

# Complex Contexts: Women and community-higher-education in Ireland

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## **Abstract**

*Education is not a neutral process, it can be used to establish and maintain conformity or be part of a process of liberation and social change (Freire, 1979; hooks, 1994). The Irish State's failure to acknowledge this lack of neutrality has characterised the formal education system in Ireland since its inception. From the introduction of the National School System of education in 1831 to the present day, the ruling force of the Catholic Church within education is evidenced in the gendered and conformist nature of this formal education landscape. Systems of privilege have been maintained and reproduced through education, in which power is exercised by means of exclusion, coercion and control. However, simultaneously individuals and groups of women have challenged this formal, religiously infused conformist education system. Their demands for full and equal access to mainstream education at all levels, including within the academy, served to challenge this hegemonic force. They also pioneered the development of innovative and radical forms of adult and community education as a means toward individual and community empowerment. This paper seeks to highlight women's educational interventions historically and socially through an explicit gendered lens and with a particular focus on community-higher-education.*

**Key words:** community-higher-education, historical context, gender, women, access, widening participation, societal inequality, feminism

## **Introduction**

Education is not a neutral process, it can be used to establish and maintain conformity or be part of a process of liberation and social change (Freire, 1979; hooks, 1994). The Irish State's failure to acknowledge this lack of neutrality has characterised the formal education system since its inception. From the

introduction of the National School system of education in 1831 to the present day, the ruling force of the Catholic Church within education is evidenced in the conformist nature of this formal education landscape. Maintained through systems of privilege, it exercises power through exclusion, coercion and control. However, simultaneously individuals and groups of women have challenged this formal, religiously infused conformist education system at all levels. Their demands for full and equal access to mainstream education, including within the academy, served to challenge this hegemonic force. Focusing on education's liberatory and transformational potential, women's demands provoked challenges to established knowledge hierarchies, pedagogic processes and power relations. In addition to challenging this formal education system, they also pioneered the development of innovative and radical forms of adult and community education as a means towards individual and community empowerment (Connolly *et al.*, 2007; AONTAS, 2010). Over time this level of provision has developed to include in/non-formal education in addition to accredited learning at further and higher levels, spanning levels one to eight in the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). This paper seeks to highlight women's educational interventions historically and socially with an emphasis on the particular context of community higher education in Ireland, women's role in forging this important educational space and in challenging systemic inequities and exclusions within higher education.

### **Complex Historical Contexts**

The National School system of education was introduced to Ireland in 1831, and although planned to 'unite in one system children of different creeds', it soon took on a denominational character. Under pressure from the various churches 'Government concessions ... ensured that by mid-century over ninety per cent of national schools in Ireland were under denominational management' (INTO, 1991). From the beginning this national system did provide a rudimentary education for girls from a working class or poor background. However, as attendance was not made compulsory until the Irish Education Act of 1892 illiteracy among girls, most particularly, working class girls continued to be high. Even where they did attend school, the education provided was focused on training them for the type of life they were expected to have. They 'were unlikely to learn more than the basic arithmetic, they were taught to read and write but since domestic service was the expected fate of most girls, great emphasis was placed on the learning of the domestic arts and sewing' (Luddy, 1995, p.89). Middle class philanthropists and educationalists, ideologically driven by both religious and Victorian ideas of the 'deserving and undeserving

poor', believed that training girls in the virtues of domesticity combined with lessons in sobriety, moral restraint, hard work, and thrift were vital in terms of social improvement. A well-trained girl it was assumed would be a moral and pure wife and mother, a credit to her husband and an example to her family and community.

