

An Occasional Youth Work Practice Paper 2

Gender Conscious Work with Young People

Seminar 2

The 'Gender Based Approaches in Youth Work' Seminar was presented by YouthAction Northern Ireland and the University of Ulster (Youth and Community Work Department). This seminar provided an opportunity for a range of practitioners to explore issues around gender based work such as single gender work, single sex work, mixed gender work, perceptions of gender work, the role modelling of the worker and possible outcomes of the work on the lives of young people. This paper sets gender in the context of both policy and practice, providing challenges to gender based work with young women and young men, as well as providing recommendations for policy developments in helping young people to understand and challenge the impact that gender has upon their lives.



YouthAction Northern Ireland has sixty years experience of working with children and young people throughout Northern Ireland aged between 10 – 25 years. Our aim is to support them as active and equal citizens whose voices are heard, respected and valued.

YouthAction Northern Ireland values Equality, Diversity and inclusion. In everything we do we seek to respect the rights and responsibilities of each individual, to value young people as they are rather than as they should be and to include young people in the social and economic life of communities. YouthAction Northern Ireland strives to proactively challenge and address inequalities that exist within society. We wish to ensure the inclusion and acceptance of all regardless of difference.

YouthAction – gender conscious work with young people

YouthAction Northern Ireland has a long and distinguished history of gender based work with young people. Through research, practice and training initiatives the organisation has developed innovative practice through its *Gender Equality Unit* and *Work With Young Men Unit*. Herein the organisation has developed gender conscious practice in which young men and young women have opportunities to explore gender conditioning, gender roles and expectations within a changing world.

The Work with Young Men Unit and the Gender Equality Unit has many shared issues, concerns and approaches. Common aspects of the work of both Units include:

- Working to actively challenge the oppression young women and young men feel from the existence of gender stereotypes.
- Promoting opportunities and approaches which challenge traditional gender-specific roles and responsibilities.
- Encouraging young women and young men to broaden their personal expectations beyond the restraints of their gendered stereotypes.
- Providing opportunities where young men and young women can positively contribute to the ongoing development of their local communities.
- Using creative forms of accreditation to recognise the participation of young women and young men.

Each unit has different starting points and approaches in its work but both emphasise how gender pervades every aspect of our existence and the issues this presents for young men and young women.

The Gender Equality Unit goes beyond that of the Work with Young Men Unit in providing a continued response to the historical inequalities women have faced within the structures of our society. The Gender Equality Unit works to acknowledge and challenge systems which undermine the position and role of women and in particular young women.

The Work with Young Men Unit acknowledges the changing role of young men in contemporary society and challenges the gendered expectations they continuously face. The Work with Young Men Unit works to support young men in recognising the restrictions to their emotional and mental well-being and promoting alternative ways of 'being male'.



Gender in a social policy context

"The word gender refers to the social differences between men and women that are learned, changeable over time and have wide variations both within and between cultures. For example, although only women can give birth (biologically determined), biology does not determine who will raise children (gendered behaviour determined by society)."

{OFM/DFM Gender Matters Consultation Document}

Gender roles are determined by the systems and cultures in which we live. This in turn means that we can address and contribute to changing roles by challenging the status quo and seeking social change.

In spite of legislative change and more equitable policies in relation to women introduced in Northern Ireland, society in general has not necessarily changed its attitude towards women. Progress has been made toward narrowing the gaps between men and women in several policy areas but gender inequalities continue to exist in our society, and these mainly disadvantage women, young women and girls.

'Women are now employed within the workforce and there is a perception that equality has been achieved'.

Until there is a more equitable society there will always be young women who face structural disadvantage and discrimination. Furthermore there are those within this group who experience double or even multiple disadvantage due to other factors or life circumstances.

New TSN policy highlights the principle of 'open and equal access for all' with measures to counteract discrimination on the grounds of gender as well as areas such as disability and sexual orientation.



The measures arising from New TSN Action Plans are likely to shape forthcoming policies and legislation in tackling poverty, disadvantage and injustice. New TSN has been widely criticised due to the lack of associated resources, thus having limited impact in comparison to those resource-rich policy directives. This highlights the importance of gender being explicit within policy initiatives and the need for careful consideration to resourcing.

