

Transcript of 40th Anniversary Interview with Margaret Ward

Please introduce yourself and your involvement with WRDA.

My name is Margaret Ward and I was Director of WRDA from 2008 to 2013

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

I started, I became a feminist I think as a consequence of the Civil Rights movement which also dovetailed with the early years of the early years of the Women's Liberation movement in Britain. It was a bit later to come over here but I had been part of people's democracy and civil rights and then I went to Queens and ... didn't stay active in politics because the Troubles started and, you know, it was difficult to know where you fitted in in a very polarized, very difficult situation. But I became more and more interested in feminism and meeting other women who were interested and so we set up the Women's Liberation Society in Queens in 1973, 1974. That evolved then. We then wanted to be outside of Queens and became more and more specific about the kind of feminists that we were and we were very much influenced by socialist feminism and women like Sheila Rowbotham, for me personally, as somebody interested in women and history. So, in 1975 myself and a few others set up the Socialist Women's Group which was a very serious body. We developed a manifesto, and we had meetings mainly with left wing groups to find out what programmes they had for women or what their analysis was of women's oppression, and then it evolved from there, isolating what were key issues. Trying to ... trying to bring feminism and women's issues into all sorts of different arenas that had never thought about them, and that brought up a whole lot of questions about our views on imperialism, on the British presence in Ireland which, as you can imagine, was difficult for quite a few people. Some felt we were far too insular as a group, too focused on that and we wanted to be wider, we wanted to attract more women so finally there was a kind of split within the Socialist Women's Group that some women went on to form Women Against Imperialism and they worked very closely with the Armagh Women Prisoners Solidarity campaign with local women in communities in West Belfast and we formed the Belfast Women's Collective. Which then was much more focused on key issues like reproductive rights, violence against women, childcare. A whole host of issues that really depended on what women wanted to take up.

Thank you. That was really interesting, what you were talking about there. Do you think those kind of tensions that you were talking about that happened in the Socialist Women's Group and led to a kind of split, do you think there still present in the modern feminist movement here or do you think the ending of the Troubles has largely resolved that?

I think things have ch...have moved considerably. When we were talking about the British presence and imperialism...I think one of the things that we, we weren't focused on I think were the totality of women's experiences here and women in Unionist communities, they were very much kind of isolated I would say from the women's movement, or that we were isolated from them. But there were very few points of reference and I think, partly because feminism was seen as kind of, not

synonymous with Republicanism but it was seen as something that was going against the status quo and that did make Unionist women wary of forming alliances. And I became the Project Officer for Belfast City Council later on in the mid-1980s and it was through that that I started meeting women from different communities and seeing at that stage, through things like the Women's Education Project which is the forerunner of WRDA, the kind of work that was being done in different communities that wouldn't be called "feminism" but it was certainly raising the consciousness of women and working with them on different education projects for example. And so ... certainly finding the commonality of experiences for women, working class women in different communities started, I think, building a different layer of understanding of feminism and I think took some of the polarization out of it, when people started to see what they had in common.

Why do you think feminism is still a dirty word for some people?

Well to me I don't understand why people can't simply just say that they are feminists. I know that the late Joyce McCartan who was very active in the Lower Ormeau Road always called herself a family feminist. And I think what she thought was that we as feminists. 'Cause well obviously when I was starting out I was young, I didn't have children etc. I think they thought that we were in some way in opposition to women who were, whose primary role was within the home, working within the home, and that we wanted everyone to be going out, getting a job, being independent, not necessarily having children or if we did, or if they did shoving them out to childcare kind of 24 hours a day. The kind of thing that was the stereotype of what a feminist was that I think made older women in particular, or women within the home feel "well, I'm not a feminist, I'm not a professional career woman". Or something like that.