Education, therefore, became a necessity in training a 'deserving' 'respectable', 'moral' working class. Such gender and class divisions continued well into the twentieth century, although for all classes of women education was restricted to reflect the proper place of women in society, which was within the domestic sphere. For middle class women, and most particularly for middle class feminists, these constraints on female education became more obvious with the opening of secondary education to women. As it was mainly middle class women who accessed secondary education, it is these women who received a more comprehensive vocational education from the 1860's onwards. This expansion of education for middle class girls was also influenced by both the expanding conventual<sup>1</sup> movement, which saw the opening of many convent secondary schools for girls, and by the campaigns of Irish suffrage women in the educational arena in the latter half of the 19th century. Women such as Isabella Tod (founder of the Ladies' Institute, Belfast) and Anne Jellicoe (founder of Alexandra College in Dublin) were vocal advocates of expanding education for women and were also supporters of the campaigns of the right for women to the vote. Indeed along with the vote, education was the second of four main issues which engaged 19th century female activists, which also included campaigns to secure married women's property, education, and to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860's.

These campaigns were long and hard fought. As Henrietta White, Principal of Alexandra College noted the 'cult of ignorance in woman did not lack adherents even in the latter half of the nineteenth-century' and the campaign to extend and enhance female education was resisted (Ó hÓgartaigh, 2009, p.37). Despite this, some breakthroughs were achieved by Irish suffragists when they succeeded in having the provisions of the 1878 Intermediate Education Act (which opened the Intermediate public examinations to girls as well as boys) and the 1879 University Act extended to girls and women students. Because of these breakthroughs by 1908 all universities had opened their degree courses

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1 Through the 19th century the numbers of women joining Orders of Religious Sisters increased, by 1910 census, being a religious sister is one of the main occupations for women outside of the domestic.

to women. Although illiteracy levels among all classes and genders continued to fall towards the end of the 19th century, the successes of feminist activists in the educational area mainly affected the lives of middle class women. However, educated women were not necessarily gaining access to the professions, many had no option but to become teachers which Martha Vicinus in her study of educated women in Britain noted was 'a narrow staircase leading to more education as an ill-paid – but respected – teacher' (Ó hÓgartaigh, 2009, p.37).

Literacy was also rising among working class girls but a gendered curriculum continued to educate these women for domestic service. The new generation of more militant, radical feminists, active from 1900, viewed better education as a powerful tool for the transformation of Irish society and culture. The growth in cultural nationalism led to a belief in the importance of education to the creation of an Irish identity, and women were seen as particularly central to this cultural education. One example was *Inghinidhe na hÉireann*, a women-only, militant, separatist and feminist organisation, established by Maud Gonne in 1900.

The editor, Helena Molony, was concerned that feminists and nationalists should educate the children of Ireland about the language, history and culture of Ireland and inculcate in them a sense of Irish identity. *Inghinidhe* women recognised the importance of direct action in achieving this and ran classes for poor children in Dublin's tenement inner city. They would have been aware of the inferior vocational education available to young women, however they were concerned that all children received a nationalist education. Although radical in their demands for national rights, militancy, the vote and working women's rights, in the area of education, especially among poor children, it was instilling a sense of Irish identity in Irish children, rather than opposition to a gendered education system, which framed their activism.

For most, the Catholic education system, which was by the early 1900's firmly established as the main area where poor children were educated, was seen to deliver the type of education which was deemed desirable and acceptable. For religious women their approach to education was informed by the ideals that 'children entrusted to our care should be instructed in every branch of secular education... but all this instruction should be founded on religious enlightenment and animated by religious spirit' (Rafferty, p.310). Many radical feminists, some of whom had become rebels in 1916, were concerned with the importance of education for girls. Some like Margaret Skinnider were themselves teachers,

however, as with the Inghinidhe women, their concern focused mainly on giving children a sense of Irishness through education, rather than seeing education as space for feminist activism. Following the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, in a country where 95% of the population identified as Catholic, education for girls retained that gendered, Catholic-influenced ethos until late into the 20th century. First wave feminist activism had achieved the goal of access to a certain level of education for girls and women. They had also succeeded in gaining access for some women to professional and vocational education, allowing more women to enter the professions. Indeed, women trade unionists campaigned through the early decades of the Irish State for better treatment and pay for women teachers (a profession in which they had begun to dominate) but transformation of the gendered nature of all educational sectors, especially for working class girls, would have to wait until the latter part of the twentieth century.

