

Patricia Donald Interview Transcript

Please introduce yourself and outline your involvement with WRDA.

Ok, I mightn't get all the dates right, and thank you Megan for inviting me along. My involvement with the WRDA started on the 1st of April 1993, when I got a job. It wasn't actually the WRDA then, it was the Women's Education Project and we were based in the attic up in Women's Aid in I think it was University Street, and I was so excited to get that job. I was so excited, I can remember my first day 30 years ago, or whatever it was [laughing].

So I was the Regional Training Coordinator, so that was for the whole of the North and it was organising training, and education, and workshops in local communities for women's centres, women's groups. I loved that job, absolutely loved that job, and I think it was funded by Carnegie Trust. Because I always, when I see the Carnegie libraries I always give them a nod [laughing].

Thank you, Patricia, and then I think

Oh, sorry. That was my initial involvement, then I was the IT Development Coordinator, forgot that. IT Development Coordinator came out of the regional training project work. So that was another, that must have been another six years. Then I left the WRDA after ten years here and I wasn't involved for a few years, then I came back as a Management Committee member. I think that might have been for about ten years as well. So yeah, long involvement.

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

Ok, I suppose growing up as a girl I always knew, I always knew it was different rules for women as there was for men, for boys as there were girls. It was always very obvious, you know, at school we had to do domestic science. I hated domestic science. The boys got out to play, to do games. I was aware of my mother's role in our home. I always knew it, I think as a girl you grow up knowing it, but I suppose I first became angry [laughing] when, after I went to Uni. It was free education then, I went to Uni and I did a degree in IT, data processing and information systems, and then I got a job in the private sector. I was a programmer, which I think the word used these days is coder. I remember working away, and there was me and another woman, there was two women and all the rest of the teams were men. I started to realise that all the work that we were getting was maintaining other people's code and making sure it still worked, and reviewing it, and to be honest it was quite boring. I had this conversation with my colleague who was also a woman, and we were also very aware that the men who were coming in, we were all in our twenties at that age, but the men that were coming in were getting the really interesting work, and the innovative work, and we were still maintaining other people's code. So we decided to go and raise this with management and we did, and we said didn't think it was fair, we wanted some of the innovative work as well and it was made very clear to us that we were, as girls, we were reliable, dependable, our work was reliable, they knew it would be done right, and that they needed to keep "the young bucks" interested so that's why they got all the innovative stuff because they didn't want them to leave, so I left [laughing]. That's when I got angry and that's when I started to think it is so

important that women have access to this new technology, to participate in it, to use it, to shape it, to lead it. I think things have moved on, in tech, but I'm not sure it's anywhere near what it should be. So I suppose that's what lit the fire in my belly, those experiences.

WRDA started life as the Women's Education Project in 1983 and we celebrate our 40th this year. How do you feel the feminist movement in NI has changed over this time?

Well, I'm sure there's other people who are better placed to answer that question than me but what I would say is I think its become much more visible and I think technology, media, online media, has helped that and there's positives and negatives to that, but I think its become much more visible. I think, I imagine its easier for younger people to get involved because it is visible. I think its easier to sign up and become involved in campaigns and that. I think the place of the movement is more visible even when you think International Women's Day is now on a Saturday, in the city centre, in the calendar, didn't use to be like that.

Sadly I think a lot of the issues have moved on but in some ways are still the same. When we think of the Cost of Living Crisis, and access to affordable childcare is just becoming more and more difficult. Access to good healthcare, access to women's community based education. A lot of the issues are similar but I think the movement is much more visible and I think a lot of that is to do with the online world, even though there is a lot of negativities there but I'm going to focus on the positives.

Thank you Patricia. Just what you were saying there, about having gone to university and it being free education and you were talking there about the struggles for women's community education. A lot of people that I've interviewed have talked about how their awakening came from free university education and how that led them to campaign for more community based women's education. Of course those days are sadly gone now. What impact do you think that has had on, in particular, working class women's involvement in the feminist movement here?

I think, and I suppose I think back to my time here and I wasn't directly involved in the Community Facilitators Programme, but I just think the Community Facilitators Programme is absolutely brilliant and I do think that model can be used for other projects which I'm happy to talk about when we talk about the IT stuff. But I think it got women involved at a very local level and when women became the Community Facilitators, they know what's going on in their own communities and they were able to raise those issues and I think that has been a huge strength of the WRDA, being able to shine the light on issues that are facing women in very localised communities.

Thank you Patricia. I think it was in 1994 we made the transition from Women's Education Project to Women's Resource and Development Agency and then shortly after, moved to this building. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about your memories of that transition.