That was in my time, and I understood it a lot more once I had children myself, that women, you know there was the famous cartoon you know "I'm only a housewife". And we spent so long trying to convince women that, you know, housewife was important work, and you were never only just that anyway. And that was the kind of thing that went through and it probably still goes through. There was also a very prominent campaign, not so much here but in Britain, the Wages for Housework campaign was very active in the 80s. And Selma James, who headed it up in Britain, she was an American woman. They were kind of using Marxist analysis to show that women's labour within the home was the basis of capitalist society and therefore they should be paid for that work, and we had huge debates about that. Whether that would actually make sure that women never were able to leave the home if they were getting paid for housework etc. Now I think that ... we still have those kind of things but we call them different things. You know, we call, we talk about a universal income and what people are entitled to, and it gets away from those gender stereotypes. The people deserve a living wage, or they deserve the form of support from the state that they can have a life of dignity. And I think that was part of the Wages for Housework campaign but it became quite a divisive issue within feminism at the time. But I think the debates have evolved so much since then.

During my research for this interview, I got the impression that your work as a feminist academic has been about writing women back into the narrative of Irish history and making women's history visible. Compared to 1983 when WRDA began what progress do you feel has been made in increasing women's visibility in the historical record and in public life?

I'd never put the two dates together but, you know, in 1983 my first book, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, was first published. So that was about women, uncovering women's role in Nationalism in Ireland but it went from 1880 up to the 1980s. the early 80s and I tried to convey some of the debates within feminism in my concluding chapter. And that was an important book and has been a foundation for a lot of research that's come about since. And I've gone onto do a lot more work in terms of women and suffrage etc. So, I think now, its not perfect at all but there are women studying history. When I was a student at Queens I was never lectured to by an academic [woman] either as an undergraduate or a postgraduate. There were no women in the department. It was very male and when I wanted to do the work, the research, they said that I couldn't. It took me a year to convince the professors that this was viable. Their argument was women hadn't done anything, if they had done something it would have been written about by now. So, I actually had to convince them to let me do the work. That's a huge step-change now. We've just had the decade of centenaries, women were written into that, not because the Irish government is particularly understanding of women in history but there were enough academics out there to insist that in all these key times women have also played a part. So, I think there has been a big change in the historical record.

In our 2010 Annual Report you commented on the underrepresentation of women in political and public life in NI and almost 15 years later that is still the reality. Why do you think this remains such an intransigent problem?

I think in public life things have changed quite a lot because I was thinking of all the big organisations that exist in terms of public sector organisations, Human Rights Commission, the Equality Commission, or the Victims Commissioner, the Police Ombudsman, the Arts Council, all of those have been headed by women or are headed by women. So women, I think, in public life have made big strides, have always been these great women, competent and forward looking women out there, and they have broken through a glass ceiling without a doubt. Used to be the phrase was "the glass cliff", women only got appointed to an organisation if it was in trouble and then they could take the blame for it as everything disintegrated, but it's not the case now. Women have broken the glass ceiling and they're there in public life. They're not there enough, in lower down positions there is not sufficient representation, or any representation if they're working-class women, women with disabilities, women of colour. We're way behind on that although I think that in terms of recruitment into positions there is more of an effort being made now.

I think political life is a different matter. Used to be, when the Troubles were on, it was just too dangerous. Women didn't want to put themselves out there and put themselves at risk. I think we're still in a post-conflict society where it is difficult, but I think the challenge of the Women's Coalition was really significant to political parties.

It wasn't simply that there was a women's party out there saying "women deserve a seat at the table and women are going to ensure that they are going to be at the table during negotiations". When they were formed it was like they took a lid off all the misogyny and hatred. Women, when you saw how during the Peace Forum, Unionist parties in particular treated them. You know, "go home and breed for Ulster", mooing at them, all of that, it was absolutely horrendous. So much of that has been caught on camera, it really exposed something and I think that parties, they may not have changed that much internally but they certainly know that they need to put a better face on it. But you also saw that when Coalition candidates were standing for election political parties started putting women up against them, looking for more women candidates. Because of all the obstacles to women, the first is getting selected and breaking through. So many political parties are happy to have them as the tea makers or whatever.