### **Complex Social Policy Contexts**

Historically, the formal education system formed part of what may be argued was a definite strategy on the part of the Catholic Church to maintain key sites of social control in a rapidly changing socio-political context. A dual strategy was systematically pursued through the 20th Century, one of exclusion (of women and those with disabilities) and one of control. Inglis notes:

The Catholic Church's primary vehicle for executing its control was by educating and caring for children, in order to ensure the socialisation of young people. As a result, the Catholic Church fought a long battle to ensure its control of education during the nineteenth century, control it maintains to this day (Inglis, 1998, pp.102-103).

Conroy (1975) extends this analysis of Catholic domination into the realm of welfare. She argues that both welfare and education were dominated by ideologies of family welfare and charity and that concepts of rights and justice only entered these discourses to any great degree during the late sixties and seventies in Ireland. However, while enormous changes took place across the welfare system (including the establishment of key welfare payments to 'unmarried' mothers, 'deserted' wives, prisoners' wives, widows' pension) the grip of the Catholic Church over education hardly yielded. While there has been much debate around whether single sex schools benefit girls (AAUW, 1998; Smyth, 2010), in the sex-segregated schooling system in Ireland harsh ideologies around guilt, shame and sin particularly targeted girls and women, their

sexual identities and reproductive selves. The embedded nature of this particular relationship between the Catholic Church and education in Ireland persists. Currently 96 per cent of primary schools are owned and under the patronage of religious denominations with approximately 90 per cent of these state sanctioned schools owned under the patronage of the Catholic Church.<sup>2</sup>

Systems of social mobility in Ireland historically were primarily based on the gendered ownership of land and property but recent history has seen education play an increasingly central role in determining levels and rates of social mobility across social class, gender and ethnic groups. In 1967 'free' education was introduced and immediately a class-based system of fee-paying and non-fee-paying schools emerged. These grafted onto an earlier system of inequality in relation to vocational training and academic schooling, the first one linked to craft and trade and the latter to a distinctly privileged third level system. Research has indicated that mainstream education has facilitated the creation and reproduction of class inequalities in Ireland, over many decades (Clancy, 1995; HEA, 2015).

Policies adopted to respond to this inequity and to develop greater equality of access for example, the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Programme, recognised first level education as a central part of an integrated approach to disadvantage, linked to local and community planning. This approach was systematically undermined by the fundamental unequal structure underlying formal education in Ireland. As MacRuairc argues:

Nowhere are the manifestations of socio-economic class more evident than in the field of education, where despite a successive range of policies, initiatives and investment, significant inequalities with respect to educational outcomes continue to prevail between socio-economic groups (2009, p.118).

As the concept of social class extended to encompass socio-economic and cultural capital, this cultural class struggle is played out to a large extent in education. Harford argues that the Catholic Church was 'one of the most powerful and strident opponents of access to higher education [by women]....resisting the possibility of reform at every turn' (2008). However, women's agency and capacity to resist and challenge this regime by forging educational entry points and pathways at second and third level is also highlighted by Harford. She

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2 <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Diversity-of-Patronage/Diversity-of-Patronage-Survey-of-Parents.html>

argues that the impact of this increased participation by women in education shifted the gendered balance between private and public domains.

Although only a minority of middle-class women were in the social, cultural and economic position to benefit from early higher educational reform, their participation in higher education had far wider social implications. It helped to move women's role beyond the private sphere of the home and into the professions and public life (Harford, 2008).

As women sought to maximise the opportunities to participate in all areas and levels of education, afforded to them through these legal and socio-political developments, their participation rates increased dramatically. Women are much more likely to complete second level education, make up a clear majority of those in the third level system and comprise the majority of those in the adult education sector.

