

## **The Women's Shed movement: Scoping the field internationally**

Barry Golding  
Federation University

Lucia Carragher  
Dundalk Institute of Technology

Annette Foley  
Federation University

---

*Our paper focuses on delineating and scoping international Women's Sheds, a movement that has emerged within the past decade, mainly in Australia, Ireland and the UK. It addresses two main research questions. Firstly, what is the origin, distribution, nature and intent of Women's Sheds internationally to March 2021? Secondly, how might Women's Sheds be located within a typology inclusive of Men's Sheds and a range of community development models? We employed a systematic search via the internet in 2020-21, followed up by attempted email or phone contact to publicly reported Women's Sheds and like organisations internationally. In the process, we created a publicly shareable blog including a database of 122 existing, previously active, developing or planned Women's Sheds and like organisations to 13 March 2021. We identify four nations where self-identified Women's*

*Sheds have operated or commenced within the past decade: Australia (61), the UK (30), Ireland (28) and New Zealand (3), particularly during the five years between 2014 and 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic seriously curtailed this previous momentum and development after March 2020. We identify some similarities but also important differences between Women's and Men's Sheds. We propose a typology that accounts not only for the different ways in which Women's Sheds operate and women participate within their communities but also the different ways in which they locally collaborate (or not) with Men's Sheds in different countries. We conclude that Women's Sheds have largely been created by women in order to claim the shed as a positive female gendered space, in order to create an alternative community of women's hands-on practice.*

**Keywords:** *women, shed, history*

---

## **Introduction**

More than a decade ago Golding, Kimberley, Foley and Brown (2008) explored the genesis and growth of neighbourhood houses and Men's Sheds in community settings. Our paper does similarly in relation to Women's Sheds, which have developed 'below the radar' over the past decade, mainly in Australia, Ireland and the UK, but also in New Zealand. These are the same countries in which Men's Sheds movements have had the most traction over the past two decades. While the number of Women's Sheds measured by the total number of successful and attempted start-ups internationally remains relatively small (122: approximately 4% of the total number of Men's Sheds), there now is a sufficient number and range to begin to map and scope the field.

The history and development of the now international Men's Sheds movement that goes back at least two decades is reasonably well known (Golding, 2015). Golding noted in 2015 that a small number of organisations in the UK had already been operating as Women's Sheds. Our current research suggests that at least six Australian Women's Sheds were operating before 2015, by which time 1,325 Men's Sheds were open (Golding, 2015, p.28). Golding (in press, 2021) identifies that approximately twice that number of Men's Sheds (2,650) were

open to March 2020 before the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to approximately 120 Women's Sheds.

Barry Golding's (2015) *The Men's Shed Movement* book includes four pages (pp.364-367) summarising data on the critically important role of women in creating and supporting individual Men's Sheds as well as the now international movement. In Australia where the first Men's Sheds opened over two decades ago, decisions about women's involvement in the shed as participants had typically been made at a local level. Whilst in most Australian Men's Sheds it is solely or mainly men who participate in the shed-based activity, a small number of Men's Sheds have included women as equal members and participants. Quite a number of Men's Sheds have separate programs and days for women but seldom call these programs 'Women's Sheds'. Some 'Women's Sheds' operate out of pre-existing Men's Sheds. A small number of Shed-based organisations are badged as 'Community Sheds' or 'Community Men's Sheds' in order to be more inclusive of women.

### **Early history of Women's Sheds**

Whilst it is too early to write a definitive history of the emerging Women's Sheds movement, there is evidence that both the idea and the practice evolved within the past decade and accelerated in the past five years to 2020. The oldest Women's Shed start-ups that we were able to identify were in Australia: in Forster and Karuah (New South Wales) and Mount Martha (Victoria) during 2010. The Women's Shed, Forster operated between 2010 and 2014 in the New South Wales coastal town of Forster (population 14,000) approximately 300km NNE of Sydney. Set up under the auspices of Forster Neighbourhood Centre (FNC), its original stated intention was:

*... to support women of all ages and backgrounds. A meeting place – a giving and receiving place. ... Representatives from various Great Lakes district organisations and services visited the FNC's Women's Shed to share information about the services that they provide to the community. Some of the group activities included: Free health checks – Blood Pressure & Blood Sugar Check, Catering for community events and the soup kitchen, Fundraising for women, children and families in crisis, Self-defence classes, Local History Walks, Singing and Poetry.*

The current 'Women's Shed Mount Martha' commenced around 20 years ago as 'Kit Kat', seeking to provide 'time out' for mothers with pre-schoolers around Mount Martha, a seaside town of around 17,000 people approximately 70km south of Melbourne on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria. Its name was changed when the organisers realised that the name they had chosen as a play on the words, 'Time for a break, time for a Kit Kat', effectively as 'time out for women of all ages', had been patented. The organisers ran a competition among the women to come up with an alternative name, that still represented its image, hence the name Women's Shed. The organisation reported that their image underwent a big change around a decade ago when they found out that the mothers of pre-schoolers had a lot of other options. As more couples were retiring around Mount Martha, the need changed to be more inclusive of older women. The Women's Shed Mount Martha in 2021 meets each Wednesday from 9.30 am to 11.30 am during the school term. Their program is planned for the whole term and includes speakers on relevant topics and a range of crafts. Participants average about 20 women each week, ranging in age from 50 to 90 years. One of the Women's Shed's main aims is to offer friendship and a support system for women that includes speakers and workshops to deal with issues women are perceived to be facing.

