

In the spirit of Feminism and in celebration of International Women's Day I wanted to write a few words to highlight the significant and inspiring contribution that women have made to cave exploration in Ario. In doing so I will mention some of the great characters whom have inspired me to be better than I dreamed, whom have lifted me up and forward, in the hopes of passing this empowerment onto the young ladies beside me.

Caving can be a physically, mentally and intellectually gruelling sport, three attributes that in a patriarchal society are not considered to be within the capabilities or embodiment of the feminine. The Ario Caves Project and the long history of caving expeditions to Ario by Oxford University Cave Club (OUCC) certainly dispel these mistaken assumptions.

In 2011, I went on my first expedition to Ario, a year that celebrated the 50th anniversary of caving expeditions in the region and the 30th anniversary of exploration down the iconic 'Xitu', the deepest cave at the time to be explored by a British team. Being the first Irish woman to bottom a 1,000m deep cave did little to appease my insecurity, but rather its rareness seeded further doubt as to whether this little Irish girl could do it. After all, maybe hard physical labour and 1,000+m deep caves aren't for the 'weaker' female body after all! I was inspired and relieved however to find our leader Fleur Loveridge, a doctor of engineering, to be taking all these 30kg carries and multi-day trips deep underground in her stride. Fleur was well adapted to the harsh and demanding environment of the Picos and its caves through many years of successful expeditioning. By 2011, Fleur had already been on seven expeditions that involved the infamously arduous 2/7 system and bolt climbing trips in Teca cave, shared with cave diver and former multiple expedition leader Hilary Greaves. She too, it appeared, had been inspired by the Women contemporaries like Annette Becher and Sherry Mayo before her.

As I followed my friend Tony Seddon through climax rift (the seat of many the epic) with trepidation, I was comforted by nothing less than the heroic story of his partner Ursula Collie, who rather incredibly rescued herself out of Ridge cave. Yet again here was another unstoppable woman at the forefront of exploration down a 650m deep cave, perched high up on the razor karst ridges of the Picos. Urs, a Cambridge educated lawyer, took an unfortunate fall at the bottom of uncharted territory and suffered a basal skull fracture, so severe that she was unconscious for some time afterwards. Painfully aware both literally and metaphorically of the gravity of her fall and the sheer improbability of a rescue, she mustered what must have been unbelievable resolve and toughness to get herself out with little more than the help of a couple of fellow cavers. Urs had already witnessed the extent of a

Woman's bravery when her fellow caver Sherry Mayo, who whilst exploring cave in the jungles of Laos, did not see a collapsed lung as an excuse to falter. And to think the word for weakness in action is Pussy!? If it wasn't for the work of Urs in cave systems so remote and inhospitable that getting to the entrance alone was a mountainous feat, we wouldn't have connections between the likes of Perdices and FU56. Pushing these was no trivial task and involved rigging virgin shafts more than 110m deep. These 'top camp' caves will likely be the icing on the cake towards the Ario Dream of piecing together one of the world's deepest cave systems. A feat that will have heavily relied upon the often silent partners – Women!

Excuses and doubt, it would seem, could not be justified in the presence of such stories. In the Picos at least, women were not only beautiful, mothers and cooks but equally accomplished scientists and explorers leading not only the male dominated activities of cave diving and bolt climbing but also scientific projects. Another example that comes to mind is the 1999 radon project lead by Jo Whistler and assisted by Lynn Cooper. Not only was Jo pushing new cave in the very remote and committing 2/7 system but she led and conducted novel scientific analysis requiring the lugging of detectors down a deep and tight cave on top of caving, camping and safety equipment.

