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*The Views and Experiences of Young Women in
Northern Ireland: a qualitative study*

Research funded by the Big Lottery Fund

YouthAction Northern Ireland
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Research Aims:

- To conduct work with young women to gain a better understanding of their lives
- To devise and pilot programmes of work based on research findings

Fieldwork - Phase 1

Focus groups

Aims:

To ensure research process to be participatory, active and engaging

to gather information on the views of young women and represent their views as a group

to enable young women to define the issues important to them so that we might include these in the interviews

7 groups – 48 young women – themed discussions

- Rural communities - access to information, facilities and services
- Urban area - leisure and community
- Interface area – health
- Derry/Londonderry - education, employment and training
- Attending a grammar school - politics
- Young women from minority ethnic backgrounds - all themes

Phase 2 - 43 in-depth interviews

Sample –Age

26% 16-18 years

35% 19-21 years

39% 22-25 years

mean age = 21 years

Sample cont'd

36 of 43 young women self identified as heterosexual

4 as lesbian

3 as unsure/not knowing

7 were mothers

49% had involvement with a youth group

51% reported no involvement

Phase 3

Develop and pilot programmes based on research findings

Develop resources for future work with youth women

Centre Staging Young Women in the Research Process

Peer researcher:

- Research design and data collection
- Primary role - work with groups of young women who would help steer the research, develop, recruit and run programmes to be developed from research findings.

Young Women's Working Group:

- Helped inform the issues to be explored
- Piloted instruments of data collection
- Commented on initial findings
- Involved in preparing presentations to research steering group
- Designed a range of resources to be used in peer education

Findings

Overall Finding: Persistence of Gender Inequality

Thematic areas:

Education and careers

Home and Family

Leisure

Education

Most positive – by far friendships and social aspects of school.

Negative – school environment /routine, bullying +lasting impact of bullying, lack of support from teachers, moving schools, personal difficulties outside school

Subject choice – traditional and areas typically associated as female.

Number of points relating to this –

1. Choice?
2. Young women's acceptance of these differences/divisions as natural or 'just the way things are'

*‘Home Economics was cooking and girls like to cook’
(Kelly, aged 21)*

*‘...Health Promotion and Social Care an’ all that there
I don’t know too many boys that would be interested in it....
Boys mostly go for the manly jobs’ (Kim, aged 21)*

- Pressure to achieve
- Tendency to individualise failure
- Those with most difficult school experiences –tended to be those who had pressures outside school: dealing with abuse; parental illness; bereavement; caring responsibilities
- Even where significant difficulties were experienced – did not result in rejection of education
- View of education being more important to women

Good experiences of Alternative Education Provision

Examples of positive experience of some school counselling services + potential of this

For some school was a positive ‘place of challenge’ in terms of information on sexuality, opportunity to meet people from different religious/cultural backgrounds

Careers

Careers advice generally regarded as poor

Evidence of being encouraged to conform to gender
Stereotypes

Vocational training courses taken were in areas of
Employment dominated by females

Home and Family

Family Support –

- Connectedness to mothers
- Financial support
- Role of extended families – especially where immediate family relationships difficult

Abuse

- Premature experience of independent living
- Lack of support when abuse disclosed

‘sometimes I would be really nervous and quiet and stuff in school, people just thought I was strange, but if the school had actually took time to think But they never did... And going into school with bruises and all’ (Susie, aged 20)

- Sense of responsibility for siblings
- Long term impact of abuse –

‘all the bad stuff that’s happened made me a stronger person’

– not uncommon sentiment – but much evidence of continuing vulnerability

Domestic Violence

Lack of surprise/acceptance at domestic violence statistic

Some comments suggest a degree of acceptance about domestic violence: *I attract them as my mum says*

Or not perceiving abuse as domestic violence because *'I had just been pushed...'* or if you hit back that's ok *'... there's far too many people thinking this is the norm ... And a lot more girls need to realise he hits you, you hit him back ...'*

Methods of Coping

Coping mechanisms tend to fall into two categories:

1. Most common - Ignore it/block it out/just get on with it
2. Talk to family/friends

Reluctance to talk – admission of vulnerability?