In April 2013 at least two other Women's Sheds commenced in the state of New South Wales, Australia: the Narromine Community Women's Shed in the small (population 3,500) rural town of Narromine, and also the Inner West Women's Shed in the inner Sydney suburb of Dulwich Hill. The Inner West Women's Shed slogan, 'Working to Honor and Empower Women' resonates with many of the more recent Australian startups. These have included 'Building confidence, capability and connection' (Port Macquarie Women's Shed, NSW) and 'Empowering women of all ages with practical and creative skills' (Fix it Sisters Shed, Arncliffe, NSW). The 'Sheila's Shack' also commenced in 2013 in the Gold Coast suburb of Nerang in Queensland.

The earliest Women's Shed to open in Europe was the Ennis Women's Shed in Ennis (population 25,000), the largest town in County Clare, Ireland. It claimed to be one of the world's first Women Sheds running alongside a Men's Shed and a European first. It was set up by a small group of women in January 2014, first opening its doors on 3 April 2014 (Quinn, 2014). According to their Facebook page, Ennis Women's Shed

was set up *'... to promote social interaction and to increase the quality of life and help out in the Community ... a free facility to all women to get out and be active'*. Using the same facilities as the Ennis Men's Shed but on different days or times, women attending the Shed participated in a wide range of activities, including woodwork, sewing, cookery, gardening, painting and arts and crafts. It is unclear how long Ennis Women's Shed remained open. The last entry on their Facebook page on 17 August 2017 noted that *'... the Ennis women shed isn't reopening with the original people [adding] if you would like to restart it I'm happy to walk you through it, but the original people don't live in Clare anymore. I was hopeful when moving back to Ireland to restart but unfortunately, that wasn't to be. I would love it if one or two of you amazing women would take on the Ennis Women's Shed'*.

Despite our best efforts as researchers, we were unable to locate any of the women involved in Ennis Women's Shed, but according to sources from Ennis Men's Shed, the Women's Shed was open for less than one year. It was reported that after a few months, the men 'moved out of their premises to give it to Ennis Women's Shed'. While our source was unsure why they closed, it was believed the reason was most likely due to lack of funding. More recently, a new Women's Shed opened in Ennis, Mná Ag Gaire [Irish for 'women laughing'] Women's Shed, in June 2020. Mná Ag Gaire Women's Shed was born out of COVID-19 when a call for help went out to the local community for help to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) to staff in the local care facilities. It was reported that 50 women responded to the call for help, with 13 care facilities in the area subsequently supplied with PPE.

On completion of this challenge, the women agreed on the need for a space where they could continue to meet, share skills and combat loneliness. One of the founding members observed how many women in Clare struggled with understanding and accessing information, including public health information and employment supports. For those with unmet digital skills, this was seen to be especially challenging. One of the aims of Mná Ag Gaire Women's Shed is to give such women more equal access to technology, resources and digital skills. It was reported these inequalities left many women isolated during the COVID-19 lockdown. Indeed, even now many continue to experience this isolation.

The UK has seen a similar number of Women's Sheds open up across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. According to our records, the first of these in the UK was Porth Women Shed, in Bromley, Wales. It was set up in February 2016 by SHEDNET, a local charity launched the same year to help valley people establish Men and Women Shed facilities and activities. Like most cooperative models, groups met separately. Porth Women's Sheds originally met on Monday and Friday from 9:30 am to 12 noon and 12:30 pm to 2:00 pm, and Porth Men's Shed on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday mornings. This arrangement seems to have changed at some stage, with evidence suggesting Porth Men's Shed now occupies a large warehouse on the Rossmore Industrial Estate based on two floors with a dedicated machine shop and a workshop area. In addition, the upper floors consist of a gymnasium and a pool table, and a computer room, which doubles as a music room. On the ground floor are the kitchen and adjoining social area. Despite enjoying such large premises, evidence suggests Porth Women's Shed is now separate. Their work pre-COVID focussed on materials produced in a craft room, selling a range of handmade gifts, vintage clothes, and jewellery in their shop in Porth.

Other 'umbrella', charitable community organisations managing Shed-based community organisations in the UK, such as Age UK and Brighter Futures, operate with the assistance of local development officers who work with the community to develop strategies in line with local needs. The creation of Women's Sheds is seen by some to be a natural development of Men's Sheds. Opening their first Women in Sheds programme in 2018, Age UK noted that:

*'Building on the success of the [Men's] Shed and in response to local demand, we also offer a Women in Sheds project to open up this creative space to women who would like to share tools and resources in working on projects of their own choosing, at their own pace and in a safe, friendly and inclusive venue. Our Shed is a place for skill sharing and informal learning, of individual pursuits and community projects, of purpose, achievement and social interaction. It's a venue for women to get stuck into hobbies old and new, get creative and make new friendships.'* (Age UK, 2019).

Just two New Zealand Women's Sheds were open pre-COVID in 2020. The 'Sheila's Shed' in Kawerau (Bay of Plenty) was created in 2017 '...

to not only be a creative hub, but also a place where people can learn to make life easier for themselves by learning new skills'. The 'Women's Shed Rotorua' also opened in 2017 but was later renamed the 'DIY Shed' because of perceived unhelpful comparisons that could be made between Women's Sheds and Men's Sheds.

