When structural violences create a context that facilitates sexual assault and intimate partner violence against street-involved young women☆

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ABSTRACT

This article presents findings from a participatory action research project conducted with a group of seven street-involved young women in the urban area of Quebec City (Canada). The objective of this research was to explore their experiences of homelessness through the lens of structural violence. Structural violence is the process through which social inequalities are produced. The data gathered through five focus groups revealed the presence of two gendered patterns of structural violence: social exclusion and social control. These two processes reinforce each other in a cycle. Indeed, the participants' strategies to overcome social exclusion and to fulfill their basic needs made them vulnerable to social control. In turn, social control had increased their financial difficulties and their fear of exclusion. These two processes of structural violence had also created contexts that facilitate sexual victimization and intimate partner violence.

Introduction

In the last two decades, there has been an increased interest in the experiences of street-involved youth. Several studies have framed these young people as an "at risk" population (Boivin, Roy, Haley, & du Fort, 2005; Feng et al., 2013; Ferguson, 2009; Gomez, Thompson, & Barczyk, 2010; Kidd, Karabanow, Hughes, & Frederick, 2013; Mayock, Corr, & O'Sullivan, 2013) or have considered homelessness as a deviance associated with criminal activities (Welch, Roberts-Lewis, & Parker, 2009; Young, 2009). Although problems experienced by street-involved young women are widely documented, few studies have analyzed these problems with them, through the lens of structural violence.

This article presents findings from a participatory action research (PAR) that was conducted with a group of seven street-involved young women in the urban area of Quebec City (Canada). The objective of this research was 1) to explore their experiences of homelessness and their strategies through the lens of structural violence, and 2) to engage participants in social actions to overcome structural violence. While this article is focused on results associated with the first main goal of this study, social actions conducted by participants and an analysis of this

PAR process have been published in another article (Flynn, Damant, & Lessard, 2015). This paper illustrates how the experiences of the participants are marked by processes of structural violence (social exclusion and social control) which have decreased the quality of their life conditions and safety. These processes overlap, working together to create a context where sexual assault, harassment and intimate partner violence are most probable to happen.

Street-involved young women: an "at risk" population

While it is difficult to precisely define the term street - involved youth, it accounts for varying degrees of homelessness and a wide range of behaviors and attitudes associated with street culture (Elliott, 2013). Young women appear to be the most vulnerable subgroup present on the street (Ensign & Panke, 2002). Previous research suggests that young women's entry into street life or delinquency is associated with abuse and violence within their families (Belknap & Holsinger, 1998; Medrano, Desmond, Zule, & Hatch, 1999; Wingert, Higgitt, & Ristock, 2005). For this reason, they would also be more at risk of living in fear, to experience anxiety or depression (Nehls & Sallmann, 2005), and to

have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Tyler & Melander, 2009). Violence experienced in childhood could also lead to incidences of suicide attempts at a rate that is more prevalent among street-involved young women than their male counterparts (Hadland et al., 2012; Kidd & Carroll, 2007).

Homeless young women are more vulnerable than homeless young men to experience different forms of violence, such as sexual assault (Ensign & Panke, 2002; Rew & ML Fitzgerald, 2001; Tyler, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Cauce, 2001), psychological violence, sexual harassment and police brutality (Dhillon, 2011). These women may consume drugs or alcohol (Chen, Tyler, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2004), which could also be seen as a consequence of sexual victimization (Ferguson, 2009). Drug or alcohol addiction is also associated with prostitution as 20% of young women living in the street have been forced to offer sexual services in exchange for money, drugs or shelter (PHAC, 2006). While some authors have been interested in street-involved young women as an "at risk" population that needs to be protected, others have denounced a vast corpus of studies focusing on their delinquency (Bellot, Sylvestre, & St-Jacques, 2013; Campbell & Eid, 2009). Both homelessness and criminal behaviors are associated with violence and family conflict experienced by young women during childhood (Arnold et al., 2002; Belknap & Holsinger, 1998; Dhillon, 2011; Loper, 1999; McCabe, Lansing, Garland, & Hough, 2002; Medrano et al., 1999). While family factors and interpersonal violence experienced in the street are well known, there is a lot to understand about how institutions could reinforce violence and homelessness among street-involved young women. For example, few authors have revealed how these women face structural barriers which reduce their chances of success in various spheres of social activities (Oliver, 2013) such as education (Acoca, 1998), labour market, and housing (Dhillon, 2011). Even though they are recognized as a vulnerable population, street-involved young women could also be excluded from health care and social services (Dhillon, 2011). Studies presented in this section reveal the necessity to address the structural dimensions of homelessness through a gender-specific approach.

