extra ORDINARY women

Supporting Communities 1965 - Today

linen hall library
established 1788

Together We Are Strong:

Women In Northern Ireland Since 1965

HERITAGE FUND
An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
FOYLE FOUNDATION
Department for Communities
www.communities-ni.gov.uk
tourism northernireland

Examining roles and attitudes of women in Northern Ireland during a momentous period of recent history, extraORDINARYwomen utilised the culturally and historically significant collections of the Linen Hall Library which reflect and illustrate women's lives and experiences in Northern Ireland, and archives which document ground-breaking movements for social change, trailblazing grassroots activism, and engagement with politics. Informed by insightful women's literary and theatrical outputs, a meaningful and sustained programme of outreach facilitated extraORDINARYwomen engaging with women across Northern Ireland.

> 'Women don't get recorded in history the same way as men do, we don't write history the same way as men do ... we just get forgotten about if we don't do it ourselves.'*

Previously unheard voices told inspirational stories of women collaborating and working together, supporting, and raising each other up, and finding commonality during a divisive period. Women engaging in movements for rights in education, health, and equality leading to improved accessibility,

**extraORDINARYwomen participants*

wider opportunities, and higher visibility. Instances of women affecting change and positively influencing their communities, emerging into community empowerment roles, and forming networks of support. And the lived experience of 'ordinary' women during the 'extraordinary normality' of the time.

'No praise or applause, women getting on with being women'*

Authentic responses to contemporary issues affecting women of all generations in Northern Ireland were captured and are amplified through this exhibition which, along with rare and unique archives and objects from the Linen Hall Library's collections, and items donated and created during the life of the project, shine a light on the continuing collective journey of women in Northern Ireland.

Education

In the years before 1965, education for women frequently ended at an early stage, with women often leaving formal education by their late teens. Importance was placed on domestic duties, including marriage, raising a family, and running a home. While this lifestyle was chosen by some, many women expressed feeling missed opportunities and quietly mourning the loss of educational potential.

During extraORDINARYwomen engagement, women noted that leaving education early meant many worked in physically demanding jobs such as in factories or mills. For those women a fire was lit; determining them to spur their children on to achieve goals denied to them.

'I don't know how she did it. She's the eldest of eight kids, she dropped out of school to look after her siblings, and at 18 or 19 got married and started having babies of her own and ended up with five. My mum was always adamant that we would go to Uni, that all of us would go...

Coming from a working-class area that wasn't really the done thing... a lot of people didn't go to Uni, and my Ma really pushed us in our education and I'm grateful to her for that because growing up in a working-class housing estate, you could have easily just fell off the face of the planet'*

While issues around accessing and remaining in education progressed, female students were still at a disadvantage when sitting assessment examinations for secondary education during the 1970/80s, with a higher pass mark set compared to that for male students, which impacted the number of female students progressing to grammar schools and exasperated limited opportunities for educational and career development.

But challenges were made to expected work roles for women, with women articulating aspirations to be scientists, engineers, lawyers, doctors, and other professions previously perceived to be reserved for men.

Women talked about finding confidence which, coupled with ability and opportunity, saw new pathways emerge. In the 1970s, All Children Together campaigned for integrated education. Professor Pauline Murphy founded training networks in the 1980/90s, including the Women's Opportunities Unit at Ulster University which provided the first formal university education programme specifically for women. This was followed by the founding of organisations including Parents Action Group for Education, Unemployed Young Women's Project, and the Ulster People's College, benchmarking a change in attitude to women in education. Women took the reins in educational leadership, policy, and advice.

Local community and education centres promoted women's issues via tailored workshops and classes. Many of the women we talked to during extraORDINARYwomen cited these classes and advice services as providing vital support for women who lacked qualifications.

> 'These are the women we need to be celebrating – the ones setting up the women's centres'*

In 1983 the Women's Education Project was created to offer regional support infrastructure for the women's sector. Women discussed achieving further education qualifications and progressing to study at university, acquiring specialist knowledge and skills.

