

Being more Lyra

by Susan McKay

Britain and
Ireland **Lives**
Entwined

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**Don't tell me
there's no hope.**

Lyra McKee, 2017



Susan McKay is a writer and journalist from Derry. She is currently writing *Outside in the Navy Dark*, a book about borders, and has just been awarded one of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's Major Individual Awards to enable her to work on it. She has also received a grant from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. Her recent work has been published in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, the *Guardian/Observer*, *The Irish Times* and the *London Review of Books*. Her books include *Bear in Mind These Dead* (Faber, 2007) and *Northern Protestants – An Unsettled People* (Blackstaff, 2000). Her journalism and documentaries have won several awards. She was one of the founders of the Belfast Rape Crisis Centre. Susan is currently working on a book which revisits *Northern Protestants – An Unsettled People*, 20 years after the original was published.

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**Hope navigates
a way forward.**

Rebecca Solnit,
The Mother of All Questions

Being more Lyra

by Susan McKay

'It gets better,' she'd said. 'It gets better for those of us who live long enough to see it get better.' Hope, for Lyra McKee was a passionate imperative, a political strategy. In 2017 she gave a TEDx talk in Belfast about how 'uncomfortable conversations' can change and even save lives. 'Don't tell me there is no hope,' she said. 'Because for some young LGBT people hope is all there is.' She was walking proof of the power of hope herself. As an isolated young teenage lesbian she'd contemplated suicide. She went on to find her vocation as a writer, to be popular and respected, to care for her disabled mother, and to meet the woman who would become the love of her life.

It got better, for Lyra. But tragically, not for long.

She should have been well into the writing of her book, *Lost Boys*, by now. She should have been engaged to Sara Canning, delighted that finally the law they'd campaigned for had been introduced, and they could marry in Northern Ireland. But just two years after she spoke about the power of hope, Lyra McKee is dead. She was murdered in Derry by dissident republicans on the eve of the 21st anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), for which an overwhelming majority of the people in both parts of Ireland had voted.

The New IRA, consisting mainly of a handful of disgruntled former members of the 'old' IRA, had mustered a crowd of radicalised young men to hijack and burn cars and vans and hurl petrol bombs at the police. A television crew was filming. This was a classic paramilitary show of strength. The dissidents wanted to signal that the people were ready to go to war again. Lyra was one of those observing the scene from behind police land rovers when a masked gunman stepped out from behind a wall and raised his weapon. Lyra had just tweeted a photo captioned 'Derry tonight. Absolute madness' when a bullet hit her in the head.

Lyra's killers have not been identified yet, and may never be, such is the fear of retribution that persists in a community still plagued by paramilitarism, a fear reinforced by vicious warnings that appeared on the walls and lampposts near where she was shot. These included a crude drawing of a rat caught in the cross hairs of a gun. What we know is that Saoradh, meaning, in Irish, liberation, is the political voice of the New IRA. It issued a statement regretting Lyra's death but blaming 'heavily armed crown forces of occupation', meaning the police.

Three days after Lyra's murder, a small group of women walked purposefully through the centre of Derry, to Saoradh's offices, in a terraced house on the edge of the Bogside. The gable wall is gaudily painted with murals showing masked men with starey eyes holding enormous guns, ready for action. It is absurdly phallic. The women were armed. That is to say they carried cans of red gloss paint, paint trays, and plastic gloves. The republicans were waiting, standing outside their building. The women put on their gloves, dipped their hands in the paint, and began silently to place blood-red handprints all over the macho murals. The men glared at them, muscular arms folded, grim-faced, but obviously at a loss.



(From left to right) Ellen Murray, Hamsavani Rajeswan and Caoimhe O'Connell in Belfast. All firm believers in Lyra McKee's 'It gets better kid' mantra.



Peace and moving forward seemed like the only options.

Lyra McKee

The women told me afterwards they had no fear as they stood up to the dissident republicans that day. These were the friends of Lyra McKee. This was their show of strength.

