

Traditions of Girls' Work

- When I agreed to speak at today's event, my immediate thought was that I should look at three historical phases. 1) pre WW1; 2) the feminist movement for working with girls dating roughly 1975-1992, and a 3rd phase which seems to be happening round about now.
- We could think differently about traditions – for instance,
 - we could think in terms of different types of work: welfare work, educational work; rescue work; campaigning work –
 - or we might think in terms of the type of organisational form single sex work, mixed work, club work, uniformed work.
 - Or then again, we might think in terms of youth work aimed at to different groups of young women Jewish girls, black girls, young workers, unemployed girls, young mothers, young lesbians, asylum seekers, trafficked young women - the list is as long as there are different identities and issues amongst young women.
- However, having thought about the options, I for locating traditions, I came back to the historical model as the most useful framework .I came back to this mainly because history points to some discontinuities as well as some continuities in work with girls and young women as well as continuities. My thought about three phases indicates change, disruption and discontinuity in the moments 'in-between'. And it is often these historical discontinuities – the low moments as well as the high - can teach us a great deal.
- So what I want to do is use the breaks in the traditions to help us think about where we are now.
- It is possible to argue that there are no real breaks. That there has been a continuous history. I was discussing this with a colleague last week and she said, yes, something came to an end, but we are still doing the work. It's going on all over the place. And yes, I have to agree with her. What is going on? Single sex work continues and has always has. For instance, the Girls guides were growing in the period between WW1 and WW2 when the National Organisation of Girls Clubs was busily mixing and losing its female-only status. Feminist work begun in the 1970s and 1980s continues today, and depending how you define feminist, it could be argued that there always has been feminist work. Issue-based work continues, and it always has. So, what characterises the breaks?
- For me, the breaks are about loss. Loss of female-centredness in the decision-making processes about youth work, loss of female autonomy in practice, loss of a distinctive language with which to understand the meaning of what we do, and perhaps integral to all of these, loss of organisation and networks of communication.
- So, for instance, the period after the first world war, was characterised by the mixing of girls' clubs, the change of focus in the National Organisation of Girls' Clubs to eventually become the National Organisation of Youth Clubs, and inevitably, the eventual loss of female control of that organisation. Meanwhile the loss experienced since the late 1980s can probably be dated exactly to the closure of the Girls' Work Unit in the National Association of Youth Clubs in early 1987 and with that the loss of the Working with Girls Newsletter and the end of the annual national conferences for feminist workers.

- On both occasions, single sex traditions of working with girls and young women were pushed into the background, or as we used to say, into the margins of generic youth work practice and language. And what was pushed out with them was any sense that there was something generic about a female perspective and female control over work with girls and young women.
 - *Anecdote about Sunderland. Interviewing a woman in the early 1990s talking about her work with girls and young women. I remember her outrage at the way in which the local authority had given to a male worker had given to her the task of organising the girls' day. I feel a similar sort of dismay at the way in which International Women's Day has become part of the calendar of community and youth work – a sort of special day for women which is tolerated by everyone, where we can all be multi-cultural and no questions are asked, but where the agendas are not expected to spill over into the remainder of the year.*
- So although single sex work might continue, it does so as a special interest, with specialist 'issues'. What it does not do is say that these issues for women have implications for everyone. That the ways in which female asylum seekers are treated is a female concern but not just a female concern. That women's understanding of its meaning should be heard as part of mainstream practice. It is this power to influence, if not *define* overall agendas which departs with the loss of female controlled organisation, and communication networks.

So what is the work about?

- I would like to move from thoughts of loss to address what I think are three important characteristics that history tells us are key to any tradition of girls' work. I think if we understand these and their meaning we are in a better position to reconstruct and grow work which is defined in female terms. These three characteristics are as follows:
 1. The notion that sex/gender difference is ever-present. There is something specific to being female which suggests different issues and priorities in the lives of young women from those of young men.
 2. This implies that youth work which is concerned with young women should be female centred and female focused. It implies specific content, programming and activities relating to the social positioning of girls and young women in order to encourage their participation. In this sense it is concerned with female commonality. But it is also concerned with the meaning of difference, between young men and young women, amongst girls and women themselves. This implies different methods of working which address the implications of these differences which range from questions of experience and interest right through to questions of equality and power.
 3. If the work is to be female-centred and female focused, this implies that should also be female organised and female directed. Commonality of experience of being female enables understanding and identification in relation to gender

issues, although to necessarily in relation to other issues and provides a space wherein female workers might exert some influence.