## Method

During late 2020 and early 2021 Barry Golding and Lucia Carragher employed a systematic search of Women's Sheds and like organisations via the internet, followed up by attempted email or telephone contact with all reported Women's Sheds and like organisations internationally. We identified the reason for our interest and our intentions both as researchers and community activists for this scoping study. The information we sought was:

- *When was your Women's Shed started, and is it still operating?*
- *Where and when do you meet, and what are the main Women's Shed activities?*
- *Who is the current key contact person for your Women's Shed and how might we contact them?*
- *What are the main aims of your Women's Shed and what is the profile of women who currently participate?*
- *Please share any other information you think is interesting or relevant to us and others about your Women's Shed.*

The shared public database we created with the permission of our informants has not only enabled us to delineate and scope the nature of this rapidly evolving field internationally but has also been of interest and use to Women's Shed organisations, members and supporters in a previously uncharted and unreported field. Barry Golding undertook a similar scoping study to create and circulate a Men's Shed database to inform and support early Australian Men's Sheds between 2005 and 2007. Since blogs were then only just becoming mainstream, the information was updated and regularly distributed mainly to Men's Sheds organisations by email or post. Since 2007 the Australian Men's Shed database has been maintained online by the Australian Men's Shed

Association (AMSA). Since the creation approximately a decade ago of other peak Men's Sheds organisations in the UK (UKMSA), Ireland (IMSA) and New Zealand (MENZSHEDS NZ), searchable 'Find a Shed' pages have been available online via each of these peak bodies that have enabled the sharing and maintenance of information about Men's Shed organisation locations, programs and contact details. While no other reliable or regularly updated Women's Shed database aside from our own has been created internationally, several community organisations and Facebook sites have begun taking up that role nationally.

At least one half of Women's Sheds that were open or developing internationally before the 2020 COVID-19 enforced shutdowns had a publicly available email address on the internet, and most had an active Facebook page or website. Around one half of the rest had a publicly accessible contact name, phone number or physical location identified via an internet search. By March 2021 we had confirmation that a sufficient number of Women's Sheds were open or active before the COVID-19 shutdowns in four nations: Australia, the UK, Ireland and New Zealand, to undertake this quantitative and qualitative scoping study.

Our database has enabled us to identify the scale, scope, spread and diverse nature of Women's Sheds that we regard as timely and potentially valuable. We were aware from our previous research into the impact of Men's Sheds on communities and individuals (Golding, Brown, Foley et al., 2007; Carragher & Golding, 2015), that governments and not-for-profit organisations make funding decisions that rely on rigorously collected quantitative and qualitative evidence and research about participants as well as anticipated and achieved outcomes. While some Women's Shed Facebook sites have shared partial lists of some Women's Sheds (for example Facebook Women's Sheds, Contact List, 3rd Draft, Nov 2018), no reliable evidence or research had previously been available for Women's Sheds. One small, in progress case study of a She Shed in Barnsley, England was underway in 2020 (Lam, 2020). We anticipate our current scoping study will lead to and encourage further field-based international research and critical analysis during 2021.

### **Women's Sheds defined**

Women's Sheds, mostly being grassroots community organisations, are all different. Aside from those with the words 'Women's Shed' included in

their organisation or program titles, we have included other shed-based organisations for and by women in our Women's Shed database that have a similar function (being run by and specifically for women) but which operate under different names. These names include 'Ladies Shed', 'Hen's Shed', 'Her Cave', 'Sheila's Shed' and 'She Shed'. For the rest of our paper, the term 'Women's Shed' is taken to be inclusive of all such like organisations. In almost all cases, the location of the Shed is included in the Shed title, for example, 'Albury Women's Shed' is in Albury, New South Wales, Australia.

While only four community-run Shed-based organisations for and by women call themselves 'She Sheds' (all in England), we are told that some others are colloquially called 'She Sheds'. Evidence online otherwise suggests that the term 'She Shed' popularly refers mainly to personal and private shed-type places and spaces in the house or backyard. A Google search of the term in October 2020 suggested that a 'She Shed' was '*... a female man cave. It is a dedicated space in the home set aside just for the woman of the house. It can be a place for recreation, rejuvenation and enjoying personal activities. Most of all it is a female sanctum dedicated entirely to the woman.*' Consistent with the above, a 179 page, full-colour book by Erika Kotite, *She Sheds: A room of your own* published in 2018 (Kotite, 2018) encouraged women to:

*... Create your very own hideaway for relaxing, crafting, reading, or just to have a private place just for you. She Sheds provides the instruction and inspiration ... They've got their man caves, and it's time for you to have a space of your own.*

It is evident from internet searches that many commercial businesses are riding the personal 'She Shed wave', particularly in the US, offering products to help construct or enhance personal or backyard She Sheds.

The notion that there are just two distinct Shed organisation types in community settings based on the gender of the participants is not borne out by the observed range and participation patterns within either Men's Shed or Women's Shed organisations. While men-only or women-only Sheds are most common, in some cases an existing Men's Shed has been reorganised such that men and women can run separate programs on different days, sometimes with separate and parallel Men's Shed and Women's Shed organisations. In order to categorise this diversity that we have observed in the field, we propose a typology by gender, summarised in Table 1, which acknowledges and is inclusive of the observed continuum

in our data between standalone Men's Sheds organisation, exclusively and located separately for men, and standalone Women's Sheds organisations, exclusively and located separately for women.

The Yeoval Shed (in the tiny village of Yeoval in central western NSW, Australia) sits in the centre of this continuum in Table 1, with 'Yeoval & District Men's Shed & Women's Shed' on the sign outside, as does the Frome Shed, incorporating the Frome Men's and Women's Shed in England. Dereel Men's Shed in Victoria, Australia is an example of an organisation called a Men's Shed (immediately to the left in table) but where men and women participate together and equally. Without wishing to unnecessarily complicate the typology, it is possible (indeed likely) that some future Women's Sheds might be asked to offer men some men-only sessions, sessions shared mainly with women, or with men and women participating equally together. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that an increasing number of new Sheds have decided not to gender the space, instead calling the organisation a 'Community Shed' or simply 'The Shed' but running a gendered program on separate days or at different times.

