



## Young Lesbian Project

### A Model of Effective Practice

"I like being part of the group - I feel that we are able to talk about our feelings and experiences without being judged, which is what normally happens."  
(Out & About Participant, aged 21)

"The group gives us the opportunity to meet other young lesbians outside the usual nightclub scene. There should be more opportunities for other young lesbians."  
(Out & About Participant, aged 20)

**Out & About**  
Young Lesbian Project

"It's hard being a lesbian in Northern Ireland, not knowing who to turn to for support and not knowing how people are going to react when you 'come out' to them."  
(Out & About Participant, aged 18)

"The worst part about being a lesbian is not being accepted. People's attitudes need to change in this country."  
(Out & About Participant, aged 23)

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The Gender Equality





## **OUT AND ABOUT: SUPPORTING YOUNG LESBIANS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Young women's lives are different from young men's. Many factors affect their social behaviour, expectations and opportunities. Many young women suffer from low confidence and low self-esteem and subsequently limited life choices. Young people as a group are often disempowered within our society. Young women make-up approximately 50 per cent of the youth population and all young women experience inequality based on their gender. But young women are not a homogeneous group. Other inequalities arise from social and economic status, race, religion and cultural background, sexual orientation and disability. Therefore many young women face multiple discriminations.

YouthAction Northern Ireland's Gender Equality Unit works strategically to address the inequalities facing young women and it is against this background that the Out and About: Supporting Young Lesbians programme has been piloted and developed over the last two years. This report describes the work of YouthAction Northern Ireland, highlighting the work of the Gender Equality Unit and more specifically the Out and About Group. The report lists issues that the group has highlighted through its engagement with the Agency and the model of practice the Agency has been developing in partnership with the young lesbians. It is important to note at this stage that the work with the group is on-going and will be further evaluated.

### **DEVELOPMENT OF WORK WITH YOUNG WOMEN**

Over the past forty years there has been significant progress in the struggle towards equality for women. This has inevitably been reflected in the Youth Sector. During the late 1970s and early 1980s the Youth Sector in Northern Ireland began to recognise that young women were not participating in the Youth Service provision to the same extent as young men. A pro-active group of women from across the Youth Sector formed a partnership to begin to resolve these issues and produced a publication in 1984 (*Waiting Our Turn*), which highlighted young women as a marginalized group. The report made suggestions for models of practice for those workers willing to challenge the inequalities.

Research carried out by YouthAction Northern Ireland into the provision for young women in the statutory sector (Trimble, 1990) confirmed the scale of a male orientated, male dominated Youth Service and found that girls began to leave youth provision as early as thirteen years old. As a result of this report a series of recommendations for policy, practice and training provided a strategy not only for YouthAction Northern Ireland but also for the Youth Service as a whole. The report further suggested that although young women were not accessing the Youth Sector to the same extent as young men, there were some young women who were even further excluded. As a result of this, the Gender Equality Unit set its objectives for the following number of years based on addressing not only the inequalities that young women face within the Youth Sector, but also the discrimination and inequality they face in their everyday lives. The objectives stated the need to engage with even further marginalized young women i.e. those who did not engage within youth provision at all.

## GENDER EQUALITY UNIT

The Gender Equality Unit within YouthAction Northern Ireland continues to tackle contentious issues, develop innovative training and pilot programmes to meet the needs of young women.

We work with those young women who are most excluded from resources and society such as young mothers, rural young women, young lesbians, young traveller women, young women with disabilities, young women from ethnic minority backgrounds/cultures and those from areas of economic and social deprivation.

The Gender Equality Unit aims to encourage these 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 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 LESBIANS

It has been evident through our on-going work within the Gender Equality Unit that when developing programmes for young women and training for other workers, young lesbians face particular difficulties engaging in programmes. This can be due to attitudes of workers and peers alongside inappropriate methods, materials and venues.

Over the past number of years we have been piloting materials to test and challenge attitudes towards young lesbians and making programmes more accessible to them.

Through this work it was recognised that there was a need for a project that would engage specifically with young lesbians.

