

Celebrating and preserving women's role in Northern Ireland's history

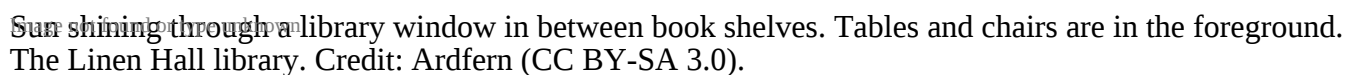
03/11/2025

Shining a spotlight on the often-hidden experiences and contributions of women during a period of significant political and social change.

Despite having always made up at least half of the world's population, women are under-represented in the historic archive and in the stories shared about the past. When women do feature, it's often because they defy social and cultural conventions or typical power dynamics – such as queens, or leaders like Joan of Arc.

But, as one of our funded projects in Northern Ireland proved, there is plenty of material and stories about women – ordinary women doing important and extraordinary things – just waiting to be explored, if people know where to look and are willing to dig a little deeper.

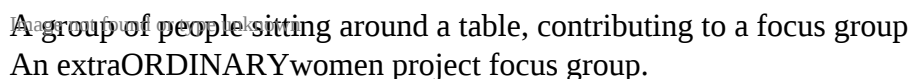
One of those places is the Linen Hall, home to The Northern Ireland Political Collection, which its librarian Samantha McCombe describes as “the definitive archive of the Troubles and beyond, collected contemporaneously and reflecting all shades of opinion. In type and scope, it is unique.”

Sun shining through a library window in between book shelves. Tables and chairs are in the foreground. The Linen Hall library. Credit: Ardfern (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Collecting and sharing the experiences of women

The extraORDINARYwomen project – which we awarded a £377,600 grant – used the Linen Hall's archive as its source and inspiration. In the process, it uncovered how women have collaborated and supported each other, found commonality during divisive times and driven positive change for other women and their wider communities. From campaigns for equal pay and anti-sex discrimination legislation in the 1970s and the expansion of women's centres in the 1980s, to women's increased participation in mainstream politics in the 1990s and campaigns for marriage equality and reproductive rights that continue today – all against the backdrop of the Troubles and an often-fragile peacetime.

The project had a dual focus on collecting and sharing the experiences of women in Northern Ireland from the mid-20th century to the present day.

A group of people sitting around a table, contributing to a focus group. An extraORDINARYwomen project focus group.

In small group discussions guided by the participants, women with a range of lived experience – including ex-prisoners, people with disabilities, members of the Traveller community, LGBTQ+ people, young people and those from both urban and rural areas – shared their perspectives. These stories were captured by volunteers trained in oral history recording.

The project also hosted intergenerational 'Living Library' events, which included a veteran activist who set up the first women's centre and rape crisis centre in Derry/Londonderry talking with a youth group about cross community work.

Samantha says: “In a project full of highlights, the overarching highlight was the authenticity and honesty of the participants. The remarkable insights, the trust we were shown with women’s stories and the genuine enthusiasm of the groups was the foundation for the project’s success.

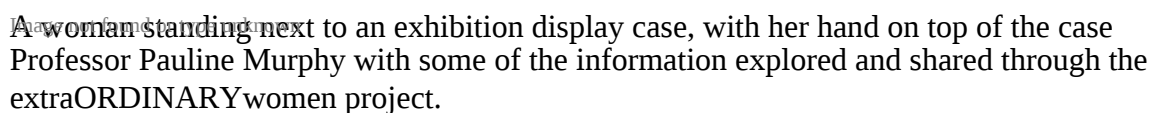
“The project also illustrated the expansive roles of women in Northern Ireland during the time under review. Often in parallel with the ‘traditional’ roles of women as mothers and homemakers, the project spotlighted women who were instrumental in progressing women’s rights in education, employment, health, welfare and social justice.”

Adding to resources for future researchers

As well as sharing their stories for posterity, project participants took part in creative sessions to make new pieces for the Linen Hall’s collections and were invited to donate personal materials, too. Over 2,000 new items were added to the archive, which will make it easier for future generations to explore women’s role in Northern Ireland’s past and present.

Belfast does not have a dedicated women’s library. Samantha says the extraORDINARYwomen project has helped Linen Hall show it “has the potential to fulfil this important role”.

Four extraORDINARYwomen

A woman standing next to an exhibition display case, with her hand on top of the case. Professor Pauline Murphy with some of the information explored and shared through the extraORDINARYwomen project.

Meet some of the Northern Ireland women whose lives and work were explored and shared through the project:

- **Maeve Mulholland**, a community peace worker who co-founded Lisburn Women Together for Peace with Hazel Aicken in 1973, one of the earliest women’s peace groups in Northern Ireland, calling on women from all backgrounds to take a stand against violence and sectarianism and promote peace.
- **Professor Pauline Murphy**, who pioneered many women’s education initiatives in Northern Ireland including one of the first formal university programmes for women, when she opened the Women’s Opportunities Unit at Ulster University in 1985.
- **Katrina McDonnell**, founder of The Homeless Period Belfast, a volunteer-led initiative to alleviate period poverty and destigmatise menstruation. Its ongoing activism and petitioning contributed to the Northern Ireland Executive launching a scheme to provide free period products in Northern Ireland schools.
- **Fidelma O’Kane**, Secretary of a residents’ campaign group protesting a planning application for a gold mine and processing works in the Sperrins Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which contains 10,000-year-old raised bogs, Old Sessile Oak Woods and is home to Ireland’s only globally endangered species, the Freshwater Pearl Mussel.

Feeling inspired?

Our funding helps bring communities together through a deeper engagement with heritage and supports creative ways of bringing heritage to new audiences. Got an idea for your own community heritage project? [Explore what we can fund.](#)

You might also be interested in...

A group of young boys sneak a view through gaps in a Belfast peace wall.

Peacelines I. Photo: Frankie Quinn. Shared with permission of Belfast Archive Project.

How collaboration helped Belfast Archive Project reach new audiences

Leaders of the project pose for a group photo

From left to right: Scott Cuthbertson, Director of The Rainbow Project, Mukesh Sharma, The National Lottery Heritage Fund Northern Ireland NI Committee Chair, Cara McCann, Director of HERe NI and Adam Murray, Community Development Manager at Cara-Friend.

Creating Northern Ireland's LGBTQ+ heritage archive

the exhibition space at The Peacemakers Museum

The Peacemakers Museum.

New Peacemakers Museum explores community journey from conflict to peace