**Table 1: A typology of Men's and Women's Sheds by gender**

Organisation Names	Men's Shed	Men's Shed	Men's Shed	Men's Shed & Women's Shed	Women's Shed	Women's Shed
Participants	Men only	Mainly men, some women	Men & women together	Men & women separately	Women only day(s)	Women only
Locations	Men's Shed	Men's Shed	Men's or Shared Shed	Shared Shed	Men's Shed	Women's Shed

The implication of this typology for what follows, is that while any group that self-identifies as a 'Women's Shed' is included on our database, it may be a women's program operating within or out of a Men's Shed, perhaps but not necessarily operating as a separate Women's Shed organisation.

## Results

We included all 122 Women's Sheds in our database blog (to 13 March 2021) that claimed online to be open or preparing to open at some stage pre-COVID-19. However, we have limited the detailed quantitative analysis that follows to a subset of 80 Women's Sheds (35 from Australia, 25 from the UK and 20 from Ireland) which responded to our request for further information and for which we have a validated and relatively complete data set.

### ***Location and year of opening***

The following provides a quantitative overview by location and opening year of all Women's Shed organisations on our database.

#### *Australia*

Of the 61 Australian Women's Sheds on our database to March 2021, there is evidence that 58 were still open to March 2021. Of those, more than one half (32: 57%) were in New South Wales, eight (14%) were in Victoria and also in Queensland, five (9%) in Western Australia, four (5%) in South Australia and one (2%) in Tasmania.

The first three Australian Women's Sheds opened around the same time in 2010. Of those 51 Sheds with confirmation of an opening year, 36 (71%) were opened in the four year period between 2016 and 2019. Three were opened a decade ago in 2010 (June: Karuah, NSW; July: Forster, NSW & Mount Martha, Victoria). None were opened in 2011 or 2012. Three were opened in 2013, increasing each year to 2017 when 12 were opened, but dropping off since to just two opening during 2020. Just one was confirmed as closed (Forster) in 2014.

#### *Island of Ireland*

Of the 28 Women's Sheds on our database, 25 were in the Republic of Ireland and three were in Northern Ireland. The Sheds were widely distributed across 18 different Irish Counties (with two each in Cork, Clare, Mayo & Galway). There is evidence that 23 were active or open at some time. Of the 16 Irish Women's Sheds with evidence of the year of commencement, all but one commenced within the past five years (2015-2020).

#### *Mainland UK*

Of the 30 recorded on our database from the mainland UK, 25 Women's Sheds were confirmed as active or open at some time. Four were in Wales, one was in Scotland but most (25) were in England. Of the 18 with evidence of the year of commencement, aside from Penge and Woolwich (both in London, opened in 2014 and 2015) and Frome (opened in 2020), the balance opened in the three years between 2017 and 2019.

### *New Zealand*

There were only three New Zealand Women's Sheds on the database, two of which opened in 2017. Because of the low numbers, they are not included in analyses of national subsets.

### *Internationally*

A total of 122 Women's Sheds had been open internationally: 61 in Australia, 30 in mainland UK, 25 in Ireland and two in New Zealand. More than one half (53%) of all Women's Sheds were located in Australia, around one quarter (24%) in the UK, one in five (22%) on the Island of Ireland, on the UK mainland and with two per cent in New Zealand.

### ***Women's Shed focus and relationship with Men's Sheds***

While most Women's Sheds opened internationally in the same broad time interval spanning five years between 2015 and 2019, national differences become apparent when Women's Shed data (available from the international sub-sample of 80 Sheds) about the relationship with local Men's Sheds and the main focus of the Shed are factored in. Of the 35 Australian and 20 Irish Sheds in this sub-sample, only five in Australia (14%) and one in Ireland (5%) respectively were operating in close collaboration with a Men's Shed. By contrast, of the 25 UK Sheds within the sub-sample, more than two thirds (17: 68%) were working in close collaboration with a Men's Shed, some of which were associated with the Age UK-sponsored 'Men in Sheds' initiative.

Women's Sheds were asked about their main focus. While the espoused responses from most Women's Sheds provided multiple and diverse foci, many Australian Women's Sheds organisations and programs focused on providing a safe and social place to empower women of all ages. The main focus of Irish Women's Sheds was more consistently about promoting social connection and avoiding isolation. By contrast, the UK Women's Sheds were more focused on skill sharing, often in collaboration with a Men's Shed.

### ***What happens in a Women's Shed?***

Our findings suggest that friendship, empowerment, and a variety of activities frame what happens in Women's Sheds across Australia,

Ireland and the UK. This includes empowering women through skills development, particularly hands-on skills traditionally associated with men, especially woodwork. This was exemplified in the following response about Shed aims from Albury Women's Shed (in Australia), about *"... empowering women that are learning together about renovation, repair and using tools. ... We help each other to renovate furniture, build garden benches and we contemplate our next project"*. Interestingly, for some Sheds however, the activities focussed on pursuits that are traditionally associated with women, such as knitting, crocheting, arts and crafts, yoga, tai chi and line dancing; activities which are readily available in women's groups not classified as Sheds. For others however, such as Mná Ag Gaire Ennis Women's Shed (in Ireland), the concerns were focused on broader social factors for women, such as poverty, inequality, discrimination, and social exclusion.

### ***How are Women's Sheds organised and managed?***

Most Women's Sheds across Australia, Ireland and the UK have a coordinator, manager or key person identified on the Facebook page or website as responsible for the day-to-day organisation of the Shed. There are some notable differences, however, with Women's Sheds in Ireland and Australia largely managed by founding members voluntarily. By contrast, in the UK, Women's Sheds are much more likely to be managed under an umbrella body such as Age UK, with a paid coordinator responsible for overseeing the day-to-day activities.

