Evaluation of Women's Sheds in Ireland: A Participatory and Ecological Approach

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Research development September - December 2024

Postdoctoral Fellowship started in September 2024. After a phase of research development and community outreach, the CAB was established in December 2024.

Data collection phase 1 - Spring 2025

The Research team and the CAB held regular meetings to develop the research agenda. Ethical approval for the research was granted in February 2025. Case study data collection took place March and April 2025.

Research pause: June 2025 - March 2026

Project lead takes maternity leave.

Analysis phase 1 and research development phase 2: March - August 2026

Analysis of case study data. Planning and designing phase 2. Ethical approval for phase 2 awarded.

Data collection phase 2: Autumn/Winter 2026

National Survey study roll-out to Women's Sheds committees and membership.

Analysis phase 2 & dissemination: 2027

Data analysis, report writing and dissemination events.

Women’s Sheds in Ireland

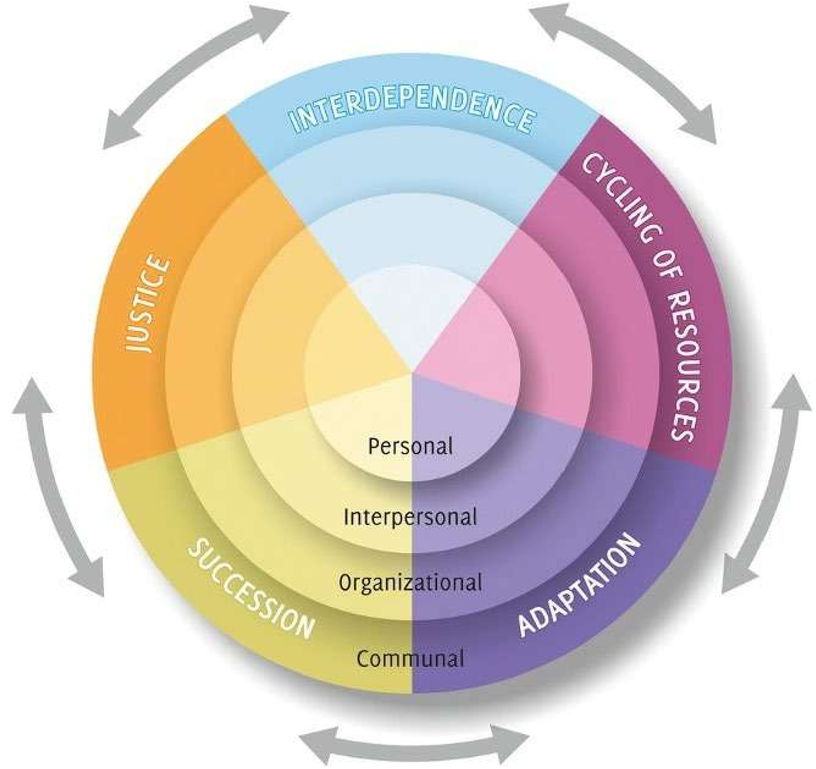
- Women’s Sheds emerged in the past 15 years, with up to 140 now established.
- All ages are represented, but most Sheds cater to the 55-80 age range.
- A grassroots movement that grew through regional networks.
- A National Organisation of Women’s Sheds is currently in the early stages of formation (Women’s Sheds of Ireland/ WSOI).
- Groups adapt to local needs and interests: focus on social connection, community participation and fun activities.
- Activities include crafts, art, dance, exercise, singing, theatre, wellbeing classes, trips, informational talks, skills exchange and development.





Theoretical Framework

Kelly's Ecological framework integrated with Justice (Esposito et al., 2015)



Ecological levels

- Personal: Individual experiences and outcomes
- Interpersonal: Relations among members
- Organisational: Resource management, practices & structures
- Communal: Broader influence of Sheds, local and beyond

Ecological principles

- Interdependence: All components and actors change *in relation* to one another
- Cycling of Resources: Resources are accessed, deployed and distributed within and between settings
- Adaptation: Individuals and organisations change in response to challenges
- Succession: Changes in the setting that occur over time
- Justice: Power relations within the setting and how they interplay with outcomes

A Qualitative Case Study of Women's Sheds

- 4 Women's Sheds selected (see table)
- Recruitment through CAB networks
- Data collection took place March - April 2025 (Megan, Ronni & Lamisa)
- 6 in-person and 2 online focus groups with Women's Shed committee & members, 4 in-person and 3 online interviews with stakeholders, 7 group observations, and review of group documents
- *n*=58 participants in total
- Focus groups and interviews analysed using deductive, reflexive thematic analysis

Case	Place	Size	Est.	Freq.
1	Rural	75	2022	Weekly
2	Rural	110	2016	Weekly
3	Urban	136	2022	Daily
4	Urban	68	2023	Twice monthly

Sheds provide a “lifeline”, supporting women to cope with individual and collective stressors

Focused primarily on the *individual* level, this theme describes how Shed members experienced and benefitted from their participation in the Shed. Shed members across the different settings described their Sheds as being a “lifeline” - explaining how participation in the Shed enabled them to overcome loneliness and social isolation due to personal circumstances (illness, bereavement, relocation); broader societal factors (e.g. COVID), or life stage-related circumstances (“empty nest”, retirement). Sheds were described as fun and welcoming settings that encouraged women to get out and try something new, with like-minded people. Shed members described better mental wellbeing in general, taking a renewed interest in their appearance, improved health and improved confidence which they attributed to their participation in the Shed.