What about their strategies?

Scientific literature reveals that street-involved young women's survival strategies are influenced by gender stereotypes, since underground criminal and street economy appear to be dominated by young men (O'Grady & Gaetz, 2004; Shannon et al., 2008; Walls & Bell, 2011). Women are more likely to practice survival sex work in order to have a place to stay (Chettiar, Shannon, Wood, Zhang, & Kerr, 2010; Shannon et al., 2008; Tyler et al., 2001; Walls & Bell, 2011). Even if sexism, poverty and racism are considered as social factors associated with delinquent behavior among young women and adolescent girls, including street-involved youth (Bill, 1998; Slater, Guthrie, & Boyd, 2001), some authors (Stephen, 2000; Welch et al., 2009) argue that it is important to address the various structural factors that support youth homelessness.

Therefore, this study focuses on the experiences of street-involved young women through the lens of structural violence.

Structural violence

This study was designed in accordance with an intersectional approach which suggests that the research be focused on social transformation, furthering knowledge about women who are marginalized (Bilge, 2015; Hancock, 2007; Collins, 2002). The concept of structural violence appeared as an opportunity to translate intersectionality through an empirical approach because of its multilevel analysis (Flynn, Damant, Bernard, & Lessard, 2016). Structural violence is often associated with different international social movements of the 1950s and 1960s, such as the liberation theology in Latin America (Gutiérrez, 1973). Since its first operationalization (Galtung, 1969), this concept

has often been criticized (Barnett, 2008; Parsons, 2007) and refined (Farmer et al., 2004; Ho, 2007; James et al., 2003). Authors that have studied the concept agree on presenting structural violence as a process that underlies social inequalities and produces suffering (Farmer et al., 2004) or the inability to fulfill basic needs (Ho, 2007).

In this study, we draw upon the work conducted by Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004), who suggest that structural violence is a dynamic process between actors and structures, which are organized around three dimensions: symbolic domination, institutional violence and everyday violence. Symbolic domination is based on Bourdieu's (1980) work, as a system of (re)production of beliefs, representations and symbols holding hierarchies in place. Our results on symbolic domination show that the different kinds of violence faced by the participants, either in their everyday life or at an institutional level, are the product of prejudices and social representations towards street-involved women. Our definition of institutional violence is based on Foucault and refers to the violence perpetrated by the state and various institutions such as health and social services (Foucault, 1975; Lagraula-Fabre, 2005). Finally, ScheperHughes (2004) defines everyday violence as daily individual experiences of violent practices in interpersonal interactions that normalize brutality within micro-communities. Thus, structural violence occurs in an interactive and iterative process. In addition to these dimensions, it is also important to pay attention to the different power relations and social positionality that have shaped the participants' experiences.

Methodology

This study was part of a broader pan-Canadian research project on structural violence towards marginalized youth in Canada (12–25 years) entitled Voices against violence and led by Helen Bermen (2011–2017 CIHR). Participatory action research (PAR) methodology was selected as a feminist methodology to mobilize street-involved young women with the aim of using their experiential knowledge for social transformation and self-determination. Several researchers have used PAR with youth (Flicker et al., 2008; Harper & Carver, 1999; MacDonald et al., 2011; McHugh & Kowalski, 2011; McIntyre, 2000; Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010). Considering youth as experts of their own lives allows them to become producers of knowledge and equally supports them in becoming agents of social transformation (Flicker et al., 2008). In this case, social networks and visual materials were used as strategies for social change. When conducted with street youth, PAR revealed that these young people can be enrolled in promising projects that are meaningful and transformative for their communities (Bellot, Rivard, & Greissler, 2010: p. 190; Petrucka et al., 2014: p. 54; Wingert et al., 2005).

Research process

The PAR was conducted over the course of a little more than a year. The data collection process took place during five meetings between June and October 2013. These meetings were held at irregular intervals because of the summer holidays and the fact that the participants were travelling in and out of the city. Some meetings took place in the apartment of one of the participants, which was located in a housing cooperative for single teenage mothers. Other meetings were held at a community organization for street-involved youth in Quebec City. The meetings were held in a setting where the participants discussed over a shared meal. Participants expressed their point of views and shared their different experiences of homelessness as well as the strategies they used to answer to their needs or to end their situation of homelessness, such as strategies of help-seeking. They discussed the circumstances that led them to street life, as well as their experiences of violence that occurred within that context and while they tried to escape it. The collected data was also discussed and analyzed with the participants during five subsequent focus groups between November 2013 and