## OUT AND ABOUT PROGRAMME

This programme has been running for two years with the Out and About Group meeting on a regular basis for eighteen months. Initially the group consisted of twelve young lesbians aged sixteen to twenty-five years from a range of locations in the Greater Belfast area. During this time the young women have had an opportunity to meet up in a safe environment, share experiences and identify the key issues that impact on the lives of young lesbians in Northern Ireland. They are currently in the process of developing ways to address these issues with a core group of eight members.



## **Pen Pictures of Two Out and About Group Members**

Alison (aged twenty-one)

**“My name is Alison, I am twenty-one years old and I currently live in Belfast. I have been ‘out’ to my friends and family for three years now. ‘Coming out’ was so difficult because you are so scared you will lose so many people. Almost all my friends stood by me when I told my family. Unfortunately my family did not accept my sexual orientation as well as I had hoped. I do not talk to my brothers any longer, however, in some ways I feel closer to my parents than I ever have.**

**I joined the Out and About Group so I could learn more about my sexuality and myself, eventually helping others to deal with issues relating to their sexual orientation. It is important to know who you are and through YouthAction Northern Ireland I am learning about myself all the time.**

**There are only two gay bars in Belfast and we have a very small gay community that is mainly male. Being part of Out and About has given me a chance to meet new people in the same situation as myself. I feel more comfortable meeting young lesbians outside the scene as you can develop friendships easily.”**

L (aged twenty-four)

**“Knowing something is different in your life is hard to deal with at a young age. I had to deal with the ‘not getting married’, the ‘not having kids’, and just breaking your parents’ hearts.**

**Also the fact that people think they have a right to have an opinion about what you do in your life is very difficult to deal with.**

**I find it extremely hard in work because of everyone’s homophobia. I do not think I would be accepted in work ever if I ever ‘came out’. But I suppose I am what I am and that’s the territory that goes with it although it may change with the right support. Thank you YouthAction Northern Ireland.”**

### **Aims and Objectives of Out and About**

The project aims to facilitate partnerships between young lesbians and relevant agencies and through effective youth work practice, engage with young lesbians in supporting them to identify and address issues impacting on their lives.

The key areas of work identified for the Out and About Project are:

Map relevant existing legalities, policy and practice of work with young lesbians.

Network and build partnerships with relevant organisations and agencies to foster good working relationships.

Engage and build partnerships with young lesbians to identify and address their needs, issues and interests.

In partnership with young lesbians and organisations pilot a model of practice, which could inform the Youth Service curriculum, and other relevant policies and organisations.

### **Issues Arising**

Many of the issues the group identified, as having an impact, have been around all aspects of their lives such as school, 'coming out', attitudes of people in general, health, drugs/alcohol, employment, laws and provision for young lesbians. The following is a brief summary of some of the key issues highlighted during the programme.

#### **School**

Most of the issues highlighted by the group around school are based on the lack of information given to pupils around sex education and relationships. If any of the young women were lucky enough to receive some form of sex education, lesbian/gay relationships were always taboo.

Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 prohibits local authorities from intentionally "promoting" homosexuality, or publishing materials with the intention of "promoting" homosexuality. It also prohibits local authorities from teaching the acceptability of homosexuality as a family relationship in any maintained school. This law is not relevant in Northern Ireland but has been used by many schools to prevent any form of education/information being given to young people.

#### **"If I asked anything about lesbians or alternative families I was told to be quiet."**

(Young woman aged seventeen)

Through discussions in the group it became apparent that the average age for young women realising that they 'felt different' from peers was eleven to twelve years old and that they never talked to anyone about this until they were fifteen to sixteen years old. This is a very long time for a young person to carry around feelings of 'being different' at a time when young women are already going through huge changes in their lives.