Neutralised Anger: Women In Work

'Women who take time out of their job to raise children, for example, face enormous hurdles to returning to work where they left off. They may have missed out on promotion opportunities, as well as facing a lack of flexibility from employers when they try to meet their continuing family responsibilities. Childcare costs can put one parent off working or make it financially impossible.'
(Monica McWilliams for the South Belfast News)

Sustained inequality in the workplace was a key injustice for many activists, community voices, and politicians in Northern Ireland. The introduction in 1970 of the Equal Pay Act required employers in Northern Ireland to pay men and women equally for equal work. But for many of the women we met questions remain as to whether equal pay, opportunity, and rights within the workplace have been successfully achieved.

In the 1960s and 70s women were frequently underrepresented in senior roles, employment generally perceived to be reserved for men. During engagement sessions, women talked about not being able to join unions which limited the empowerment of their voice and experience, and how they encountered rules and regulations which discriminated against them in the workplace. The Marriage Bar, for example, required a woman who was employed at the time of her marriage to resign from her job, with women discussing encountering this barrier in the civil service and other administrative settings. They also articulated a social expectation for women to give up full time work if they had a family.

> 'Whenever I got married, you had to leave [work] – we just expected it. When you look back at it, we were treated like second class citizens, but it was so normal.'*

**extraORDINARYwomen participants*

extraORDINARYwomen participants reflected on employers who required women to wear ‘appropriate dress’ in the workplace, and contracts for women that included having to wear a skirt and high heel shoes. All of which led to a bubbling discontent within women in the workplace and ignited calls for rights and equality.

In the 1980s research and campaigns were carried out by the Northern Ireland Women’s Rights Movement to raise visibility and amplify voices of those employed in the contract cleaning industry, hairdressing, and retail sectors.

> ‘Even if you were going out to work you were pushed towards domestic roles: caring, cooking, cleaning.’*

Cases against discrimination were successfully brought, and won, by the Equal Opportunities Commission for Northern Ireland. The first successful sex discrimination case was won on the 22nd of February 1980 by Norma Wallace and was described as ‘a breakthrough’ by the Commission.

And while in the 1990s legislation was enacted to tackle discrimination

on the grounds of race, disability, and in relation to fair employment,

many women feel common concerns around childcare, contractual requirements, qualifications, and skills development are ongoing issues.

> ‘[Childcare] is the single biggest reason why women aren’t in work. It was something that second wave feminists campaigned for in the 60s and literally nothing has changed.’*

Leadership: Organise

> '[There's a] constant bleaching out of women's history so that it all has to be discovered again.'*

During this period, women across Northern Ireland reached out to each other to action their shared vision of a better future for all. extraORDINARYwomen participants articulated feelings of frustration at being invisible: in the history books; in creative and political life; in activism; and in the workplace.

They discussed how by feeling more empowered to speak out they began campaigning for improvements for their communities, becoming catalysts for change. This consolidation of skills and strength ensured that the collective women's voice gained momentum.

Fear and indifference were replaced by empowerment and a shared hunger for change. The birth of support networks, women's centres, and initiatives such as International Women's Day, laid the pathway for what followed; while campaigns for education, employment, and equal rights led to the formation of collectives and groups.

Women took the lead on many fronts, including entering mainstream politics. extraORDINARYwomen participants highlighted Inez McCormack, Betty Sinclair, May Blood, Lynda Edgerton Walker, and Monica McWilliams as important figures in their narratives. Grassroots campaigns for quality-of-life improvements which were led by women were praised for their community impact. Examples cited included Avila Kilmurray and Cathy Harkin setting up Women's Aid in Derry/Londonderry in the 1970s; the 1971 lobbying of Belfast City Council by Lynda Edgerton Walker to make milk freely available in schools; and in 1984 when women spoke out against the

**extraORDINARYwomen participants*

'pram ban' from shops and campaigned for toilet facilities when shopping with young children.

Beginning in the 1970s, International Women's Day was lauded as a day belonging to women to celebrate their personal and shared journeys of the past, present, and future.

