

IWD 2016

Over the last few years, Reclaim the Agenda has been striving to make women visible in the historical narrative commemorating the decade of centenaries. In 2016, we are 'Reclaiming the 1916 Agenda' and today I want to shine a light on some events and achievements of our sisters who were striving for equality 100 years ago.

In 1916 women were an integral part of the war effort - the First World War was still being fought, and in Belfast Irish suffragists helped in war relief work. There were 4 Scottish Women's Hospitals in Serbia and France established by Scottish Suffragists to assist the war wounded. One of these hospitals was headed by Dr Louise McIlroy from Ballycastle and many women from the North worked as nurses in these hospitals. Dora Mellone from Warrenpoint was the organiser of the Belfast Suffrage Society. In 1916 she held a large public meeting in Central hall in Rosemary Street to raise money for the hospitals.

In 2016 women and their struggles remain invisible in war torn countries. Our sisters abroad are fleeing their homes with their families to escape war and terror, arriving in foreign lands with little else but the clothes on their backs. Their daily lives are experienced through trauma and crisis. Today on International Women's Day – we stand in solidarity with you!

In 1916 Discrimination against women persisted in the work force:

In October 1916 the Irish National Teachers held a large meeting in the Ulster hall to demand equal pay for female teachers and for them to be paid the same war bonus as male teachers were being paid as they all had to face the same increased cost of living due to the war. The platform included suffragists Dora Mellone and Margaret McCoubrey of the Ormeau Road. A month later it was announced they would get a bonus.

In 2016 after over 40 years of equal pay legislation, women are still fighting to be paid equally to men. The gender pay gap persists around 12.5%. This society has yet to realise that the job of 'caring' for our young or elderly is as important as the job of a banker.

Today, women's centres, organisations and groups struggle to provide much needed services to women in local communities as women's community education provision is decimated and the childcare strategy remains a document – a dream and not a reality. Moreover, welfare reform and austerity are impacting women and children disproportionately.

For those surviving on low pay and struggling to feed their families – on this celebration of International Women's Day - we stand in solidarity with you!

In 1916 the Easter Rising happened in Dublin and the proclamation was published.

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, who in 1912 and 1914 served prison sentences as a result of her fight for the vote for Irish women, said of the Proclamation of Easter Week 1916

‘that it was the first time in history that men fighting for freedom voluntarily included women’. The men who had fought for American independence did not include women, the French Revolution was about the rights of men, but the Proclamation promised equal rights and equal opportunities to Irish women and a parliament elected by men and women.

Subsequently, Constance Markievicz became the first woman in Ireland or England to be elected to Parliament in Westminster in 1918.

In 2016 and as we head towards an election here, it would be remarkable if more than 30% of the candidates put before the electorate are female. Today we commend the women who have stepped up and entered politics and particularly those who embrace and argue for gender equality. On this celebration of International Women’s Day – we stand in solidarity with you.

And so it is clear that for many women struggling to realise their rights a century ago – their lives and stories were not deemed worth noting.

My call to all of you today in 2016 is to ensure that this history becomes our story for the women and girls of today.

Looking to the future:

Let's be visible

Let's be loud

and

Let's support each other

Let's realise a more equal future for all women, men, girls and boys –

An equal future for all!