Education has become a leveller for women to an important extent. While half of all university undergraduate students are women, fifty-four per cent of postgraduate students are women. The percentage of women aged 15-64 attaining third level educational qualifications in Ireland has increased to a high level reaching 40% in 2014, higher than the average rate across the twenty-eight European Union countries (EU-28) which was 26%. Among women in the 30-34 age group the percentage is particularly high at 59% for women, again way above the EU-28 average of 42% (Barry, 2015). But discrimination and material inequalities resulting from a lack of care provision, undervaluing of care work and under-representation in decision-making, combined with the penalising of women in paid work for having and rearing children, means that women are constantly fighting for access and equality. Where innovative programmes facilitate such access, the outcomes are dramatic in both educational and social terms. Educational programmes that effectively respond to the ways that women learn and that respond to women's needs (particularly care needs), and social circumstances indicates that 'women learn best in relational and relaxed environments, where the challenge comes from a setting that affirms and honours their experience and nurtures their desire to know and to use that knowledge in a diversity of ways' (NWCi Millennium Project, 1999). Community education has been one of most proactive environments in which women's learner needs and desires have been responded to in particular ways.

### **Complex Community-Higher-Education Contexts**

Community-based education has over many decades carved out a centrally important offering on the Irish educational landscape. The growth, significance and innovation of the community education movement were acknowledged almost two decades ago in the White Paper on Adult Education in which it was posited ideologically as a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level (2000, pp.111-2). It was from the outset radical and political in intent. This reflected a global backdrop in which new left social movements of the 1970s and 1980s set out to interrogate, destabilise and challenge limiting identity-naming categories, and in so doing challenged their inclusions and exclusions, their power bases, and their spaces of discrimination. The emergence of community education also reflected a class-based and conservative socio-cultural context and Irish demographic especially in terms of race and sexuality. Connolly has observed that while 'community education may have had a clear, concise definition at one time...that definition has been reworked by the dynamic interpretations that have imbued it as a result of the community education movement, over two decades' (Connolly, 2003, p.9). It is currently defined by Ireland's national adult education agency, AONTAS, as:

...a process of personal and community transformation, empowerment, challenge, social change and collective responsiveness. It is community-led reflecting and valuing the lived experiences of individuals and their community...Community education is grounded on principles of justice, equality and inclusiveness (<http://www.aontas.com/commed/>).

As it has evolved, community education has spanned a combination of non/in/formal education programmes, both non-accredited and accredited across a range of socio-spatial contexts. The attraction of community education for women located within isolated, disadvantaged and socio-economically excluded contexts is clear. The development of a particular Women's Community Education movement provided a participatory woman-focused and women-friendly context which attracted low-income working class women, back to education. Research by the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI) estimated that 80% of the 14,000 people participating in community-based education in the late 1980s and 1990s were women (Johnston, 1998, in NWCI, 1999). Currently, taking just one example, the National Collective of Community Based Women's Networks (NCCWN), represent a total of seventeen Women's Projects countrywide involving thousands of women learners and participants.



The vast range of services they provide are based on community development principles and values which have been central to engaging with disadvantaged women to address the structural barriers that impact negatively on their lives (NCCWN, 2016).

Feminist scholars since the 'second wave', along with critical adult educators including Freire and hooks, understood the importance of listening to women's socially situated narratives and of co-constructing knowledges with them as a way to challenge their invisibility not just within academia, but within the processes of the very construction of knowledge (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). This methodological process is captured by Barr who, drawing on the seminal work of Haraway (1991), states:

Women's education as it developed in adult education thus challenged, in concrete, practical ways, the notion of disembodied knowledge, recognising that knowledge, is not neutral but always socially situated: there is no 'God's eye view, no 'knowledge from nowhere' (1999, p.40).

In this sense, knowledge is 'not simply out there waiting to be collected and processed, but rather is made by actors that are situated within particular contexts (Hubbard *et al.*, 2005, p.8). Starting with the reality of the women's own lives, feminist pedagogy acknowledges that such education not only models feminist principles but demonstrates a core principle of all adult education activity with marginalised groups. Linda Connolly (1996) sees a clear link between the women's community education groups and earlier radical feminist groups, particularly as they resemble the small-group, consciousness-raising approach of the radical women's sector which emerged in the 1970s. It would, however, be facile to assume that women's community education is always feminist in outcome (Dolphin & Mulvey, 1997). Adopting an explicitly feminist agenda, mirroring radical adult education, involves both a politicisation of consciousness and action for change. These are deliberate acts that get played out in particular ways:

So that has meant working with groups in neighbourhoods, in local communities, to try to develop the kinds of structures that enable them to decide first what it is they want and need to know; why they need to know it; how best they think they can learn it and fourthly what it is they are going to do with that knowledge (Smyth, 2002, p.7).

