

Institute for Conflict Research

Grasping the Nettle: The Experiences of Gender Variant Children and Transgender Youth Living in Northern Ireland

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Executive Summary

This report was funded by the Office for the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and was conducted by the Institute for Conflict Research (ICR). It is the first piece of research from Northern Ireland to specifically investigate the experiences of young people who experience gender distress and/or identify as transgender (aged 25 and under). The data presented was collected through a series of 12 interviews and 5 focus groups. In total 55 people, including young transgender people, family members, youth workers, and healthcare professionals, contributed to the findings put forth in this report. The report highlights the numerous challenges that young transgender people and their families face in multiple spheres of their lives because of the widespread ignorance, prejudice and discrimination that continues to exist towards transgender people in Northern Ireland. The report argues that service providers and policy makers need to take a proactive approach in order to erode the cultural inertia that is marginalising young transgender people and preventing many of them from reaching their full potential. Only by *grasping the nettle* can young people, their families, the voluntary sector and government agencies co-operate to make Northern Ireland a more inclusive society in which young trans people are able to participate freely without fear of reprisal.

Gender distress in young people

Gender distress is a phrase used to describe the emotional and/or physical discomfort caused when a person experiences a disjuncture between their gender identity and the cultural expectations associated with their assigned birth sex. Medical research shows that gender distress is not a mental illness but an innate biological condition that commonly onsets during childhood. Young people who experience gender distress commonly identify as transgender, or trans. Currently, there are no official estimates for the number of young trans people (aged 25 and under) living in Northern Ireland. However, anecdotal information collected during this research suggests that there are between 40 and 50 young trans people accessing support services due to gender identity issues and that referrals appear to be rapidly increasing. This figure however is likely to be a gross underestimate of the actual number of young people who *experience* gender distress in Northern Ireland. Extreme social pressures including the high levels of prejudice, discrimination and harassment trans people face combined with a general lack of awareness, understanding and knowledge of trans issues means many young people who experience gender distress do not or unable to seek the professional support they require.

Recommendation 1

A standardised gender identity question should be developed that can be used by public bodies for administrative purposes and equality monitoring. This question should be designed based on international good practice and through consultation with relevant stakeholders to ensure the question is appropriately phrased.

Recommendation 2

CAMHS teams should specifically record referrals made to its service relating to gender distress and/or gender identity issues. In situations where a young person is referred for another condition, such as depression, and gender identity issues are found to be an underlying factor this

information should also be captured. Information collected in each of the Health and Social Care Trusts should be collated at the Departmental level for analysis to determine the future development of services and allocation of resources. The strictest care should be taken in the handling of sensitive data to ensure service user confidentiality is maintained.

Recommendation 3

Referrals made to the GIC should be collated in order to identify referral trends. Referral trends should be regularly analysed in order to ensure that the GIC receives adequate funding to meet the needs of service users. The strictest care should be taken in the handling of sensitive data to ensure service user confidentiality is maintained.

General issues affecting young trans people

This report found that the general lack of societal awareness, understanding and knowledge of trans issues in Northern Ireland impacts every dimension of the lives of young trans people. Interviews with young trans people revealed that they commonly develop a strong self-awareness that their gender identity is different from their assigned birth sex between the age of 3 and 5. However, due to a lack of information they did not have the awareness or understanding to discuss their feelings adequately with others until much later in their life, anywhere between 6 and 16 years later. This led many interviewees to feel isolated, disempowered and consequently suffer from low self-esteem and develop feelings of self-loathing.

Young trans people typically 'come out' first to their parents. Parental reactions are varied and unpredictable. Some interviewees reported receiving compassionate support from their parents. Others however faced denial, anger and rejection. Meanwhile, some received a mixed response of both support and rejection from family members. Parental response has a massive impact on a young person: positive responses help to validate the young persons' self-determination and can reduce the risk of emotional problems occurring; negative responses, on the other hand, can have a detrimental impact and subsequently lead to the loss of their family support network, which can put the young person at increased risk of homelessness.

Young trans people were also found to experience problems when engaging with service providers such as the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Police Service of Northern Ireland due to their gender identity. Inadequate training was found to lead service providers to act inappropriately and leave young trans people feeling discriminated against. This in turn reduced young people's willingness to engage with the service provider again in the future. In addition, young trans people were also found to be at risk of suffer discrimination in employment because of their gender identity.

Recommendation 4

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive should conduct a 'Transgender Accommodation Needs Assessment' to establish the specific accommodation needs of trans people. Particular attention should be paid to the specific vulnerabilities young trans people face, which should be reflected in the allocation of 'points.' The choice of temporary accommodation should also be sensitive to

trans people's vulnerabilities, need for privacy and required access to medical treatment in the greater Belfast area. This Assessment should also include an analysis of staff training needs across the workforce. The Assessment ought to be used to develop a 'Transgender Accommodation Programme' in conjunction with key stakeholders and be reviewed periodically.