It happened very soon after I joined the Women's Education Project. I remember the meetings up in that top attic in the WEP, I remember coming down with Joanna and

seeing this building, I remember the excitement around it. I remember thinking the new name speaks more to what we were doing, the education was important but it was also about resourcing and developing, supporting the development of women's groups etc.

[Laughing] I can remember Kathleen Feenan of the Women Information Project, which was such a fantastic project, absolutely brilliant project. I remember Kathleen, determined she was going to have that front room downstairs and she got the room in the back at the end, because we were the landlords and she wasn't.

But yeah, I do remember it, and then I remember we were able to buy this building at a time when it was a very difficult thing to do. But it was a very brave, courageous thing to do and I think, a very wise thing to do because it really grounded us with regards to funding applications and that, that we owned this building. It was quite amazing really, that we did it.

Thank you for that. I think it was at least partly purchased with a loan from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Yes, this building has become somewhat of a hub for the women's sector so we're very lucky to have it, definitely.

It's brilliant.

Through the Women Talking IT project from 1997-1999 you were responsible for getting many women's organisations online for the first time. What was that process like and what was the impact on the women's sector in Northern Ireland?

I loved that work, absolutely loved that work. The Women Talking IT project grew really out of the work that we'd been doing, the regional education project. I remember, just before the Women in IT project we did this piece of work in Fermanagh with Fermanagh Women's Network, fantastic organisation. We literally went round all the women's groups and asked them what they wanted to learn about. The project was called Women Learning Locally and I remember it came up over and over again, computers and IT, computers and IT. So, I can't remember where the funding came from, but we got funding to buy a suite of laptops. I realise that might sound, that's what you do now, but we did that before the FE colleges did it, outreach with IT. I remember being at a meeting where we had put the application for, and the rationale for, the suite of laptops which were going to go round all the different women's groups, to the funder. But they sent out an "expert" who was male to make sure that we had got the spec of the computers right and that we knew what we were doing. I remember sitting, gritting my teeth at that meeting and thinking to myself, "just go with, just go with it, we really need the funding, we really need the funding". So he did a report to the funders that yes the spec and everything was fine, but the one thing that we hadn't thought about was women that maybe couldn't see very well, that they would need a bigger screen. So part of the criteria for getting the funding [laughs] for the laptops was that we bought this monitor. Now, monitors nowadays are about this width, the monitors in those days were about that width. We had to agree to it, so the tutors brought all of these laptops round in their bags but they also had to hulk this massive big monitor around. Like, we could have just made the font on the screen bigger but [raises hands]. In the Buttermarket in Enniskillen

we had a workshop and that monitor, the woman who was carrying it slipped and the monitor fell down the stairs. I was never so happy in my life to see it gone [laughing].

So that's where the Women Talking IT, we knew that there was a real hunger among women's groups, that they wanted to learn about IT. So we got the funding from, I think it was the lottery and started the project. WRDA went online in February 1997 and I think there was us, might have been Fermanagh Women's Network, and a group up in Derry that were online. Then that summer we had a workshop in Omagh to talk about the internet and what the benefits might be for women and the women's movement, and what the benefits of email might be. Out of that was born WomensLink.

There was a woman there, Susan O'Donnell from Dublin City University. She was doing research around women and the internet so between us we set up WomensLink. There were six women's organisations in the North that had an email address and that was the birth of WomensLink all those years ago. Then the following year, March 1998 I think it would have been, we decided to run an event and see how many women we could get online at the same time to talk to each other, which really now would be a big Zoom. There used to be an internet café in Shaftesbury Square, I'm showing my age now, and I was even nervous going into it and I thought "no, women need to be able to go in there". So I remember going down and talking to the guy and saying "can we take this café over just for one morning". We had another suite where we were able to go online in, I think it was WorkNet. Then we had one in Fermanagh, I think there was one up in Derry and we linked everybody up that International Women's Day and there were over 70 women went online. We were so excited, we were on the evening news, we were in the papers. But when I look back on it now, all the excitement was about being online but we didn't put any structure around what are we going to talk about. So we all got online and we were all buzzing, all excited and then it was, so what do we do now. [laughing]. But it was great, it really was great.

So that's how WomensLink got started then. What was the drive behind WomensLink and what do you think the impact of WomensLink has been? Because it has survived into the social media age when there's maybe easier or more public facing ways to keep in touch ways but Womenslink has remained active and also popular.