While this offers advantages in terms of raising the profile of Sheds and advocating for them, it shifts the locus of control away from the community, as this English example suggests:

*In May 2019, Age UK decided to close Hartford Women In Sheds (WIS) project. We were only told three weeks ago with five weeks' notice, so it was a complete shock to us. It's a real shame. It's such a good community spirit we have here. A lot of women have the same issues as men, but a lot have additional carer responsibilities as well. They are isolated and the group really does make the difference.*

By 2020 Age UK had also informed local Men Sheds in Hartford that they would be removing their funding as of August 2021. This prompted

the community to take control, and a decision was made to form their own community shed. *'They applied for, and got charity status, and best of all, invited the Hartford WIS, to join them.'*

***Who are the targeted participants (and who participates)?***

In most cases, Women's Sheds promote an inclusive environment, targeting women of all ages and diverse backgrounds. In practice, members' ages range from age 30 upwards, in some cases to 90 years. While the message is typically targeted at women, as for an increasing number of Sheds in England, a mixed model is emerging, with women and men sharing premises but attending on different days or times. Colwyn Bay Men's Shed in Wales, for example, created a parallel organisation comprised of women, the 'Colwyn Bay She Shed'. They meet in the same space in a separate time slot on Monday evenings for craft and a chat (7-9 pm) and Thursday mornings for woodworking or craft (from 9.30 am). The She Shed logo is a shed with a pink bow on top. The call for other women to join describes it as *'... a club for women of all ages or abilities, to learn new skills and to share those that they may have and enjoy with others. ... If woodturning doesn't appeal you are welcome to join us in a cuppa or two and 'do your own thing' and show others or maybe learn something new.'* Similarly, the Hills Women's Shed in Baulkham Hills, Sydney, Australia is described as being 'women focussed', man and family friendly: *'... we welcome the community in general, including women from different cultural backgrounds and also some male members'*. In Bega, NSW, the 'Two Shed Workshop' targets both women and children and describes its intention as 'addressing the entrenched gender gap in the building industry'.

Some women enjoy creating and participating in a place-based Shed organisation that empowers and involves them in a hands-on activity with other women in a community setting. In some ways, like Men's Sheds, a Women's Shed is fundamentally about somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk with, but in the company of other women. But our evidence suggests that women often have quite different aspirations that vary across national contexts.

Women's Sheds are essentially community places and spaces where women can come together at any life stage, engage in a variety of activities and connect with other women in an all (or mostly) female

environment. While most adopt an organisation title which puts the name of the place first, e.g. ‘Port Macquarie Women’s Shed’, around one third put ‘Women’s Shed’ up front, e.g. ‘Women’s Shed Seymour’.

Many Women’s Sheds have been created as grassroots community organisations, typically led by one or a small number of passionate and well-networked women. Most make good use of social media, particularly Facebook, and some have dedicated websites. Some Women’s Sheds have emerged as separate entities or been operating out of, or through, an existing Men’s Shed organisation or building, particularly in the UK. Some began or are now operating in an auspice arrangement through an existing community organisation such as a community centre. Others have been set up independently as stand-alone Women’s Shed organisations, though relatively few appear to have acquired or own purpose-built premises in a community setting.

### ***A proposed Women’s Shed organisational typology***

Our proposed three-part typology of Women’s Sheds that follows is summarised in Table 2. The organisational typology has been adapted from insights in the health and community engagement literature (O’Mara-Eves et al., 2013; Harden et al., 2015) since the broad categories and associated organisational models appear to fit with trends identified within the Women’s Shed data.

**Table 2 A proposed Women’s Shed organisational typology**

<b>Models</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Typified in:</b>	<b>Relationship with Men’s Sheds</b>
<i>Community Partnership</i>	Community partnering with charitable organisations	England	Often close and collaborative
<i>Peer Involvement</i>	Local women supporting peers	Ireland & Australia	Minimal: Autonomous & independent
<i>Cooperative</i>	Connecting women to existing workshops & expertise	Australia & UK	Sharing resources, expertise & skills

#### *Community Partnership model*

The ‘Community Partnership’ organisational model is most evident in the UK (mainly England), with charitable organisations such as Age UK, Brighter Futures, and Footprints in the Community working in partnership with local community organisations to sponsor and open

**Women's Sheds, including overseeing the management of programs** within them. This model can be seen to be underpinned by a belief that Women's Sheds will be more effective when developed within a larger body that advocates for them nationally. It is pertinent here to add that the UK Men's Shed peak body, UKMSA, has to date been more accommodating of women within Men's Sheds in England than in Scotland (via SMSA) or Ireland (via IMSA).

*Peer Involvement model*

The 'Peer Involvement' organisational model is the dominant one in Ireland but also in Australia. Most Women's Sheds have originated from the efforts of a small number of highly motivated and politicised local women who have strived to raise awareness of local needs and grow support among their peers locally. Such Women's Sheds are typically autonomous and independent of Men's Sheds, although sharing many of the same principles, albeit from a feminist perspective. Activities are typically agreed upon and organised by women based on peer-based skills sharing (for example, via peer mentoring) as well as via peer support (learning together or sharing experiences) and empowerment (where needs are identified, and women are mobilised into action). In this second model, change is believed to be facilitated by the credibility, expertise or empathy of Shed members.

*Cooperative model*

The 'Cooperative' model, becoming increasingly popular across all countries with Women's Sheds, but less so in Ireland, has seen Women's Sheds share premises with Men's Sheds locally, but meeting on different days or at different times. This model connects women to existing resources and information, such as sharing workshop equipment and skills. Often men are allocated set time slots to teach the women how to safely use the workshop equipment such as lathes, band saws and other tools and materials.

