

The three main strands of work within the Gender Equality Unit include:

- Work with Young Women
- Support and Training for Workers
- Informing Policy and Practice

Work with Young Women

- Employment of young women as peer educators
- Training and employment of young mothers
- Pilot programmes – young lesbians, minority ethnic young women, young women with a disability and other marginalized groups of young women
- Accredited programmes – pre-vocational training for young mothers, peer education training for rural young women
- Political development programmes for young women
- Support to young women's groups

"Through the Speaking Out Programme I have not only built up my own skills and confidence but I have worked with the other young women in the village and they are benefiting too."

Support and Training for Workers

- Accredited training programme – Principles and Practice of Work with Young Women
- Training events exploring gender roles and single gender work
- Co-working in local communities to share expertise of work with young women
- Thematic training – political awareness, sexual health, body image
- Support to develop, deliver and fund programmes for workers and young women's groups

"The programme was a good opportunity to evaluate the reasons why we work with young women, it was really useful to see that other workers were experiencing the same problems as me. I feel more motivated now to work with the young women despite the difficulties."

Informing Policy and Practice

- Support for young women to be included in conferences and events
- Support for young women to take their place on relevant forums and action groups
- YouthAction Northern Ireland conferences to inform policy on specific young women's issues
- Specialist fora set up to focus on young women and young mothers
- Research informing policy and practice
- Responses to consultations regarding young women

"We need the people who make decisions affecting us to hear what we have to say about our experience, they should not only listen but also take action."

INTRODUCTION TO THE AGENCY

Visit our website at www.youthaction.org

YouthAction is Northern Ireland's leading youth development Agency. It is a regional voluntary organisation with bases in Armagh, Belfast, Carrickfergus, Clogher, Crossmaglen and Derry. YouthAction Northern Ireland works with young people to enable them to become active and equal citizens whose voices are heard, respected and valued.

The Agency is committed to:

The potential of young people – we strive to develop young people's capacity to improve the quality of their lives and to affect change in their communities.

Equality, diversity and inclusion – we seek to respect the rights and responsibilities of each individual, to value young people as they are and to include young people in the social and economic life of communities.

Peace building – we want to contribute to a society in which communities live in peace with each other, in which every individual is valued as a citizen and in which there is no place for violence.

Volunteering – we aim to promote voluntary commitment as an integral and vital contribution to society.

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Youth Council for Northern Ireland

COMMUNITY
FUND
Lottery money making a difference

Gender Equality Unit



Supporting Young Women in their Community



YouthAction
NORTHERN IRELAND

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

This priority area of youth work for YouthAction Northern Ireland aims to encourage young women to value themselves, develop their abilities and potential and help them to understand and challenge the prejudice which they may encounter in their lives. The Gender Equality Unit works strategically to redress imbalances and inequalities facing young women. Development of training, networking, models of effective practice, research and influencing policy has been the focus of this work. Partnerships with statutory, voluntary and community organisations have been forged in the development of young women's work. Training for those working with young women has been pioneered and developed by the Unit. The increasing focus of the Gender Equality Unit has been on providing infrastructural support to communities and to develop processes which promote the inclusion of young women (aged fourteen to twenty-five years).

The Gender Equality Unit works with those young women who are most excluded from resources and society e.g. young mothers, rural young women, young lesbians, young travellers, young women with disabilities, minority ethnic young women and those from areas of economic and social deprivation.

DEVELOPMENT OF WORK WITH YOUNG WOMEN

Over many years, one of the key concerns of YouthAction Northern Ireland has been to improve the equality of participation of girls and young women in the Northern Ireland Youth Sector. The need was identified in 1979 for support and training to improve the participation of young women. Between 1979 and 1984 this work became integral to the Agency. Conferences for girls and young women were held annually and training, support, resources and publications such as "Waiting Our Turn" were also offered to those working with young women. In 1984, funding was received from the Department of Education for Northern Ireland for the first training post to develop work with girls and young women. A major review of the Youth Sector was undertaken in 1986 amid concerns about the lack of participation among young women in society in general and the Youth Sector in particular. It became increasingly evident that young women were not using the service to the same extent as young men and when they did attend, they were often on the periphery of the activities.

