

## 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Interview with Anne McVicker Transcript

*Please introduce yourself and your involvement with WRDA.*

OK, I'm Anne McVicker and I am the director since January 2014.

*Thank you. Now, tell us a bit about yourself and your journey as a feminist.*

Well, I probably wouldn't have used the word feminist until, maybe until the mid 80's. After I completed my A levels, I went to Manchester and studied law and politics. I went on then, after 3 years, to London, where I did my solicitors' exams. And then after I did that, I realized that I didn't really want to be a solicitor and I came back home. But I knew that I wanted to do something to do with, I wanted to use my law in some ways and my politics. And at first, the thing that I got involved with in Northern Ireland, in Belfast, was housing rights. And then it was, working with a group of women in the Shankill, North Shankill estate, and what I did note was that it was the women who were involved. We set up regular meetings with the housing executive and you know, got work done and developed a good relationship with the housing executive. [1:50]

But then come the AGMs, men used to appear, and they used to get elected in as chair and secretary and treasurer and then that was the last we'd see them until the next AGMs. So there was something grinding at me. And what I seen was that it was women who were keeping, you know keeping communities going and carrying the can. And I also think that there was probably little difference between what was happening in north Shankill and what was happening in Falls. [2:32]

And then after that, the women that I was working with, they wanted something more. And then at that stage there was quite a lot of free provision then, and in fact, I contacted the forerunner, the WRDA, it was the women's education project. And that was Joana McMin at the time and they provided some training to the women. And also, the Worker's Education Association, WA, which is now gone, which is so sad; and they provided, they provided education and training as well. And then really after that the women just took off and then became the lower Shankill's Women's Group. And that probably leads me to another question. [3:32]

But in terms of my journey, after Shankill Women's Centre then I got involved with Women's Tec. So that was again looking at inequalities in employment. And then after 13 years at Women's Tec and building that up, I then took up post here in January 2014, as director of WRDA. So, all of those, all that experience I had working with women in communities in welfare rights, and housing rights, and employment rights, and then I was able to bring all that experience together, which really put me in a good position whenever I took up as director in 2014 with WRDA. [4:25]

*Thank you, Anne. So you would certainly be quite happy and quite proud to call yourself a feminist. Many women wouldn't use that word to describe themselves, even if they hold feminist principles and that's something which we've come up against again and again. Why do you think 'feminist' has become like the f word, this kind of taboo word?*

Well I think that in terms of Northern Ireland, you know, because of The Troubles, you know women's rights or equality, it wasn't on the agenda. It was all about the constitutional issues and about whether peace is possible and that. So I think that there was quite a lot of kind of mis-information that would've gone around because we had the development and the mushrooming of women's centre's in the late 70's and early 80's. And, I do think that there was an undercurrent there of 'what's all this about' from men and politicians, 'what's all this about, are they gonna take over?' [5:50]

So in some ways, it's sort of like feminism was used, was quite a derogatory term. And you know, you're quite right, if you actually sat down with anyone who was using Shankill Women's Centre or going into Falls Women's Centre and asked them what their views and their aspirations were, they were all feminists. I remember, some groups like to call themselves family feminists. Actually that was, I remember actually, what somebody from social services at the time, whenever I worked for Shankill Women's Centre and we were moving into a new building and social services would've felt more comfortable if it was called 'Shankill Family Centre' but we held out, and we says 'no, it's Shankill Women's Centre.' And there is a difference there, because it wasn't just about, you know, although women's centres do all that, you know for communities and for families, but family centres don't specifically work with women on their own. So it was important that the Shankill stood their ground and I'm really delighted that to this day, they're still called Shankill Women's Centre. [7:18]

*You have volunteered for many feminist causes over the years: Alliance for Choice, Reclaim the Agenda, can you tell us a bit about the role of voluntary activism in building solidarity in the women's movement?*

I think that that was really important because when groups start to get funded, in some regards they are silenced. So, they can't really kind of really speak out on what would've been seen as contentious issues. So having groups like Reclaim the Agenda and Alliance for Choice, who weren't, you know like, funded through any government departments or any local councils or whatever, give those organisations an opportunity to speak out. And organisations like WRDA and Women's Tec and the Women's Centres, could actually get behind those organisations in terms of activism and how their voice is heard. So they played a very important role and actually, Alliance for Choice and Reclaim the Agenda, they formed really around the same time, maybe around 2010. And at that stage, things were starting to get a bit more normal in Northern Ireland in terms of our politics, but it was still very important to have those activist organisations doing what they did. And in some ways supporting other organisations, let's say mainstream organisations, although believe you me, no

women's organisations are mainstream. And it allowed them, other organisations to come on and get onboard. [9:44]

*Thank you, Anne. What was the impact of The Troubles on the WRDA and the women's movement more generally?*