It is relevant here to note that Men's Shed organisations tend to fall within four broad and sometimes overlapping models. One is the 'hosted model', where an agency seconds staff and other resources, including premises, to bring members together, such as via the Age UK Men in Sheds program in the UK. Another, perhaps the commonest,

is the 'bottom-up' model where a group of men come together to plan the develop an independent, community-based Shed organisation themselves. A third model involves an 'auspice' arrangement in Australia (but sponsorship in some other countries), where the Shed operates under the insurance and organisational umbrella of a separate parent organisation. A fourth arrangement is where a service is provided by a service provider for men who are not in a position to fully self-organise, for example for men with dementia or some forms of disability.

It is tempting here to look at the Women's Shed phenomenon and reflect on the growing number of Men's Sheds opening their doors to women and in some cases to Women's Sheds. We have evidence that it may at least in part be influenced by practical considerations. For example, commenting on Aberdeenshire Men's Shed opening its doors to a group of women, trustee George Pringle (Pringle, 2009) said, *"I don't see any conflict with being a Men's Shed and admitting women. ... The fact is we're a Men's Shed three days a week, it's just that we have the ladies group in once a week on a fourth day. When we apply for funds, it asks on the application form whether our ethos is to serve the whole community."*

Patrick Abrahams, a UK Men's Sheds Association Ambassador has recently concluded, based on observations of quite a few Women's Shed start-ups across the UK, that:

*... they typically follow a different development path than the Men's Sheds in the UK. Women's Sheds often gather a large number of members early on, and this quite rapidly dwindles. This was happening even before the shutdowns forced by the COVID-19 pandemic. By contrast Men's Sheds typically start slowly and then grow. The overall failure rate of Women's Sheds in the UK tends to be much higher than Men's or Community-based Sheds. I think this is caused by the greater need in Women's Sheds of training/support on DIY/woodwork and other skills (or specific planned group activities). By contrast, Men's Sheds seem to be more self-sufficient, in terms of individuals undertaking projects without the need for support, training or group activities.*

This suggestion is not borne out by the Women's Shed data pre-COVID-19 from Australia, where only one established Women's Shed had closed. In Ireland however, we have evidence that six Women's Sheds closed their

doors permanently within one or two years of opening. While lack of resources appears to have been a contributing factor in Shed closures, we also have evidence in at least one case of an unwillingness among men to share resources. Crò Na BhFear Maigh Cuilinn (Men's Shed) in Galway reported that the men did not think it was feasible to share a space with women. They were concerned that sharing a workspace would cause tensions with members and that it would have implications for Shed insurance. For these reasons, the men decided that it would be better for the women to open up their own Shed in the same building and not to share equipment. When the Men's Shed subsequently moved premises, it was reported that the Women's Shed stayed but never thrived after that, and within a short space of time had closed permanently.

While it is clear from the data in our Women's Shed blog that many were struggling pre-COVID with recognition, finding it hard to attract funding and create a permanent meeting place, this problem is shared by many Men's Sheds. In Australia, this may change post-COVID. From 1 October 2020, the ability for Women's Sheds to attract funds within Australia was boosted by the declaration by the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) of DGR (Deductible Gift Recipient) status of 'community sheds', defined as 'Men's Sheds and Women's Sheds'. To receive this status, the ATO (ATO, 2020) stipulated that the Australian Women's Shed organisation's dominant purposes '*... must be advancing mental health and preventing or relieving social isolation, and seeking to achieve those purposes principally by providing a physical location where it supports individuals to undertake activities, or work projects, in the company of others*'. Further, either: '*... there is no particular criteria for membership for your organisation; or the criteria for membership relate only to an individual's gender or Indigenous status (in that membership is, for cultural reasons, open only to Indigenous persons), or both*'.

Similarly, The Irish Times (11 January 2020) reported the extension of eligibility for funding to Irish Women's Sheds as well as to Men's Sheds. In announcing its availability, the Irish Minister of Rural Affairs (Michael Ring) said that: '*Since its establishment less than 10 years ago, the impact of the men's sheds movement has been phenomenal. ... I've no doubt that the emergence of women's sheds can only be a good thing for community life in Ireland*'. In January 2020, 22 Women's Sheds across Ireland as well as 339 Irish Men's Sheds were acknowledged for the first time as being eligible for a total pool of funding of a half million Euro to help purchase equipment and carry out works.

Funding difficulties associated with setting up a Shed-based organisation in community settings were common to many early Men's Sheds until evidence was available of impact and until the movement gained traction. Once Men's Sheds started to actively network, and research became available to buttress some of their claims about evidence of impact from 2007, the Men's Shed Movement took off in leaps and bounds. By September 2020 approximately 180 research articles, many peer reviewed and including several Masters and PhD theses, had been published internationally about Men's Sheds (Golding, in press, 2021). Until Women's Sheds can gain wider recognition including from researchers, it will be difficult to produce evidence of impact other than informally or by extrapolation from Men's Sheds research.

Despite their positive ideals and early successes, most Women's Sheds in the UK and Ireland were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and several had shut for a range of reasons beforehand including concerns about older women's health and safety in shared spaces. It is very likely that while the need for the types of services and support created by Women's Sheds post-COVID will have increased, the disincentives associated with opening (or reopening) safely, including for older women participating, will have increased. As researchers and community activists committed to being of assistance, we anticipate that our blog and this paper will help to identify some of the common difficulties as well as provide some common solutions and future possibilities.

## Discussion

Whilst it is too early to theorise the development of Women's Sheds and the Women's Shed movement through a gender lens at this early scoping stage without data from participants, we acknowledge a body of feminist research (Taylor, 1999, p.8) which '*... demonstrates that gender is an explanatory factor in the emergence, nature, and outcomes of all social movements, even those that do not evoke the language of gender conflict or explicitly embrace gender change*'.