Lyra was born in 1990 and grew up in a working-class family on a long north Belfast street known during the Troubles as ‘the murder mile’. There was very little money but she was surrounded by love, including in particular the love of three women, her mother, Joan McKee, her grandmother, and her older sister Nichola. In a blog she wrote in 2014 she remembered the fear of violence that circumscribed her world as a child, the streets she was warned not to walk down, the individuals she was told to avoid. ‘Northern Ireland has come so far ...’ she wrote. She believed, however, that the obsession with the constitutional status of Northern Ireland that still characterised the main political parties was blinding them to the realities of life for the young.

‘The Good Friday Agreement has created a new generation of young people freed from the cultural constraints and prejudices of the one before,’ she argued. ‘It used to be that being a Unionist or a Nationalist was an accident of birth. You didn’t decide ... the decision was made for you.’ Looking at her own eclectic circle of friends she said that times had changed. ‘Whilst I saw the tail end of the conflict, I didn’t see enough to make me bitter towards “the other side”. I saw enough that peace and moving forward seemed like the only options. Most children of the GFA generation, those born after 1998 ... saw no conflict at all.’ A consensus was slowly but surely emerging that the national question was ‘holding us back’.

She and her friends were preoccupied with economic survival.

I'm worried about paying this month's bills. Work is hard to come by. The cost of [third-level] education is so high that the door has practically been closed on working class young people ... I don't want a United Ireland or a stronger Union. I just want a better life.

It was a theme she returned to in 2016 in the piece for which she is probably best known, 'Suicide of the Ceasefire Babies'. Her generation was, she said, 'destined to never witness the horrors of war but to reap the spoils of peace. The spoils just never seemed to reach us.'

The red hands protest was subversive, creative and eloquent. It was incredibly powerful. It told those whose henchmen murdered Lyra that they had blood on their hands. It also unapologetically appropriated a symbol previously only used by loyalists for whom it was the red hand of Ulster. It insisted that the old war in Ireland was over, and that a new struggle had begun. This struggle is non-violent, inclusive, locally rooted and globally focused. It is political but not within the structures of the mainstream parties. It is being led, overwhelmingly, by young women.

Lyra wrote about how her generation wanted tangible change in Northern Ireland, and were prepared to cross all the old lines to go out and get it. Some of the young women I spoke to knew Lyra, some were inspired by hearing her speak or reading her work after her death. Some work with girls, the next generation. All of them share her passionate belief that you can make life better.



Young people who feel they haven't much to hope for are getting lost.

Cali Morrow

'We did it because we loved Lyra,' says Cali Morrow, who along with her partner, Sharon McCloskey, took part in the red hands protest. 'We wanted to show them we weren't afraid. They'd killed our friend. They couldn't hurt us any more than they already had.' Cali grew up Protestant in Rathcoole, a huge working-class estate on the outer edge of Belfast. Sharon grew up Catholic in Derry, knowing from an early age she was different and didn't fancy boys. 'It hadn't occurred

to me yet that I could fancy girls,' she says. She took up bodybuilding. 'I was the only woman in a group of men, a freak, and all the men supported me,' she recalls. Cali knew she was gay when she was 14 but got married because it was 'the done thing'. The marriage was abusive and she left it in 2005. 'I came out of my shell. I found my voice. I felt so free,' she says.

She met Sharon, by then a champion bodybuilder, a few years later, and they became a couple, and part of a group of friends to which Sara had introduced Lyra in 2018. Sharon is a carer for her brother. Cali is a special needs classroom assistant, though she is currently seeking a new job. In her last one, cutbacks meant that she was attending to the needs of six children with profound special needs when the maximum was meant to be two.

For most people, they believe, the kind of identity expressed by flags no longer matters. 'It's a distraction,' says Cali. 'You can't stand up and look for rights and deny them to others.' 'The Troubles were shameful,' says Sharon. 'Fighting over shit that happened hundreds of years ago. But there are still people who are stuck in their ways and they are tramping on the futures of the young. They have their claws in the

Sharon McCloskey (left) and Cali Morrow at Derry's walls. 'We did it because we loved Lyra,' they said of the red hands protest against the New IRA and Saoradh.





Why not here?

