living in a rural area because in their mind an urban area is a centre of a population that has some services, e.g. a town of 60 inhabitants is an urban area, if it is able to provide the necessary services, whereas a rural area is the individual farms in the countryside.

Carol: "No, I don't think my town is a rural area, for me it is an urban area, even though the population is about several hundred people. But it has to have some service institutions that we need, like in urban areas, but the rural areas do not have that".

In the women's mind, the villages around Iceland are urban areas and the countryside is rural. To be able to call a community rural or urban depends on the status of the service that can be found there. If there are all the necessary service institutions, e. g. a pre-school, a compulsory school, a health clinic with a doctor and/or a nurse, various shops that sell food and/or clothes, a town hall and a bank, the women felt they live in an urban community. Those are the things you need to live your daily life the same way you can in the capital area, which is the benchmark.

#### *The universities' role and rural development*

The women didn't think that Icelandic universities were doing well when I asked them about what they believed to be the universities' role in the development of higher education and research activities in rural areas.

Karen: "In many ways, higher education study should be organized in a way, that you don't have to go to Reykjavik. .... here people have taken higher education degrees, and then left, it's cheap to live here and study through distance learning, but opportunities are maybe elsewhere".

They felt that universities were not thinking about the people in rural areas or about rural development, but that they ought to do that. They stressed that the chance to have distance higher education in every university subject is important for people in the rural areas and their development.

Dee: "Universities role is, naturally, to educate people to get better jobs for themselves and the community. ....To be able to study through distance learning has a positive effect for this area; could be an attraction, but it will not prevent out-migration".

Even though lot of things have been done in the higher educational sector, migration from rural areas has not stopped and the women felt that education itself would not prevent people from moving, the labour market was more of a key player in that sense, meaning that if there are no suitable jobs in the area, people leave.

#### *Masculinity, femininity, equal rights and feminism*

When asked about the meaning of masculinity and femininity, the women expressed very traditional ideas about them.

Jane: "Well, you know, femininity is naturally the mother figure, the home and children..... masculinity is related to the car, the house and maintenance".

Despite the traditional ideas about masculinity and femininity, all women claimed to be equal-rights minded. They said they were not feminists because in their minds that concept had a negative meaning.

Ann: "I'm equal-rights minded, but I'm not a feminist. Why? Because I feel that it is a negative concept and extreme, like women are superior. Like, if a man and a woman apply for the same job and are equal, the law say you have to hire the woman; I don't see the point".

The women, although claiming to be equal-rights minded persons, seem not to realise, that the discourse about those matters is a patriarchal discourse, which favours male values, norms and beliefs. So they are not able to discriminate between the structure of individual rights and the structure of the patriarchal structure of their communities. Therefore they don't see, that their understanding of feminism strengthens the male dominance.

## Discussion

In this research the rural communities the women were living in are traditional fishing communities. Those communities, as the women identified, are male dominated, favouring male values rather than female ones. Eco-feminists argue that the world's economy is male dominated, with neo-classical and capitalistic perspectives where market forces are seen as natural and privatisation of natural resources the best way to create and sustain prosperity and quality of life (Mellor, 2006; Langley and Mellor, 2002; Buckingham, 2004; Leach, 2007). The women find themselves living in a structure of a masculine community, disadvantaged over ownership and control over land and sea. Such places tend to appeal to conservative women and "tend to hold up as their strongest woman-friendly card good conditions for raising children and family-friendly jobs in the children/youth and care sector" (Skålnes, 2004, p.6). Even though the women saw that the fishing industry was a male industry and that there was the money and the real power, they had that traditional perspective that it was a natural thing, that couldn't be changed, because women had no interest in that industry and that they were not fit to fish. Having such a perspective towards the fishing industry, strengthens the male dominance over the natural resources, money and power and helps to keep things as they are. Because of their traditional perspective their choice of study line was not addressed to the fishing sector and they showed no willingness to enter into that field.

The women I interviewed had that conservative perspective. They valued family life and child upbringing and tended to pattern their lives around those values. Their choice of residence or study lines was not always based on their desire of living there or that the study they chose was not always what they wanted the most; rather the choice was based on what they believed was the best for their families, especially for their children and how that education could fit into the communities they lived in and wanted to continue living in. So it can be said, that the women educate themselves for the benefit of their families and communities.

Research shows that the main reason for choosing to live in rural areas is family ties (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Ní Laoire, 2007; Rye, 2006; Pretty, Bramston, Patrick, and Pannach, 2006). It is believed that it is better to bring up children in rural areas. Those areas are considered to be safe, healthy and relaxed and living in rural areas is more 'natural' than life in urban areas (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Ní Laoire, 2007; Rye, 2006; Pretty, Bramston, Patrick, Jeff and Pannach, 2006). Families stay in rural areas as

long as the male partner has a job, even if the economy in rural areas is monotonous. When one loses one's job, it might be difficult to get another one but it is more important that men have jobs. Research has shown that the lack of diversity in the economic sector plays a big role in out-migration from rural areas (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Ní Laoire, 2007; Rye, 2006; Pretty, Bramston, Patrick, Jeff and Pannach, 2006).

Women who pursue an education claim that they gain a lot by getting educated, not only does their economic status improve, but also other things which are more related to themselves. They start to see things differently; they often have to change perspectives, values and beliefs (Moore, 2005). They accept the knowledge they get in their study and consider it as an important one. They seem not to question the contents of their studies and seem not to think about their study in a sustainable way, referring to the economy, environment and social factors. Their perspective is an individual one; e.g. themselves. It can be said that their approach towards what living a "good life" means is well being as a state of mind and as human capability. Their goal is to get a university degree and to get a qualification for a job that is lacking in their community. The driver for their study is the desire for a degree, not the knowledge that is provided. The knowledge could be more related to the place they live in and would then be more relevant to the women and the place.