A more recent policy development is contained within the Gender Equality strategy of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. This strategy aims to provide an overarching framework within which government departments, associated agencies and other relevant statutory authorities will channel their efforts towards tackling gender equality for the benefit of both women and men. Work under the strategy will complement and build upon the work that the public authorities are doing under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. This aims to mainstream equality of opportunity among nine equality categories through the development and delivery of programmes, practice and decision-making processes.

The main emphasis in the Gender Equality strategy is the promotion of policy and practice to tackle gender inequalities using more effective gender mainstreaming. Mainstreaming has become a major approach to gender equality policy-making internationally, and is promoted by the UN, the EU and the Council of Europe, who have offered the following frequently quoted definition:

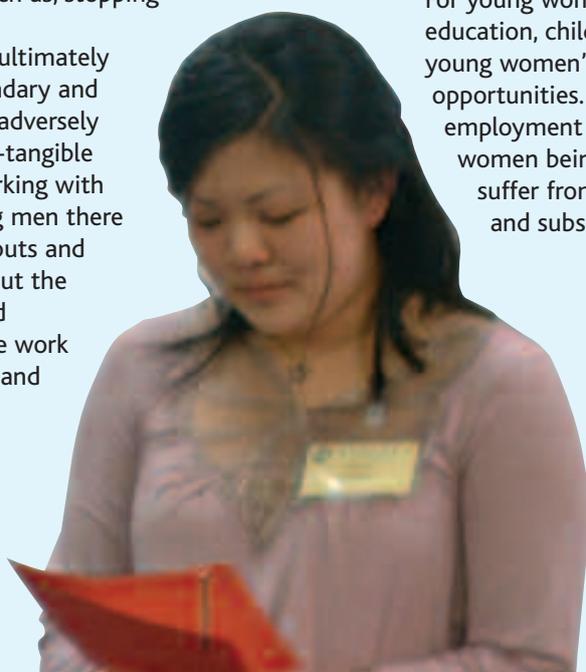
“Gender mainstreaming is the (re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy making.”

(OFMDFM, Gender Equality Indicators for Northern Ireland – A Discussion Document)

For gender mainstreaming to be adopted by all Government departments, each will set their own targets and bid for resources for equality measures within their own expected remit. However, there is no guarantee that individual government departments will even bid for gender equality measures to be carried out.

Gender in a youth work context

The emphasis of gender work, within the current climate is of a crisis facing young men and of effective interventions in addressing this. Young men are depicted as victims, particularly in relation to the higher levels of suicide, underachievement in education and unemployment. In contrast young women are portrayed as having things 'sorted' as they provoke less anxiety within society. However this is not necessarily accurate as young women may act out their frustrations and anxieties in less obvious behaviours in private. This is then reflected in official statistics where the risks that young women face are often hidden. Greater attention is being directed towards the more public 'threat' (i.e. young men) as opposed to the less 'problematic' aspects of society (i.e. young women). Funders and policy makers are demanding more hard-edged, tangible and measurable outcomes such as, stopping violence or preventing underachievement. They ultimately see the 'process' as secondary and this has the potential to adversely affect important yet less-tangible outcomes. For those working with young women and young men there is a recognition that outputs and products are important but the value of the methods and processes used within the work should be acknowledged and endorsed.



In dialogue with key funders, policy-makers and stakeholders, practitioners need to articulate a more pro-active rather than problem-focused approach to working with young men and young women. This would acknowledge that young men can sometimes be a 'problem' but also recognises their potential and what they can contribute and achieve. Likewise we need to be able to articulate the invisibility of young women within public life and support effective practice which proactively engages with them.

A key youth sector development has been the Joined in Equity, Diversity and Interdependence initiative. Specifically, the term Equity is about ensuring that young people are treated fairly regardless of difference. In participation terms it is more than saying 'our activities are open to everyone, regardless of e.g. gender', it is ensuring that we do not directly or indirectly exclude people, and that we positively seek ways of including those who might choose to get involved. This has clear implications for how we engage young men and young women in programming and for inclusive youth work practices.