> 'Women's history needs to be told accurately and correctly and it needs to be celebrated, for the women that we were, the women that we've become because of those women, and the women that our children become because of the generation before.'*

From The Ground Up: 'Troubles' And Peacetime

During the 'troubles' communities across Northern Ireland felt the effects of bombs, injuries, lives lost, low employment, poor housing, and lost opportunities.

> 'We all suffered the same deprivation, poverty, the same jobs, we had to do exactly the same things and that's the thing that binds us, as the female, as opposed to the Catholic or the Protestant.'*

In recording experiences of the 'troubles' women often felt that

their roles and importance had been glossed over or seen as irrelevant.

'Even our own history – women have been totally written out of it. I'm an ex-prisoner and sometimes I hear ones talking and I'm thinking – "must have been only men fought that war then" – you never hear women's names mentioned.'*

Women discussed caring for their families under extreme circumstances, with stress and mental health issues a frequent occurrence, and many expressed how their lives were changed forever.

> 'Living in West Belfast, particularly at the height of the "troubles" [...] I wasn't thinking about my own identity. We had bigger issues to deal with.'*

Women felt they were perceived as bystanders during this time, often recorded as 'next of kin' or 'eyewitnesses'. However, from conversations during the extraORDINARYwomen project it is evident women were at the forefront of events, leading 'on the ground', ensuring families thrived, and supporting each other in times of great need. This created lasting networks which would go on to change women's roles in society across Northern Ireland.

> 'The big screaming gap in the middle of all of this is the ordinary lives of people. I just keep thinking of the phrase "We were there".'*

Many women found commonality through their shared experiences of this time.

> 'Grief's the same on both sides'*

Huge leaps were taken in the political arena by the women who collected the strength of their communities and became politicians, formed political parties, or spoke out for change. Many faced adversities by being undermined in meetings, debates, the media, and on the streets. With resilience and tenacity, they became leaders, formed movements, and affected change.

Health And Resilience

During this period, women campaigned for progress in many areas, with health care and personal safety topping the agenda for many. Women discussed the awareness and availability of advice and treatment being of paramount importance. From the 1960s onwards women supported each other in their communities by setting up health care centres, holding public meetings, and promoting services of support for mental health, safety, and reproductive issues. The key articulated objective was accessibility; if the service was required, women wanted it to be available across the generations and to be economically viable. Women's centres and advice centres acted as a key touchstone for information and provided a safe space to seek help. Many services relied on 'word of mouth' promotion within communities, which in turn relied upon the building of trust.

> 'It wasn't all sunshine for women at all, and yet in many cases there were happy families and things were working out well for them. But certainly, they appreciated the fact that they could come to us and discuss in confidence any problems they were having... the health service had a big staff of people like health visitors who were engaged in health promotion... I've always felt that the nurses were very much accepted in the community, that they were trusted.'*

The women we met felt issues of concern, including divorce and family planning, were not given the spotlight, but were aware that campaigns around violence against women, cancer awareness, and family planning have been prevalent since the 1960s. From the 1970s, family planning

services were introduced through Article 12 of the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 (services fully introduced in 1982). Organisations such as Women's Aid and Cara-Friend were also formed. In 1980, the Northern Ireland Abortion Campaign was formed following the death of Charlotte Hutton, and in 1982 the Rape Crisis Centre was established by NICRA. In 1983 Sheelagh Murnaghan chaired a tribunal which heard the very first case of sexual harassment brought before a court in the UK or Ireland. Brook Advisory Clinic opened in 1992, and Queer Space was founded in 1998. The volume of organisations which were established in a matter of years underlines that women's experience mattered, and momentum for change was being generated. Women helping other women left a legacy of empowerment and confidence enabling future leaders, educators, and champions in society.

