

40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Film Archive Project Interview with Ann O'Reilly

I've been a long time with WRDA. I started as a staff member, as the Director, and it was my first time into the Women's Sector. Stepping into that was new for me so from that point of view I took a lot of time to find out about the organization and the wider Women's Sector and I think that was really where things began to sort of make sense as to the role of the Women's Sector and how important it is within Northern Ireland and wider.

When I left WRDA I didn't want to lose contact with the organisation and that's when I went on the Board of WRDA as a Board Member to begin with and then as Chair. So it feels like I've been involved with WRDA for many years. Time has flown by, but it has been a real joy to be part of the organization through its ups and downs over the years, really.

*Tell us a bit about your own journey as a feminist.*

Well I came to it late I would have to say it wasn't something that I really had any consciousness around. I knew instinctively around the whole area of gender inequality and broader equality because my background in the voluntary and community sector opened my eyes to that and then being on the Equality Commission very much brought into sharp focus the whole issue, particularly of inequality. It took me to come to WRDA to really understand the need to have a feminist perspective on things and I suppose I learnt from the people you're going to be talking to as part of the 40 years anniversary. They educated me, informed me, and gave me a really good grounding in feminism and the importance of it. I haven't looked back since. It took that experience and it took that opportunity for me to really get it. I've been very grateful particularly to fellow Board Members and Directors who really gave me a strong sense of how important it is, we're good stewards and guardians of WRDA with that feminist perspective and how important it is that we remain, that is a big central plank of who WRDA is, its identity, its DNA, and it's very important it stays that way.

*How do you feel the feminist movement in Northern Ireland has changed over the last 40 years?*

Feminism isn't linear, it really isn't. The issues to do with feminism ebb and flow, being given greater visibility, and stronger in policy terms. It's become I think a stronger movement overall. Not just within WRDA but some of the big issues that have brought feminism out of the cold a bit, into the mainstream, I think has been the MeToo movement and some of the big structural inequalities that have begun to emerge and have taken its toll. You only have to look at Covid and its impact, the cost-of-living crisis. Of course, the impact of the Troubles when you look back, the sort of more hidden aspects of gender inequality and feminism, that were around but weren't given their place within a society that was not at ease with itself during our Troubles. I always think organisations like WRDA, if they weren't there you'd have to invent them. You'd have to invent the organisation to be able to hold that feminist space and be good stewards and guardians of that space.

*Just to go back to something that you've already touched on there. Could you talk a bit more about the Troubles and impact on the Women's Resource and Development Agency and the women's movement here generally?*

I think for me the big lightbulb moment to demonstrate how important women were in the conflict was the women's centres. WRDA has had a relationship with the women's centres through partnership for quite some time. There were members of the women's centres at one stage on the Board, we still have that thankfully, but there was much more visibility around the women's centres. I think their role in communities really stood the test of time. They were there when women had no safe spaces just as much. They could come together, they held themselves in the community well

and built up the respect of those communities and it had to be a safe space at times. The other thing that struck a chord around the Troubles was, how important that women's voices were heard. I think WRDA and others made very sure that women's voices had a place at the table. It didn't always go according to plan but they were there, they remained there, they were focused and they made sure that those voices were heard either through meetings, policy discussions, papers, proposals. All of the hard work that's involved in terms of policy and influencing change in tough times.

*Thank you. How does WRDA approach building the capacity of the women's sector?*

Two things. Really it's about the Community Facilitators programme, I really do think that is one of the mainstays of WRDA. It's how it came into being, with education, how important education is, Community Education in particular. I think at the time of WRDA community education wasn't fully understood and didn't have its place. I think WRDA has a track record around the need for community education as a step up, as a way of supporting women to have a better footing in terms of opportunity, in terms of employment, in terms of a sense of who they are and self-esteem and confidence building. Those qualities that were built into the Community Facilitator Programme. The real measure of success in my view is that the Community Facilitator programme has continued to survive and indeed thrive.