The childcare is a big issue because so many political meetings are in the evening or at teatime. Council meetings tend to be in that early evening time. All of the research that's been done on childcare, confidence, cash, the Five Cs, are the things that have militated against women being politically active, and they are still obstacles. Particularly, I would say, the childcare one and how can we make political life more women friendly, or more family friendly, and enable women to take that role. Because you want to encourage young women to come in, young women have children so you have the position then that there's no maternity leave. They're bringing their children in, what happens then? In the South, Helen McEntee, the minister who's just had her second child, has been sanctioned for bringing her baby into the Chamber. In Westminster, Stella Creasy brought a breast-feeding baby into the Chamber. There is no creche or anything like that. The Women's Coalition, when they were first in the Assembly, campaigned for a creche on site and that never happened. There was such resistance to that. Something like that, is an easy thing to do and it would make life so much easier for women.

As feminists living in a society still emerging from conflict how did WRDA contribute to making the role of women and the experiences of women during the Troubles visible in the discourse around the conflict's legacy?

We did that in various ways, one of the things that we did is we had a project on women talking about the Troubles which went out, had residential, it worked with women, brought women together from very different backgrounds. Talking about their experiences, their experiences growing up, their experiences with their parents, with society generally, and put that together. I thought it was really moving. One woman I can remember saying "my daddy loved Ireland more than me" because he was in prison for so long. You suddenly realized the intergenerational impact of all of that and these women were looking back on their early years and still with a huge amount of pain and hurt because they didn't understand what was going on or why their father, in this case, wasn't with them. They could see the difficulties their mothers went through, what it was like just going to school, being scared, being stopped, or having strange men in the countryside. The urban and rural differences, all of that was very interesting. When we got it launched, Jeffrey Donaldson actually was the one who launched it. What he said at the time was "it's a very valuable piece

of social history”, I think he was absolutely right about that. I think its those sort of things that are important, to not get lost, just filed as a report, but one can learn from them or have that learning in other places as well because its important to see what our society has gone through. It explains so much in terms of mental health issues, dependency on prescription drugs, and all sorts of things can stem from those experiences that WRDA documented very well in that report.

Can you tell us about the Hanna’s House project and your involvement in that?

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington was an Irish suffragette, our best known suffragette, and I’ve written a biography of her. She went to gaol several times for the fight for suffrage, she was based in Dublin but had lots of links in the North, in fact spoke in Ormeau Park one year and got heckled for her Dublin accent. But I knew her granddaughter, Micheline. Hanna’s son, Owen had developed TB and when he returned from a sanitarium they got a house that at that time was just outside Dublin, it’s actually in Tir A Nur, it’s not outside Dublin now, but it was in a market garden area. So they still had a lovely garden and they had this house, not a grand house by any manner of means. Micheline was then living in it and she was very keen that it could form a basis for women from all over Ireland to come together and talk about issues, strategize, and develop campaigns, and a group of people developed around that. Joanna McMinn was actually living in the house at the time as well, she was renting it for a while as she had taken up a post as director of the National Women’s Council of Ireland. Joanna’s and my personal and professional lives seem to box and cox a lot.

Anyway, I then became involved. At first it was a Dublin based thing. So, we started having a campaign about, it was initially Hanna’s house but when there was a visibility study done it was obvious that it just wasn’t suitable as a residential centre and it couldn’t be transformed without losing its character. So we were in a position of wanting a Hanna’s House but the actual physical Hanna’s house wasn’t suitable. So we decided on a virtual Hanna’s House and Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust supported us very generously and we had a worker. We organised over a number of years a series of events all around Ireland on different themes. For example, in Derry we were talking about the recent past and the Troubles, but as we went round different places, in Galway I think we were talking much more on violence against women, in Cork we were talking about new migrant communities and how Ireland was changing.

So, we would bring women from all the different communities together and have those kind of discussions and it kind of developed from there. It became almost international in looking at women in conflict. Then we had a big all Ireland conference in Croke Park that President Higgins opened. It was one of his early events as president of Ireland. We had people like Judith Gillespie from the PSNI talking about the role of women in policing, so we had women who were in prominent public roles. The whole thing was about transformation, how we could understand what was happening and try and transform things.

It wasn’t that it ran out of steam, I think it had got to a stage where what could you do next to bring all of this together. I think what it did bring was the National Women’s

Council of Ireland and WRDA closer together as two women's organisations on the island of Ireland who hadn't worked together. I mean they had in the past, but hadn't worked together for a long time, and trying to see what women had in common and how we could work together. We did have another Peace funded project together. But Hanna's House had a really good web presence, lots of publications, but then in the end we didn't have the money to keep that going. Its terrible that the whole website, which was a fantastic resource, doesn't exist now and I think that's often the way of funded projects. You eventually run out of money, people move on, the core organising committee, we all were moving on to different things so that was the end of the Hanna's House project, but while it lasted I thought it was great.