Doire Flynn

community and young people who feel they haven't much to hope for are getting lost.' Cali agrees. 'Northern Ireland is a poor and troubled place and young people are being let down. They don't know how to control their aggression and it is coming out wrong.'

The proportion of Northern Irish people who identify as neither unionist nor nationalist has been growing steadily in the 21st century. Research by the young Queen's University academics Katy Hayward and Cathal McManus in 2018, using the NI Life and Times Survey, found that, overall, 45 per cent of those surveyed opted for neither/nor, and that this was the choice of 61 per cent of women:

There is much research to show that women have tended to have been written out of their active role in Nationalist and Unionist mobilisation and conflict – and peace building – in Northern Ireland.

For women to constitute such a large portion of those identifying as Neither Unionist nor Nationalist suggests that the rejection of the Unionist/Nationalist typology may also be associated with a rejection of the type of macho, patriarchal politics that is still quite predominant.

The central paradox of the Good Friday Agreement is that it promotes reconciliation while institutionalising sectarian identity. Hayward and McManus comment on this. Their conclusion, though it is perhaps more of a tentative suggestion, is that 20 years after the agreement, 'perhaps Northern Ireland is ready for a revolution from the centre: to make Neither/Nor into All/Together.'

Doire Flynn grew up in south Armagh, next to where the massive British Army check point used to mark the border. She was born in 1995, a year after the IRA ceasefire, so she heard about how disturbing it used to be, but did not herself experience it. 'Mum and Dad raised us not to get involved in identity politics,' she says.

We didn't believe in being Irish or British.' She did have an uncle who ran for the Social Democratic and Labour Party against Enoch Powell, 'which is awesome', she reckons, and she did grow up politically minded, studying politics and international conflict studies at Queen's University, founding the International Relations Society and becoming president of the Politics Society. 'We were encouraged by some excellent teachers to be free thinkers,' she says. She also got to spend several weeks on a study trip to China, funded by the British Council. 'It was incredible. It was so eye-opening just to see difference,' she says.

The Trump presidency in the US confirmed Doire's conviction that young people need to be active.

Our generation in Northern Ireland is just tired hearing about pre-Good Friday Agreement politics. What we see is that we have a mental health crisis – in one 20-day period recently there were ten suicides in west Belfast. We see education in crisis too, and while all this Brexit thing is going on, we still have the environment being destroyed. We look at the south and we see that they have marriage equality and abortion. Why are we socially behind them? Why is the North always left behind? We were inspired by that – if it can happen in Ireland, which used to be socially conservative, why not here?

At Lyra's funeral, the celebrant Father Martin Magill challenged the politicians. Stormont had collapsed in acrimony in 2017, but after Lyra's death the local parties had stood together to condemn it, and had pledged to resume talks about restoring local government. 'Why did it take the death of a young woman with her whole life in front of her?' he demanded, and the mourners in St Anne's Cathedral clapped and rose as a body to their feet.

The talks failed. In October 2019, the Catholic and Protestant churches in the North and the Irish Council of Churches united to issue a statement calling on the politicians to get back to Stormont to stop Westminster legislation which would decriminalise abortion from taking effect. Lyra's partner, Sara, had told the political leaders, including the prime minister, after the funeral that the political vacuum in the North had encouraged dissident republicans and that they therefore held some responsibility for Lyra's death. When in mid-October the secretary of state and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) supported the appeal from the church leaders, Sara was

furious. ‘It seems that pleas from people who have seen their loved one murdered mean a lot less than the demand of church men desperate to repress women,’ she tweeted. ‘Their time is over, their hold on society has slipped and we will not be dragged backwards.’

When, in 2018, Doire heard that a branch of the new UK youth organisation called Our Future, Our Choice was being set up in Northern Ireland to campaign for a people’s vote on Brexit, based on a choice between remaining in the EU and accepting a Brexit deal, she applied for and got the role of full-time organiser. ‘It is youth led – I’m the oldest, at 24,’ she says. Her wages and the running costs are met from crowdfunding. Since then she has spoken at the European Parliament, to a packed rally in the Ulster Hall, and to several local councils, as well as having meetings with senior figures like Michel Barnier. ‘He was very kind. He said his children were far less political than us!’