- Now I realise that each of the characteristics which I have identified is contentious. Certainly the meanings have been interpreted differently at different historic moments. But in some ways, that is the point. We need to be constantly debating and discussing the meaning and implications of these characteristics between ourselves and with others in order to establish where we sit within traditions of working with girls and young women.
- For example, if I just take the first issue (I probably won't have time to do more than this)
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 - Pre WW1, sex difference and gender difference were identified as one and the same thing. For most of the women involved in girls' club work and outreach work with girls and young women, social role was defined by nature. It was considered the natural destiny of girls to become mothers. Although that simple idea was beset with all sorts of complexities relating to class, ethnicity, sexuality and of course the simple problem of there being a surplus of women over men, there was a general belief that fulfilment of female nature was through the feminine attributes associated with marriage, housewifery and motherhood. So as middle class women sought to intervene in the lives of working class girls around their ideas of the meaning of sex, gender and social roles, they sought to do so in relation to the possibilities for such girls of fulfilling their feminine potential and achieving the full expression of their female nature. The aim was a good marriage, good household skills and good mothering skills – all framed in a sort of romantic perception of femininity:
 - *Oh woman, lovely woman! Nature made thee*
 - *To temper man; we had been brutes without you:*
 - *Angels are painted fair to look like you;*
 - *There's in you all we believe of heaven;*
 - *Amazing brightness, purity, and truth,*
 - *Eternal joy and everlasting love.*

(Quoted by Lily Montagu, in Urwick 1904).
 - Within this in turn, two traditions emerged, and here we perceive the politics of the work. Firstly there was a tradition of simply 'skilling up' the girls, training them, passing on the benefits which the middle class workers had accrued in their own lives. Most girls' club workers were concerned with this essentially conservative practice associated with 'lack' and 'deficiency' in working class girls, encouraging a surrogate 'mothering' amongst workers.
 - But there was another, more liberal, and even socialist tradition, which identified problems in the workplace, in the conditions within which working class girls lived their working and domestic lives. This awareness added another dimension to the practice, including a combination of

welfare and campaigning work. And it was this tradition which led to the development of the National Organisation of Girls Clubs.

- *Like other philanthropists, club-workers are too easily satisfied with fringing the problems with which they should endeavour to grapple. They peep down the abyss in which the underfed, the ill-housed, and badly clothed work out their life's drama, and then they turn their energies to surface polishing. They try to make their girls conduct themselves well in the clubs, and interest them and amuse them as best they can during their evening's leisure. But they are inclined to ignore the industrial life; they like to forget the grim truth that if girls work for less than a living wage, in a vitiated atmosphere, they are not likely to become the strong, self controlled women whom we desire the clubs to train... (Urwick, ed. 1904 p249/50)*
- Most importantly, it was this particular aspect of the work which was lost in the mixing process which took place after the first world war.
- If we fast forward to the 1970s, we find that the whole idea that there should be any relationship between sex/gender and social role was turned on its head. Within this the relationship between sex and gender themselves were open for question. Because a girl was biologically female, there was no reason why her sexuality or her gender identity should be concerned with traditional notions of the meaning of femininity. Instead, women workers emerging from the feminist movement of the period questioned the whole notion that adult roles should be related to biology. They focused upon the injustices and inequalities wrought by this assumption and sought to raise questions with the girls and young women about the meaning of being female in a society characterised by gender inequality. From this perspective, questions of power in personal relationships and inequality in economic relations were central. And whatever the actual practice, the idea of the movement for work with girls and young women was to question and challenge such power and inequality.
- But here too there were complexities. Was this challenge to be done by working within the system as it stood, or to be undertaken through campaigning, political action and challenging the nature of the organisations. At some point, perhaps the challenge became too great for the organisations. The sudden closure of the girls work unit, was a warning that organisations can actively exclude if they feel challenged and threatened. At the same time they can accommodate. So we see a move towards the dominance of thinking about policy, about equal opportunities approaches and women workers beginning to be co-opted into management positions. Here they might exert influence but only in certain terms.

- And so I am brought to ask, what is the nature of sex/gender difference now? What does it mean to say I am female in this society? What does it imply about gender roles? What should we do as women workers to incorporate that into our practice? And what are the complexities of that?

Ended here apart from the final few points.