The Youth Work Strategy (2005-2007) is the most significant co-ordinated and strategic framework the youth sector has seen to date. The plans proposed by the Youth Service Liaison Forum refer to the development, implementation and review of particular strategies for encouraging participation by excluded and traditionally under represented groups. The strategy however fails to recognise equality as a separate issue but rather integral to the value of promoting human rights. The operationalisation of the strategy however may have more explicit directed targets and action that specifically address equality issues relating to young men and young women.

The lives of young women

Young women's lives are different from young men's. For young women, factors such as friendship groupings, education, childcare and domestic responsibilities affect young women's social behaviour, expectations and opportunities. Traditional values and limited employment opportunities also contribute to young women being socially excluded. Many young women suffer from low self-confidence and self-esteem and subsequently limited life choices.

The lives of young men

Young Men's lives are different to young women's. Many factors affect their social behaviour, expectations and opportunities. They are continually faced with issues such as masculinity, violence, health, cultural identity, sex and sexuality that directly have an impact on their development as young males in Northern Ireland. Subsequently young men are often disillusioned and frustrated and actions can lead to violence, suicide or risk taking behaviour.

Key issues and barriers for workers working with young men and young women

- Workers are sometimes reluctant to engage in gender-based work as they view achieving genuine equality for both men and women as a huge unrealistic task. This often generates a sentiment of 'Why Bother?':

'Gender roles may have changed somewhat within Northern Ireland but the sexism has not'.

- Workers often have a fear of being isolated and unsupported in undertaking gender-based work. Practitioners often engage in gender-based work due to a personal conviction or belief rather than being encouraged or supported through their agencies.
- Doing gender-work is not viewed as a core part of youth work practice. In many instances practitioners are given limited or little time and space to develop this area of work:

'Work can be viewed as an 'add-on' by agencies, but yet it is central to young people's development in relation to their behaviour, attitude and options'.

There is often a perception that work with young women and work with young men are in competition with each other and that one is prioritised at the cost of the other:

'Young men's work can be perceived as a threat to young women's work particularly around resources and redistribution'.

Practitioners have regularly expressed a lack of clarity around the fundamental components and differences between single sex work, single gender work and gender conscious practice. They have identified the need for a *"clearer definition of what the work is from both a theoretical and practice base."*

- Workers have further sought to clarify the expectations and outcomes for young people, local communities and wider society in undertaking work with young men and work with young women. "What are we trying to achieve exactly through this work?"

"The Youth sector needs a clear definition of gender based work circulated to youth workers with the underpinning theory and key practice elements."

To shed light on some of these fundamental questions YouthAction Northern Ireland have provided a model of practice established based on solid practice research and training over a number of years. The model is constantly being refined and reviewed within the organisation in terms of meeting needs of young women and young men. This is an initial attempt to progress understanding and action within the sector.

Differentiating between gender-conscious work and work with young men and young women

Single sex work and work with young men and work with young women is different to gender conscious work. Single sex work is working with young men and young women as one group. Examples of this span from sports initiatives and health and beauty projects to uniformed groups such as scout groups. Gender conscious work, however, is a conscious reflection on gender constraints imposed by societal structures. It stems from the premise that gender is at the core of who we are and how we are as individuals and as a

society. Gender pervades every aspect of our existence and in doing so provides us with very powerful norms within which we as individuals are expected to behave. Therefore, gender conscious work should be central to all work that is delivered to young women and young men as it challenges the stereotypes and enables young people to address these issues.

Work with young men and work with young women can provide unique opportunities for young people to engage in developmental opportunities as it provides young people with a space to relax, address issues and feel comfortable. Gender conscious work however provokes a conscious engagement with young women and young men which proactively addresses some of the societal issues and restrictions they often encounter throughout their lives. It is where gender is embedded as an issue in terms of reflection and progression for both young men and young women. Gender work can also take place with both young men and young women - mixed sex work with a gender specific focus.

