

Voices of young women leaving care: 'I did not have anywhere to go...so I went with a man'

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Abstract

Transitioning into adulthood can be difficult for many young people but transitioning from residential care comes with challenges to those who have grown up away from parents and family. This paper will present the voices of young women in Trinidad and Tobago and the challenges they faced transitioning from residential care. Their voices highlight the need to think in more gendered terms when contemplating effective strategies for facilitating transitions from out of home care.

Keywords

Residential care, transition, women, developing country, Trinidad and Tobago

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Introduction

Transitions out of child welfare residential services and into various forms of independence or semi-independent living arrangements have been studied for years. In this paper, I want to focus in particular on the unique challenges facing young women. There is a large body of literature on young people transitioning out of care, with poor outcomes being documented worldwide (such as Hedin, 2017; Rome & Raskin, 2019; Haggman-Laitila, Salohekkila & Karki, 2019; Perez & Ramo, 2011). Most studies do not specifically focus on the experiences of young women, despite very clear evidence that their social circumstances differ substantially from those of young men. Policy recommendations are often gender blind. For example, a recent report from the Scottish parliament (Hall, 2019) provides information for support for young people transitioning to adult life and then proceeds to make no further reference to gender. Similar silence on gender can be seen in, for example, the Youth Leaving Care Working Group in Ontario, Canada (2013) and Childtrends in the United States (2017).

Over the course of the past five years, I have focused my research on residential care in the Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago, my original home. I quickly realised that there is an untold story about young women transitioning out of these facilities. In addition to a lack of transition planning and programs to ensure preparedness to support themselves and live independently, the young women's transition challenges may be compounded by gendered expectations that women will become attached to a man who will support her.

When I consulted the international research literature, I quickly realised that we rarely hear the voices of young women themselves. To contribute to a global discussion about the unique aspects of young women transitioning out of residential care, I present here the stories of transition which four women shared with me. The women generally reported stable, happy childhoods in the residential care homes. It was upon departure that they faced the greatest problems. They told me about lack of preparation for the transition, homelessness, trading sex for a place to stay and for basic survival, unemployment, no financial supports and substance abuse.

Context

There are three main sources of out-of-home care for children and youth in Trinidad and Tobago: 1) state-supported former orphanages, now called children's homes; 2) community homes run by local community members; and 3) faith-based homes run by various religious groups. The state-supported homes accommodate most children. These homes were established in the mid to late 1800s to care for orphans of deceased indentured workers or former enslaved workers. Today, the children in the homes are generally not orphans but rather children taken in from the community because of neglect or abuse.

There are no hostels for girls aging out of the homes. Instead, young women leaving residential care without family or community support can access an adult woman's shelter, attempt to reconnect with family, or temporarily seek to board with staff members from their residential programme who offer this option in exchange for low rent and/or domestic work. Another survival tactic is to develop a sexual relationship with a man, not for money but for a place to stay.

Below, I describe my conversations with four women: two grew up in the larger children's homes, one in a faith-based home and the other in a community group home.

Veronica

As with most alumni from the state homes, Veronica and her brother were admitted to the home as toddlers. Veronica was allowed to stay in the home until age eighteen. The siblings had lost contact with their parents; however, recently, Veronica had seen her mother in the city. *'She was with another man. We walked face to face and she ended up passing me straight!'* Veronica's brother arranged room and board with a staff member for himself. In contrast, her transition out of the home was traumatic as she was sent to a facility that she felt was completely inappropriate:

I went to Esther House. That home is for abandoned women. They didn't even tell me that and I was so upset. I am not abandoned. And it is for

pregnant women who had been getting licks [physical assault] from their boyfriend. They told me the day before, 'You going to a place' but...you know when somebody telling you something they would make it sound alright, all okay. So, I end up going with it until I see what it is. I saw one person who was pregnant and I saw one who was very mad. She would be always trying to take your stuff. She lies, because the last time she stole my wallet, my ID, everything.