## Out & About

This period of feeling alone inevitably leads to feelings of isolation, depression, low self-esteem, self-hate, self-harm, anxiety, suicide and other emotional health issues. The quotation “of course it is extremely difficult to like oneself in a culture which thinks you are a disease” (Chrystos) sums up many of the feelings expressed by the young women:

**“I remember feeling so alone at school, I had no-one to talk to that I could trust and I tried on several occasions to commit suicide.”**

(Young women aged twenty-two)

**Many of the group members had also experienced various forms of bullying at school ranging from name calling to physical violence. Most of the young women talked of a ‘huge pressure from peers to be straight’.**

**“It would have been really good if teachers had taught us more about us all being equal instead of how wrong it was to be gay.”**

(Young woman aged nineteen)

The majority of the young women in the group felt that around the time of making choices for future careers they were struggling with coming to terms with their sexual orientation and that took precedence over any career choices they were facing at the time.

**“I just wanted to get a job and leave home so I could be myself and go on the gay scene and not have to explain my whereabouts to my parents all the time. I really felt like I fitted in on the gay scene.”**

(Young women aged twenty)

### Coming Out

“Coming out is the process of realising and accepting your own sexuality.”

(Davies, D. & Neill, C: Pink Therapy, 1996)

The group agreed that one of the hardest aspects of their lives was that of ‘coming out’. Lesbians and gay men spend their entire lives coming out to either themselves, friends, family, work colleagues, teachers, youth workers, medical staff etc.

**“It’s hard being a lesbian in Northern Ireland: not knowing who to turn to for support and not knowing how people are going to react when you ‘come out’ to them.”**

(Young woman aged eighteen)

The main concerns for the young women are dealing with the feelings of rejection, particularly from family and friends.

**“When I told my mum that I was gay she told me that I had to move out. I didn’t realise until later that my whole family were getting hassle from neighbours about my ‘being out’.”**

(Young woman aged seventeen)

The majority of the young women in the group felt guilty at not being able to be honest to family and friends. One young woman's personal strategy was **"if they cannot try to accept it (me being gay), then it's not worth it."** (Young woman aged twenty-three). She did, however, say that this strategy did not really work if it was a family member that she wanted to 'come out' to.

### Attitudes

**"The worst part about being a lesbian is not being accepted. People's attitudes need to change in this country."** (Young woman aged eighteen)

The young women in the group all felt that the attitudes of many people they come into contact with such as family, friends, teachers, youth workers, doctors, employers, work colleagues needed to change if life was to be any easier for lesbians in Northern Ireland.

All of the young women were able to relate to several occasions in their lives where they felt they had been treated differently because of their sexual orientation.

**"I have had to move jobs at least four times over the last two years because of work colleagues giving me a hard time about being a lesbian. In one job male workers threatened me with violence."** (Young woman aged twenty-three)

### Health

**"I hate the way doctors always assume that you are straight."** (Young woman aged eighteen)

This seemed to be a big concern to the young women in the group and made them feel particularly awkward on many occasions when visiting their GPs.

All the young women in the group felt that they were given absolutely no information around sexually transmitted infections and other general health issues relevant to their lives either at school or by GPs.

Sexual health information workshops were organised for the group and were delivered by an information worker from Health for Youth through Peer Education (HYPE), the Sexual Health Project within the North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust. The worker came to the sessions with an abundance of relevant information for the young women, which they felt they knew absolutely nothing about.

**"I had no idea that we should be using protection, how are other young lesbians meant to know this."** (Young woman aged twenty-four)

Work with young women includes many discussions about sexuality in a safe environment. It is one of the most central concerns for young women and they want to discuss it. Young women need the opportunity to explore their feelings and attitudes about their sexuality. Unfortunately discussions about sex and relationships often centre around issues of boyfriends, contraception, pregnancy, childbirth, abortion, etc. The assumption is that sexuality is heterosexuality and it is rarely considered or acknowledged that young women may be lesbian.



## Out & About

Young women generally have little or no opportunity to discuss their sexual feelings in an open and honest way. Young lesbians have even less opportunity and therefore often experience feelings of isolation. Many experience teasing, ridicule, threats and violence from other young people. Teachers, parents and youth workers who dismiss their 'coming out' as a passing phase often treat them as immature.