That's an interesting question. I think the drive, to go back to the first part of your question, the drive behind it was around communication. Was there a better and quicker way of communication. An example of the impact of that very quickly, and it was within the first year. I remember that there was a funding stream had been awarded and there was no women's organisation had been successful in accessing that funding. We realized it would have taken us months to find that out. It would have been, you know, by going to different workshops, or different conferences, or people calling in for specific pieces of work, that we would have found out nobody got that funding. But on WomensLink, within a week, because a message went out "did anyone get the funding, did anyone get the funding", and it was coming back, "no, no, we haven't heard of anyone who got it". We found out very quickly, no

women's group had accessed that funding so we were able to go back to that funder and say "what's going on here". So I think that's when we realized the impact of that very fast, very quick communication.

I completely take what you're saying about social media and I suppose the thoughts that I would have round that is a lot of people have a mistrust or a fear of putting themselves out there on social media, because you know, you have to sign up for an account whether it be twitter or whatever it is. So you really are putting yourself out there and you also have to have a bit of knowledge of that system. Most people that are online now can handle email and email comes into your email box. Its not, WomensLink isn't public in a way that a twitter feed might be so I think it still gives some privacy. It's so simple to use and it kind of pings up when you're in your email box. So I think it is quite incredible that it has lasted all this time, but it has [laughs].

Thank you Patricia. Yes, that's what I fee about using Womenslink. I'm our Communications and Membership Worker but I don't have any personal social media apart from Womenslink which feels like a very different space. It feels much safer. I suppose that's because we do still have a vetting process. You have to apply to be a member of WomensLink and I think that is part of the key to its Longevity. Its great to see it still going and we have moved over. Were now a google group.

Yes, I think that's its third move. It started on the servers of DCU and then when Susan moved back to Canada, we moved it to Yahoo and now its google groups so yeah, and it has kept going. Its quite incredible.

It is. We're very proud of it.

What do you feel the impact of social media has been on the feminist movement and how have we responded to the opportunities and challenges?

I think there's positives and negatives. I think it has helped make the women's movement and the issues that they're working on much more visible. I think that's a good thing. I think it makes it easier for people outside the movement to join in and support campaigns.

The negative side of it, and I think we saw it particularly during lockdown, is the online abuse and the trolling. Its just shocking and its particularly worse for women. I think women journalists, activists, and politicians really have had an awful time. I would hope that, I know the UK government is bringing out, I think its on the way, the Online Safety Bill and I think Ofcom will be the regulator for that. It will be interesting to see what teeth they have, how far they go. I do hope that helps.

I also think education around being safe online and minding your mental health online is really important. The Australian government I think are the only country in the world that have an E-Safety Commissioner and I think they've done fantastic work. They've done an awful lot of work about reclaiming yourself if you feel you have been trolled or too much has gone online, or too much has been put online about you. They do an awful lot of work around that. You're also able to report issues to them. So, I'll be watching with interest to see what happens with this Bill and I do hope it has teeth and there is protection there, particularly for women and girls.

Digital exclusion was highlighted as an issue during the Pandemic. What do you think the women's sector can do to reduce the impact of this?

I think digital exclusion has been there for a very long time. I think you're absolutely right, it was highlighted, or the spotlight was shone on it more brightly during the lockdown.

I think digital exclusion is a human rights issue, it's a social justice issue. As more and more government services are going online, banking's going online, they're closing local branches, post office branches. The whole move to UC [universal credit] is coming down the line and it's a digital first benefit. So I do think it's a human rights issue and women have the right, not only to participate in the online world, but to help shape it and lead it. So I think it's really important that women are in that space. I think if women are excluded from it, those women who are excluded risk even more exclusion from participating in society because it has become a space that is part of society.

In particular, what the WRDA can do about it, as well as advocating about it. I think you already have the model in the Community Facilitator's model. Because I think to train up digital champions, which is some of the work we're doing in Advice NI, training up digital champions from local communities and digital champions are not 'techies'. It's more about how to encourage people to use that space, how to keep women safe in that space. Also for parents, how to keep their children safe in that space. To me, that's what a digital champion is, and digital champions know their own communities better than any of us. So to use that model to train up digital champions and then ask them to volunteer or otherwise to support people in their local communities to get online. I just think it's so important, so important and if the WRDA ever wants to work on it [laughing] I'd love to do a piece of work round that.

[Laughing] Well thank you, I will let Anne know. Just to go back a bit there, we've kind of covered your career with WRDA but then after a break you came onto the Management Committee which you served on for about ten years. How did you find involvement in the Management Committee as it can be quite a commitment.

