

WINspiration:

Feminism for libraries and librarians

CILIP Scotland has been holding regular events to celebrate women and leadership in the profession. **Kirsten MacQuarrie**, CILIPS Membership Officer, developed and launched WINspiration, and here she looks back at the last 18 months of events.

“THE only rewarding thing for me is to bring to light information that no one knows. What’s the point of rehashing the same old thing?”

The words of library decolonisation pioneer Dorothy Porter (1905–95), reflecting on her impactful, if still poorly acknowledged, contribution to our profession, can just as effectively capture the spirit of WINspiration – CILIP Scotland’s programme of events, collaborative activities, recommended readings and more to champion feminist values across the library and information sector (www.cilips.org.uk/feminism). Supported by the amazing allyship of Head of CILIPS Sean McNamara, it has been a pleasure and a privilege for me to see WINspiration evolve throughout the past 18 months, with a range of further feminist opportunities planned.

As a person and a professional, feminist values inform every aspect of my life: maximising my skills as best I can to help create a world where women are respected, empowered and celebrated. CILIP’s Changing Lives Action Plan (www.cilip.org.uk/changinglives) likewise includes commitments to tackling sexism through measures such as understanding and taking collective action on the sector’s gender pay gap. As CILIPS Membership Officer, I know that women are a significant majority – 72 per cent – of CILIPS members, yet our presence is not



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evenly spread across all levels of seniority. Seventy-seven per cent of members in ‘junior’ roles are women but only 63 per cent in ‘senior’ and just 51 per cent of Chief Executives, with women also constituting 76 per cent of CILIPS members not currently working.

Despite being a female-majority sector, it seems that problems linger within LIS in either empowering women to achieve library leadership roles or ensuring that the nature of library leadership itself – whether in working hours compared with caring responsibilities, childcare availability and/or menopause support – suits the reality of our lives. Questions of what leadership is, the values that inform it, and what it can (and should) mean for our sector, were key

to the inaugural WINspiration webinar back in November 2021.

As a founder and director of Glasgow Women's Library, and an icon of contemporary feminist leadership, Dr Adele Patrick's work will already be familiar to many *Information Professional* readers who may recall her March 2021 article reflecting on her Clore Leadership Fellowship. Graciously accepting our invitation to lead the first-ever WINspiration webinar, Adele devised the title *What would libraries led by feminists look like?*

She began her session with a thought-provoking presentation that introduced attendees to GWL, intersectional feminism and the values prioritised by feminist leadership – in Adele's own words, "a work in and about progress" that involves ongoing learning, accountability and rooting equalities into our ways of working. Adele then invited participants to share two words on "what first made me a feminist". Responses ranged from "my mum" and the "Spice Girls" to "patriarchal oppression" and everything in between!

After this icebreaker, attendees discussed two provocations put forward by Adele:

- If you could do one new thing from a feminist perspective in your workplace, what would you do (and what might the impact be)?
- If you could make one new demand of yourself in your feminist leadership journey, what would it be (and what might the impact be)?

An incredible 40 ideas about feminism in library workplaces were shared, addressing everything from physical library spaces to personal working practices:

- Making spaces safe for women and girls i.e. free sanitary products, comfortable breastfeeding areas, body positive design etc
- Create an infrastructure that does not primarily suit men but everyone – i.e. ergonomics in the workplace, shelf heights etc
- To fight for equal value to be placed on people-centred roles versus tech roles
- Role model different styles of leadership – "quiet" leaders as well as "noisy" ones
- I love the idea of getting comfortable with being uncomfortable
- Stop replying to emails with "no problem" when there is a problem!

The powerful, personal insights shared by participants highlighted that WINspiration was already extending beyond a classic lecture or webinar series: providing a space to see feminist library leadership in action by sharing women's ideas, amplifying their voices and role-mod-



elling a collaborative workplace culture in which professionals listen to and learn from each other. As Adele herself noted at the time, "whenever I'm in the company of librarians, the world feels a little more hopeful, and hope is something that we need in abundance at the moment".

"The WINspiration project is, well, inspirational!" says Adele now when reflecting on the programme's progress. "This wonderful CILIPS resource collection is for anyone who believes in the twinned powers of libraries and literature to change lives for the better.

"Ours is a sector where women have played a leading and critically important role shaping how books and library resources can reach people in deep and meaningful ways, and this is made evident across the collection. I love the ways WINspiration demonstrates that libraries remain impactful forces for good locally, nationally and internationally, and a natural home for feminist leadership and cultural and social justice to be nurtured."

In 2022, with International Women's Day fast approaching, WINspiration was again honoured to feature 2022 CILIPS President Amina Shah (see pp. 20-23). In late 2021, Amina had become the first woman and the first person of mixed heritage to be National Librarian of Scotland, and our attendees were moved to hear her stories of the women who had inspired her on that journey: from pioneering family members in both Scotland and Pakistan to the feminist heritage of Dundee where the Second World War had engendered a culture of strong, independent and exceptionally determined womanhood.

As we invited our participants to share similar stories, a fascinating mix of personal and professional role models emerged that often centred on not simply a woman's achievements but her attitude to others: whether within her workplace or her family (or both), creating much-needed cultures of mutual respect and compassion.