### Employment

There were many issues raised by the group around employment. The main issues were 'a fear of being outed at work', 'peer pressure from colleagues to be straight', 'homophobia', 'harassment' and 'discrimination around promotion opportunities'.

**“I work in a mainly male work environment with around three thousand employees. Not a day goes by without derogatory comments being made about gay people. There is absolutely no way I can be myself in work. It's hard when they talk about being out at the weekend and talk about their girlfriends/wives because that's all I want to do.”**

(Young woman aged twenty-four)

As mentioned previously, one young woman has had to move jobs four times in the last two years and at one of her places of employment was threatened with violence by male workers.

**“I think people know immediately that I am a lesbian, because of the way I look probably - I seem to get a really hard time about it especially in work.”**

(Young woman aged twenty-three)

### Law

There was a consensus within the group that there was a lack of information around as to the rights of lesbians in Northern Ireland. The main issues mentioned were around having no protection and no rights in relationships.

### Provision

All the young women agreed that there is little in the way of provision for lesbians in general and more specifically young lesbians.

From first identifying that they were lesbians the young women felt a total lack of support and information. There was no information at schools, in youth clubs, in nightclubs, at doctors' surgeries. They felt they had nowhere to go to access information or to meet other young people like themselves. One young woman had the courage to ring Lesbian Line to find out if there was somewhere that lesbians went.

Having the Out and About Group for the young women to attend has proved to be a great source of support to the young women. These are some of the comments they have made during regular evaluations:

**“I like being part of the group – I feel that we are able to talk about our feelings and experiences without being judged which is what normally happens.”**

**“I feel like I am understood in the group.”**

**“I am happy and feel privileged to be part of this group. I feel excited about what we can achieve.”**

**“I enjoy meeting new people who are just like me.”**

**“The group gives us the opportunity to meet other young lesbians outside the usual nightclub scene. There should be more opportunities for other young lesbians.”**

The Out and About Group is currently designing some posters and postcards which it's hope will raise awareness of the issues that impact on the lives of young lesbians in Northern Ireland whilst also promoting young lesbians in a positive way. The group is also designing a web page with the same objectives but also to offer some kind of support/information-giving service to young lesbians or those questioning their sexual orientation.

As a response to more and more organisations looking to consult with the group for various reasons, the Out and About Group is undertaking training that will enable its members to be more confident and articulate during consultation sessions.





### MODEL OF PRACTICE FOR WORK WITH YOUNG LESBIANS

The model of practice we have effectively used to engage and work with the young lesbian group is underpinned by the values of the Gender Equality Unit.

#### **We believe that young women have:**

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

#### **We work towards young women being:**

- Equal members of society
- Consulted and involved in decisions affecting their lives
- Given equal access to provision
- Included not excluded
- Valued

#### **Mapping**

##### **Review any existing legislation to ensure the work is informed**

##### **Review relevant policy to ensure resources can be accessed**

Map existing support structures of work with young lesbians in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, United Kingdom and other European States, to avoid duplication, to build possible links with a view to developing partnerships and sharing practice and to build a support network for the development of the work to prevent working in isolation

Develop partnerships with the relevant local organisations to build alliances and identify the gaps in provision

#### **Engaging**

Set up an advisory group with people who have the required skills, knowledge and expertise including young lesbians. The advisory group is a vitally important element of the practice ensuring good quality analysis, reflection, and formative evaluation, support and advice to the project.

Recruit a group of young lesbians. This requires research into where young lesbians are and outreach work ensuring young lesbians can be accessed, have on-going contact and the assurance of a safe environment. There are other aspects that need to be considered which include transport, a comfortable and accessible environment for the group to meet and childcare, where relevant.

As young lesbians are a group that are vulnerable to consequences due to exposure of their sexual orientation it is extremely important to provide an environment where they will be physically and emotionally safe to explore aspects of their sexual orientation in an open and honest way.

Explore and address their expectations and fears of being part of the group and develop a working contract that will be kept under constant review.

A lot of time needs to be spent on building relationships both within the group itself and with the facilitators. This builds the potential to explore and reflect on more personal issues during the later stages of the programme.