It was quickly becoming apparent in the words of the new social media campaign, that 'this girl can!' And us ladies did. Surrounded by male peers, whose previous experience of caving women was to expect nothing but the best, I found the drill – a figure of masculinity - thrust happily into my hands for bolting projects. Soon the realms of possibility for the little Irish girl were as infinite and unknown as the caves we explored. Maybe women were being held back or holding themselves back, not by their physical capabilities or apparent emotional vulnerability but by the narrow and low societal expectations imposed upon them from birth. The perfect example that comes to mind are the stories I heard of Hilary Greaves, the courageous and fiercely tough cave diver, who always put the furthering of novices first even at the expense of her own success. This philosophy of investing in novice expeditioners, a cornerstone of the OUCC expedition ethos, has remained at the forefront of the Ario Caves Project, the name for the now more international group of people who continue exploration alongside OUCC. Hilary, once described as 'the best mind of her generation' in the context of Oxford philosophy, led the 2008 cave diving expedition at the bottom of Sistema Julagua and went on to be the instigator of the return project to the resurgence at Culiembro which ultimately led to the historic connection of Xitu to the resurgence. Hilary later led many expeditions in China and became one of the first British cavers to bottom Krubera, the deepest cave in the world, over 2,000m below the ground.

In 2013, continuing the long legacy of women leadership and after finding courage in the bottom of the Refugio's finest red wine, I volunteered to become the 9th Woman leader of an Ario expedition. Being nothing in comparison to these ladies I contented myself in standing alongside the many other women whom were pushing physical and mental boundaries at depths of over 1,100m underground - Éabha Lankford, Avelina Wright, Holly Bradley, Emma Wilson, Vicky Lim, Claire Dunphy, Rosa Clements to name but a few. Rosa in fact, a mathematician, was so modest and unassuming she apologised for being a little slower when she carried a 35L tacklesack from near the bottom of the cave, filled entirely of metalware, an enormous weight disproportionate to the bags carried by anyone else. Oblivious to her strength she seemed more concerned with doing her bit, and that she certainly was!

The following expeditions would focus on C4, the key to a connection resulting in a super deep cave, but was left tantalisingly unresolved by the severity and remoteness of the desperately tight Rio Grande rift, a seemingly satirical name. The original C4 expedition was led by Pauline Rigby who was one of the very first people to pass the rift and explore the new passage with the equally impressive Jo Whistler who was so unphased by the ordeal that she posed in a bikini at the sump pool they found below. A later expedition, led by the famously competent and tough polish cave diver [Wlodek Szymanowski](#), failed despite much effort to re-enact Pauline and Jo's success. This year, an expedition co-led by another woman, sees the return of my caving heroes Sara Gregson, Jo Whistler, Pauline Rigby and Fleur Loveridge. C4 was the location of Fleurs first expedition and will mark her 20th anniversary of Picos expeditioning. They, alongside the many other inspirational women not mentioned here, continue to smash psychological barriers, opening minds and expanding the scope of the feminine. Their shared successes hopefully empowering the Women of the future. I watch and listen with bated breath 😊

The Women Leaders of Ario

1988	<i>Las Brujas</i>	Lynn Smith	2/7 explored via "Just Awesome" to choke Drusilla.
1990	<i>Jultayu</i>	Sherry Mayo	2/7: Choke Egbert bypass attempt
1996	<i>Gustuteru</i>	Pauline Rigby	C4 connected to C3 forming Sistema Verdelluenga.
1999	<i>Extremero</i>	Jo Whistler	2/7: upstream pushed to "Viagra Falls".
2000	<i>Ario</i>	Pippa Crosby	2/7: upstream pushed towards C3/C4 sump
2008	<i>Julagua</i>	Hilary Greaves	Cave diving in Sistema Julagua
2010	<i>Sima de la Chapa</i>	Lorna Wilson	Exploration of Sima de la Chapa

2011	<i>Xitu</i>	Fleur Loveridge	Exploration of leads in Xitu
2013	<i>Ario Caves Project</i>	Steph Dwyer	Exploration of leads in Xitu

In addition to this there are countless Women cavers who have made selfless and daring contributions over the years, not just as cavers but as medical, equipment and rescue officers to ACP and OUCC expeditions. I am too young to know or remember them all but please do tag them onto this post.

Feminism it should be said is not anti-men, it does not allege that women are better than men, it is about equality and is not compromised by the unveiling of female bodily parts that have been sexualised by men! The latter is in reference to the recent controversy surrounding Emma Watson. Feminism instead calls for the social, economic and political equality of Men and Women. I personally call for Women to be whatever they want to be whether it be a mother, caver or both and for our aspirations to be limited only by our imaginations.

Please share and tag your own stories of the Women that have inspired you.