

Women's Grassroots Activism Toolkit 100+

Helping to enhance the lives
of women and girls for
another 100+ years

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Women's Grassroots Activism Network...

...worked collaboratively with participant women's organisations representing over 200,000 women across Ireland, England, Wales and the Islands, whose members come together for friendship, education, crafting and activism.

Taking part in our network were representatives of the:

- Federation of Women's Institutes of Northern Ireland (WINI)
- Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA)
- National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI)
- Soroptimists Northern Ireland
- Soroptimists Republic of Ireland
- Soroptimists South East Region
- Soroptimists Tunbridge Wells and District Club



What does activism look like in women's grassroots organisations?

Are you an activist?

Women's activism has been ongoing across the British Isles throughout the twentieth century; it didn't end with the women's suffrage movement and winning the parliamentary vote.

There are many examples of how women have and continue to effect change through everyday practices.

This can be through personal behaviour change, for instance, deciding to buy fairtrade products or recycling waste. It can also be through educating yourself about a cause by attending a meeting on environmental concerns to better understand the issues. It can be taking part in local, national and global events, for example the United Nation's 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence:

www.unwomen.org/en/get-involved/16-days-of-activism

All the organisations participating in our project are involved in practical local action to help make their lives and the lives of their local communities better.

The most well-recognised form of activism is campaigning. This includes drawing up petitions, undertaking research and surveys to provide information and then taking this evidence to the local council or MP/TD to persuade them to act.

The histories of our participating women's organisations vividly demonstrate how activism, even small everyday acts, make change happen.

More than that it can make a difference to those engaging in activism, giving a sense of achievement, recognition and most importantly camaraderie, solidarity and sociability.

What we learnt from this project is that there are many forms of activism:

Loud, dramatic, quiet, gentle, kind, self-help, creative, craftivism, advocacy, everyday, local, national, and global.



What do women campaign about?

Women's organisations have a long history of campaigning for improvements to women's lives.

Our participating women's organisations have played a key role in making the lives of women and girls better across the twentieth century and continue with this work today.

For example the NFWI passed a resolution calling for equal pay for women in 1943, the ICA opened the first residential adult education college in Ireland in 1954, WINI has campaigned to improve the lives of rural women in Northern Ireland since the 1930s, and since 2008 the Soroptimists have led the way with its *Orange the World* campaign.

Over the past 100 years these organisations have contributed in so many ways to making the lives of women and girls better, and in doing so they make the lives of everyone better.



These campaigns have incorporated many issues that matter to women and their families. High quality housing, access to adequate healthcare, equal pay for women, environmental protection, loneliness, ensuring women benefit equally from social welfare and pension payments.

Campaigns can be promoted locally and nationally and taken directly to elected officials, in national and devolved government across the UK and Ireland or through their consultative status at the United Nations.

How to be an activist?

The Women's Grassroots Activism network gained fascinating insights into experiences of women's activism by meeting and working with current members and learning from them about the wide variety of ways to be an activist.

Hear more about these experiences: [listen to our Women's Grassroots Activism podcast series](#)

historyhub.ie/womens-grassroots-activism-podcast

Being an activist doesn't look the same for everyone and the ways we engage in activism can change over time. This diversity of experience ensures that women's grassroots organisations remain relevant and vibrant, and continue to campaign for gender equality and social justice today.

How to keep on making a difference to women's lives over the next 100+ years?

What examples of past and current activism inspire you and your local club, institute, guild, to keep up the important work of activism by members?

What old and new activities might you want to encourage within your group to further enhance the lives of women and girls?

We have put together a 100+ Checklist based on what members have told us and from what we gathered from the archives of the ICA NFWI, Soroptimists International Great Britain and Ireland (SIGBI) and, WINI.

100+ Women's Grassroots Activism Checklist:

Making use of your history & archives:

During our project our conversations with participants returned repeatedly to issues surrounding archives (all forms of written records created by your organisation).

Over the past century our participant organisations have accumulated immensely detailed sources (for example minute books, leaflets, membership lists, resolutions etc.) which not only tell the stories of activism but also offer precious insights into local histories. But these archives are too often housed in members' spare rooms, under beds, in cupboards or up in the attic, facing an uncertain future.

Participants identified a need within organisations for more consistent approaches towards the curation of archive material, and for improving access to it, so that these vital sources of history can be safeguarded.

It's not for this project to say what the policies should be, although it is strongly recommended that institutes, guilds and clubs give the matter consideration, and we have produced some resources to help.

[Check out our webinar on how to best manage your records and archives](#)

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vimeo.com/936219163

Some great examples resulting from this project are: the Soroptimists Republic of Ireland have set up an Archive Committee, the Soroptimists Tunbridge Wells and District Club has drafted its own archive policy, ICA guilds and Soroptimist clubs in Wexford have deposited their records in the Wexford County Archive and the WINI is working with the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) to safeguard its own archives.

Telling stories & intergenerational conversations:

Storytelling is a great way to share the ways that your group has made a difference to women's lives, and to the local, national and global community.

Storytelling events could be organised by local groups, for their own members, but also via local libraries, schools or community hubs. Stories can be used to inspire new members to get more interested in the work of your organisation and intergenerational conversations can inspire the next generation to get involved. This helps ensure the sustainability of women's grassroots activism into the future. Stories of past activism are a great way to do this.