Our gender work with young women and young men at YouthAction Northern Ireland defines itself as "**not traditional activity-based provision**". It is different in that it provides a particular space for young people to explore and learn about their gender socialisation and influences as well as perceptions and attitudes towards other genders. This includes educating young women and young men about historical impacts such as feminism and patriarchy. It addresses the reality of young women's and young men's lives in preparing them emotionally and practically for a changing world in terms of male and female roles. Gender conscious work involves using a variety of approaches and interventions that directly challenges the norms of how young men and young women are expected to behave and live their lives. It addresses gender conditioning and the impact that this has on young women and young men. It is innovative and challenging in a conscious attempt to influence change.



We believe that Gender is at the centre of youth development as it defines the norms and expectations about appropriate male and female behaviour and the interaction between the sexes. Gender describes the socially constructed roles, rights and responsibilities that communities and societies consider appropriate for men and women. We are born as males and females, but becoming girls, boys, women and men is something that we learn from our families and societies. Young women and young men learn through conscious and unconscious messages how they are expected to behave, achieve, participate and engage with others. These expectations are, more often than not, gender-specific, limiting individual young women and young men because of their sex. These gender norms influence developmental changes among young people by inhibiting their self-confidence, access to information, and opportunities to develop skills. Therefore issues of gender inequality begin from early stages of development. In order to adequately address issues of gender inequality in men and women, careful consideration must be given to addressing issues of gender inequality among boys and girls and young men and young women.

Gender conscious work, therefore, is political as it challenges the status quo of women and men in our society. It is confrontational as it disputes the validity of gender roles and stereotypes. It is painstaking as it deconstructs all that is known about masculinity and femininity. It is also reflective as it continually questions workers on how their practice promotes challenges of gender expectations.

Gender conscious based practice works to acknowledge and challenge the systems which undermine the position and role of women, and more so, young women. The historical disadvantage experienced by women in the economic, social, political and private sphere as well as the continued unequal position of women in society is a key focus of the gender practice. Gender based practice also acknowledges the changing role of young men in contemporary society and challenges the gendered expectations they continuously face. Young men in particular face emotional difficulties and having a healthy emotional intelligence to address the pressures in a world which is often perceived to be favourable to men.

As such there needs to be opportunities for young people to explore their attitudes towards gender roles and gender expectations, particularly considering how traditional stereotypes might conflict with the modern reality. This is the premise in which YouthAction Northern Ireland advocates its gender-based work with young women and young men.

Settings for gender-conscious work

Historically, it has been regarded that the best place for gender work is within single sex groups. However, YouthAction N.I. would contend that gender-conscious work stretches out beyond this limited setting. Gender-conscious work can and should take place with single sex groups, with mixed sex groups and with individuals. It takes place in formal programmes and informal exchanges. The role of the worker is crucial as each of these settings require different skills and requires the worker to possess a questioning and challenging approach.

“There’s not many opportunities for young men to talk about their problems, but there should be. When You Talk About Your Problems You Need To Be Sure That People Won’t Talk To Others About Them.”

(young man)



Single sex group:

Working with a single sex group can minimize the emotional and social pressures which can feature in mixed gender settings and maximize the potential for a safe experience. This creation of safety in itself promotes expression and allows for more rapid development of self and skills.

“You can express yourself more and talk about more in front of girls.”

(young woman)

For example, young men could discuss issues about becoming a man, rites of passage from boyhood to manhood and acceptable behaviours of masculinity, more openly within a single sex setting. Similarly, the single sex setting supports young women to focus on issues of self-confidence, self-esteem and assertiveness in a safe environment.

A single sex group has two significant characteristics which make it suitable for gender-conscious work. Firstly, the group is built on the common ground of shared sex. There may be different levels of understanding of sex and gender within such a group,

but this presents an opportunity to explore how we are the same while challenging our own perceptions and expectations of our own gender. Secondly, a single sex group is separate from 'the other sex'. They are physically and psychologically removed from 'the other'. Therefore, the inhibitions, anxieties or embarrassments often experienced in close proximity of 'the other' is removed. In this way, we create intimacy for the group members. This allows for discussions of 'my sex' and of 'the other sex' to flow more easily in this space e.g. likes and dislikes about being female/male or advantages and disadvantages of being male/female.

"I feel that the group has benefited me greatly both as an individual and in the group also. I think that it has helped me understand more about the way young men are looked upon in society."