In 2011 WRDA alongside WomensTec developed a women's history tour of Belfast. Can you talk about how this project came about and what impact it had on increasing the visibility of women's impact on Belfast?

This was *Celebrating Belfast Women* and I just had this idea that I had a lot of knowledge about Belfast women that wasn't out there, that I could put out there so that everyone would know more about the contribution women in Belfast had made to the history of Belfast and women's campaigns. Tourism was starting to really happen in Belfast, different tours, but what about a women's tour. Then, because of WRDA's whole ethos which is trying not to be top down but bottom up, what about training women as tour guides and given them the information, passing it onto them.

That was a good mix between WRDA and my expertise so I undertook to write a booklet celebrating Belfast women. Women'sTec undertook the training of women who wanted to be tour guides, they got an NVQ qualification from that. We also then as a third leg of that had a series of lectures in the Ulster Hall, lunch time lectures. So it was a really nice gathering that people could come in at lunchtime have a lecture on, May Blood gave one on her life working in a factory and how her life developed after that. She ended up in the House of Lords. I talked about the suffrage movement, Myrtle Hill talked about women in history more generally, the contribution women had made in Belfast. So we had a whole series of lectures and we had lovely sandwiches and tea and coffee. People could just get together beforehand and chat and listen to the lectures so It was really, really good.

So the pamphlet was produced and I think it was a great resource. Its of its time, I know even more than I knew then but it does give you a lot of North, South, East and West Belfast. The women who undertook the training, they got a lot individually in terms of their own personal knowledge of history, and also how to conduct a tour guide and how to speak in public. All sorts of transferable skills. A lot of them then went on not to become tour guides themselves, but they got jobs. The Titanic building was just opening, several of them got jobs in that, so that was a great result. A lot of them found that it was a transformative personal experience. One woman, Lorraine Mills, went on to develop the Millie Tour. I follow her on Facebook and she does general tours as well but she seems to be making a good living as a tour guide and seems to be really busy and I'm just delighted that that happened.

During your time as Director in 2011 WRDA became active on Facebook and Twitter and we have continued to expand our engagement via social media in the years

since. What has the effect of social media been on the visibility of the feminist movement and what impact has this had on feminism both in NI and globally?

When we started, I was always very keen that we have a good website, we revamped our website a lot to make sure we had all our publications, newsletters, everything was out there. Of course, WRDA had already hosted WomensLink for a long time, which is a really great way of linking up all the different women's groups all over the place, and individuals. I still get WomensLink messages. So social media has always been important for the women's movement.

I can see now with the website, you have to log in and register and various things. Its not always a safe place for women out there, in terms of misogyny, trolling, which has certainly developed. But when we started one of the posts I'm most pleased about was the Women's Sector Lobbyist, that we got. I can talk about that in more detail but one of the things that she did was really to develop the social media side as a communication tool. That I think is when we started Twitter and all of that. Those were in the early days and obviously its developed. I'm a great Twitter user, in my own life, finding out about conferences and events, is just, I don't think I'd hear about half the things that I would go to or subscribe to if it wasn't for Twitter. But I can see also if you're looking at reproductive rights, abortion campaigns, you know, what women are doing in places like Malta for example, or what's happening in other places, you can find that out through that kind of women's network and who tweets. So I think it's a really important tool, I feel, for enhancing the visibility of women and campaigns. Just letting people know what's out there because if you're not in an organisation and hearing all of that, you're really dependent on being able to login and find out what's happening so I think it's a great communication tool.

Yes, thank you. You mentioned there, the Women's Sector Lobbyist post. We still have a Women's Sector Lobbyist today and in fact that post has expanded and we now also have a lobbyist's assistant. I was wondering if you could talk a bit about the origin of that post and how it developed during your time?