*One of the duties of the Management Committee is to provide good governance for WRDA. What does good governance mean for a feminist organisation?*

Good governance is good of itself. It has to be in place irrespective of the organisation. [Feminism] brings a sharper understanding of governance when it comes to protecting and stewarding the need to maintain ourselves as a feminist organisation. Governance for me is about organisations like WRDA showing to funders, to policy makers, to the public and to their members, that the organisation is extremely well run. That the organisation, through its Management Board, and the way it exercises itself as a Management Board, that people can trust us and have confidence in us as an organisation. That's why WRDA has needed to work hard on that. A big part of it from a feminist perspective is to have very progressive and very women friendly policies and practice in terms of childcare, in terms of leave, in terms of work life balance. To make sure that our policies are of a high standard so that they can be used not just by WRDA but send out a loud message to other organisations, that's what an organisation that's focused from a feminist perspective does.

It's also important from a governance point of view that there is good finance and funding in place. You will not survive as an organisation without attention to your finances and looking after your finances because we have responsibilities through the Charity Commission, as employers around health and safety. Those can be things that can feel laboured, they're not exciting at times but they're absolutely the building blocks for an effective and efficient organization, and they need to be in place. It is up to the Board to provide that confidence around good governance. WRDA, I think, has set a standard in the Women's Sector, certainly over the years and the colleagues I've worked with, the importance of good governance. Good governance is good practice, make sure that the organisation is run well, for funders, for partners, but also for the staff. Staff have to feel that they're working for an organisation that is very open with a transparent culture. A Board is there to create a culture that is welcoming and warm, not always dealing with easy things. Tough things can happen and the staff need to know that the Board will take good decisions, tough decisions, but fair decisions in relation to the running of the organization and the support of staff.

*During your time as Chair there have been difficult times financially for WRDA and the women's sector generally. I was wondering if you could talk about how good governance contributed to WRDA, not just our survival but our flourishing.*

That's a really good question Megan. The women's sector and its survival versus its sustainability has been a running thread throughout WRDA's history, there's no doubt about that. What you do in circumstances like this, it was incumbent on us as a Board to work together. We had to make sure that the decisions we made, we had to keep, make sure the resources that we had did well for women in the community. There were times, for example, when we needed good communications with staff if funding was extremely fragile. From that point of view there has been decisions in the past where we've had to downsize in terms of staff, we've had to rethink working hours for staff. We completely understand the impact on staff and our duty of care is to make sure we understand our business well and that the decision we make are good decisions, to the best of our ability, to communicate them, to be transparent and consult with staff.

It's similar with funders. If funders have any sense of the risks associated with running the organization, if there's risks around finance, that effects your reputation, your credibility, it effects your standing. So, we as a Board, there's been occasions where we've maybe had to say no. Simply say "no, we can't take anything on". We want full recovery, you can't just reduce costs, we've had to adjust our programmes, adjust our work. So it takes a good strong Board, a diverse Board with different skills to really talk with each other and make sure that the decisions we make are collective decisions. The Board, or the Management Committee of WRDA works not as a democracy [laughs]. It can't be a democracy when it comes to governance, but it does work as a collective in so far as I don't think in my whole Chair's career I had to exercise a Chair's vote. There was always consensus, and collective, even through the toughest times, and that is the measure of a good Board.

We've had some tough staffing issues to deal with and I think that's where the resilience and strength of the Board really come into their own. It's good to govern when things are going well, it is extremely hard to govern when things aren't going well. That is the measure of the trust of a Management Board, is to build a certain solidarity and trust particularly when things aren't going so well. I think where we are now has proved that that journey has worked.

*You were talking there a little bit about the diversity of the Management Committee in terms of its skill set. I was wondering if you could expand on how WRDA ensures our Management Committee accurately reflects the diversity of the women's movement?*

I think over the last few years, we've given that a bit more thought, genuinely given that a bit more thought, because WRDA was very keen to increase its diversity and some of the building blocks for that were where we surveyed the members. As the membership had grown and developed we needed to start reflecting our membership. One of the most significant things we did was to do that survey and reach out to the membership and put energy and effort in to try and diversify our Board. Some of the areas are just to increase the number of young people coming through. The women in the women's sector I've known a long time, we're all getting to a certain age, If I may say so, and I think what we need to do is make sure that there's greater diversity, certainly in terms of younger women. Reflecting the broader diversity of LGBT, of women with disabilities, and we were also keen to strengthen the political, make sure that we reflected the society that we live in, in a political sense. So, I do think that effort and energy have gone in.