It was a commitment and I'm not going to say it was easy. It wasn't easy because we were faced with the governance issues, funding issues. It has always been difficult to get that funding into community based women's organisations. That was a struggle and we also had a commitment to the staff around funding. That was really hard.

We were also faced with other financial issues such as pensions which was really difficult. So yes, while I enjoyed my time, all the WRDA staff and Management Committee were brilliant, it wasn't easy, it wasn't an easy space. But I think the WRDA is in a really good place now, not that it wasn't then but there were a lot of struggles. [Laughing] There always seemed to be something, but we handled it and I think we handled all of those issues with integrity and always did what we thought was the right thing.

There were other issues that came up. I think I'm right in saying that at that time the WRDA was the first organisation to publicly say that we supported a women's right to choose. So there were always issues and they were discussed and teased out. What

I always admired about that committee was, even if you take that example, I know that not everyone sitting round that table agreed that we went public with that but we always reached consensus and I always valued that.

Thank you. Yes in her interview Anne O'Reilly also touched on the fact that WRDA was the first big organisation here to go public in support of a women's right to choose. What was that like, in as much as you can talk about it. It must be quite brave to be the first organisation to go public with that in a place like Northern Ireland especially when there's a reliance on government funding?

Yes, and we had to take that into consideration, and that was one of the considerations. What are funders going to think of this? What are a lot of the women's groups and organisations that we work with and our members, what are they going to think of it? But we really did, we took the time and space to really tease those arguments out and work out where each of us was on it, and as I say, not everybody was in agreement round that table. We did not want to be funding lead, I think everybody was in agreement on that. We felt it was a really important issue, a really important issue for women so that is why we took that stance and I believe it was absolutely the right thing to do and I think it was really important we managed to reach that consensus.

Yes, thank you. I think that must be one of the more difficult aspects of being on a management committee or a board of trustees. Once decisions are taken they become corporate decisions and its for the whole board to stand over them. I imagine that can sometimes be quite challenging. Especially because, I think it is important to always point this out, our Management Committee are volunteers. Its quite a demanding role to ask of someone for no remuneration so I'm always grateful to our Management Committee members because I know its not an easy thing to do so thank you for that.

Thank you.

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

I suppose I'm most proud of the women, for me personally and the work I was involved in, it would have been the Women Talking IT. Because, although it sounds crazy now all these years later, it really was innovative and we really wanted to claim that space. Initially it wasn't even claim the space online, it was claim that space accessing women to computers and being able to use Office or whatever it was that women were wanting to use. I remember Desk Top Publishing, DTP, was a big thing. That was so important and then it was like, getting women's groups computers that were networked, and backups. That was huge. Then it moved into some of the bigger women's centres having IT strategies. That work was so important, I think it still is important, and then getting online and being part of that space and onto WomensLink and the internet. It was just so important. So yeah, I loved that work and I'm proud of that work. Its incredible to me that WomensLink is still there. Amazing.

I couldn't name one achievement, I think the WRDA has been brilliant at being able to shine on issues that are facing women in very locally based communities, creating campaigns and advocating with women on those issues. The many health projects like the Mas project is brilliant, the Breast, Cervical and Bowel screening project, I remember it starting. Absolutely fantastic. I remember Carolanne Barr doing the women's health workshops around smoking and supporting women who wanted to stop smoking. That was way before the smoking ban. So I suppose the achievement is being able to shine a light and listen to what women are saying and then move that forward. I think being able to buy this building all those years ago was a huge achievement, so yeah.

Thank you Patricia. You'll see beside you there the red book. That is the book we've recorded I think every AGM in since 1985 and I was just wondering if you have any memories or anecdotes about past AGMs?

Oh my goodness. Well I always remember "is the red book, where's the red book, put the red book out". Its just amazing, so many names in there I remember. I suppose one that stands out, I don't remember if it was the 25th or the 30th anniversary. I remember the present Director and the four past directors being there and I remember thinking each of those women brought something of themselves to the WRDA and the work they did and how they lead it. It was brilliant. I always remember Karen Armstrong was the one to ask questions about the finances from the accountants. Yeah, I've a lot of fond memories.

Do you have a message for our 40th AGM?

I suppose my message would be a huge congratulations, you should be very, very proud of yourself. I think the WRDA is a fantastic organisation and I would say keep doing what you're doing because you do it very well. Keep shining those spotlights in particular on issues like the health issues, the community education issues, all those women that are seeking asylum that are stuck in those hotels. As well, I think digital inclusion is a big issue as well. So, I would just say huge congratulations you're doing amazing work. Keep doing it and mind yourselves in it because its hard work, it is hard work but well done.