‘The Good Friday Agreement came about after a huge consultation. We haven’t had that with Brexit. People didn’t even realise why the EU was important until after the referendum,’ Doire says. ‘Here in Northern Ireland young people feel we have had no say. We haven’t been represented properly. I think there is a wave of young people who just want a different sort of politics.’



**You have to have hope
or you’d do nothing.**

Maeve O’Neill

Doire ended her speech at the Ulster Hall rally with the words: 'The children of the peace process deserve better.'

Maeve O'Neill was in Derry's Guildhall celebrating the new legislation that decriminalises abortion and same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland when someone told her that the DUP leader, Arlene Foster, had warned that her party would look at getting the law repealed. Maeve laughed. 'Someone should tell her we know a thing or two about repeal,' Maeve said. Northern feminists had supported the successful campaign to repeal the eighth amendment to the Irish Constitution in 2018, leading the way to legislation for abortion in the Republic. Southern feminists went on to lend support to 'the North is Next' movement. The border was not a barrier. Nor was the Irish Sea – it was British MPs, taking their direction from Northern Ireland activists, who got the new laws attached to the Northern Ireland Bill in the summer of 2019.

When Maeve gets to the diversity monitoring section of an official Northern Irish form these days, she circles all three options: Catholic, Protestant and Other. 'It's what I am,' she says. She respects the fact that the questions are meant to facilitate fair employment and balance the representation of 'the two sides', but she finds the choices too limiting. 'The Good Friday Agreement was good at the time it came in but it needs to be changed. It is still structured around the two blocs of orange and green.' From a Derry housing estate, she went to Catholic schools and 'didn't know any Protestants until I left to go to uni in Glasgow'. She says she was 'switched on to politics' by the Scottish independence referendum.

She came back in 2014 to work as a community health development worker with the Rainbow Project, which supports LGBT people and campaigns for their rights. 'So much in relation to health is also about equality,' Maeve says. After Lyra moved to Derry in 2018 she'd taken part in a *Strictly Come Dancing* fundraising benefit for the Rainbow Project.

Maeve, who's 32, now works as a physiotherapist with the local health trust, but says that although she loves it, her job is 'my downtime'. Her real work is as an activist. When she found out there was a plan to change the law so that health professionals could refuse services to LGBT people, she and friends organised a rally in Guildhall Square

in Derry. Maeve's parents supported her – they had demonstrated against the location of a major waste incinerator in the city and her mother had taught women in Bangladesh in the 1970s before helping to develop the Derry Well Woman Centre.

'Environmental rights is my *grá* [love],' she says.

I love that we are fighting for something, not against. We need an independent environmental protection agency. It leads you into other issues, too. I went to a few socialist worker meetings and learned about the links between economic systems and the environment. The women's rights movement has such energy and excitement now as well and a lot of young women are gaining confidence from their involvement in that. More and more women are getting into politics.

Maeve has joined People Before Profit.

In Derry our activist circle is intergenerational – it's gorgeous. It is my community. Young people bring energy and optimism, but older people bring wisdom and experience. People care less about sectarianism now that there is more access to integration. At school I played Gaelic football – now I play rugby, which is lovely because it is super-mixed – but I know I live in a progressive bubble. The patriarchal structures are still embedded. Housing and education are still segregated.



Maeve O'Neill: 'Catholic, Protestant and Other' in Derry.



We are at risk of going backwards.

Ellen Murray

Working in the health system, Maeve is angry at the underfunding of key services. 'There are waiting lists for everything. Mental health services are diabolical. On my way to work this morning the bridge was gridlocked and the Foyle Search and Rescue boat was on the river. It is so sad.' Northern Ireland has the highest suicide rates in the UK and in Derry young people in despair have often chosen to throw themselves off the bridge. The volunteers of the Foyle Search and Rescue service patrol the streets as well as the river and its banks in a bid to avert these tragedies.

Maeve believes that activists have to take care of themselves. 'You have to avoid getting bogged down,' she says.

