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A mural in Derry celebrates the series' much-loved characters. Channel 4

## Derry Girls: the riotous show that shifted the experiences of teenage girls in Northern Ireland to centre stage

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It's a summer evening in Derry in 1997, the night before four teenage girls and a wee English fella get their GCSE results. In between newsflashes and 90s dance hits, 16-year old Clare nervously explains just what is at stake and why these results are so vitally important: "We're girls, we're poor, we're from Northern Ireland and we're Catholic!"

Lisa McGee's riotous [Derry Girls](#), back for its final season, distilled the power of this hilarious drama in just 10 seconds of dialogue. The fears of the four girls – mouthy Michelle, stressed-out Erin, eccentric Orla and anxiety-ridden Clare – were played for humour, but the challenges facing them were real and serious.

Narratives about Northern Ireland, and especially the conflict euphemistically known as "[the Troubles](#)", focus overwhelmingly on men. Derry Girls showed us what life was like for one of society's most marginalised groups in a time and place some academics have described as an "[an armed patriarchy](#)".

We don't often hear about daily life for girls and women during this period. The writer Eli Davies makes it clear how such stories are "often flattened out by mainstream conflict narratives". These tend to centre narratives about paramilitaries, politicians and the British military – all predominantly men.

Derry Girls gloriously upended these conventions by putting Northern Irish girls firmly centre stage.

TRAILER | BAFTA-WINNING Derry Girls | Series 3 | Channel 4 Co...



## Real life in Northern Ireland

Horny Michelle gets some of the best lines in the show: "We're doing it for peace. A piece of that fine, Protestant ass." Her irreverence is refreshing in a culture that still finds the sexuality of teenage girls subversive.

But audiences might not find it so amusing to learn that if Michelle had got pregnant, she wouldn't have been able to access vital reproductive care in 1997. She would still struggle now, in 2022.

Although Clare is accepted by her friends when she reveals she is gay in the first season, there are still pockets of Northern Irish society that are deeply homophobic. Clare wouldn't have been able to marry a girlfriend until 2019, when same-sex marriage was finally legalised. This was a fraught process, as was the decriminalisation of abortion.

Teenage girls are often the centre of moral panics. Historically, society has been unsure what to do with girls and women who aren't (yet) wives and mothers. This is especially true in an extremely conservative society like Northern Ireland.

How joyful to get to see teenage girls challenging taboos just by being themselves and living their lives. Derry Girls showed us a vision of teenage life that we just hadn't seen before. I was born outside Belfast and didn't, in fact, grow up in the North – but others can testify to the enormous pleasure of seeing themselves represented on screen for the first time. Academic [Caroline Magennis](#) and blogger-activist [Seaneen Molloy](#) have written powerfully about this.

Yet audiences who didn't live through the conflict, or even [know](#) much about it, have responded with overwhelming enthusiasm to McGee's much-loved comedy. Seeing a show about four teenage girls (and token boy James) is still groundbreaking TV.

## **Girls don't want to be sidelined**

If there is a cultural problem with sidelining women, then attitudes towards girls are even worse. Girls still make society anxious and it fails to take them seriously.

The treatment of Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg is a case in point. The then US president, Donald Trump, famously [tweeted](#) that Thunberg being named Time magazine's person of the year 2019 was "so ridiculous", labelling her resolute commitment to her cause "an anger management programme". [Other](#) national leaders were equally [disrespectful](#).

We find some men clamouring to devalue the culture associated with girls, assuming that girls have poor taste or what they think is unimportant. In an interview with [One Direction in GQ](#), journalist Jonathan Heaf confidently declares girls don't understand music and "don't care about history". This is clearly not true: female history students outnumber male at [A-Level](#) and [degree](#) level. I'd like to see Clare, the straight A student, challenge Heaf to a history test. Or watch Heaf try to take tickets for a gig out of Orla's hands.

## Changing the script

The cultural script still largely views the sexuality of teenage girls as horrifying. Even romance stories privilege female virginity. If we think about recent and phenomenally successful programmes such as Normal People or Bridgerton – also starring Nicola Coughlan, who plays Clare in Derry Girls – the male romantic lead is permitted a sexual past whereas the teenage female lead is not. This is one of the key conventions of the romance genre: a chaste heroine saves a bad boy from himself.

Contemporary Irish fiction is crackling with the voices of girls and women but men are still more likely to read books by men.

In film, male actors get more than twice as much dialogue as their female counterparts. Researchers are still working through what these stats look like for trans, gender fluid and non-binary folk, but it's clear there would be no comparison.

Lisa McGee's girls might have graced our screens for the final time but they are joined by an ever-expanding group of brilliant Northern Irish girls filling the pages of new books by the likes of Jan Carson, Sue Divin, Wendy Erskine and Michelle Gallen.

If Derry Girls has been your entry point to Northern Ireland, you'll find a whole world of new stories that will challenge all you thought you knew about life here. And though the uproarious series has ended, it has shifted the everyday lives and experiences of teenage girls centre stage, resonating with young female audiences well beyond the Irish Sea.