- If I take the second characteristic, very briefly, about being female centred and female focused, how we interpret this depends upon how we understand the implications of sex and gender difference.
 - So we can see that in the first pre-WW1, there was as strong sense that masculinity was predatory, that young women needed protection. Single sex conditions of work were assumed. They were not fought for because it was taken for granted that females were so different. Because there were very specific skills and knowledge, and very specific social issues which were of concern to girls and women it was inevitable that clubs would construct female centred programmes, centering these issues and encouraging girls to develop their skills.
 - But also for those workers in the liberal tradition, the specific experience of the gendered division of labour meant that young women's domestic and employment issues were distinctive and to address them required a specialist focus. So this might involve for instance, campaigning for better sanitary facilities in the workplace, and for female factory inspectors to deal with health and safety in women's work but also for
 - Again, if we move to the late twentieth century, we find that after nearly half a century of ceding space to men and boys, of a process of mixing girls clubs, when youth, rather than gender was perceived as the dominant issue for young people, then single sex work in itself becomes contentious. In some ways, women in the 1970s had to reconstruct and rediscover a whole set of issues about predatory masculinity and refashion them for a new age. Masculinity was re-identified as problematic for girls and women, but not just around sexual predation, also around aggression and violence which extended from the extremes of the physical right through to women's ability to speak and thing for themselves. So single sex work was now not just about protecting girls and women, it was also about enabling them to fight back, but also about empowering them and about challenging the assumptions about gender relations which created inequality.
 - The question now became one associated with the way in which gender power was related to gender difference and the agenda shifted to challenging the terms of reference of that power. This included a challenge to the previous conceptions of essential male and female biology. Here both personal and social practices need to be tackled. In this, women workers suggested that female centred practice had implications too for the ways in which men worked with boys and young men, and the ways in which everyone worked around gender issues.

- Meanwhile, the workplace was counter-posed to the domestic drudgery associated with traditional female roles and female focused practice. so again, presuppositions of a previous era were turned on their head. The domestic role was challenged and so too were the terms of femininity with which it was associated. Instead, the potential of the workplace and opportunities for work were highlighted. This fed into an agenda which included the idea that single sex youth work might compensate for deficiencies in girls' education, focusing upon non-traditional skills, upon the nature of sexual discrimination in workplaces that excluded or prevented women from participating fully and upon childcare provision.
- And in this regard, with reference to today, perhaps we should say, before of what you wish for! We need to continue to look at female centred practice in terms of the power relationships between the sexes, and we still need to consider the relationship between domestic life and employment, but the gender issues here have shifted again, as everyone is expected to work regardless of domestic opportunities, and expected to work in an essentially low waged economy.
- To move to the final point, the issue about identity and identification between women workers is one which is especially fraught.
 - To some extent, it relies on the feminist conception of sisterhood and the idea that we can somehow all relate to each other because we are women. Certainly it was a belief held by the women who worked in the late Victorian/Edwardian period, who though mainly that female nature was decreed by god (whoever they identified as their god). And there is no doubt that it was the basis upon which the feminist movement for work with girls was founded, but this time around common gender inequality in addition to female experiences of biology.
 - This notion of female identity and identification is a powerful means of encouraging empathy and sympathy, intensifying the relational element of the work at the same time as encouraging a shared language of experience to help identify mutual issues of concern.
 - However, it becomes dangerous and problematic if it doesn't identify limits to mutuality. The class difference between the first female social workers and the girls with whom they worked, was responsible for a serious strain of conservatism in the work where the real issues confronting working class girls and women were simply ignored by most. When a masculine trade union and labour movement began to move into the frame of campaigning on workplace matters, the liberal wing of the girls club movement was simply outflanked on both sides partly because of a failure to understand the implications of the class power relations.
 - We must also acknowledge that the feminist movement for WWG&YW floundered partly because of its inability to deal with the inherent contradiction which suggests that same should work with same, in relation to structured power relations between women. One of the keys to its success also became a key to its fragmentation and disintegration.

- So to move forward again to the present, how do we identify the common female interests? Where are they, what do they imply about the way we work and most importantly, what are their limits and how should we address that?

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to say firstly how important I think this conference is today. Important partly because comes from within a national organisation whose origins are in work with young women but mainly, it is important because it is a step to recovering those key things we have lost – an opportunity for speaking to each other as women in female only space and hopefully the beginning of an opportunity to begin to regenerate lost networks and meaningful female-controlled organisation.

I hope that we shall be able to speak about things today that are denied us or self-censored in other contexts and I hope we shall be able to do so in a way which recognises our traditions and builds upon them, but at the same time recognises that they are not fixed, that we need to engage in a process of constant questioning, debate, and development between ourselves and with young women. Mostly, I hope that today brings new thoughts, new organisation and new energy for a politicised practice around youth work which is female focused.