“When I saw the (...) Shed advertised, I was in a very dark place due to illness and bad experience and jobs and stuff like that. And I was in a very, very, very dark place and I saw it advertised and I like that, I said, will I go, won't I go? But I went. And it has saved my life and I just have got so, so much out of it.”
Shed member, Case 2

“ I'd be lost. I'm a widow. And as I've no, children at home or anything, it has got me out of myself and I've joined more clubs since I came here, so it's a godsend.”
Shed member , Case 3

Sheds are “virtual hammocks” that provide social connection, support and a sense of mattering

On the *interpersonal* level, Women’s Shed members described their Sheds as hubs of social connection and mutual aid; where members could access and provide social, informational, practical and emotional support to one another. WhatsApp was employed in all settings for top-down and horizontal communication among members, with multiple groups for specific needs and high levels of engagement. Committee members sustained this “virtual hammock” (term coined by a Shed member, in case 2) through consistent practices of welcoming, greeting and checking in on members, and using various strategies to promote member engagement. Most settings were relatively homogenous in terms of age and ethnicity however the Shed in case 4 was an exception, with opportunities for rich cultural and intergenerational exchange. Many women also described examples of feeling valued by the group and adding value to the group; both of which are key components of Mattering.

“The activities and the social occasion, living on my own, and it’s lovely to get out and meet, you know, other women, and the companionship you make. And if one event may not suit you, you go at the next event. And that's the beauty of it I think. “
Shed member, Case 1

“ And when you haven't seen anybody, you kind of say, "I wonder if she's okay." "How are you doing Maureen; how you doing Mary?" You know, and you kind of might bring them in… into the conversation again.”
Shed member, Case 2

Resilient committees develop practices to manage resources and address challenges

At the *organisational* level, this theme covers committee practices and strengths in developing and sustaining their sheds; as well as the challenges committees experience and the resources available to them to address these challenges. Committees across the four sites varied in their degree of cohesion and organisation, however shared practices and challenges emerged across the contexts. From their establishment, Sheds engaged with local community development workers who helped to build the committee's governance skills and smoothed their access to funding. All Sheds experienced similar challenges such as limited capacity to support social inclusion measures (e.g. through social prescribing/medical referrals) and restricted venue access, to different degrees depending on the context. Sheds all recognised the need for an umbrella organisation to increase the profile of sheds and provide access to essential resources.

"Space is limited and then the community space is limited because everybody is fighting for the same space."
Committee member, Case 3

"Somehow, we got on a list of like rehabilitation after brain injury, occupational therapists, and we got six or seven inquiries. Which ended up on my thing to answer. Where I had to say we're not a service. The e-mail would come from an occupational therapist, often phrased as I have a patient I would like to refer to your service. You know that's not what we are."
Committee member, Case 4

Sheds facilitate rich exchanges that affect change beyond their borders

On the *communal* level, this theme is about the ways in which participants described the Sheds as playing a role in affecting changes on a community, and broader societal level. Across all settings, participants described Women's Sheds as key drivers of local community activation. Members' engagement in their sheds sparked broader participation, either through starting up new projects or developing collaborative relationships with other groups (e.g. Men's Sheds). Sheds demonstrated solidarity with other groups by attending and supporting their events, engaging in volunteering and charity drives. On an implicit level, Women's Sheds were also discussed in terms of how they had the potential to shift perceptions of women, especially in terms of the contributions that they can make to society through community engagement or political participation.

"We found a lot of groups to join from being from here. Things ... for health and well being."
Shed member Case 2

"They're regulars at events. If we want to promote anything, we always contact them, let them know. They come to… last year, Refugee Week was in June and there was a potluck event. Members would have come to that, members of the group -- as individuals I'm saying, it's not that the group -- but they come as volunteers to the conversation club that's held."
Stakeholder, Case 1

From ripples to waves...

Invest in Sheds as community wellbeing settings

Social connection, belonging and supportive relationships are central to their value.

Support the settings, not just the activities:

Funding, venues, governance capacity and volunteers are critical to sustainability.

Resource inclusion and community pathways:

Diversity and social prescribing require intentional support rather than relying on goodwill alone.

Strengthen the wider Women's Shed infrastructure:

Greater visibility, advocacy and national representation could help sustain and expand the movement, but this effort should not overshadow community needs.