Amina noted that, as National Librarian, she had been reflecting extensively on

the meaning of leadership, citing Adele's session as inspiration as well as the work of Simone Buitendijk, Vice-Chancellor at the University of Leeds, whose paradigm-shifting thoughts on bringing 'love' into our work (<https://bit.ly/3S2TZID>) resonated deeply with our attendees (and I later added to CILIPS's Emerging Leaders resource collection – www.cilips.org.uk/emerging-leaders).

Amina concluded by inviting attendees to each contribute a line to CILIPS's 'Letter to a New Woman' (www.cilips.org.uk/iwd22): an organisation-wide welcome to female new professionals. With companies being challenged on social media for the hollowness of their International Women's Day platitudes (<https://genderpaygap.app/>) compared with relative inaction to address sexism, it felt vital that CILIPS WINspiration provide tangible, permanent evidence of our commitment to listening to women in LIS. The letter echoed the inspiring themes of Amina's session by referring to "common purpose across sectors, ages [and] locations", "standing up for everyone's rights and discovering answers in the collective".

"Women of the World Unite!" was the musical rallying cry that roused our delegates in action at the first in-person WINspiration, hosted by CILIPS Trustee and current Vice-President (and U2 superfan) Dr Diane Rasmussen Pennington. As co-chair of the iSchools Women's Coalition (www.ischools.org/womens-coalition), Diane shared shocking examples of inequality and endemic sexism in the international sector that vividly illustrated why the work of her and her colleagues is so necessary, before encouraging delegates to share what and who WINspires them in their careers.

"I was delighted when CILIPS asked me to contribute to WINspiration," says Diane. "Speaking as a co-chair of the iSchools Women's Coalition, which seeks to empower and develop leadership skills of female information scientists worldwide, this is an incredibly important initiative. To me, feminism means that women can choose their own life paths.

"My father introduced me to computing in 1981, when I was six, so I didn't know



Dorothy Porter.

that girls growing up in the 1980s weren't 'supposed to' like computers... until I was sadly bullied for it at school. Regardless, I've been in front of a computer for over 40 years now, whether gaming, programming, or finding information for other people, and I wouldn't change a thing!"

The same spirit of determination, drive and intersectionality also informed our next online session, taking place in October during Black History Month 2022. CILIPS was honoured to welcome Professor Zita Cristina Nunes, Associate Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, who introduced us to Dorothy Porter: the critical cataloguing pioneer quoted at the start of this article whose groundbreaking work continues to shape our profession.

As our libraries tackle the task of decolonisation today, what can we learn from Porter's legacy? And what does her vastly under-acknowledged contribution tell us about the history of librarianship, the herstories that are missing and why? Please visit the WINspiration collection to find answers and watch the captioned recording of this unforgettable session (<https://youtu.be/mJZVlosr7Vs>).

Another story that, regrettably, needed exposure to the light was the one addressed by WINspiration on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women in November 2022. I know I speak for every member of the CILIP community when I write that even one incident of sexual harassment in a library is one too many, yet researcher Brooke Cambie discovered – in the UK's first comprehensive survey examining the problem – that the scale of harassment is

worse and more widespread than previously recognised.

Sharing her findings, alongside a suite of supportive resources highlighting the legal rights of staff and the responsibilities of employers, this webinar marked CILIP's first direct statement condemning sexual harassment in library workplaces. We emphasised that, as women, it is #NotOurJob to tolerate harassment; nor is it our job to 'deal with' as individuals what the evidence reveals to be a sector and society-wide problem. This tough yet necessary session, which can also be viewed online (www.cilips.org.uk/notourjob-abc), concluded by inviting attendees to pledge their support for the #NotOurJob ABCs:

- Acknowledge sexual harassment exists in library workplaces around the world
- Believe staff when they disclose harassment

- Challenge harassment whenever you see, hear or read it.

Accompanied by downloadable posters to display in your library spaces, our petition remains live on the CILIPS website (www.cilips.org.uk/notourjob-abc). Please spare a moment to sign it if you have yet to do so and support our stand against sexual harassment in libraries.

"In a profession predominantly comprised of women, the need for feminist organisations and programmes such as WINspiration may seem surprising," notes Brooke. "Despite the strong presence of women within librarianship, the severe and harmful impacts of patriarchy and misogyny persist. These consequences are detrimental not only to all librarians but to the institution of libraries and the communities they serve.

"Events such as #NotOurJob reveal the extent of this harm, bringing to light experiences within librarianship that have rarely been openly discussed. In addition, these events provide genuine support and practical advice for combating misogyny and patriarchy. It is uplifting to see this work being done, and I look forward to seeing what the future holds for WINspiration."

In 2023, as the quest for true equality continues around the world, WINspiration will be there in solidarity with and celebration of the women in our sector. We have a diverse and dynamic array of future content planned, from an online workshop with award-winning poet Nadine Aisha Jassat to events, blog posts and other impactful interventions centred on Imposter Syndrome, period poverty, menopause awareness and eco-feminism. Just like women working in libraries, information and knowledge, this empowering programme continues to go from strength to strength.

Visit www.cilips.org.uk/feminism for more on past and future events, and to discover a wealth of resources and organisations aligned to the aims of WINspiration. **IP**