

ARLIS Research Award report

Reflections on visiting Glasgow Women's Library (12 – 16 September 2022)

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In the week of 12th September 2022, I visited [Glasgow Women's Library \(GWL\)](#) for five days, with my main aim to learn from [their highly praised volunteering programme](#) (which is, in alignment with [GWL's wider practice](#), inclusive of anyone who identifies as a woman, as well as non-binary and gender fluid people who feel comfortable in a space that centres women's experiences). I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the GWL staff and volunteers for generously sharing their knowledge and insights; to [ARLIS UK & Ireland](#) for funding this travel; and to my colleagues at [iniva](#) for encouraging me to make the most of my learning experience. The time I spent at GWL was enriching, meaningful and thought-provoking, and I am delighted to share some of my reflections.

Glasgow Women's Library has evolved from women artists' grassroots project "Women in Profile" (1991) to become the only Accredited Museum in the UK dedicated to women's history. Today, GWL is a vibrant cultural space with a lending library, archive and museum. It also offers a wide range of learning, engagement and outreach programmes in arts, literature, heritage, education, and many more areas, where women's contributions are highlighted and their achievements celebrated.

I first learned about GWL in 2020 and has been intrigued ever since. As Assistant Librarian at Stuart Hall Library (SHL), I help with developing our volunteering programme. During the 2021 [ARLIS Taking the Plunge event](#), I watched a presentation given by GWL Volunteering Programme Assistant Ren Clark, and this experience motivated me to reach out to GWL. For over 10 years, SHL has been running [a popular volunteering programme](#), in which the largest group of our volunteers has always been current university students and recent graduates. However, thinking about increasing importance of widening participation, as well as seeing [GWL's volunteers being more diverse in age and social backgrounds](#), I became keen to learn more deeply from GWL's approaches and practice.

Very fortunately, GWL Volunteer Coordinator Gabrielle Macbeth responded positively to my request and prepared a wonderful week programme for my visit. The programme included:

- attending meetings with Gabrielle and Ren;
- going through a volunteer induction session;
- speaking to volunteers and joining their activities (re-shelving and notebooks making);
- observing wider team meetings (online and in-person);
- individual meetings with other staff members (Co-Founder and Director Dr Adele Patrick; National Lifelong Learning Development Worker Morag Smith; Librarian Wendy Kirk; Black and Minority Ethnic Women's Project Development Officer Syma Ahmed);

- participating in a neighbourhood heritage walk led by a volunteer guide

Throughout my visit, I was able to immerse myself in GWL's environment, where volunteers and staff members collaboratively foster their sense of agency, belonging and continuity in alignment with GWL's values – documenting and celebrating women's lives, histories and achievements.

Even as a short-term visitor, I was invited to become part of this community. During my first day at the library, Gabrielle made a name badge for me, and I was then given a choice to wear my pronoun badge (Photo 1). On the ground floor of GWL, there is a big board on the wall filled with tin badges. These are the name badges for staff members as well as for volunteers, and there are also various options for sharing one's own pronoun, such as "they/them", "they/she", "she/her", "she/they" and "pronoun indifferent" (Photo 2). A tin badge may be a simple object, but in the GWL's context, this board of badges not only visualises their team but is an important expression of wider solidarity amongst women. From their past blog posts, I knew that [the GWL archive houses badges collections and held an exhibition in 2014 to highlight the social and political significance of women's badge wearing](#). With this background in mind, I instantly felt welcomed and connected holding two badges in my hand.

My meetings with the Volunteering Programme team were useful and inspiring. In September 2022, approximately 50 people are actively volunteering with GWL. Currently, the organisation accepts new volunteers meeting the criteria set in their [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan 2018-2021](#):

- 1) Women who live in their local neighbourhood
- 2) Women who identify as having a disability, long-term or chronic health condition, sensory impairment, cognitive or learning disability or mental health condition
- 3) Women of colour or women from an ethnic minority
- 4) Women who are aged 16-25

Together with these volunteers, there are also other more experienced volunteers, some of whom have been offering their time for more than a decade. Excellent retention of volunteers is one of the many things that amazed me at GWL, and the reason for their success is clear. The GWL volunteering programme is designed to be flexible and inclusive; accommodates volunteers' needs and interests as much as possible; and places a strong emphasis on person-centred learning. The level of care achieved within the programme (as well as the organisational support given to the Volunteering Programme team) is remarkable, and in this supportive environment, the volunteers can build their skills at their own pace. I heard stories of volunteers [developing a full sense of ownership in the badges collections digitisation project](#); helping to look after the library's garden; providing front of house support at the reception desk; giving introductions at GWL's online events; taking in-person event photos; tutoring learners in the adult literacy and numeracy programme; cataloguing and re-shelving library books; helping to develop and lead heritage walks; and many more. In my personal conversations with volunteers, they shared with me their experiences of moving (back) to

Glasgow and the reasons for starting to volunteer at GWL. Each life story was unique, and I learned so much from all that was told.

The five days I spent at GWL happened to be an unusually sunny week. On each day after visiting the library, I walked in Glasgow Green or along the River Clyde to reflect on the conversations and activities I had during that day. It was particularly helpful that I was given wider organisational perspectives to frame my experience. Librarian Wendy explained to me [the ongoing process of developing GWL's feminist classification scheme](#); Director Adele stimulated me to explore [the ideas and practice of feminist leadership](#). National Lifelong Learning Development Officer Morag gave me insights into embracing differences based on [her collaborative outreach and engagement work across Scotland](#). Black and Minority Ethnic Women's Project Development Officer Syma shared stories of [fostering intergenerational understanding and solidarity in communities of migrant women](#).

Throughout the week at GWL, I came to recognise once again the important role of art libraries as a place to access knowledge and information about various forms of arts. At the same time, I have also seen Glasgow Women's Library creatively pushing the boundaries of this role, to make positive changes in all women's lives. As a visiting librarian, I felt welcomed and inspired. As a woman, I felt supported, encouraged and empowered. I am very eager to take this learning further in my practice at Stuart Hall Library.