

The fourth Youth & Policy, *Thinking Seriously* conference on the 10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> June 2014 focused on the subject of feminism and youth work. Aptly named *Thinking Afresh: Feminism and Youth Work*, the two-day women only conference brought together youth and community workers, academics and students with a desire to develop a critical feminist understanding of current policy agendas and issues of gender inequality that affect young women, girls, and women workers.

The conference opened with Keynote Speaker, Julie Bentley CEO of Girlguiding, who gave a rendition of space for feminist potential within the largest voluntary female organisation. Julie identified tensions and limitations, reflecting upon her own personal experiences of 'coming out' as a feminist to members and Trustees of the organisation. In all, Julie created an atmosphere favourable to debate and conversation on challenges to feminist youth work.

Workshops provided opportunity for delegates to come together and develop ideas for feminist work with young women, to identify the root causes of gender inequality, and explore different ways of 'disrupting' power. The Young Women's Adventure Club and Girls R Ace Adventure Centre covered the benefits of the outdoors, a feminist 'curriculum', and the challenges to engaging with young women. Sacha Kaufman from the Deans Youth Centre facilitated an interesting session on working with under-represented groups that had much to do with group work. Huffty Reah from the West End Women's and Girls Centre and Tracey Hodgson from the Safe Project together offered top tips for influencing preventative domestic abuse, as a practical, non-judgemental, effective and theoretically-based approach to enabling women and their children to understand the impact of domestic abuse without blame being put on themselves.

Other workshops reflected values at the heart of campaigning and communications, as well as ways of organising. For example, Gemma Aitchinson's *YES Matters* workshop, *A Better Sexual Education for a Better Future*, provided opportunity for her to discuss the campaigns current position on training in schools, colleges, youth clubs, and community organisations, and to explore potential future direction with the support of participants in the session. In addition, Feminist Webs contribution to the conference focussed on the lessons learnt so far in the organisation's endeavour to continue with the forward march of feminism in youth work, covering key issues and strategies to tackle sexism.

There was input from women academics who shared their research interests, such as Tyrell Golding's session on female volunteers' motivations and experiences in youth work, which was set against the backdrop of current social policy, as was Aniela Wenham's exploration of experiences of 'teenage' pregnancy. Judith Metz from Amsterdam University shared fascinating research to identify methodical principles in girls work to guide the action of girl's workers. Other topics of interest included Steph Green's session on the powerful messages in children's films, as participants were encouraged to think about how they could use film as pedagogy in their own practice. Moreover, Janet Batsleer's session considered global brandings of feminisms and what forms of solidarity might be encouraged through community-based work with girls in

the future. In addition, Kate Thackeray's session considered the question, *Do Women in Professional Roles Find Their Voices are 'censored' in their personal and family domains?* This proved to be an illuminating topic of discussion as participants shared their own experiences of having a 'strong' presence in their professional lives, but often unheard in their personal domain.

These themes reflected the symposiums question - *is it the time to set up a national organisation for work with girls and young women?* As a 'hotly' debated discussion, it ended with a consensus that Feminist Webs online and 'real world' space for women and girls work, offered a model of feminist organising with potential to spread far wider than the North West of England. In addition, it was noted that In Defence of Youth Work campaign, that seeks to defend and extend youth work as a distinctive educational practice, also had its place as it recognises young people are not a homogenous group and that issues of gender should remain central to youth work.

Delegates were also delighted to welcome two other Keynote Speakers to the conference. Camilla Brown, UK Coordinator of Unchosen, a specialist domestic slavery organisation, spoke about trafficking and realities of women domiciliary workers. Using advocacy and film as tools for promoting awareness, Camilla was able to stir some critical thinking on wider contemporary issues in society that may also affect the lives of the young people. Finally, at the close of the second day, Kat Banyard, Founder and Director of UK Feminista, and author of *The Equality Illusion: The Truth about Men and Women Today*, discussed how the non-for-profit organisation brought together passionate feminists with a hunger to tackle sexism in their communities. As her talk progressed from training events and networking opportunities, to campaigning tools as aids to support groups to develop skills, knowledge and confidence to take action, delegates were left asking if we are able to identify impact of pornography and objectification of women in their homes, schools, youth clubs. Moreover, if women workers are serious about *thinking afresh* on the direction of contemporary feminist youth work, does it mean we are ready and capable of action with potential for working alongside other feminist social movements, such as UK Feminista, in making change happen?

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