Offer social activities on a regular basis, to compliment the group work sessions.

Opportunities to meet with and discuss issues etc. with other young lesbians in Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, United Kingdom and Europe.

### **Reflection**

Informal and participative youth work methods are used to explore and reflect on:

Issues relevant to the young women. These issues may include, coming out, employment, isolation, depression, low self-esteem, self-hate and self-harm, alcohol and drug mis/use, suicide and other related health issues, attitudes, school/education, laws and provision/resources available and other interests the young women may have.

Heterosexism and homophobia and how these affect themselves, their families, friends, schools, youth service, churches, sports, the medical professions and employment.

The more positive aspects about being a young lesbian, which may help to raise their confidence and self esteem.

The visualisation of what can be changed towards supporting themselves and other young lesbians in the future. This leads into the next phase of the programme that involves the group becoming active in making a difference.

### **Active Citizenship**

In partnership with the young women challenge the prejudice and inequalities faced by young lesbians and create more opportunities for them to be involved in a safe, inclusive and meaningful way.

Raise awareness of the existence of young lesbians, promote young lesbians in a positive way and support other young lesbians, for example, through disseminating information about the project, development of a web page giving relevant information to young lesbians and those exploring their sexual orientation and posters and postcards displaying positive images of young lesbians.

Create opportunities for the group to meet with other young lesbian groups to share experiences i.e. in the Republic of Ireland, United Kingdom and other European countries.

Inform policy and practice through ensuring the voice of young lesbians can be heard in the relevant arenas.



## Out & About

Where decisions may be made affecting them. Inform the Curriculum and other relevant forums of the needs and issues facing young lesbians. Get involved in any research that will affect policy, practice and resource allocation.

### Evaluation

Ensure on-going evaluation throughout all levels of the project using this reflection to ensure the effectiveness of the project.

Develop clear and concise recommendations that can be used to affect practice towards an improved provision for young lesbians.

Identify ways to sustain the work with young lesbians through building partnerships, disseminating learning and effective models of practice, sourcing funding and resources and keeping informed regarding legislation and policy.

## INITIAL RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Our experience with the Out and About Group has clearly shown that with the right environment and skilled staff it is possible to engage effectively with young lesbians and provide programmes that can meet their needs. Some of the recommendations to date include:

Work with young lesbians should be based on principles of equality, respect and trust.

The safety of the group should be paramount to the work as young lesbians are more vulnerable to consequences as a result of exposure.

Young lesbians need to be adequately supported and resourced to enable them to engage in peer education models, consultations and conferences e.g. travel expenses and childcare costs when appropriate.

Specific projects should be developed regionally to support young lesbians to provide information, advice and safe arenas for exploring needs and issues.

It should be recognised that a social aspect should be involved in programmes as young women have little opportunity to socialise with other young lesbians outside the 'gay scene'.

Good partnerships should be developed with young lesbians and those working with young lesbians, to ensure maximum benefit to the young women involved.

Work with young lesbians requires appropriately trained and skilled and supported staff.

Those who engage with young people need on-going training to develop an awareness of issues facing young lesbians, to develop their skills and challenge heterosexism and homophobic attitudes in practice.

There has been significant and on-going learning for the Agency through implementing the Out and About Programme. This learning is being disseminated through our practice, with other workers involved in working with young women, communities and policy makers.

Through the Gender Equality Unit we offer training to those working with young women on the 'Principles and Practice of Work with Young Women' (level III NIOCN) accredited course, and although young women and sexual orientation has always been an aspect of this training we are currently working on a more extensive module that will focus on sexual orientation.

Through our work within our EQUAL – Northern Ireland Community Employment Initiative we are further exploring the issues that young lesbians may face in relation to their access and progress in employment and developing ways to address these issues.

The Out and About Group has already been instrumental in informing recent consultations such as for the Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, the Centre for the Study of Conflict on their research on homophobic hate crime, the Department of Education commissioned research into the needs of young lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Northern Ireland and another EQUAL funded project Diversity Matters.

The Out and About Group continues to meet and we will continue to evaluate and disseminate our learning.



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