

WRDA 40th Anniversary Interview with Joanna McMinn

So my name is Joanna McMinn and I was the first worker with the Women's Education Project that began in 1983 and that became the Women's Resource and Development Agency of which I was director until 1994, so I worked for the organisation for 11 years in total.

Tell us a bit about yourself and your journey as a feminist.

Ok, well I was born and reared in Cornwall, and I grew up in a working class English family, Cornish family, and so was very conscious of social inequalities growing up. I would say my family were quite socialist in their outlook and then of course growing up when I did, which was during the sort of rise of feminism anyway globally, I was very aware myself from my personal experience of inequalities as a woman. I was aware of my mother's choices and how limited they were as a woman and I had very different choices because I had access to a free education, and in fact free access to higher education. Which no longer is a possibility for somebody from a working-class background. So, I was very lucky in that regard. I became aware through my life experiences of inequalities in my own life and others lives and gradually became a feminist before I called myself a feminist which I think is not uncommon.

Where did you go to university?

I went to university in University College Dublin. I had no connection with Ireland at the time, but my Head Mistress encouraged me to think of coming to Dublin to go to university. Subsequently, I discovered that my great grandmother had emigrated from southwest Cork, after the famine, and gone to London and worked as a servant in a household. Then, subsequently, I have discovered that I have a big Irish connection. So, I lived in the south of Ireland for some time, obviously, during my degree, then went to America and got married, came back and then moved up to the North in 1974.

So that's right in the very early days of the Troubles, I think 72 was the most violent year, so 74 would be coming of the back of that. If you don't mind me asking, what motivated you to move to Northern Ireland?

I was married to somebody who got a job in Northern Ireland [laughs] so that was that. it wasn't really my choice but it was very much, as you say, it was a very difficult time and a very frightening time actually, living in Belfast. So, we moved out to Glenarm in County Antrim and I loved living in the country. That's where my children, when they were very young, lived so that was good.

What was the feminist movement like in Northern Ireland in the Early 1980s?

Well it was very exciting, there was a lot going on. There were some very interesting people getting involved in all sorts of initiatives that were to do with women's liberation, women's education, women's politics. There was a lot of activity and there was different organisations that set up at the time. I found that because I had small children I was quite dependent, and I became a single parent in 1981. A lot of the support that I had as a single parent was from feminists, in the women's movement

or women I was meeting when I moved into Belfast and began to look around and see what I could join and be part of.

So WRDA started life as the Women's Education Project in 1983 and I was wondering if you could tell us a bit about how the project started and what the early days of the organisation were like?

Well, it was started by a group of women who were involved in adult education, for example the Workers Education Association, and different initiatives. At the same time as the Women's Education Project started, Belfast City Council also initiated a post for Women's Office, which Margaret Ward took up, who was also later a director of WRDA. So Margaret and I worked together quite a bit at that time. So there was quite a lot of activity around education, and the idea of women's education because it was clear from the numbers of local women's groups that were setting up for mutual support, for shared childcare, all these kinds of things, some community centres, that there was a hunger there for getting together and talking together and for education. It was really a great time, there was no pressure for accreditation. It was much later that the kind of neoliberal agenda that was very economy focused took over. At the time, what was wonderful was that we could respond to need, and that's what we did.

The first office of Women's Education Project was actually in Women's Aid Federation offices on University Street. So one desk, one telephone and that was it. I used to go out to women's groups and talk to them and used to go to the Women's Information Group meetings and meet people there. It was very much about responding to need and the needs were around welfare rights, assertiveness training, women's health courses, mental health, and things like that. It was very free of constraints and controls from above.

What impact do you think the neoliberal drive for accredited, economically active focused courses has had on the women's movement generally and on women's education in particular?

Well it has become much more instrumental, in that it's geared towards qualifications. The characteristics of women's education, as a lot of community education in the 1980s, was around critical education. It was a reflection on experience and it was based on dialogue. It was about becoming more socially conscious and reflective of people's experience, and based in people's experience. That space has shrunk hugely, until today it hardly exists at all. So that has been the impact of that, and the funding shrank as well. The funding was very much geared towards qualifications, access to employment, that kind of thing. There's nothing wrong with that, but how it started with the kind of much more feminist consciousness raising, critical reflection, all that kind of thing was not lost entirely because I think where women get together to discuss anything they share experience and they become more aware, it's not just them in this position, it's a shared condition. That in itself leads to different kind of choices I think. But I do think that the education of the 1980s has long gone now really.

I know that you have worked in south east Africa and you mentioned there about the effect of women getting together and I was wondering what you thought about the solidarity between feminist movements in the global north and the global south. Are there adequate connections, enough shared learning, and what your take on global feminism is?