We could view this pedagogic position as one which challenges the notion that 'ruling groups are able to exercise control over what is taught and how it is taught, maintaining hegemonic control (Jackson, 2011, p.5). This radical re-positioning of knowledge making, ownership and purpose highlights the capacity of critical adult and community education to remake as liberatory the power relations endemic in any educational provision, including within Higher Education (Connolly, 2006; Quilty, 2003). It is significant that the White Paper also highlighted the pivotal role feminist, women's education had, not only in pioneering and driving community education in Ireland, but also in challenging persistent under-representations within higher education. The emergence of a particular form of community-based higher education is what is considered in the remainder of this article.

It remains the case that the academy is one of the most valorised and legitimised locations of knowledge generation. Massey calls us to scrutinise such locations, 'to ponder the elitist, exclusivist, enclosures within so much of the production of what is defined as legitimate knowledge still goes on' (2006, p.75). There is much to guide us in this work. Feminist scholars and activists, who over many decades worked to counter their invisibility and exclusion from masculinist knowledge-making arenas and to articulate their situation in the world, strove to give women a central place within philosophising and theorising. They sought to destabilise the knowledge-making machine (Foucault, 2007) by challenging the spaces of knowledge production within the academy. Simultaneously, and in partnership with community and feminist activists located outside the academy, they worked to challenge exclusions of women (Macdona, 2001) and persistently underrepresented groups (HEA, 2015) within the range of higher education institutions.

This persistent under-representation of some social groups in higher education can be read as part of the 'powerful cultures of exclusion which operate within contested social spaces as universities' (Puwar, 2004, p.51). Reflecting the Irish HE (Higher Education) landscape, Kathleen Lynch makes a strong statement about the spatialised university, one of boundaries and procedures, impacting not only on who enters but on what is valued:

They practised exclusion, not only through their selection procedures for students and staff, but also by maintaining rigorous boundary maintenance procedures within and between disciplines, and between what is defined as legitimate and what is not (2006, p.73).

The women's community education movement had a significant role in challenging these exclusions. They sought to widen participation within higher education, but to do so on their terms. Community sector groups and organisations set about partnership building within the crevices, nooks and crannies of the elitist academy (de Lauretis, 1987) to develop and deliver in innovative ways programmes that mattered, that had relevance for people's lived lives (WERRC, 2004). The emphasis was on principles of partnership, empowerment and participation (Hart *et al.*, 2013; Scull & Cuthill, 2010).

There is evidence to suggest that the Irish higher education policy arena is finally beginning to take seriously this relatively small, though politically and strategically significant, community higher educational presence. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Hunt, 2011) recommends improved levels of engagement between higher education institutions and local communities in which 'higher education institutions need to become more firmly embedded in the social and economic contexts of the communities they live in and serve' (Hunt, 2011, pp.77-78). They advocate for more community-based approaches so as to challenge systemic inequity through widening participation. Importantly, within an Irish context, the communities in which this form of higher education provision has greatest impact and demand are those most characterised by systemic, inter-generational disadvantage and social exclusion.

What this highlights is that the vagaries of location have become an important consideration in how educational equity plays out across the island of Ireland. Kearns, drawing on the seminal work of Smith (1994) notes in this regard that 'spatial justice starts from the recognition that access to foods and social services can depend on where one lives or works, the question of who gets what where' (Kearns, 2014, p.3). In fact, the demographic disparity in relation to higher education access in Ireland is alarming. In Dublin, the participation rate spans the lowest 15% within Dublin 17 to the highest rate of 99% within Dublin 6 (HEA, 2015). The identified areas of significant and persistent underrepresentation have effectively been described as 'deep reservoirs of educational disadvantage, mirroring in large part economic disadvantage' (HEA, 2014, p.3), that continue to be an uncomfortable and sobering part of the Irish higher education story.