It isn't easy to attract members to the Board. It's something we have to do year in and year out. The last few years we have attracted really particularly talented young women coming through. It has

ebbed and flowed more in the last few years, and I think it's something we have to keep working at, working hard to make sure that we do have that diversity.

*Thank you Ann. Yes, it's a major commitment being a member of a management committee and at times it's not an easy role. Of course all the Management Committee members are volunteers, so it's a lot to ask of people. Thank you all for doing the job so well.*

*How does a diverse Management Committee contribute to WRDA's good governance?*

When we look particularly at policy areas. Recently we had a really, really good discussion on the maternity policy. It really struck me because we had a on the Board women who were single parents so they added a real richness to the discussion. We had a discussion, a much more sensitive, difficult discussion of decriminalisation of sex workers. I think that was probably the most challenging Management Board discussion that we had. Because it was very clear from the discussion and the debate in the room, a healthy discussion and a healthy debate, that there were different voices, different views. That's what's rich about it. If we all thought the same, I don't think that makes for good governance. What makes for good governance, to me, is to take an issue and to hear different voices, challenged voices. What happens then, you end up coming out with something that is much better, it stands up to scrutiny, it stands up to the test of time, because internally we have really thought through the implications of some of the policies. So I suppose that to me is where a diverse board comes into its own. The other one [issue] was reproductive rights. I mean that would have been something that's settled in WRDA for quite some time but I remember when it was something that, way back now, it was something that we had to navigate our way through as well. A Board that takes tough decisions, allows different voices and different views, makes sure that all voices are heard. But where corporate governance comes into play, and its extremely important for me, is once we've had the discussion, once we've had the debate, once we've agreed the policy, we all, all are responsible as a corporate Trust Board to stand over that policy. You do not go out and then complain or have debates about it because we have gone through a good process where the policy has come out as the corporate policy of WRDA. We have a duty to stand over that, even if we disagree with it as an individual. I suppose for me that brings sometimes the dry subject of governance to life. Its about real life and what we do when we're up against some of those tougher issues.

*Thank you Ann. Yes, I suppose it's about the Board operating with collective responsibility rather than individual outlooks.*

And you can have both. I mean you can still have your individual view whether on reproductive rights or the decriminalisation of sex work. Whatever, you can maintain those individual views but it's the collective consensus that comes from a good process, that produces good policy, and that becomes the policy that WRDA stands over as an organisation.

*Stormont has been suspended for 35% of its existence since 1998. What impact does this lack of good governance at a devolved level have on the WRDA and the women's movement more generally?*

I think what has happened here is stark, stark evidence, not so much the impact on WRDA and the wider women's sector, but the impact on women and families per se. You only have to look to recent history around covid, the Cost of Living, all of the issues to do with that. The reduction in the health service, women's role as carers, in health and social care has shot through the roof in these last ten years. Policies are not coming into play, the slow progress on domestic and sexual violence, the stop start approach to the gender equality strategy. Its so hard to accept that we've had such a dormant, dormant, silent, silence around some of the important work that would be the bread and butter of

WRDA in terms of its policy role and influencing role. It can act as a barrier to take some of that policy and influencing role forward. At the same time what has really struck me is WRDA and the wider women's sector, the Women's Policy Group in particular, haven't stood and sat on their laurels. They have kept going, producing women's manifestos over and over, making the case to the politicians even though they're not in play if you like. I think that's where the women's sector really has such a strength in that it has never given up. It hasn't given up, it has remained resilient and its remained strong. I think as I've said before, if there wasn't a WRDA you would have to have one so that somebody is the guardian the keeper of some of those important issues. We've got to keep knocking on the door in relation to that but it is tough, it is tough. But WRDA and the Women's Policy Group, some of the individuals in that, haven't given up. We can't become hopeless, we just can't. We have to try and remain hopeful.