Well I worked in east Africa, I worked in Somaliland for a year and it felt very similar to working here in a lot of ways but the context was totally different. Obviously, poverty was such a huge issue, and it is an issue here, but there I mean we're talking about drought and really high infant mortality. Poverty, clearly, greater poverty. But in terms of women talking together, the same kind of solidarity emerges from that I think. Which I think is really good.

In terms of global feminism one of the events which happened, which I wasn't able to go to but helped fundraise for, was the Beijing Platform in 1995. That was after I left the WRDA. That was hugely important, I think the impact of that is still there. I think feminism as a global movement is still very strong but sometimes in terms of organised actions, is constrained by all sorts of things, funding and so on. But I think the impact of global feminism is huge, and the reaction to it is also strong as well. I don't think we can underestimate that, an ongoing challenge.

Yes, that's a good way of putting it. To go back to the local then, I was wondering if you could chat a bit about the Women's Education Project's Local Organiser course? I believe that a lot of local organisations owe their genesis to that programme.

Yes, well it's interesting because I think what happened was that we always had the view that anything that we learned we would share with other women's organisations. Sometimes people talk about funding as they're very protective of their sources of funding because they see it as a competitive situation. Whereas, that's not the way we saw it. We saw it as expanding, the more demand there was at the time, the more it would become something women's groups could access if they had the information they needed. It was things like how to become a women's organisation at all, you know. How to set up a women's group, how to fundraise, how to organize. It was interesting because we just thought that what would now be called open source learning, was a good thing. So we began to run courses like that.

I will never forget the one we ran up in Derry because I learned afterwards, there were so many organisations that set up after it, like the Derry Well Women, so it was great to be able to share the learning that we had gone through. How to write a fundraising application, all those kinds of things that you need to do, and how to set up a management committee. All those things, practical things that you need to know if you're going to try and become more permanent as an organisation. So they were a great success and I was really pleased afterwards that we had done that and that we hadn't kept all the knowledge to ourselves. It was more about sharing the knowledge, sharing the skills, sharing our learning. Pros and cons of all that we had done, and just really building a women's movement and helping to contribute to it.

Thanks so much. I think actually a lot of those organisations that you mentioned like Derry Well Women are still going today so its great to see the impact of the transfer of that knowledge.

In 1992 Women's Education Project's membership voted to rename the organisation, the Women's Resource and Development Agency. I was wondering if you could talk abit about how that decision came about and what the transition was like?

Well that was very simple really, simple explanation for that is that funding was becoming difficult. I mean there were times when we had no funding and Geraldine and I worked a few months without any pay because there was just no funding. We just worked our backsides off to get it, and we did [laughing] as Geraldine will tell you. So I mean it was a simple issue really because it came down to funding. We were finding it very difficult to get new funding, for education, purely.

In the Department of Health and Social Services there was a voluntary activity unit where there were some very progressive civil servants, men actually. Anyway, there were some very progressive civil servants and they wanted to fund us but they couldn't fund something that was called 'education' because it would come under Department of Education and Department of Education weren't going to fund us. So DHSS had funded the Women's Information Group and they funded community development type projects, so it was they who said 'look, we would like to fund you, but you will have to be called something slightly different. In the end we came up with the name the Women's Resource and Development Agency and at the time there were some kind of reservations about losing 'education' from the title but we just thought, actually, they were very supportive and in fact bought this building in partnership with the Joseph Rowntree Trust and DHSS as a Public Private Partnership, which was very unusual, bought this building. This building has made such a huge difference, it has given stability to the organisation. It was prior to the first ceasefires so it was also inexpensive to buy. So it was for practical reasons really, it wasn't because of a change of emphasis. What the Women's Education Project did, and what it was successful at doing, was combining a feminist approach with community development and educational responses to working class women's groups didn't change, that's continued.

Thank you, that's very interesting. I had never heard the story of how our name changed so thank you for that. It's a tremendous sacrifice to have made to have went without pay for months. I think that speaks to women's struggles in keeping the movement going and what the feminists who will inherit the movement and these organisations owe the previous generation. Thank you for that, that must have been incredible difficult.

Well, it was difficult but like, there was just me and Geraldine. Just the two of us at the time, only two of us, and I was hugely committed to the whole enterprise and there was no way I was going to let it fold due to lack of funding. I was determined, and Geraldine was so good to support me in that, we supported ourselves really. We knew we could get funding if we really put our backs into it. It was just a timing thing, so we did, but there were members of the management committee at the time who were really made anxious by it, and rightly so I have to say, in retrospect.

What are you most proud of from your eleven years with the project and what do you feel this organization's greatest achievement is?