Recommendation 5

The PSNI should develop a working partnership with youth organisations that work with young trans people and design protocols for engaging with young trans people.

Recommendation 6

Research into the equality issues faced by trans people in employment living in Northern Ireland should be commissioned.

Recommendation 7

Each of Northern Ireland's 26 District Councils should ensure that they have policies and protocols in place that recognise and promote trans equality across the services they provide. District Councils should follow the guidance produced by the Equality and Human Rights Commission to ensure best practice is followed and consult with local service users to tailor services to local needs. Policies and protocols should be reviewed regularly to check services are in line with current best practice and meeting local need.

Issues for young people in education

Young people's experiences at school have a massive impact on their lives. The report found that information regarding issues of gender identity, gender dysphoria and transgender are absent from Northern Ireland's 'revised curriculum.' Consequently, it is highly unlikely that pupils in Northern Ireland receive any formal education regarding trans issues. This severely disempowers young trans people from having the necessary awareness to understand their gender identity. By preventing all young people from learning about trans issues the revised curriculum institutionalises a culture of ignorance of gender diversity within school settings and society generally. Interviewees reported that they had witnessed teachers expressing overt prejudice views that marked their gender identity as shameful. This was experienced as both disturbing, alienating and legitimising transphobic discrimination and harassment.

Freedom of gender expression has a massive impact on the educational experiences of young trans people. This report found that being forced to wear a school uniform that did not match a young trans person's gender identity caused stress, anxiety and discomfort for the young person. In turn, it can encourage truancy. Being able to wear a uniform that matches the young person's gender identity, on the other hand, was found to legitimise their self-determination and reduce their alienation in school settings. Each of the young people interviewed ultimately felt that they would be better equipped to succeed educationally if they had been able to wear either a uniform that corresponded with their gender identity or a uniform that was gender neutral.

Transphobic bullying is a significant problem in school settings. Experiences of transphobic bullying were commonly found to involve sustained verbal abuse, which was perpetrated by pupils of all ages frequently in public spaces with many witnesses. Worryingly, on occasions, young people reported that staff who were aware that bullying was occurring did not offer support or attempt to end the harassment. Such experiences left young people feeling profoundly isolated to the extent that they suffered depression, self-harmed and had suicidal thoughts. Typically staff lack the appropriate awareness and knowledge to respond to incidences of transphobic bullying. Often a school's reaction is to view the young trans person as the problem rather than the bully and so are prepared to allow the young person being bullied to drop out of school rather than attend to the bullying. One school was found to uphold its duty of care and protect the young person suffering from transphobic bullying. This was done by taking a proactive approach and stopping the bullying before it spiralled out of control. Nevertheless, this report found that many young trans people in Northern Ireland are dropping out of education permanently because of the negative impact transphobic bullying has on their lives and the inability of schools to adequately support them.

How a school responds to a young trans person was found to have a major impact on their educational experience and attainment. Many schools react with disbelief, suspicion and adopt an insensitive approach that denies young people their self-determination and is inconsiderate of their best interest. This has a detrimental impact on the young person and their willingness to engage with education. One school that was found to proactively have engaged with the young person, their family and relevant agencies to ensure the young person's needs were met. This enabled the school to ensure staff acted in the best interest of the young person by using a gender appropriate name and pronoun, providing access to gender appropriate facilities, allowing freedom of gender expression, and offering robust emotional support. By putting the young person's best interest first schools can help to minimise the chance that a young person will become disempowered and disengage with education and help to increase their self-esteem and social integration.

The lack of information on the revised curriculum, limited freedom of expression and the high prevalence of transphobic bullying reveals the inequality young trans people face in school settings. This inequality discriminates against young trans people by hindering their personal, emotional and social development. The report argues that more needs to be done by the Department of Education and that the failure of the Educational and Library Boards to recognise young trans people as a 'priority group' is unacceptable. It is paramount that actions are taken by both the Department of Education and the Educational and Library Boards to reduce the inequality young trans people face.

This report also investigated the experiences of young trans people who have attended further and higher education. Unlike school settings, young trans people reported typically positive experiences in further education colleges and universities who appeared to be proactive, prepared to engage and sensitive to their needs.

Recommendation 8

The Department of Education Northern Ireland in conjunction with the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment should integrate information about gender identity, gender distress and transgender issues into Northern Ireland's school curriculum. This process should involve consultation with relevant community and voluntary groups.