I have a circle of beautiful, ridiculous women friends called the No Man Band Clan. We have an old broken-down caravan and we enjoy the good things in life, camping, swimming in the sea, a wee whiskey. A tribe of women watching sunsets. We look after ourselves to sustain our resistance. Sometimes, most of the time, I am hopeful. You have to have hope or you would do nothing.

In the shocked weeks after Lyra's death, her close friend Ellen Murray wrote on her blog about trying to come to terms with Lyra's loss and understand it. She missed Lyra for their conversations and their journeys. She missed what Lyra modelled for others. 'Something about the way she knew herself was so empowering,' Ellen commented. She missed the way Lyra 'stood steadfast when her friends were being attacked.'

But she tried to look further. Was this shocking death on the streets of Derry 'a catalyst for societal change in Northern Ireland to move us further on the journey to peace, or perhaps ... a painful reminder

of the dangers of rolling backwards, of political vacuum, and of hopelessness'? For Ellen, it was both. The loss of someone she loved in an incident of a kind that seemed to have been consigned to history was shocking. It was also hard to deal with for a generation that had not had to learn to deal with such bereavements. However, Lyra had been 'a torchlight of courage' – and an advocate of hope.

Lyra was an innovator – she'd faced formidable economic obstacles and had taken up all the opportunities that came her way. She'd got a place with Children's Express, an NGO that opens up opportunities for talented young people who want to work in the media. She'd done a grant-supported master's by distance learning at Birmingham City University. She also got involved in a news startup and got part-time editing work with a US tech company, and she was an early pioneer of crowdfunding, using it to launch her first journalistic investigation. In the absence of traditional full-time jobs and career paths, working-class millennials need this versatility, this creative energy.

'When I say my cat paid my rent, it is true,' Ellen says. Her exceptionally handsome cat, Bilbo, has his own Twitter account, which Ellen set up in 2017. 'He has 63,000 followers and that is growing by around 1,000 a month.' She sells photos, paintings, stickers, badges and other Bilbo-themed merchandise. 'I work with artists all over the world – they license Bilbo fan art. As well as bringing joy to thousands of people and paying my rent, it allows a dozen creatives to make a significant income in royalties,' she says.

Ellen lives in social housing. She has a progressive connective tissue disease, and uses a disability walking aid. She is extraordinarily mobile. Based in a large, bright room in a social enterprise hub in one of west Belfast's old mills, she researches and produces resources on the needs and rights of trans people and travels the world as an activist. 'I'd known – it just felt like an innate truth – that I was trans from when I was about ten, but I didn't start to come out until 2013, when I was 20. It was a significant event and it opened my eyes to what marginalisation meant. I decided to drop out of uni to focus on working out how to do everything. There were doctors to see, mental health services, lawyers.'

It all went well. She started out using Tumblr to try to meet other young trans people, and went on to set up Genderjam, and later on a resource centre in Belfast. She now works for Global Action for

Trans Equality, advocating at the UN and other international forums. She is also studying disability law part-time at Galway University.

She grew up as a nationalist but says on balance she would 'prefer to see NI stay as it is but be treated fairly by the UK.' She ran as a Green Party candidate in the last local elections. 'I'm a socialist,' she says.

The democratic deficit we have here is having a negative effect on marginalised lives. We don't normalise trade unions or cap rents, for example. The benefits model is disastrous. I think at the moment we are mitigating damage. There is a risk of going backwards. Look at the 1960s civil rights campaign which started out fighting for housing rights. The core issues then as now are to do with people living in poverty.

As for her hopes: 'I hope I am changing Northern Ireland,' Ellen says.

'I was a very timid activist,' says Hamsavani Rajeswaren. 'I had imposter syndrome. It was Lyra who changed that.' Lyra continues to inspire many young women through her writing – she also found time in her short life to offer personal support to an astonishingly large circle of people. They include Hamsa, now the Students' Union's vice-president for equality and diversity at Queen's University. The young Indian woman certainly did not look timid when I saw her up at Stormont on the day abortion was decriminalised. On the front line at the celebratory demo, she was one of those holding the Alliance for Choice banner. She was wearing red lipstick and a 'Free Safe and Legal' t-shirt and she was yelling out the chant, 'Not the church, not the state, women shall decide their fate!'