(young man)

Mixed gender group:

A mixed gender group is more likely to raise the contentious gender issues in a shorter time-frame. This is due to the fact that many of the issues of gender already exist and manifest themselves within the group dynamics, within individual interactions and often reflect those of the wider society in general. Therefore, safety and intimacy are not common ground for the mixed gender group. Rather the common ground is the contested space of gender. This can be seen in doing gender training with a mixed-gender group of youth workers, whereby elements of competition between the sexes becomes prominent and encourages more aggressive interactions.



This places the onus on the worker of the mixed gender group to create a safe space for exploration of the issues, while employing the skills and mechanisms generally associated with conflict mediation work. The skills of the worker are tested in working with a mixed gender group. The outcome of working in a mixed gender group is that, not only do the issues bubble up more quickly, but also that direct negotiation and challenge can enhance understanding more rapidly.

"In a mixed group we can do things and that we have different opinions...sometimes you can get to learn more together"

(young woman)

Work with Individuals:

More often than not, gender-conscious individual work is carried out through informal interactions with young people. This is whereby gendered expectations, roles, stereotypes and structures are challenged either directly or indirectly. A direct challenge to the individual is whereby the worker challenges attitudes, behaviours or language that is gender stereotyped. This requires the youth worker to be clear and assertive in their message while simultaneously being supportive to the position of the individual young person. An indirect challenge to the individual requires the worker to model behaviour, which, by its own existence, challenges the preconceptions and stereotypes of gender. The gender-conscious worker behaves in ways which challenge gendered expectations in their own life. An example of this would be of a male worker who cleans the groupwork room at the end of the session and encourage young men to do likewise. Both direct and indirect challenges require a keen awareness of self.

The methodology for gender-conscious work

There are a range of methodologies which are used in gender-conscious practice. Often the methodology employed by the worker reflects their own level of skill and level of self-awareness in gender work, rather than the needs of the group. This can often limit the effectiveness of the work, due to workers underestimating their own capacity or staying within their comfort zone. YouthAction N.I. advocate that the specific approaches chosen will reflect the setting of the work and the awareness levels of the young people involved. This encourages workers to expand their consciousness of the issues and catalogue of practice.

Conscious awareness and use of self

A gender-conscious worker is always deliberate in their work with young people. They consciously plan how their presentation of self, their programmes, their interactions and their ethos are gender-conscious. This is not to say that they are not 'being themselves'. On the contrary, because they choose not to adhere to the stereotypes and gender norms established by society, they are possibly more 'like themselves' and show greater congruence than others. Therefore, a gender-conscious worker will have already worked through their own attitudes and values about the impact of gender on their own life. They can articulate their own experience and their own values on gender where necessary. But, more importantly, they bear these out in their own life and in their interactions with others around them.

As before, this conscious use of self can be either direct or indirect. Direct use of self refers to an explicit challenge to the behaviours and language of others who promote gender stereotypes or gender inequalities. The Indirect use of self calls on workers to live a gender-conscious life which questions the 'gender rules' of our society. These behaviours can act as a role model to young people who are in contact with the worker over a sustained period of time.

"There is a spectrum of practice including conventional provision which often perpetuates gender stereotypes and at the other end innovative practice for change."

(worker)

Preparation for a changing world of gender

Gender-conscious work requires a political, sociological and economic analysis of past and contemporary society. An understanding of the historical development of gendered roles and expectations raises an awareness of the depth of the issues involved. A further understanding of contemporary society allows workers to understand the changing roles of men and women within economic, social and political life. This gender analysis is required for the

gender-conscious worker to provide young people with a clear sense of reality about the society within which they live and to prepare them for the negotiation of future gender relationships, roles and responsibilities.

Challenge to structural inequalities

Gender-conscious programmes and projects are devised to address specific issues which arise from gender structural inequalities. These structural inequalities are historic and have been built in to our society to ensure that the position and role of women and men maintain the status quo. Gender-conscious programmes challenge these structural inequalities using a three-pronged approach: Firstly, through raising awareness of the inequality; secondly, through enskilling the young people to overcome potential barriers arising from the inequality; and thirdly, through motivating them, as individuals and as a group, to take positive action in addressing similar inequalities in their own lives.