When I was Director I was very active in the group that met with civil servants to develop the Gender Equality Strategy. We'd meet politicians or we'd meet civil servants on various things. We would collect all this evidence on women's needs etcetera, but the gap was how do you make that information important enough to change policy, to change legislation. What's the link there, how are we going to make politicians understand or speak up, because one of the things was that the Assembly was very new. Politicians had very little experience, most of them wouldn't have had a policy background. So I felt there was a real way in there, if you had somebody who could inform them. So that's why I thought a women's sector lobbyist, that wouldn't just be, that wasn't lobbying, this is what some people couldn't understand, It wasn't lobbying for WRDA it was lobbying for the issues that affected all women. You know, it took some convincing for organisations to see that WRDA wasn't just putting in a bid for itself. It took a while before you could see that.

Lynn Carvill was our first lobbyist and did a fantastic job in first of all getting to know politicians and developing a relationship with them. Then we had different ways of communicating all of this. We had policy seminars, they weren't called that but what

we would have is we would have experts, we would have politicians, and we would have policy practitioners all talking about an issue. Say, issues affecting older women. So you could have the older women's network, an academic who was specializing in that kind of area, etc. And the hope being that that kind of information would then get translated back into debates in Stormont for example. Lynn started a lobbying newsletter, bringing up issues so that she would see what was coming up on the political agenda, what were the key issues, and then what did we want, as the Women's Sector, to have. We started seeing when the debates went on that some of them were actually just reading from those briefing newsheets. So I thought it was a really great way of encouraging and supporting politicians to take up issues, and giving them enough information that they felt confident doing that. Obviously that became difficult, in terms of when the Assembly wasn't in existence but committees were still there.

There were other campaigns we got involved in like, when Austerity really hit, the empty purse protests and then linking up with Reclaim the Agenda. So I think the Women's Lobbyist role is pretty unique and Rowntree as a funder have always been incredibly supportive of it and wanted to continue the funding, they could see the real significance of having that link there between politicians, policy and women.

There have been fantastic women in those positions, I continue to follow them. Everyone has their own particular strengths and things that they can bring to that role. I mean covid was such a challenging time. How did you work, how did you operate, how did you communicate. People were having to be very creative in how they could work from home, be isolated but put information together, remaining in touch and trying to get the message across that way. The Feminist Recovery Plan was a brilliant piece of work.

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

WRDA has been a great organisation and it had great foundations when I came in. The one thing I thought it didn't have as much, it had this fantastic foundation of working with women in the community, the Community Facilitator programme, fantastic, both in terms of the health information it imparted but also the training that it gave to women and the qualification they got. So all of that was great and that was running smoothly, It didn't need any input particularly. What I felt that it lacked was greater visibility generally as an organisation, an organisation that was articulating women's interests, taking part and critiquing what was out there. So I think that my role, and I think I did achieve that, was to bring up WRDA as that authoritative voice for women. Not the only voice out there but an authoritative voice that the media could come to, politicians could have faith in, policy makers. That it could go out to different policy fora and hold its own and put forward really strong issues and well argued.

How do you feel the feminist movement in NI has changed over the last 40 years?

I think the biggest change, I left Northern Ireland in 1986 and didn't come back until 1999. When I left, WRDA, well, the Women's Education Project had Joanna McMinn

as a paid worker, you had Downtown Women's Centre with I think a part time worker, Falls Women's Centre I think had just about started. They were all kind of on the ground initiatives by feminists who'd been acting on the ground. Women's Education Project was started by women who worked in women's studies, WEA, etc. But most of it was voluntary labour and very shoestring, you know one room kind of thing. When I came back, because of the Peace money and everything else there were all these organisations, women's centres, very professionalised and we didn't talk about the women's movement anymore, we talked about the women's sector. So that has good and bad points. A lot of it was a lot of time spent chasing the money, worrying about being compromised, you know, will your funder let you do things, how do you negotiate all of that if government are given you money. Things that we never used to have to worry about before because when it came to controversial issues that was a consideration. So, negotiating where the boundaries were. I found all of that quite difficult to take because over in England where I was everything was still on that voluntary capacity, little organisations. It wasn't like here. Northern Ireland I don't think realises, in some senses, just how much the peace funding and the European funding, has made this huge difference and created this sector that I don't see its equivalent in other places.