What I'm proudest of for myself is developing models of education that were based in feminist perspectives and that were accessible, based on dialogue and conversation. I drew our materials from everywhere and was very influenced by other people who were working in adult education at the same time. I mean there was some very radicle education going on in West Belfast. The person that I had the RobbiKid award with was Eilish Rooney who was working in Spring Hill at the time and so she was doing exactly the same. I also had met women working in women's education in the South with Aontas, the adult education association. We wrote a book actually, *From the personal to the political* I'm very pound of that and that was done in collaboration with women in the South.

Throughout my career in the Women's Education Project and the WRDA I worked on a cross border basis with women in the South who were involved in exactly the same kinds of adult education and building of a women's movement really, across the island. So I'm proud of that, I'm proud of the educational model that was developed. When I left in 1994 I did a PHD to reflect on women's education to try and ask the question, did it lead to social change. I learnt so much form my time in the Women's Education Project, WRDA, and had the kind of freedom that no longer exists so much because there was no accreditation involved and it was possible to design courses that responded to women's actual needs and concerns, and to make a difference. I think the Women's Education Project and the WRDA have made a difference.

We were talking about what it was like here in the 1980s, we touched a little bit on what its like now but I was wondering if you could talk about how you feel the women's movement in Northern Ireland and Ireland generally has changed over the last 40 years?

That's a big question. I think the women's movement has had an impact for sure. In terms of have women's material circumstances changed in working class areas, no they haven't really. There's still a high degree of poverty and lack of access to education. That means that its very expensive for women to get access to further and higher education. Even more expensive that it was back at that time, and there's fewer courses. Nevertheless, I think there are different supports available. Obviously since the ceasefires and the Good Friday Agreement we no longer have a war going on everyday. I mean I can remember taking classes in places where women turned up in their nightdresses with a coat over the top of them because they'd been put out of their house. There'd been a bomb scare on the street or something and there was very high levels of stress and people were on valium. A lot of people were on valium during that time, so there were a lot of mental health issues. I think now that some of those things, we no longer have the daily killings going on, but we don't have peace. A lot of people still endure a high level of poverty. It's kind of a cliché to say, post-traumatic stress and intergenerational trauma, so they have even some more difficult health issues to deal with, and to deal with their children and grandchildren and so on. But I think women who have learnt to organize and continue to organize on

issues do influence policy, they are listened to. I think in the South more than up here, one of the things I learnt about down there is that there's a closer relationship between women who are activists and politicians. It's not so strong up here I think, that sort of link. When I was working in east Africa I used to listen to the BBC World Service and frequently would hear on reports from Ireland voices of people I knew [laughing], people like Alva Smith for example, who's very well known. There is a voice, women do have a voice I think.

You mentioned there about the South, there's a stronger connection between women's activists and policy makers and that it's less strong in Northern Ireland, why do you think that is and what do you think can be done to strengthen those lengths.

Well why it is, is because there was a long period of direct rule. Certainly, when the Women's Coalition set up, Bronagh Hinds would have had a strong personal relationship with the minister, the British minister of state. Afterwards, I know that there was a civic forum that was formed that lived a very short time because the people in that had stronger experience and expertise of working on policy issues than a lot of the politicians who then got elected. So they didn't like it, they felt threatened by it probably. I don't know how it ended but it didn't last very long. I think that was part of the reason, I think it's just a matter of political culture, the way it developed differently in the South and the North.

You'll see beside you the red book and we have recorded every AGM in that book since 1985 and we're still using it for our AGM records. I was wondering if you had any memories or anecdotes about our past AGMs?

Oh gosh, I'm just looking at some of the names. Well AGMs are a headache for the person who's the director [laughing] to be honest. You feel very accountable, you have to write an annual report, and there's elections and you just feel you'll be glad when it's over. So I don't really have any anecdotes because I can't remember many of them, all I remember is the stress of them.

They're maybe gladly forgotten [laughs]

Well not so much that, I mean the people who were on them, who were on the management committees were fantastic really, over the years. When I look at some of the names and remember some of the names I just think it's amazing that all of these people, like Jane Robb who worked for the WRDA for a while. All these different people who were so good. Evelyn Collins who ran the Equality Commission for so long, Anne Hope, all these people who were involved in organising and supporting the work of the Women's Education Project and the WRDA. So that's what I remember, the women who supported it and helped keep it going for so many years.

Thank you. This is going to be our 40th AGM in November and I was wondering if you had a message for those attending for perhaps for our own Director, Anne McVicker, who is now having those same headaches?

Yes [laughs] bless her. Well my message would be just to remember, and stay committed to the feminist roots of the WRDA. To really value the social solidarity

between women and now of course it's much wider than just women's inequality. We have to think of all the intersectional aspects of race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, all the different experiences and identities that make the women's movement very strong, needs to be valued. It's not just about identity it's also about how women are represented and, also the resources that they have access to. Be committed to that, be committed to women's representation in all the diversity that's there and also be committed to redistribution of resources so that women have a fairer share, globally, a fairer share of the world's resources.