For example, the Moving On Programme works with young mothers on employability. Additionally, this programme recognises the financial issues for young mothers, employment inequalities for young women and the burden of caring responsibilities they face. Similarly, the Personal and Political Development Programme for Young Women has been specifically designed due to the historical under-representation of women within public life and the political arena. The young men and

violence programme supports young men to explore the root of violence and abusive behaviour which they tend to adopt as opposed to effective problem solving techniques. This programme encourages young men to address the complex environment in which their behaviour has often been dictated by a set of





expectations throughout generations. This incorporates a reflection on the individual, community, society and the relationship to masculinities. Central to the methodology has been young men's involvement, actively identifying their own motivation for changing their attitudes and behaviour. All three are designed to challenge structural inequalities. By challenging structural inequalities, we are, in effect promoting opportunities for young women and young men, which they may not otherwise have chosen or even seen as an option for themselves.

Reflective of gender influences

A crucial aspect of gender-conscious work is that it uses reflection as its primary tool. This is no different to the skilled informal educator, who engages young people in reflection as a necessary part of the learning cycle. However, the reflections are gender-specific and encourage exploration and challenges to societal gender norms. This involves a re-evaluation of how people, places, experiences, systems and institutions impact upon our own gender formation and our gendered expectations of others.

These reflections can be generated through artificial situations (programmes designed with this purpose) or through organic situations, naturally arising throughout regular discussions or activities. Therefore, reflective

gender-conscious work can happen in any setting, provided the gender-conscious worker uses naturally arising moments to build in reflection.

Challenging perceptions of the 'other'

As gender is viewed as male and female, they are considered to be opposing polarities, which set each up in competition with the other. This actively works against understanding of the other, and increases the possibility of misunderstandings and misconceptions.

Gender-conscious practice involves more than simply an exploration of one's own gender, but consciously moves into the realm of exploring the 'other'. The intention is to challenge the misconceptions of the 'other' that can lead to sexist or discriminatory attitudes and behaviour. This exploration of 'the other' is commonly used with groups and individuals involved in 'good relations work'. It is particularly effective where there are different identities, whereby there is either explicit or implicit rejection by one group of the 'other'. The approach works on separating myth from reality, encouraging understanding of difference and acknowledging common features of both. The next stage of this practice involves translating this into anti-sexist and anti-discriminatory behaviour towards the other sex.

Recommendations

- There needs to be a clear vision for the work which is formulated and standardised within all practice and across sectors. As such a 10 – 15 year strategic action plan should be devised, involving active partnerships and a coherent approach across the voluntary, community and statutory sectors.
- Development of academic literature and recorded examples of practice should be disseminated throughout the sector. This should be used to strategically influence policy.
- Developing sectoral partnerships and a gender sectoral manifesto to influence all electoral representatives. Central to this will be custodians and ambassadors who consciously and proactively represent the needs of young women and young men at a policy and decision making level.
- There is a need for policy change in which government prioritises gender based work. This recognition and valuing of the work will support implementation of action plans through relevant departments and subgroups.
- Identifying a team of trained workers, in terms of knowledge and practice, who can guide the strategic development of the work at a practice level throughout the sector.
- Gender should be central to all training with those working with young people. This includes training at all levels from Introduction to Youth Work programmes to the degree in Youth and Community Work.
- There needs to be a consistent awareness raising initiative which profiles the issues and needs facing young men and young women.
- The youth sector needs to provide resources, facilities and space for workers to develop gender based work. The concentration is currently on 'participation' but this should be broadened to incorporate participation of young women and young men in all aspects of life.

YouthAction Northern Ireland recognises the need for and significance of further debate in relation to gender based issues. This paper is presented as a further discussion tool for organisations and practitioners working with young women and young men.

This paper has been supported by the University of Ulster – Youth and Community Work Department



YouthAction Northern Ireland, the University of Ulster Community Youth Work Department and The Curriculum Development Unit have hosted a series of thematic seminars.

The purpose of the seminars is to contribute to the understanding of Youth Work, develop training and enhance methodologies. An action learning approach provided opportunities for youth and community workers and others working with young people to share ideas and methods of practice.

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