In broad terms, the development of spaces through Shed-based organisations, gendered or not, can be seen as a social movement. Holland, Price & Westermeyer, 2018, p.270) noted that '*By definition, social movements are potential engines of change, disruptive to interests vested in the status quo and potentially the source of new imaginaries*

*to live by*'. Social movements are purposeful, organised groups striving to work toward a common goal (Tuğal, 2009) to promote social change. Because social movements create social change, they have traditionally been associated with rallies, demonstrations, strikes, and street action that challenge the political elite. Dahlerup (1986) for example, suggests that social movements represent a protest against the established power structure and the dominant norms and values.

This description is however more applicable to early social movements, but by the end of the twentieth century, social movements had shifted their focus away from targeting the state towards a greater focus on society and everyday life. Tuğal (2009) shows how the concern for institutional politics gradually gave way to a concern for civil society. Thus, whereas old social movements were directed against the state, new social movements bypass the state to find original ways of linking the personal, the national, and the global. The central focus of new social movements including Men's and Women's Sheds in community settings is around the creation of identity, and as Tuğal contended, is something which is chosen and defined by the contending group themselves.

The research literature into such new social movements has previously been inclusive of these movements as adult learning sites (Welton, 1993; Walter 2007). More recently, Niesz, Korora, Walkuski and Foot (2018, p.2) have argued a case for developing a new interdisciplinary and multi-perspective research field to '*... pose and answer new and important questions related to formal, non-formal, and informal education*'. They argue that such a field of inquiry '*... would also raise the profile of this scholarship such that it could have greater influence on educational policy and practice, as well as on social movements themselves*' (p.2).

While Women's Sheds appear to be a female response to and mirroring the development of Men's Sheds, they are also distinct and tailored towards how women identify their arguably different needs and interests. There is, for example, evidence as early as 2010 of the intention to create a Women's Shed Network internationally. A Women's Shed Facebook site was founded in July 2010 as 'A place to exchange and share in the building of a Women's Shed Network across Australia and beyond!' In Ireland, Mary from the Women's Shed in Waterford (contacted in January 2021) reported that, but for COVID-19, Ireland would already have had its national Irish Women's

Shed Association (IWSA). They reportedly intend to establish an IWSA as soon as everything in Ireland opens up again post COVID-19 because their aspirations are seen to be different to Men's Sheds. According to Mary, they share values with Men's Sheds with regard to giving back to the community and addressing isolation, but nothing more, adding that 'as feminists, in the nicest possible way, we do not want to come under the IMSA [Irish Men's Sheds Association]'

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was twofold. Firstly, to explore the origin, distribution, nature and intent of Women's Sheds internationally to March 2021, and secondly, to attempt to locate Women's Sheds within a typology inclusive of Men's Sheds and other community models. Our evidence points to the gradual development of Women's Sheds over the past decade, but particularly between 2014 and 2019, in Australia (61), the UK (30), Ireland (28) and New Zealand (3).

While COVID-19 has meant Shed-based community organisations had, to a greater or lesser extent, closed their doors across Ireland and the UK, by March 2021 in Australia and New Zealand, most had reopened. Our evidence suggests that while shut, women continued to find ways to maintain contact with Women's Shed members via Facebook, Zoom and other forms of media and remained resolute that face-to-face meetings would attempt to resume when the COVID-19 restrictions ended.

In just a few years, Women's Sheds have created a range of likely benefits for women's wellbeing, social and community involvement, skills development and empowerment. Across the three main nations considered in this study, we identify three broad models of Women's Shed operation: a Community Partnership model (most evident in the UK), a Peer Involvement model (that is dominant in Ireland and Australia) and a Cooperative model involving local sharing with a Men's Shed (most evident in the UK). This final model is likely to be advantageous in some ways, also to Men's Sheds as both struggle to maintain community support, resources and members post-COVID.

While not a concept traditionally associated with women, we conclude that Women's Sheds have largely been created by women to claim the Shed as a positive, female-gendered space and an alternative community of women's hands-on practice and empowerment. As an emerging social movement,

**Women's Sheds seek to promote changes in local communities and raise the consciousness of the issues and problems faced by women. These early findings suggest important directions for future research, including what this new social movement might mean for 'pedagogical praxis' of social movement learning as anticipated by Holst (2019).**

We envisage our publicly available database of Women's Sheds will be used to inform and support the development of Women's Sheds internationally. As researchers, we also envisage further studies of Women's Sheds as gendered spaces inclusive of intersectionality. This might include, for example, future exploration of in what ways Women's Sheds are inclusive of participants by class, age, disability, ethnicity and Indigenous status. We also anticipate exploring how, and in what ways, gender is experienced and negotiated in women-only Sheds and in mixed Sheds and how it shapes behaviours in both.

## **Acknowledgements**

We acknowledge the generosity of spirit of the Women's Sheds who agreed to share information about their sheds and allow it to be made publicly available on our Women's Shed blog <https://barrygoanna.com/2020/07/13/womens-sheds/>. Without access to this data, this scoping study would not have been possible. While we have made every effort to be inclusive of all Women's Sheds internationally, we acknowledge that data about some Sheds that were closed or offline during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, the small number of Sheds which declined to provide information beyond the information available publicly, will not have been included or captured.