Rural communities where primary production has been the main focus in the economy tend to value education and work that is related to the local economy of technology and difficult working conditions. Higher education is thus less acceptable in a community dominated by mainly male values (Verstad, 2004, Skålnes, 2004). In urban areas, the labour market is diverse and jobs requiring higher education tend to be located in urban areas (Verstad, 2004; Arnardóttir, 2001; Peace, 2003; Wiborg, 2001; Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Pretty, Bramston, Patrick and Pannach, 2006; Rye, 2006).

Young people and women are more likely than men to move away from rural areas in order to get a higher education (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Ní Laoire, 2007; Rye, 2006; Pretty, Bramston, Patrick and Pannach, 2006). In order to prevent that, both state and local governments have emphasised distance learning in higher education, but out-migration is continuing (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Ní Laoire, 2007; Rye, 2006; Pretty, Bramston, Patrick and Pannach, 2006). Like the women said, the labour market is more important, if one doesn't get a job, he or she will move. They all stressed that they had of intention in moving from the area unless they couldn't get a job or would lose the one they had.

All around the world the fishing industry is male dominated; women don't fish, they don't run the fishing companies and they don't sit on the company's boards. They don't see themselves as fishermen although they take part in the fishing process, e.g. baiting the line, working in the fish plant or doing the book-keeping. Even though they were doing things that can be called managing the business, they don't see themselves as managers or that they are in a position of having power. In accepting the *status quo* people rationalise the absence of gender in an occupation. Then it is common to use arguments that are linked to intrinsic abilities of masculinity and femininity (Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture, 2007; Skaptadóttir, 2000; Proppé, 2004; Nadel-Klein, 2000).

Gender equality is written into Icelandic law and prohibits any discrimination between sexes. Despite that, women get paid less than men and take more responsibility in the household and child upbringing. Women are in charge in the domestic sphere and men in the public sphere. Still, women think that gender equality is a fact in Iceland and that feminism is something that is no longer needed and will just destroy that equality. It is a neo-liberal discourse, where the individual's ability is in centre and people should be valued as individuals. This discourse does not take into account the fact that we live in a patriarchal society which favours male values, norms and beliefs. When measuring women and men

from that perspective the danger of favouring the men is always there (Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture, 2007; Proppé, 2004; Ministry of Welfare, 2000; Prime Minister's Office, 2004b).

## Conclusions

For these women, "places makes us" (Gruenewald, 2003, p.621). The women realise and accept that they live in patriarchal communities that favour male values and perspectives. In such communities a women's space for action in the public sphere is limited. Women tend to dominate the private sphere, e.g the home, and men tend to dominate the public sphere, e.g the communities' main industry, the fishing sector. Women realise that men dominate both the land and the sea, and not only do they accept that fact, but support it by using biological arguments for women's absence in the industry.

The women are 'place makers' in that sense that by taking an higher education degree, they strengthen their action space in traditional women sectors; e.g "the family-friendly jobs in the children/youth and care sector" (Skålnes, 2004, p.6). But their action space does not expand, because they don't go into the men's sector; the contractor business, the fishing industry or politics. Their space for power, decisions and action is limited.

In a discussion by Barbara Pini (2006) about women in local authorities in rural Australia, she finds that women who get into the local authorities do not have the same access to power as men, because of ignorance, political inexperience, no access to a network or lack of support from institutions and communities (Pini, 2006). Women's action space is limited by male discourse, which the whole community maintains. The female discourse is not heard and women's opinion about the community is of less importance. By strengthening their status and space activities in traditional women sectors, they also strengthen the male discourse, which becomes the dominant one in the communities. Because they have the conservative perspective towards life, where traditional family values are strong, they seem to be happy living in their conservative, traditional male dominated communities and seem not to want any changes.

Rural communities in the Westfjords areas face population decline, especially among young people and women. It is important for the communities to acknowledge that and try to find a way to create a community that meets the demands of "a good life" for young people and women. They have to bring back the women that hold modern and alternative perspectives so a more diverse community can be created. Communities are often willing to do this when their demographic situation show a decline over a long period (Skålnes, 2004). How they will manage, depends on the communities' resilience. Resilience is the capacity of a system, in this case, a community to adapt to a change (Folke, 2006, Schouten, Van der Heide and Heijman, 2009) and in the case of rural areas "it describes how well a rural area can balance ecosystem, economic and social function" (Schouten, Van der Heide and Heijman, 2009, p.3). Creating sustainable communities where balance between the environment, economy and social factors are in place which favour male and female values and work equally is something that rural development should be about.

One tool to use for that purpose is the development of higher education through distance learning and I believe that universities and communities in the Westfjords area should work together to increase the offer of study lines that can be studied through distance learning. By diversifying what is on offer, universities would both be a provider of knowledge and a learner of the knowledge the place possesses and increase opportunities for diversification.

Implementing place-based education into their study programmes is one way of fulfilling those demands. It could be done through research and development with inhabitants in

mind, and in developing a curriculum which nurtures local knowledge and skills and encourages discussion on issues, perspectives and values. Knowledge about local fish stocks could be as important as learning to resolve difficult issues. To meet these new demands for knowledge and skills university teachers may need to adopt a place-based pedagogy and promote transformative learning and develop a curriculum more suited to encouraging collaboration between local place knowledge and academic knowledge, for example, through validation of community-oriented project work. This will be the future challenge for university-level distance learning with a widely dispersed student group living in varied geographical areas. It might be important for universities to keep in mind certain guiding principles to ensure human well-being, such as equity, social inclusion and interaction, security and adaptability (GEES, 2005).

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