The literature has comprehensively documented the persistent barriers to educational participation for adults, and particularly women, living within these 'designated areas of disadvantage' which include child/elder care, finance, time and transport (Morris & McMahon, 1998; OECD, 2014). Adopting a dynamic,

solution-seeking approach to addressing these barriers, AONTAS (2009) identified three significant changes that need to be made to the higher education system if adults were to be fully welcomed and included. First, they identified the need for more flexible learning opportunities for adult learners taking into account their work and caring responsibilities. This point was recently reinforced by a governmentally appointed Expert HE Funding Group who observed that ‘embracing a greater share of mature students entails greater provision of flexible and tailored staff contact times that work around their work, household and other commitments’ (2015, p.39). Second, AONTAS identified the need for a change in the culture and attitude of higher education institutions. As Lynch has argued ‘they come, but they are not fully expected; very often they are not fully accommodated’ (2006, p.89). Third, and finally, they identified the need for better financial supports for adult learners in higher education including revising the eligibility for maintenance grants for part time mature students. The literature also reinforces the important link between parental education levels, especially that of the mother’s, and children’s educational achievement (Doyle & Timmins, 2007; Currie & Moretti, 2003).

Evidently, the call by the HEA (Higher Education Authority) for increased university-community engagement exists against a backdrop of persistent inequity in higher education vis-à-vis the continued exclusion of people from particular geographic communities, including women. Within an Irish context, it is clear that despite the rapid expansion of higher education and the removal of ‘formal’ tuition fees the ‘most glaring inequities in access, namely, the under-representation of the lower socio-economic groups and the small share of mature students, have not been significantly improved (Expert HE Funding Group, 2015, p.22). The persistence of such educational inequity ‘highlights what a great deal of work we have to do in terms of exploring and decoding the deep movements and multiple dimensions and spaces of exclusionary forces’ (Armstrong, 2010, p.108). This persistent reality also reinforces the importance of acknowledging and recognising those movements, including women’s community education, that have succeeded in offering a way forward, not least in relation to their influence on curriculum and pedagogic development within the elitist academy.

## Conclusion

Significant advancements across the educational spectrum have been realised since the 1800s in Ireland. These advancements were especially hard fought, given women's unequal position in society and particularly within education. Political and social developments driven mainly by women led to the emergence of a society less mired in the legacy of our Catholic manacled state, a legacy that placed women in subservient roles and which penalised them at every opportunity. The central role played by women, and by countless communities and development projects, in advancing a more radical, equal, inclusive society, cannot be overstated. In addition to political activism and social change, these groups and organisations drove a vision for social justice within education drawing on the liberatory, as opposed to conformist, capacity of education. In gender and class terms these gains have been impressive in opening up access to education for previously excluded cohorts. However, more recently the reality of austerity policies (Barry & Conroy, 2014) coupled with systemic under-representation within higher education of certain student cohorts (HEA, 2015), poses a serious challenge to the proposed vision for equity of access to higher education as articulated by the HEA. This laudable vision references a 'fully inclusive system' that would enable more citizens irrespective of age, socio-economic background, disability or other factors to access, participate and complete higher education to achieve their full potential (HEA, 2015). Nevertheless, the persistence of structural barriers resulting in socio-spatial exclusions of the level experienced in Dublin, especially, highlight the urgent need for all educational actors within the university and community to imagine a new educational landscape.

Such a landscape should span multiple entrance and progression pathways, inclusive pedagogies and attractive, inclusive physical and social environments. Women's community education has provided a template and rich legacy that could play a key role in reinvigorating such a community higher education landscape. It is not time for reinvention, rather perhaps time to recall and recover the legacy of feminist and women's education to continue to inform a way forward. A higher education system that attends to persistent structural barriers, and simultaneously places lived lives and experiences at the centre of the learning process, is surely worthy of even greater acknowledgement and recognition from the HEA and related bodies.

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