Well, WRDA or it's forerunner, the Women's Education Project, would've formed in 1983 and that would've been, that would've covered a period where the conflict was still ongoing. Like probably most organisations at that time, it was a case of doing what you could and keeping your head down, because your issues just weren't on the agenda. But I was around at that time and I was working with the Lower Shankill Women's Group in terms of housing rights and what there was, was there was like a coming together of the groups, of the women's centres and the women's groups and it wasn't some big Damascus moment. But it was just, I suppose the way good relations and community relations are built, step by step and bit by bit. Just starting to have the conversations. And I do remember many conversations actually that took place in this building and in some of the, let's say safer maybe, women's centres. [11:34]

So it had, it certainly had an impact, but I feel very proud that women, you know despite the conflict raging at the time, you know, decided that enough was enough and that they were gonna start to look at their own needs and start doing it for themselves. So that was, you know, whether that would've happened if The Troubles hadn't happened, maybe we would've got equality quicker, I don't know. I do know that we kind of still lag behind and are left behind in terms of what's happening in other regions of the UK. But it is what it is. So it did have an impact, but I think that women are very resilient and I think that we just worked around that and got on with our lives because what else was there to do? [12:40]

*What was the impact of the peace then on the women's movement?*

I'm not sure about the women's movement, but I remember, at the time I was working in Shankill Women's Centre, and whenever the cease fires happened, the IRA one first, then I think that was followed a couple of months later by the UVF cease fire. And I at that stage, my two youngest boys would've attended the creche in Shankill Women's Centre and you know, there was some awful atrocities that happened. I mean, I was working for the Shankill Women's Centre at the time of the Shankill bombing and it was awful. And at the time, I'm a Catholic, and there were other Catholics that worked in Shankill Women's Centre and whenever things like that happened, like basically you just had to, probably there's the first example of working from home, you just had to work from home, it wasn't safe. It wasn't safe to be on the front of the Shankill road whenever things like that had happened. And although there was no fear from within the women's centre, but any man walking down the Shankill could've opened fire into the Women's Centre. So, it was very scary times. But I do remember whenever the loyalist cease fire was called and I remember sitting in a car park and I had the boys in their chairs in the back of the

car, and I had listened to it on the radio and I just felt a huge sense of relief that things were changing. [14:53]

But it wasn't as if different women's centres based in different areas didn't communicate with each other. That was all happening throughout The Troubles. So, peace, I suppose, whenever peace came, peace really kind of allowed more of that work to happen. More sort of cross community work to be happening, more conversations happening, residential would've been a big thing then that you could've got funding for. And I do think that there is a lot more, certainly a lot more solidarity and coming together, I mean I haven't heard anybody say to me, since the IWD rally got up and running again in 2011 that they couldn't attend because there's too many Catholics or too many Protestants. It just doesn't happen. So peace was good for the women's movement. [16:17]

*How do you feel the Feminist Movement in Northern Ireland has changed in the last 40 years?*

Oh, its changed big time. I think whenever groups start to form they're very much based around, and rightly so, their aims and objectives are around where they are based geographically. I think that also because over the last 40 years, I mean that includes the period where we were still in conflict in Northern Ireland and women's rights and equality, they just weren't being dealt with. It really was the role of women's centres and women's groups, in the words of the song "sisters doing it for themselves", because nobody else was going to do it for them. [17:31].

I did see then whenever we had ceasefires called, talks process, and then the Women's Coalition being formed, and eventually the Assembly getting up and running. Changes were starting to happen. Not fast enough, here we are in 2023, we still don't have a Gender Equality Strategy. We have a draft but that's about it. We still refer to the programme for government as a draft programme for government after so many years. We don't have a childcare strategy. We don't have an anti poverty strategy. So there's quite a lot that we don't have but I do think that the culture is starting to change. [18:35].

Its not that International Women's Day rallies didn't happen during the Troubles, they did happen. Then there was a bit of a lull, that was one of the reasons Reclaim the Agenda formed. It was to coincide with the Centenary of IWD in 2011 and, probably you know this already, but from 2011 right up to the present day the IWD rally has just grown and grown, and it is mainstream. It is funded through Belfast City Council and is part of the Council's calendar of events, which is absolutely fantastic, and so it should be. [19:26]

So things have changed. We've got more women now in politics, but not enough. There's still a lot more that needs to be done but we're getting there, we're getting there slowly. [19:48].

*Thank you Anne. You have said in our 2018 Annual Report that “what WRDA does best is promoting and practicing inclusion, participation and collaboration”. In what ways does WRDA do this?*

Well I think its important to say that WRDA does not compete with its members, in terms of the women’s centres and women’s groups. So we’re not usually competing for the same funding. WRDA tends to do projects when there is seen to be a gap. So for example, the MAS project, the Maternal Advocacy and Support Project is a really good example of that in terms of the lack of provision for women experiencing perinatal mental health issues. That’s a really good example [20.52].