Recommendation 9

The Department of Education Northern Ireland should, as a matter of urgency, produce comprehensive policy guidance for schools relating to young people who experience gender distress and/or identify as trans. This guidance should include information regarding school uniforms for trans pupils and anti-transphobic bullying protocols. The guidance should be produced in line with international best practice and through consultation with relevant stakeholders. It should be reviewed regularly to ensure guidance remains in line with current best practice. In addition, the emotional health and well-being needs of trans pupils should be incorporated into the Department of Education's 'Pupils' Emotional Health and Wellbeing Programme.' Research into audit tools and existing good practice should be conducted to ensure that the needs of young trans people are met in a consistent and coherent way.

Recommendation 10

The Equality Commission should conduct a comprehensive review of the education inequalities faced by young trans people living in Northern Ireland.

Recommendation 11

The Education and Library Boards should, as a matter of urgency, recognise trans young people as a 'priority group' who face multiple inequalities; identify on-going work and actions that address these inequalities; and, propose actions to be built into an agreed inter-Board/Staff Commission Equality Action Plan, which includes performance indicators and anticipated outcomes. This should be done in consultation with relevant community and voluntary groups.

Recommendation 12

The Department of Education Northern Ireland should promote 'Gay-Straight Alliances' as a model of best practice for helping to reduce homophobic and transphobic prejudice and discrimination in school settings.

Recommendation 13

An information leaflet regards to trans issues should be produced for social workers. The leaflet should be produced in collaboration with voluntary and community groups.

Issues for young people in healthcare

Accessing healthcare is of paramount importance to young trans people. There is no 'cure' for gender distress, in the traditional sense, however, undergoing a process referred to as 'transition' can help alleviate the anguish the young person experiences. Healthcare professionals should take into account the young person's perspective as well as consult regularly with family members, schools and social networks as appropriate. This entails engaging with families to facilitate understanding and support as well as with education providers to encourage acceptance and tolerance in educational settings. However, this report found many young trans people experience barriers to healthcare that prevents them from accessing the support they require.

GPs are commonly the first point of contact for young people and their families. This report found that many young trans people have had negative experiences with GPs. A lack of awareness and knowledge of trans issues limits GPs' professional competency and can lead them to disregard young trans people's self-determination and deny a young person from accessing appropriate services. This is worrying given the high risk of young trans people developing mental health problems if they are not provided with appropriate levels of support in a timely fashion.

GPs should, after conducting an initial mental health assessment, refer any young person who presents with gender identity issues under the age of 18 to Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). CAMHS should then conduct an initial assessment of gender dysphoria and provide support to the young person and their family. This report found that CAMHS teams are well suited to meet general mental health needs of young trans people. However, they typically lacked awareness and knowledge of gender identity issues. This was unsurprising given that none of the CAMHS healthcare professionals that took part in this research had received formal training in relation to gender identity. Consequently, CAMHS professionals develop their professional competency regarding gender identity issues has been through a combination of hand experience, consultations with the national Gender Identity Development Service and personal research. The ad hoc nature of professional development has led to a huge variability in professional capacity among CAMHS teams in Northern Ireland. Some healthcare professionals have developed considerable professional expertise in gender identity issues and are well equipped to meet the needs of young trans people. However, other professionals with much less experience and knowledge are ill-equipped to effectively meet the specific needs of young trans people. This variability in service delivery can act to prevent young trans people from accessing the specialised support they require. The report found that the lack of standardisation in professional competency is exacerbated by the lack of a Northern Ireland specific 'Care Pathway' to guide CAMHS teams. This has produced considerable professional anxiety among certain CAMHS teams in relation to young trans people. The report found that the need to offer formal training and design locally specific protocols is essential to improve service provision and meet increase demand.

At the age of 18 young trans people should be referred to Northern Ireland's regional Gender Identity Clinic (GIC). This report found that currently CAMHS and the GIC currently work to recommended best practice in the transferring of young trans people between services. A period of joined-up therapeutic support is offered to ease the transition between child and adolescent services to adult services. Once transferred current policy requires the young people to undergo a period of assessment at the GIC. This policy leaves some young trans people disgruntled because by the age of 18 they have been living in their preferred gender role for a number of years. The need to undergo further assessment can lead them to feel that the legitimacy of their gender identity is being scrutinised. Staff at the GIC noted how this assessment process is a requirement set forth by national guidelines but agreed that there was potential for operational protocols to be streamlined. This report found that in general young trans people who have received support from the GIC are happy with the service that they are they are provided with. The robust support on offer, however, may be under threat due to increasing number of referrals that GIC is receiving.