## **References**

- ATO: Australian Taxation Office (2020). Extending deductible gift recipient status to Men's Sheds and Women's Sheds (community sheds). Retrieved from [https://www.ato.gov.au/General/New-legislation/In-detail/Other-topics/Not-for-profit/Extending-deductible-gift-recipient-status-to-Men-s-Sheds-and-Women-s-Sheds-\(community-sheds\)/](https://www.ato.gov.au/General/New-legislation/In-detail/Other-topics/Not-for-profit/Extending-deductible-gift-recipient-status-to-Men-s-Sheds-and-Women-s-Sheds-(community-sheds)/), Accessed 25 October 2020.
- Carragher, L., & Golding, B. (2015). Older men as learners: Irish Men's Sheds as an intervention. *Adult Education Quarterly* 65(2): 152-168.
- Connolly, L. (2002). *The Irish women's movement: From revolution to devolution*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

- Dahlerup, D. (1986). Is the new women's movement dead? Decline or change of the Danish movement. In Drude Dahlerup (Ed.) *The new women's movement: Feminism and political power in Europe and the US*. London: Sage, 217-244.
- Golding, B. (2015). *The men's shed movement: The company of men*. Champaign: Common Ground Publishing.
- Golding, B. (in press, 2021). *Shoulder to shoulder: Broadening the men's shed movement*. Champaign: Common Ground Publishing.
- Golding, B., Brown, M., Foley, A., Harvey, J., & Gleeson, L. (2007). *Men's sheds in Australia: Learning through community contexts*. Adelaide: NCVER.
- Golding, B., Carragher, L., & Foley, A. (2020). *Women's sheds*. Retrieved from <https://barrygoanna.com/2020/07/13/womens-sheds/>, Accessed 5 March 2021.
- Golding, B., Kimberley, H., Foley, A., & Brown, M. (2008). Houses and sheds in Australia: An exploration of the genesis and spread of neighbourhood houses and men's sheds in community settings. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 48(2): 237-262.
- Harden A., Sheridan, K., McKeown, A., Dan-Ogosi, I., & Bagnall, A. M. (2015). *Evidence review of barriers to, and facilitators of, community engagement approaches and practices in the UK*. London: Institute for Health and Human Development, University of East London.
- Holland, D., Price, C., & Westermeyer, W. H. (2018). Political becoming in movements: Lessons from the environmental, Tea Party, and Rastafari movements. In C. Strauss & J. R. Friedman (eds.), *Political sentiments and social movements*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 265-293.
- Holst, J. D. (2018). From radical adult education to social movement learning. In M. Milana, S. Webb, J. Holford, R. Waller, & P. Jarvis (eds.) *The Palgrave international handbook on adult and lifelong education and learning*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-55783-4\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-55783-4_5).
- Kotite, E. (2018). *She sheds: A room of your own*. Quarto US: New York.
- Lam, B. (2020). She Shed Association, Study in progress, Brunel University, England, [www.sheshed.org](http://www.sheshed.org); see <https://www.sheshed.org.uk/post/158116317149>. Accessed 14 March 2021.
- Niesz, T., Korora, A. M., Walkuski, C. B., & Foot, R. E. (2018). Social movements and educational research: Toward a united field of scholarship. *Teachers College Record*, 120(3), 1-41.
- O'Mara-Eves, A., Brunton, G., McDaid, D., Oliver, S., Kavanagh, J., Jamal, F., Matosevic, T., Harden, A., & Thomas, J. (2013). Community engagement to reduce inequalities in health: A systematic review, meta-analysis and economic analysis. *Public Health Research*, 1(4)

- Pringle, G. (2019). Portlethen men's shed used by ladies group, *The Press and Journal*, 23 January 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/news/aberdeenshire/1659500/portlethen-mens-shed-used-by-ladies-group/>, Accessed 13 March 2021.
- Quinn, J. (2014). 'Mary Coughlan to launch Ennis Women's Shed', *The Clare Champion*, 16 April 2014. Retrieved from <https://clarechampion.ie/mary-launch-ennis-womens-shed/>, Accessed 13 March 2021.
- Taylor, V. (1999). Gender and social movements: Gender processes in women's self-help movements. *Gender and Society* 13(1), 8-33.
- Tuğal, C. (2009). Transforming everyday life: Islamism and social movement theory. *Theory and Society* 38, 423-458. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-009-9091-7>.
- Walter, P. (2007). Adult learning in new social movements: Environmental protest and the struggle for the Clayoquot Sound rainforest. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 57(3), 248-263.
- Welton, M. (1993). Social revolutionary learning: The new social movements as learning sites. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 43(3), 152-164.

## **About the authors**

**Professor (Adjunct) Barry Golding's** research in adult and community education in the past two decades through Federation University in Ballarat has included analysis of the now international Men's Shed Movement. Barry is an honorary Patron of the Australian Men's Shed Association and a former ALA president.

**Dr Lucia Carragher** is a researcher in the broad field of health and wellbeing at Dundalk Institute of Technology, County Louth, Ireland. Since Dr Carragher's ground-breaking 2013 research into Men's Sheds across Ireland, Lucia has maintained an interest in this field, and collected the scoping data on Irish and UK Women's Sheds for the current article.

**Annette Foley** is an Associate Professor of Adult and Vocational Education at Federation University Australia and the current president of Adult Learning Australia. She has worked for over 30 years as an adult educator in TAFE, higher education, adult community education, and the private training sector. Before Annette commenced her academic role at Fed Uni, she had first-hand experience as a TAFE manager and CEO in a VET/ACE and youth services organisation, where she worked in a regional community and liaised with industry,

community, and local government agencies to develop education and training programs for youth and older learners.

**Contact details**

*Barry Golding: [b.golding@federation.edu.au](mailto:b.golding@federation.edu.au)*

*Lucia Carragher: [lucia.carragher@netwellcentre.org](mailto:lucia.carragher@netwellcentre.org)*

*Annette Foley: [a.foley@federation.edu.au](mailto:a.foley@federation.edu.au)*