*Yes, hope's very important in those kind of situations, thank you for that. Just to go back and pick up on something that you mentioned during that answer was the role women played during the Covid-19 pandemic and the lack of support. I was wondering if you could talk a bit about WRDA's response to the pandemic. I think as a member of staff experiencing it, we were one of the leaders in good practice.*

We have to pay tribute to Anne McVicker and her leadership around all of this because governance and leadership are interdependent in some ways. Anne McVicker had her finger on the pulse, she was picking up in the community and within the organisation and broader women's sector that we needed to find a way of. What do we do, how do we as a management board exercise good care and responsibility for the staff team. And that's why at every management board meeting there was, covid-19 was on the agenda in terms of what were the best policies for us to look at, how do you make this building safe, how do you have good flexible working. Working from home, what is the technology that enables people to work from home, how do you create conditions for our staff to be able to remain and work from home? That was constant real time, real life, governance in action, where we discussed that at every management board meeting. What was working, what needed to change. And then gradually, the risks associated with our responsibility for staff. When do you return to the office, is it a blended approach, you know things like that. It was very heightened in all of the minds of the management board that we would make sure that our staff, I suppose its being aware of their emotional wellbeing, not just the physical of the practical side of it but the emotional wellbeing. Times where people were meeting on zoom, people meeting online, whatever supports could be put in place to support particularly the staff at that time.

*I was wondering if you could talk a bit about what you are most proud of from your time with WRDA so far and what you think the organisations greatest achievement is?*

Well the most proud of, I think, has got to be the community facilitator's programme. It really, really struck a chord when I came to the organization and it has continued year in and year out to attract women to become community facilitators which is really good for women in terms of their confidence, their self-esteem, increasing their employability routes as well as self-employed. Not only that, that community facilitator programme has led to a series of programmes in terms of breast and cervical screening for example that make a difference out in communities. From the information we get some of the work saves lives. Our work particularly with the Public Health Agency has been evaluated and that's something else that WRDA does well, whatever it does, it evaluates it. I think building that into the work that we do so that it doesn't get stale, it develops, it improves, it shifts as needed, but the essence of the community facilitator programme has stayed the same but it has grown. The leadership throughout the years, we've had different ways of thinking about it, but it really has stood the test of time.

The question about WRDA's achievements, how you would measure that, WRDA's commitment to partnership working. Its in the DNA of WRDA to have good partners, or to have partnerships as one of the missions of the organization and it's always been a key objective within any of our strategic plans is partnership working, and that's not easy. There have been times when the partnership relationships weren't at their best and it wasn't easy to keep the door ajar, or the door open around partnership working. We're at a very good stage in terms of partnership working now and it is key to the survival and the sustainability of WRDA. You only have to look at the diversity of the income base that is WRDA, a lot of that is based on that hallmark of partnership. I think it is through that, that WRDA has gone on a journey from survival to sustainability, through partnership. If that is the one thing that will be my biggest memory is to utilise partnership as a means of sustainability and staying with it. I think that's its greatest achievement.

*Thank you Ann, yes we always work in partnership. I think every member of staff's work relates to a partnership in some way. I'm involved in the Women's Regional Consortium for example. So yes, I think its fair to say that that is a cornerstone of our approach to work.*

*You'll see on the desk beside you the red book, and it's the same red book we've been using to record all of our AGMs since 1985. I was just wondering if you had any memories of any anecdotes about our 39 previous AGMS?*

When you asked me that question Megan, I really couldn't think of anything. The AGMs are a good time to come together, just human relationships, a time to meet and to communicate. I happened to be, and I don't remember which celebration it was. 20 years, 25 years, I don't know, but again a lot of the previous directors of WRDA came together and I think that's what's good about WRDA AGMs. It brings people in, it's a way to welcome people in who you haven't seen, year in and year out. So it has its place, not just as way to do the business which you have to do, but its an opportunity to communicate and connect with others. Obviously during Covid that didn't happen so it's great that the AGMs are meeting in person and we need to get the numbers up and make sure that people know they can come and they're welcome, and it's a way and an opportunity to meet with others.

*Thank you Ann. So in November we will celebrate our 40<sup>th</sup> AGM, I was just wondering if you have a message for people who will be attending?*

I would repeat, I think the ethos of partnership has been the journey of WRDA, from survival to sustainability. Do not give up on partnership and work hard on partnership. The women's sector is so small in the scheme of things, it can't afford not to work as a collective. When it does, it is a loud, loud voice. Not just in terms of sustainability but in terms of influencing change. I think that is to me the hallmark, is partnership and wherever we can bring that to bear, we should.