Negative life experiences lead many trans people to experience mental health problems, including: anxiety, panic attacks, depression, eating disorders, addictions and dependencies, self-harm and suicidal thoughts as a result of pervasive social prejudice and discrimination they experience. The

report found that the onset of puberty has a detrimental impact on young trans people's emotional well-being as their bodies become increasingly discordant with their gender identities. Early intervention through the use of hormones blockers can suspend a person's pubertal development allowing young people to explore their gender identity, prevent distressing permanent physical changes and improve mental health. This report found that early intervention through hormone suppressants has the potential to prevent costly interventions, including prolonged mental health support, inpatient psychiatric admissions and complex surgical interventions. Currently, however, few young trans people aged under 18 have access to hormone suppressants, this in part due to the historic lack of a permanent endocrinologist in Northern Ireland. This has created inequality in service provision with young trans people under the age of 18 without the same level of access to hormone suppressants as those over the age of 18.

Peer-support has been found to be beneficial for trans people. The report found that peer-support can have a positive impact on the lives of young trans people. Providing a safe space for young people to receive social support from peers can help to mitigate negative societal factors and reduce the chance of risk taking behaviour. In Northern Ireland a peer-support group for young trans people, 'Translate,' has recently been established. This is a much welcomed development. Statutory agencies should work in partnership with voluntary and community groups to increase accessibility of peer-support groups for young trans people across Northern Ireland.

Supporting the needs of young trans people's family members is vital. This report found that the challenges that young trans people face throughout their lives are intertwined with those of their family, particularly parents and siblings. However, family members have experienced being treated with suspicion by service providers leading to feelings of victimisation. This comes at a great emotional expense to the family. In response to the lack of formal service provision, a grass-root family peer-support group has been established: Support Acceptance Information and Learning (SAIL). The organisation provides support and advice to family members of trans people. Statutory organisations should develop working partnerships with SAIL in order to help support families of young trans people.

Recommendation 14

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should produce an information leaflet for GPs regarding gender identity issues and the relevant services available for referral for both young people and adults. This should be conducted in consultation with relevant community and voluntary groups as well as gender identity specialists.

Recommendation 15

The Health and Social Care Board should attempt to streamline the operational protocols in place for the seamless transfer of young people from CAMHS to adult services. There should be routine evaluation of how these arrangements are working and efforts taken to ensure that the views of the young people are collected and considered.

Recommendation 16

The Health and Social Care Boards should routinely measure the experiences of and outcomes for

trans service users, both under-18 and over-18, and their carers using consistent methods across all trusts. Findings should be used to continually improve service provision.

Recommendation 17

CAMHS staff should receive relevant training in the necessary skills and knowledge to meet the needs of young trans people and their family members.

Recommendation 18

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should fund the development of a regional gender identity specialist team for under-18s. This team should be multi-disciplinary in nature and consist of at least one specialist nurse, one social worker, one psychologist, one psychiatrist and one endocrinologist. This team should receive specialist training from the Gender Identity Development Service and receive periodic consultations with them. The regional specialist team should hold periodic consultations with CAMHS teams from each Health and Social Care Trust.

Recommendation 19

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should confirm through policy guidance a model of service provision for young people who are diagnosed with gender dysphoria. This care pathway way should be comprehensive in its scope and detail best practice in relation to referral, assessment, support, treatment and the transfer between child and adult services. It should be based on internationally agreed best practice and standards of care. The care pathway should be developed through a process of consultation with gender identity experts, people who experience gender distress as well as their family members. Once complete it should be communicated to clinicians at all levels of the health service, including primary, secondary and tertiary care. The care pathway should be audited on a regular basis to ensure it remains in line with international developments and is responsive to the needs of service users.

Recommendation 20

Young trans people should be considered as a 'priority for youth work.' Government agencies, including the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should develop a working partnership with organisations currently working with young trans people. A Needs Analysis should be conducted by each of the Health and Social Care Boards in conjunction with the relevant Education and Library Boards to determine the need for and viability of establishing additional peer-support groups for young trans people outside the Greater Belfast area. Where establishing a specific group is not viable a concerted effort should be made to facilitate existing peer-support groups and youth organisations to become 'trans friendly.'

Recommendation 21

Relevant statutory departments and agencies, including the Department of Education, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the PSNI, and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, should develop lines of communication and establish working partnerships

with SAIL in order to ensure they adequately assess and meet the needs of family members.

Conclusion

The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister's (2006) ten year strategy for children and young people in Northern Ireland, 'Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge' states that all children and young people should be 'healthy;' 'enjoying, learning and achieving;' 'living in safety and with stability;' 'experiencing economic and environmental well-being;' and 'living in a society which respects their rights.' Currently, young people who experience gender distress and/or identify as trans do not. The recommendations made in this report are reflective of the widespread prejudice, discrimination and inequality that must be overcome in order to make Northern Irish society a place of equal opportunity for young trans people. The onus is now on the government to grasp the nettle and ensure strategies and actions are putting in place to challenge the ignorance that causes so many difficulties for young trans people and their families.