It's been hard. The funding goes up and down, organisations have to deal with that but its an achievement, a huge achievement, because it was women lobbying for that, and lobbying against the odds for it. But its also important to be campaigning and unafraid to speak out regardless of whether that offends. So its, I guess, treading that line as well.

Yes, I hadn't actually realised that there wasn't quite the same professionalised sector across the water. That's a very interesting difference that we have here then. I suppose for every organisation there is always that fear of mission drift and being led by the funding but certainly I think it is something that we have managed to avoid. Although I'm sure that's not true for every organisation. It is always a concern, I mean what do you think was lost in that transition from "movement" to "sector"? In particular, do you think that space is still held as well by and for working class women?

Well I think that ... you know, how much can, say women's centres empower the women, their users then to become involved. Not simply as recipients of whatever it is, but much more taking control, saying what they want and maybe then taking on paid roles as well. Because it should be about the empowerment of women and not simply having them as users and consumers all the time. So I think that's interesting. Different centres have different models, so you can't really just say there's one, but I think that's one. You know, you don't want to be in some sort of social work kind of role and it can be a bit of a difficulty there. You know, how do you actually impart feminist ideas and you're not just doing "education and tea and biscuits". Because that was the other tension I can remember when some women's education groups first started and it was all about knitting and various things. I was impatient that there wasn't something a bit more challenging. It was always "but we have to start here", but the "starting here" seemed to go on forever and you never get anywhere else. So

I think there is that question to be asked, what are we doing, what are we achieving, and how much have we changed women's lives.

But I mean the challenges here, I can't downplay because there are challenges that you wouldn't get other places. When so many of the centres are in the hearts of areas that have been controlled by paramilitary groups, or continue to be controlled, and women have to carve out, its so important to keep that women only space. That's, I think, the main issue, I think, now because that's where a lot of funding pressure has been. I know from when I was WRDA Director that there was some government funding certainly wanting us to change that. And once, I know from some women's centres, once that would happen you're lost. The women in new communities, Muslim women coming in for example, who can come into a safe women only space, that they wouldn't be able to do if it wasn't that. There're are so many ramifications to being women only and how important it is, and how important to keep that.

Yes, thank you. I think we have a document that was written by another Women's Sector Lobbyist and it's called "Why Women Only" and we will link that in the video description for anybody who wants to find out more about that.

I wrote a briefing paper for government departments, for DSD at the time, on Why Women Only to say why it was important.

Yes, thank you. I think there always is that kind of push against women only spaces, and yes, sometimes you can be led by nose for funding. I think that is something that certainly we have resisted but, like you said, there have been organisations who have fallen prey to that and fallen by the wayside because of it.

Well, to end on a lighter note hopefully, you'll see beside you there the red book that we record all of our AMGs in. I was just wondering if you have any memories or anecdotes about past AGMs?

Oh, you sprung this on me. We had a nice AGM, I think it was for 25th anniversary, were we had all the Directors back to talk. That was down at the Edge I think. So we had Joanna, and Judy, and Anne O'Reilly and myself. And actually that was really interesting because four directors in 25 years is not a big turn over and everyone brought something different to it. Everyone was there at a different stage in Northern Ireland's evolution as well so it was fascinating to hear people's different experiences. It was a lovely event, I still have my keyring from then.

Do you have a message for our 40th AGM?

I just think, you know, to be so proud of both the longevity of WRDA, how its continued to evolve as an organisation, and I don't think it has compromised any of its principles. It still empowers women within the community, it still delivers really innovative programmes, and its still an organisation that tries to particularly convey the experiences of working-class women, women in the community, women struggling on breadlines. Keeping that in the forefront of policy makers at a time when you really feel like giving up, when the political scene is so dismal. When you're wondering who are you even trying to talk to now, who is making policy, when

you've got anonymous bureaucrats, no politicians able to do anything at the moment. You kind of hope that there will be a more positive future where you can go back and actually start feeling that you can make a difference, that there's an arena to make a difference in. I think that we are in a position at the moment where we're just drifting, not sure what's going to happen, say, in the Autumn. But I suppose you just have to keep a sense of hope. That's what's kept people going here for so long.