Survivor mentality

Leisure

Evidence of young women dropping out of youth provision between 12-14 years:

- Not gender appropriate
- Not age appropriate
- Other commitments (e.g. school, work, caring etc)

‘I’ve went to youth clubs an’ stuff whenever I was growin’ up an’ things like that but ye jus’ never had a big range of activities it was either football or pool. An’ like I jus’ wasn’t one for playin’ football’ ...//... The girls usually jus’ sat an’ played a board game or somethin’ an’ hang about, ye know, ‘I wanna go an’ play board games on a Friday night’ it doesn’t quite work does it?’ (Jemima, aged 20)

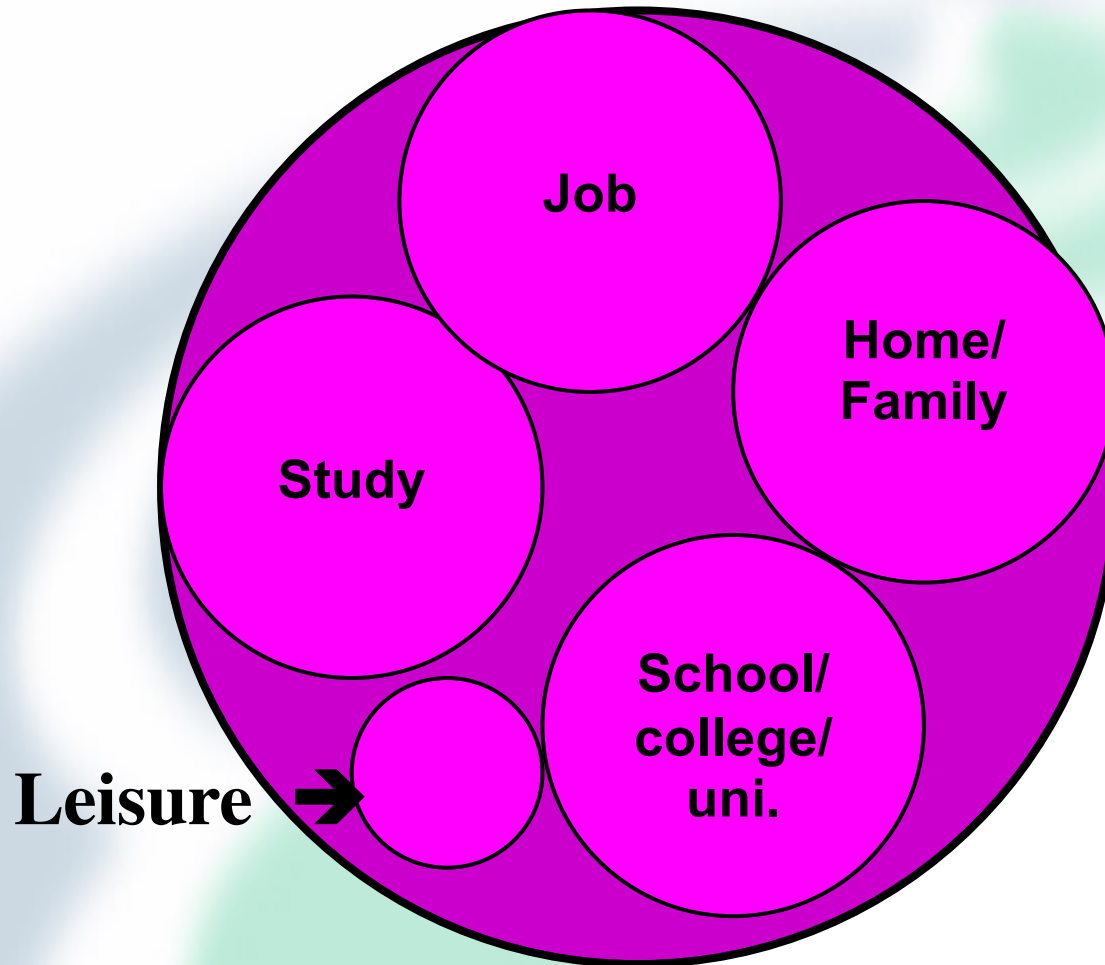
Lack of things to do in local areas resulted in many spending much of their free time on the streets.

Engrained gender stereotypes?: Despite prevalence of this activity among young women and its association with alcohol use, some damning responses about behaviour of young women - even from those who had been involved in this activity themselves.

Lack of free time - multiple realities of young women's lives.

‘Work, go to school, do my homework ...//... I don't really have much time for anything else.’
(Jill, aged 17)

The Leisure Squeeze



‘...there’s so much media and so much literature about the fight for the woman going back hundreds of years and look how far it’s come, then has it really? ...//...it’s quite confusing when you’re led to believe that you can do anything, but then when you try, you get knocked down and you think to yourself ‘what’s it all about?’