"It is difficult to capture the mood of the moment" says Kate Campbell in describing the early development of the work during the late 1970's and early 1980's, "though it is important to acknowledge that this was a time when awareness of gender issues and equality was very limited and seen by most as a radical view. Female youth workers raising these issues were perceived as extreme. Single sex programmes e.g. girls and young women's weekends and health programmes were viewed with a lot of suspicion. A conscious decision was made by the Agency to use the term "young women" for those aged fifteen years and over, at a time when it was common that all females, including women workers, were referred to as girls. YouthAction Northern Ireland was the leading organisation pioneering this work and supporting other organisations to develop their practice. The Agency was the first to raise the issue of equality for girls and young women and to fight for the recognition for this vital work, convincing the Department of Education for Northern Ireland to provide resources. Funding for the full-time training post in 1984 and the research that followed in 1988 demonstrate how innovative YouthAction Northern Ireland was in pioneering this work."

YouthAction Northern Ireland continued to set aims and targets to affect change in awareness, attitudes, resources and youth work practice. Links were developed with the University of Ulster's youth work training and the Education and Library Board's training for youth workers. Accredited courses were developed for women such as "Women in Management" and the "Towards Equality" course was designed for both female and male workers towards anti-sexist youth work practice. Furthermore, funding was secured for research into the "Equality of Opportunity for Girls and Young Women in the Full-time Sector of the Northern Ireland Youth Service" which was presented in 1990. The findings from this confirmed the scale of a male orientated and male dominated Youth Service and found that girls began to leave provision as early as thirteen years old. A series of recommendations for policy, practice and training provided a strategy not only for YouthAction Northern Ireland but also for the statutory and voluntary Youth Sector.

Work With Young Mothers

1990 research also highlights young mothers as a specific grouping whose needs were being neglected in relation to accessing education, training and employment. To meet this need YouthAction Northern Ireland piloted innovative work with this group and in 1993 secured substantial European Employment Funding. This resulted in the development of the highly successful Moving On programme which is an accredited pathway to education, employment and greater participation in communities for young mothers aged sixteen to twenty-five years.

"Since becoming a young mother, the combination of not meeting other people regularly, the frustration of lack of opportunities and feeling stigmatised had lowered my self esteem. The Moving On Programme gave me the opportunity to mix with others, build my confidence and self respect."

In 1997 the work developed into a Community Leadership Programme, an employment initiative for young mothers, in partnership with Southern Education and Library Board. This programme combines personal development with professional training, equipping young mothers with a qualification equivalent to NVQ Level 3 and a recognised route into higher education. The young mothers are actually employed on the project, changing their status and lifting them out of the benefit trap.

CURRENT WORK

Despite legislative change and more equitable policies in relation to women introduced in Northern Ireland, society in general has not necessarily changed its attitude towards young women. Particularly with the introduction of the Equality Agenda (Section 75), it is crucial to re-awaken the debate within the Youth Sector with regards to the changing needs of young women in our communities. YouthAction Northern Ireland continues to tackle contentious issues, develop innovative training and pilot programmes which seek to meet the needs of young women.

THE VALUES AND PRINCIPLES OF WORK WITH YOUNG WOMEN

We believe that young women have:

- the right and responsibility to be active citizens
- the skills and capacities to direct their own lives
- the right to have their experience of life valued
- the ability to make real choices about their lives

Through our work we know that young women want to be:

- equal members of society
- valued
- consulted and involved in decisions affecting their lives
- given equal access to provision
- included not excluded

Principles of working with young women are:

- inclusion
- valuing
- partnerships
- empowerment
- challenging inequalities
- effective communication
- informed choices
- challenging negative stereotypes
- innovative programmes
- addressing needs

