ABSTRACT

THE REGULATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S SEXUALITY AND CITIZENSHIP IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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This paper is concerned with how young people’s sexual health and reproductive rights in Northern Ireland are structured through discourses of national identity. It considers how group identities are maintained through gender, sexual and reproductive norms, and examines the effects this may have on young people’s citizenship.

The paper focuses on two key issues which have politicised young people’s access to sexual and reproductive services: firstly the controversy over the establishment of a branch of the Brook Advisory Centre in Belfast in 1992; and secondly the Legislative Assembly’s June 2000 decision to resist the extension of the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland. Drawing on a British Academy-funded qualitative study of agencies’ and political activists’ interpretations of this political debate, this paper aims to open the way for a fuller understanding of how citizenship and identity can be connected in a devolved political context through the regulation of young people’s sexual and reproductive health.

The analysis of why and in what terms young people’s sexual health and reproductive rights have become the subject of political contention in Northern Ireland connects previous research in the fields of national identities, gender, politics and youth culture, with the growing literature on sexuality, reproduction, social identities and citizenship (e.g. Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989; Yuval-Davis 1997; Lister 1997; Voet 1998; Isin and Wood 1999). The role of devolved government in maintaining or transforming the connection between citizenship and identity for young people in Northern Ireland is a central focus of analysis. The connections between citizenship, national identity and gender provide a useful means for accessing the dynamics of sexual health and reproductive service provision in the UK.