Two years ago, as a partnership that was WRDA, Women’s Support Network, and Northern Ireland Rural Women’s Network, came together and we submitted a successful application for the Community Renewal Fund. Just earlier this year we heard again, in the same partnership along with Reclaim the Agenda, we submitted a successful partnership to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. I have often said that ourselves alone just doesn’t cut it anymore. I think that the best way to deal with addressing inequalities, trying to make our society a more equal and equitable place for us all to live, we’ve got to work in partnership [22.05]

So there are lots of examples of working in partnership. Another great example is Raise Your Voice and that project set up at a time when VAWG in NI was high on the agenda. There were various incidents that had happened and again that’s something that WRDA could not have done on its own. It needed partners, it needed Reclaim the Agenda, and NIRWN, and Women’s Support Network. That project is still going strong and there is still such a need in terms of calling out VAWG in NI [22.57].

*Thank you Anne. WRDA was one of the first Women’s Sector organisations in Northern Ireland to adopt a public prochoice position and 2018 saw the culmination of decades of activism with the decriminalisation of abortion here. What can you tell us about the fight for decriminalisation?*

Well, again Northern Ireland was left behind when the UK introduced abortion law in 1968 and we were left behind probably because of our politicians and probably because of the conflict which was just about to kick off. Northern Ireland people, in my experience, maybe they’ve just been told this for too long but, they’re quite conservative so when I working for Shankill Women’s Centre if you asked any of the women in that centre whether they supported abortion that would have categorically been a big no, and equally in Falls Women’s Centre they would have been the same. So all of the women’s centres would have been against abortion. However, people need abortions and that didn’t stop women who attended women’s centres from accessing abortion. It was all just done under the raydar. You know if someone had presented themselves at Shankill Women’s Centre and needed abortion for very good reasons, maybe they were a victim of violence, of rape. Maybe they just couldn’t afford to have another child. Each of the centres would

have rallied round and gave them phone numbers and there might have been donations from other centres. So women did continue to travel and have abortions [25.35].

When Alliance for Choice then formed and started talking and using the word “abortion”, even the word “abortion”, it wouldn’t have been part of anyone’s vocabulary. You would have referred to it as a termination. I think that was necessary, it took an organisation like Alliance for Choice, back to what I said earlier, because they weren’t inhibited by funders so they had more freedom in terms of speaking out. They’ve done some fantastic work. I know that WRDA and other women’s centres and organisations were able to get behind them to have their voices heard [26.40].

I do remember when decriminalisation happened, let me get this right, was that July 2018?

*I think I was October? I have in my mind. But it was definitely 2018.*

I think it was July 2018 but it then happened on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October in 2018. I remember I was in work and I heard that on the radio and I just could not believe it. It was fantastic. Now here we are five years later and abortion services haven’t been commissioned and I don’t know how many secretaries of state promised it was going to happen but it still hasn’t happened yet. But I think right is on our side and it will happen [27.48].

*WRDA adopted a formal position in support of the inclusion to trans women in 2018 and had been trans inclusive in practice for much longer than that. How can feminist organisations show solidarity with trans women and other gender minorities during these times of increased transphobia and anti-trans moral panic?*

Ok, what we have done in WRDA is we have our policy, we have regular training and workshops for staff and our board, and we have various events for our membership. We try to be as inclusive as possible in terms of having trans women on our Management Committee. We don’t want that to be seen as tokenism either and that’s why training is important [28.56].

Its just important that trans women’s voices can be heard. Supporting events like Songs for Solidarity. WRDA came out and supported that. We’re there every year for Pride and also Trans Pride as well. We need more solidarity, I feel, from the women’s sector generally [29.33].

*Thank you Anne. Yes, it’s about having those policies in place. Its about good training for staff and for the board, and its about showing up for trans women. That’s very important, thank you very much for that.*

*How has WRDA responded to the challenges of Brexit and what impact has the UK’s exit from the EU had on WRDA and the women’s sector generally?*

WRDA, where we would be coming from in terms of Brexit is that a lot of laws that were made, even in relation to the like of maternity leave and rights, that were

made and introduced through Europe and there has been, there's no doubt, there has been a roll back and that is where Brexit is going to be particularly damaging for the women's sector in Northern Ireland, if there's going to be a roll back on rights. [30.41].

*You've had to face many challenges during your time as director including the covid-19 pandemic. How did you lead WRDA through that difficult period?*

Well, I have to say on reflection, that was probably one of my proudest moments. I think I really have to put this in context for you because at the time there was no advice, there was no guidance for our sector. There was guidance for businesses, for hospitality, for health, education. There was no guidance for our sector and it was very much a case of just acting on feelings. I closed down WRDA a week before Boris announced it and I wrote to all of our funders and I explained what was happening and I have to say I got some letters back from funders reminding me of our responsibility in terms of targets that had to be met. I just put that down to, they hadn't a clue about what was going on either [32.20].