Hamsa grew up in Singapore. She came to Belfast when she was 17 to study psychology.

Looking back it seems quite a scary thing to do. Where I come from you didn't even move out of your parents' house until you get married but at the time I just jumped into it quite fearlessly.

Northern Ireland is beautiful and the people are so welcoming, but there are some serious fractures. Racism is a serious problem. A lot of young people come from rural backgrounds and they have never met a black person – more dangerously there has been a lot of strong anti-immigrant rhetoric from certain politicians in recent times.

When she found out abortion was illegal she was shocked. ‘I thought, oh, I just signed away my bodily autonomy in exchange for an education,’ she says. ‘That got me thinking and I began to get involved in campaigns for social justice.’

One of Hamsa’s closest friends is Laura Corner, Lyra’s niece, who has the honour of having had one of Lyra’s first books, *Laura Sees A Fairy*, handwritten and illustrated by the author when Lyra was nine, named after her. Laura also worked as a students’ union activist. ‘Lyra was what my mum would have called a *chillipaddi*,’ Hamsa says. ‘It is Malay for someone who is small but powerful and fiery, a tiny person with a huge personality. She sat down with me for lunch and said, “you are a brilliant young lady, missis, and you need to fight for your space”.’

Hamsa went on to front campaigns on disability and LGBT rights, she introduced Black History Month and she joined the pro-choice task force. She does case work with individual students and she does policy work with senior management in the university and outreach with community groups. She has in particular championed international students, representing them at an all-party parliamentary group at Westminster. ‘I am very proud that I was a huge catalyst in changing the way the university looks at its international students,’ she says. ‘It is about internationalisation. They are no longer seen as just a way to bring in fees.’

She feels she is part of a tradition – the Students’ Union at Queen’s has a radical history. It was where some of the students who led People’s Democracy began their activism, and some members were prominent in the civil rights movement and became politicians. ‘Racist and fascist hate speech is around, but so are more and more of us, too. We are part of social movements that are making big wins,’ she says. ‘That re-energises people, seeing that after years of work, positive change can happen.’



Lyra was ... a *chillipaddi*!

Hamsavani Rajeswaren

Hamsa was going to Dublin for an awards ceremony on 18 March 2019, and was nervous about whether or not she was going to win. She called Lyra. ‘She said, “don’t let anyone try to put you down”,’ Hamsa says. On her way back to Belfast that night on the bus, the award stowed in her bag, Hamsa got a call from Laura to tell her that her Auntie Lyra had been shot and killed. ‘It has made me angry, and determined to go on,’ Hamsa says. ‘Lyra was the person here that made me believe there was space for a voice that wasn’t about green or orange.’

Lyra was 24 when she wrote her *Letter To My 14 Year Old Self*, which was later made into a moving short film. It begins, ‘It gets better kid...’ The letter is about how knowing as she did from a young age that she was gay, she went through years of torment because she knew her church condemned her sexuality, and received homophobic abuse from other teenagers. ‘Right now, you’re wondering if you’ll ever be “normal”,’ she wrote. ‘You are normal. There is nothing wrong with you. You are not going to hell. You did nothing to deserve their hate.’ She told her despairing younger self that life would get easier, that she would be liked and loved and regarded as cool. She finished with a plea: ‘Keep hanging on, kid. It’s worth it. I love you.’

The ‘uncomfortable conversations’ that Lyra urged are central to contemporary feminist youth work. In Derry and Belfast I met youth workers who are determined to liberate girls from what one of them calls ‘the gender strait jacket’ so that they can find themselves and have easier, better lives, as Lyra did. ‘You will smile every day,’ she’d promised her teenage self.

At 38 Emma Johnson unabashedly wears a t-shirt that says: ‘I am a girl. I am smart. I am strong. I can do anything.’ After 15 years of professional experience Emma firmly believes that all youth work needs to be gender conscious and that girls and young women need their own space within which to find themselves. ‘Traditional youth work was all about boys. But girls grow up in a gender strait jacket and you need to break out of it, but if you do, you are seen as a militant,’ she says. ‘We want girls to flourish.’ When she was 15, she was part of an early peace initiative called The Right to Hope, which led her to want to work with young people on imaginative peer-education projects that actively bring about social change.