> 'When we opened the first [family planning] clinic in Belfast, women used to make excuses, give us a reason why they were coming "I've four already" this sort of thing'*

Defined Expectations: Family Life And Gender Roles

> 'If we waited until everyone agreed with us, we would never do anything or go anywhere.'*

Through authentic and insightful discussions with the women we engaged with during extraORDINARYwomen, a spectrum of opinion was captured in relation to gender, and family life. Many women expressed inherent pride and found great value in running a home, raising a family, and providing the main caring role in their family. Others discussed choosing less

expected paths in employment, education, and family life. Discussions around equality, sexism, welfare, marriage, and divorce were all part of this social narrative, with each being questioned and challenged. Improvements in benefits, better living conditions, childcare, and working life were highlighted as forming the basis of campaigns which saw individuals and groups carry out forms of protest. Seen as 'the women who dared', they were often negatively portrayed in the media as they no longer 'toed the line'.

> 'Part of my brain is still conditioned that it's still my place to do the housework, to cook and clean and all that, because I saw my mummy doing that-even though I'm working full time, and sometimes you're stretched to do things in the home'*

Women have 70% chance of providing care in their adult life, compared to 60% for men. By the time they are 46, half of all women have been a carer

(11 years before men).

(Carers UK (2019), 'Will I care? The likelihood of being a carer in adult life')

For many women, family and work life is a juggling act with challenging and conflicting responsibilities. In some instances, the women discussed roles within the family being defined by gendered expectations or the historic legacy of assumed gender roles. Gender equality has been, and still is, a focus for lawmakers, activists, politicians, and community workers. Questions still arise around what has been achieved and what needs to change, with women feeling equality has been a long-fought but continuing battle. Some women discussed having thriving working lives but also feeling the strain of expectations as the main carer in the family. Debates continue to challenge gendered expectations, including around

**extraORDINARYwomen participants*

the connotations of colours, toys, clothing, and reading materials in early life, and expected life roles.

> 'I did come across people of my generation who even though they were at university, were still expected to give up their Saturdays to clean the house and things'*

The Look Book: Femininity, Appearance, And Stereotyping

> 'Females have to look the part, but you can't look too much the part or you're not taken seriously'*

Throughout society, ideals of beauty and femininity have led to the stereotyping of women and their expected roles. Portrayals of women are particularly layered with associations, connected values, assumed skillsets, and expectations. Women have historically been related to caring, nurturing, or domestic roles. Through protest, campaigns, and challenging the 'norm', new opportunities have provided space for women to welcome change and diversify. The women we met during extraORDINARYwomen debated how this sits with women and discussed how they respond and feel about notions of what they should or shouldn't be doing. Do women have to adhere to legacies of assumed femininity, appearance, and stereotyping to be seen and heard?

> 'I think [social media] is why all girls look similar now. You can go and get your lip filler done, your cheeks, going to beauticians - I think there's an expectation of perfection that's been put on everyone'*

From discussions during the extraORDINARYwomen project there is unsurprisingly no definitive answer. Women are diverse in their experience, knowledge, how they wish to live their lives, and how they wish to be perceived. Women frequently referred to having been shaped and squeezed into forms they don't wish to fit, feeling the need to fulfil notions of current trends or the fashion of the times. Most of the women who took part in extraORDINARYwomen had encountered stereotyping, with many speaking about the frustrations and pressures of modern life for women.

Responding to items in the Linen Hall's archives, the women we spoke to were particularly interested in the almost 'weaponisation' of physical appearance and stereotyping which can be found, particularly in the Library's political collection. These archives document that women were often verbally attacked for 'taking up space' in public arenas or carrying out roles which were not considered to be the 'norm'. Many of those who took part in the extraORDINARYwomen project recollected the challenges presented to the Northern Ireland's Women's Coalition and others.

'When you look at the history of our politics here, I always remember the Women's Coalition being mooed at and just treated with absolute contempt...This one incident sticks out in my head in terms of when Bernadette McAliskey was coming to prominence. In my house, it actually wasn't even so much her politics. It was the fact that she was a young woman, how dare she?! I find that really interesting because it wasn't even what she was saying. It was the fact that here was this cheeky, young woman saying it, daring to'*

linen hall library
established 1788

#extraordinarywomenni

www.extraordinarywomenni.com