What I did do was all staff were sent home, the office was locked up. I think it took maybe about a week to kind of recalibrate. I had only ever been in one Zoom meeting before with a funder, so something came into my head and I remember thinking "this is how we're going to have to do it". So I went online and found out about Zoom, created an account myself, and I think within two weeks of closing the office we had our first Zoom meeting. Very quickly, once Geraldine got onto it, we all had Zoom accounts. Went from one Zoom account with myself to about 12 Zoom accounts [33.26].

I thought it was also important that the mental health needs of all staff were addressed so I carried out risk assessments in terms of what support they needed, what equipment they needed to work from home, what in terms of emotional support what was required. I made a point of continuing with Support and Supervision sessions monthly, annual appraisals, I mean its amazing what can be done online. Looking back on it now, that was a really proud moment because some of the work that was undertaken by staff during that awful time that we all just want to forget about now, was absolutely fantastic. There was fantastic work that was done around the BCB, there were videos that were made, there was great work that was done. There were webinars that were made to do with Good Relations work. The volume and the standard of work was just absolutely fantastic [34.59].

It was also important to do fun things. I found out you could do quizzes on this app called Kahoots so we would have quizzes. Brought in some facilitators who did some mindfulness work and then a bit more in depth in terms of mental health. Also I think it was important that it got to a stage then where staff, they wanted all back into the office. So we had to do that in a phased way and we've actually just within the last couple of months set aside the need for signing into the building and taking your temperature. [36.00].

So it was a very scary time but I suppose what I learned from it was that there's no one person in an organisation that deserves the glory or is the star. It's the

sum total of everybody doing their role, doing their specific job and tasks that makes the place a more welcoming and better place for everyone to work in. I'm really glad that we're over that and I do think in order to move on we've all had to suppress those memories of what it was like because it was truly awful. [37.01].

I did a survey as well, I think it was for our first AGM [during the pandemic]. So it wasn't just WRDA staff it was our tenants in the house as well, and it was absolutely no surprise the number of women who were working who were carers, who were homeschooling, who had young preschool children, who were dealing with disability. So and then that actually lead onto another piece of work which I am really proud of and that's the Feminist Recovery Plan in July 2020 [37.53].

*Thank you Anne. How did activism in the women's movement contribute to mitigating the impacts of the pandemic?*

Well, I think a really good example of that is the Women's Policy Group. The Women's Policy Group just before lockdown had been meeting online and very soon, towards the end of March 2020, stats were being published saying that women were bearing the brunt of the pandemic. Domestic violence against women and girls, levels were rocketing. It became clear as well that pregnant women who were furloughed were going to lose out in terms of their statutory maternity pay. So that was very evident from early on and the Women's Policy Group basically set themselves a task to produce a feminist recovery plan under different themes. That was basically how we could find the road to recovery coming out of the pandemic [39.35].

It was very disappointing, it was launched originally in July 2020 and basically there was no takers in terms of the government or ministers. Then the Women's Policy Group were so persistent that they went back to the drawing board and they secured the lived experiences of women in different areas, produced more evidence and relaunched the Feminist Recovery Plan in July 2021. There were bits of it that were taken up and acted on. That was such a sisterly, collective, collaborative effort. It was just absolutely fantastic that they could come together and say "this is impacting on women and this is how this could be dealt with as we emerge from the pandemic" [41.02]. Wasn't it interesting as well that whenever the executive produced their recovery plan, I think in the autumn of 2020, and childcare wasn't mentioned once in it which is just crazy. Trying to get women back to work and no childcare provision, just pretty typical [41.33].

*What are you most proud of from your time at WRDA so far and what do you feel is the organisation's greatest achievement?*

Well I'm really pleased with the way that I managed covid. Its only when you start to look back that you realise what you call came through and what was achieved. I think that during covid and during lockdown whenever staff were working from home, I think that staff were well looked after. I think I put their needs first and I think we emerged from covid, all the organisation and all of us individually, stronger. [42.21].



Also 2023 has been an incredible year, not just for WRDA but for myself personally. Just recently I have been awarded an honorary doctorate for my contribution to working with women in communities and addressing inequalities. Now I know that that covers all of the work that I have been involved in from 1984 and I'm just so proud and I hope WRDA is proud of me as well. [43.05].

Also this is a significant year because it's the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. I know, looking back, in terms of getting agreement women were excluded. There weren't that many women around the table and negotiating, and I take a lot of pleasure that one of the events to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary was an exhibition by Hannah Sharkey in the Ulster Museum. It's called *Principled and Revolutionary Women* and its 21 women who played a part in terms of the Good Friday Agreement, or were active in communities at that time, and I'm one of those women and I just couldn't be prouder [43.59].