‘We had an event earlier this year with outdoor education activities like climbing and biking. It is about connecting with the environment,



We want girls to flourish.

Emma Johnson

and also a lot of young women have very poor aerobic health. When it is a female-only space they lose their embarrassment. We talk about stereotypes and role models and action.'

Emma's team gets philanthropic funding. It is aligned with the NI Gender Equality Strategy, which means she is well placed to take part in policy debates. She is involved with the NI Women's European Platform, which gives women the opportunity to contribute to international feminist debates – Emma has participated in an intergenerational event at the UN's huge global women's rights event, the Beijing Platform.

The key work is, however, finding ways to support young women to take control of 'the living breathing issues' of their day-to-day lives. 'We talk about consent and social media, which is a huge area of pressure,' says Emma. 'We target young mothers who may be very isolated and need to make friends. We talk about period poverty, choice, domestic violence.' Emma and her colleagues are always dreaming up creative ways to approach sensitive conversations. 'We do LGBT awareness – we had a fun day for families based around a dog show. We work in interface areas. We recently had an amazing drag storytelling session in the Waterside Library. Our mantra is we want to raise expectations among young women.'

Caoimhe O'Connell works in the Oh Yeah centre in Belfast. It is a non-profit music hub in an old record distribution centre in Belfast's Cathedral Quarter. Supported by philanthropic funds, it sets out to involve young people in 'hard-to-reach' communities in making music and training to work in the music industry. Gigs at the centre are organised and run by the young people. 'Success for us isn't about getting 200 people through the door,' says Caoimhe. 'It's about things like the group of young trans people at the back who feel comfortable about being there.'

Everything imaginable is done to make Oh Yeah inclusive and welcoming.

We have projects that reach out to particular groups that are isolated – we have a Syrian women’s choir – and to carers for people with dementia. We go to schools, bonfire sites, youth clubs and anywhere else where young people gather.

Music has always been a driving force for change in Northern Ireland from the Undertones back in the 1970s to the feminist punk bands that play at Alliance for Choice rallies today. Music transcends everything.



Music transcends everything.

Caoimhe O’Connell

A lot of the kids who come here are from strongly loyalist or republican areas. They know about the constitutional issue but they don’t care. It is the same with religion – at our Girls Rock School we had 20 girls and 13 of them said they had no religion. We had five Arab girls. They care about being stereotyped as a woman, they care about trans rights. We are completely cross-community and we have an anti-misogynist culture. The kids who come here write songs about the shit they’ve been through and they stand up there and sing about how they’ve been feeling. It is quite magical.

Lyra wrote about how she had been conditioned into hating herself, and Caoimhe says she felt the same. She sees it as a mark of success for Oh Yeah that ‘we have 15-year-old girls in here who love being 15!’ She was ‘a stressed and anxious teenager’ herself and left school at 16. She went on to train as a teacher, and left a full-time and secure teaching job to work in the centre. She also runs an Irish language youth club. ‘I don’t have disposable income or free time but I love what I do. I jump out of bed in the morning and I can’t wait to get in here.’

From west Belfast, Caoimhe used to vote Sinn Féin but became disillusioned. A year ago, she joined the Green Party and stood as a councillor in the 2019 local elections. She did 'shockingly well' and was almost elected. 'I have a Gaelic name and red hair but I polled ten per cent of the vote in one very traditionally loyalist area,' she says. 'It was a green wave. We offer a credible alternative to people who don't care about orange and green but do care about social issues and the environment.'

While the big parties, Sinn Féin and the DUP, still dominate at the Northern Ireland Assembly, the 2019 local government elections saw remarkable changes, with the Alliance party increasing its number of councillors by 65 per cent, the Greens doubling their previous vote, and socialists and independents making significant gains. Green Party leader Claire Bailey notes that her party has seen an upsurge in young members in their early 20s, and that there is a whole new post-conflict generation of under 18s who are looking out for a new political agenda.

