



Keeping Gender on the agenda

We live in a society where there is constant interaction between young women and young men through family life, friendships, relationships, school, work and socialising – the list is endless. In highlighting the purpose of single gender work we are acknowledging that young women and young men have specific needs and issues that can be best explored in single gender setting. This is not to be divisive; rather it aims to support young women and young men to reflect on their lives and the impact that gender has upon each and every one of us.

YouthAction Northern Ireland is a leading voluntary youth organisation which works to enable young people achieve their full potential by providing services, information, training and support to community groups, youth groups, young people, their trainers and workers. It also seeks to extend the understanding of youth work through the development of innovative models of practice. This article shares some of the learning from YouthAction Northern Ireland's developmental work with young women and young men.

Work with young women

Over the past thirty years there has been significant progress towards equality for women and this has had some impact in the youth sector. During the late 70s and early 80s there began to be recognition that young women were not accessing youth service to the same extent as young men and the services provided were often male orientated and dominated. As a result of this YouthAction N.I. set up a working group and facilitated conferences and workshops in partnership with young women and workers, exploring ways of how young women's participation could be improved. In the 90s research highlighted that young women began to leave youth sector from about the age of thirteen. YouthAction N.I. continues to develop new and innovative practice for young women aged fourteen plus, directly related to their needs, issues and interests. Relevant training is provided for those who work with them. Although the agency works with all young women, as they all experience inequality, young women are a diverse group and some may experience more difficulty with participation such as young mothers, young lesbians, young women in rural communities, young women with disability. The work of YouthAction's Gender Equality Unit is to provide young women, including specifically targeted groups, with:

- ▶ A less threatening environment where they do not have to compete for the attention of the other gender.
- ▶ A chance to meet in small groups, which reflect their friendship groups.
- ▶ The opportunity to feel more secure about being a woman and to feel valued in her own right.
- ▶ An opportunity to value the company of other young women.
- ▶ Increased confidence to challenge the stereotypes and inequalities they may face in their everyday lives.
- ▶ Space and time to develop confidence, ability and potential without feeling judged.
- ▶ Positive role models reflecting their gender.

- ▶ A safer environment to reflect on and explore their own issues such as sexuality, health, gender roles, and self-esteem.
- ▶ An opportunity to have their voices heard at various levels where decisions will be made that may affect their lives.
- ▶ An opportunity to reflect on their position within society and make informed choices regarding their futures.

The development of work with young women has had a direct impact on work with young men. In the mid 90s YouthAction N.I. began to look more closely at the quality of service provided for young men.

Work with young men.

Research into young men's issues is consistently highlighting that their lives are increasingly complex, contradictory and potentially dangerous to their well being.

Traditionally, work with young men in Northern Ireland has been about keeping young men out of trouble, distraction and deflection from the streets. Increasing evidence that this type of provision was not meeting the emotional and developmental needs of young men led the agency in the early 1990's to explore new and more imaginative approaches to working with young men. . At the heart of the work is recognition of the need to build meaningful and non-judgemental relationships with young men in safe environments where they can think, talk, reflect, consider other viewpoints and explore issues important to them. Opportunities are provided for young men to share their feelings and emotions about what it means to be young and male and the pressures they experience within stereotypical masculinity. Our work also addresses sensitive issues such mental and sexual health, suicide and violence as well as offering young men personal support. This is an important aspect of our work as young men repeatedly tell us that they find it difficult to ask for support and lack confidence accessing resources. Our work has shown that when young men feel valued and supported they are more willing to share their own thoughts and ideas and show increased desire to become more involved within their own community and have their voice heard in wider society.

Working Together

Whilst our work happens primarily in single gender settings, there are many occasions when young women and young men come together to work on specific programmes, training courses, youth forums such as YouthAction's recently formed 'Youth Governance Group.' We have found that when young people have been part of single sex groups they are more confident and assertive in mixed groups; they participate more fully in groupwork; they show more acceptance and understanding, with an increased sense of self worth which can result in the respecting and valuing of others.

Towards the future

Despite the fact that our gender work has shown many benefits to young women and young men, there still appears to be reluctance within the Northern Ireland Youth Service to take gender seriously as an important

aspect of youth work curriculum. We firmly believe that policy makers and funders have a responsibility to ensure an equitable and quality youth service for all young people and should therefore have strong gender based policies in place and be proactive about ensuring the resources required so that these policies can be fully implemented.

YouthAction Northern Ireland, 2000