[Watch our public lecture which tells the story of how the ICA campaigned for rural electrification in Ireland during the 1950s and 1960s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggrNZOBxTxo)

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Storytelling also helps share how joining a women's organisation creates wonderful opportunities to make new friends, learn new skills and have fun. Storytelling can draw on your group's archives and the objects that represent your group.

Quizzes linked to stories told at meetings are another fun way to make the contribution of women's grassroots activism better known.

The power of objects:

Using material culture (objects) can inspire current and potential members to learn more about an organisation's history, to inspire current and future activism.

Material culture might be objects which show the history of your group, such as chains of office, membership badges or photographs. It could also include things that have been made during previous campaigns – posters, placards or handmade craft objects.

These objects might commemorate landmark events, like significant anniversaries or the founding of an organisation. Or they might be related to specific campaigns undertaken by your local club, guild, institute. Objects can be used to collect and preserve histories, passing on stories of activism through words and conversations, or you might write about these for magazines or on social media sites.

They are a powerful visual reminder of the work done by women's organisations for current members, as well as wider society. You can do this in a fun and informal way – perhaps a 'show and tell' night of objects that tell the history of your local branch. But you might also consider partnering with local councils, or local history groups, to share this more broadly – as a display in a local museum, or a plaque marking a significant person or place.

[Watch our Power of Objects webinar to find out more](#)

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vimeo.com/951608325

Collaboration:

Think about ways to work on issues of shared concern with other local organisations and groups, including other women's organisations.

Take action to build connections and break down any barriers that may exist between different groups. This could be done by organising a social event or a meeting about a local issue and inviting members of other local women's organisations along. The results could be an agreed joint action that may prove more influential than separate initiatives.



Over the past 100 years women's groups have often worked together on key campaigns, for example the campaign for equal pay.

One surprise from our project was that local members of different organisations in the same area sometimes didn't know each other or about the work of other groups and participants agreed that breaking down some of these boundaries would be a good idea.

Networking:

Our participants valued the opportunity to work together across perceived borders and boundaries, including those separating the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland and those between the different organisations.

Six UK women's societies are already working together at a national level in the **Six-0 group** but we believe more could be done to build co-operation both at the local level and between societies in different areas.



Suggestions include twinning of guilds, institutes and clubs across regions. Local groups can collaborate on special-issue campaigns and individuals in different organisations can support each other e.g., non-members can **support the NFWI** without having to attend meetings. Women's organisations can also co-operate by telling stories of local, national and international activism to inspire a new generation of activists.

What's next for Women's Grassroots Activism 100+?

This has been a fantastic project, and we hope that you and your organisations will take some of the learning and practice forward.

Through our network we have witnessed how important and powerful collaborations across groups can be. We also feel that there is potential for the national organisations to help local groups by offering tools and resources to assist their activism.

Some ideas might include performance management tools to help measure the impact of campaigns, workshops on how to engage in activism, guidance on writing blogs or creating podcasts, and advice on how to work with local media to highlight campaigns.

We know so much is being done already, in what can at times be a difficult environment for activism, but we hope this project and our ideas and conversations can build on the incredible work already being done by so many of you.

Thank you all for the work you do to make the lives of women and girls better and for enhancing our communities, locally, nationally and globally, in the past, present and into the future.



Further resources

An Introduction to Archives for Non-Archivists, The National Archives
cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archive-s/archive-principles-and-practice-an-introduction-to-archives-for-non-archivists.pdf

Archives and Records Association (useful best practice toolkits)
www.archives.org.uk

Community Archives and Heritage Group (CAHG) (UK and Ireland)
www.communityarchives.org.uk

Federation of Women's Institutes of Northern Ireland
www.wini.org.uk

Feminist & Women's History at the Bishopsgate Institute
www.bishopsgate.org.uk/collections/feminist-and-womens-history

iCAN Irish Community Archive Network
www.museum.ie/en-IE/Learning/iCAN-the-Irish-Community-Archive-Network

Information Records Management Society
www.irms.org.uk

Improving records management in charities – a new toolkit
www.voluntarysectorarchives.org.uk/improving-records-management-in-charities-a-new-toolkit

Irish Countrywomen's Association
www.ica.ie

National Council of Women of Great Britain
ncwgb.org

National Federation of Women's Institute
www.thewi.org.uk

National Library of Ireland (ICA archive collection)
www.nli.ie

National Museum of Ireland: Decorative Arts and Military History
www.museum.ie/en-ie/home

National Women's Council of Ireland
www.nwci.ie/discover/about_us

Oral History Network Ireland
oralhistorynetworkireland.ie

Oral History Society
ohs.org.uk

Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI)
www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/public-record-office-northern-ireland-proni

Scottish Council on Archives, Community Archives
www.scottisharchives.org.uk/community-archives/community-archives-and-heritage-group-scotland

Scottish Women's Institutes Heritage Project
www.theswi.org.uk/heritage

Scottish Women's Institute Heritage Resources
<https://www.theswi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/SWI-Records-for-Permanent-Preservation-Rachel-Wade.pdf>

<https://www.theswi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Archive-guidance-for-SWI-institutes-V2.docx.pdf>

Soroptimists International Great Britain and Ireland
sigbi.org

The Women's Library, the LSE Library, London (NFWI + other women's organisations' records)
www.lse.ac.uk/library/collection-highlights/the-womens-library

Voluntary Sector Archives
www.voluntarysectorarchives.org.uk/resources

Women's History Association of Ireland
womenshistoryassociation.com

Women's History Network
womenshistorynetwork.org

Women's Archive of Wales
www.womensarchivewales.org/en/history

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