Catherine Pollock finds that 'seeing both sides' of Northern Ireland's contentious issues can have its drawbacks, though she wouldn't have it any other way. 'I dance a fine line,' she says. 'In fact I seem to spend a lot of my time arguing!'

I meet with Catherine in a café in a community centre in Derry's Bogside. She has just dropped her daughter at the Irish language pre-school in the centre, her little boy goes to a *meánscoil* (Irish language primary school) up the street, and she works nearby for Cultúrlann, an Irish language cultural organisation. She is from a unionist part of town, and a fairly staunch working-class Protestant family. 'A lot of my close relations always vote DUP, and some even vote UKIP,' she says. She's a diplomat, a natural practitioner of Lyra's 'uncomfortable conversations'. When she talks with her family about contentious issues, she tells them why people from a nationalist or republican background feel differently to them. When she is discussing the same issues with colleagues and friends in the Bogside or Creggan, she insists they listen to the views and feelings her family have expressed. At the end of her TEDx talk Lyra had appealed to anyone who had a problem with her gayness to come and talk to her after the event. 'I won't call you a homophobe,' she promised. It is a radical stance in an era in which it is regarded as normal to hurl abuse on social media at anyone who departs from your own particular set of beliefs.



I dance a fine line.

Catherine Pollock

Catherine grew up a church- and Sunday School-going Presbyterian, but as a teenager she began to rebel against the conservatism of the church's social teaching. 'We were told we had to be virtuous, no drinking, no sex before marriage, gays were going to hell. I said to my mother, 'I'm not going any more' and she said, 'that's fine' and I thought, 'after all these years, is that all it took?'

At university in England she was politicised by the role the UK government played in relation to the war in Iraq. When she returned to Northern Ireland she was shocked by the extent to which sectarian issues kept communities apart which had all kinds of social problems in common, many of them rooted in poverty. She began to work for community development organisations and also got to know and respect people involved with the campaign for justice for the Bloody



Catherine Pollock at the *Derry Girls* mural with her children, Frankie and Rohan: 'I don't want them to feel they can only have part of Derry. They can have all of it.'

Sunday families. ‘When I met the women fighting for abortion rights in the Alliance for Choice, I was like, “Hallelujah!”’ She loves the creativity of their protests – like changing a letter on Free Derry Wall so that it read, ‘You Are Not Entering Free Derry’.

Lyra’s friends also used the iconic wall – painting ‘RIP Lyra McKee #not in our name’ on it immediately after her death.

Catherine lives in the loyalist Fountain estate, works in the Bogside, and job-shares with Lisa Anderson, a Londoner whose parents immigrated from Tobago. She is impatient with the relatively new designation, Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL). ‘I hate the way we have all these acronyms dividing people up,’ she says. Her friends come from all backgrounds. ‘I feel very British and I am content to say I’m British. I feel culturally at home in Glasgow and London. But I am Irish too and I feel at home in Dublin and Donegal.’

Despite political differences, she has a loving relationship with her family. ‘My dad is no Irish language enthusiast but he’s impressed my kids are growing up bilingual and chuffed when my son says, “*Cá bhfuil Granda*”,’ she says.

As a family my kids and I engage completely with both communities. They love the band parades and my son throws his red, white and blue band stick up in the air like the rest of the boys. But we also go to hear Songs of Resistance on the Free Derry stage. I am bringing them up to be community minded and compassionate. I don’t want them to feel they can only have part of Derry. They can have all of it.

In October 2019 Lyra McKee’s name was inscribed on the international War Reporters Memorial in Bayeux. It was six months after she was killed. Sara said of the inscription, ‘We had hoped the war she wrote about was over, but there are those in our society desperate to drag us back into darker times. Let Lyra always stand as a reminder to look to the light.’ Lyra’s friends have a new way of urging each other to have courage when facing a challenge. ‘Be more Lyra,’ they say.

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I don't want them to feel they can only have part of Derry. They can have all of it.

Photography credit

Katrina Taggart is a freelance photographer who began her career at her local newspaper in Omagh, County Tyrone and is now based in Belfast. She loves telling stories through her photographs, and is passionate about human rights and Irish culture.

She received a Master of Fine Arts in Photography from the University of Ulster in 2016.