One time, I returned to the home around 11 o'clock and she [the manager] locked me out the house. So, I had to jump the gate. I didn't eat, bathe or anything. She did that to me about twice and around Friday she told me I no longer could stay here. She was like, 'By Saturday you have to leave.' So, I left. I went to work the morning. It had a woman at work who [asked], 'Where you going to go?' and I was like, 'I don't know'.

Veronica was late because she played for a professional football club and had to attend practice. Because so few women play professional football, this excuse may not have been as acceptable to the manager of the home as it would have been for a young man. In addition, staying out late could have been viewed as Veronica being involved in a sexual relationship, which was against the rules of the home. Her co-worker took Veronica to a community home owned by a woman called 'Auntie'. Auntie could make a decision without the approval of a board or any formal authorities, and it was easier for her to accommodate a young homeless woman than a young man. The worker at Esther House could have encouraged Veronica to contact the welfare officer or the manager of the state home but based on her experience, Veronica believed that might not have helped. The assumption was that the state home discharged her to a safe place and it was her choice not to follow the rules of Esther House.

Beverly

Beverly was also placed at a home as a toddler with a twin sister. However, at age sixteen, she was transferred to a residential training centre. Beverly may have been displaying behaviours which the staff felt were disruptive to the home's functioning.

I was transferred to a training centre, which was like a boarding school. There was this man who was working as a supervisor in the boys' department. He used to buy stuff for me like chocolate, etc. At the age of 18 I ran away because he bought a phone for me and they took it. I couldn't take it any more...the frustration just got to me and I just run away and never looked back. He [the supervisor] took me in. When I moved in with him, he told everybody that I would be his daughter. In the outside I am his daughter, in the inside I am his wife... because he used to turn and say, 'If you ain't do what I say I will put you out and you will have nowhere to go'. So, you have nowhere to go, you have to do what you have to do.

Beverly's experience illustrates the vulnerability of young women to sexual exploitation when leaving care.

Kelly

Kelly and her two siblings lived in one of the faith-based homes, operated by the Catholic Church.

Initially, I left when I was 19 because we met our dad then. He supposedly wasn't well and my sister wanted to go and my brother and I decided that all of us will go. It did not work out with our father. I end up homeless after that. He had put me out so I had nowhere to go. I end up sleeping not on the street but I found a little makeshift something to stay in. And it was probably one of the most down periods in my life.

Kelly found it humiliating to return to the home and ask for shelter. Yet,

I eventually went back. I had to beg. They had a board meeting to decide because they were concerned [that while] I was out I was exposed. They did not want me to influence the other children. Returning was much harder than before. It was like I had to work to stay to earn my keep. In addition, I had to give them my tithe [one-tenth of one's salary].

Kelly eventually moved into an apartment with her siblings who had moved out of their father's home when conflict developed.

Liz

Liz and her brother were placed in a small community home. Liz could not recall how the decision was made for her discharge from the home. She went to live with a staff member when she was 10 years old. She remembered the transition being quite challenging for both her and the staff member.

I think the staff took me because she felt sorry for me that nobody wanted me and you know she kind ah really force herself to be there for me. She kept reinforcing that when I was 18, I had to leave because she is only my foster parent until I was 18. When I was in form 4 or 5 [levels of schooling], I turned 18 and I did not have anywhere to go...so I went with a man. He showed me love and cared for me and I moved in with him.

The man Liz moved in with was 12 years older than her. The relationship became abusive. She left after the birth of her second child. Once again, the vulnerability to sexual exploitation is clear.

Discussion

For decades in Trinidad and Tobago, boys have been placed in transition group homes after the age of 18 while girls were expected to find their own homes or return to unstable, and often unsafe, family situations. There are twice as many boys as girls in residential care. It may be that girls are easier to control in single female-headed households (Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, 2012, p. 62), thus leaving boys to be caught up in criminal behaviour or be abandoned to the streets. Concern about boys' criminal behaviour could have been a reason for the establishment of the transition centres for boys. This would be similar to the development of child welfare systems in the United States, Canada and some European jurisdictions to respond to increasing male youth deviance and criminality.

Recognising the negative effects of lack of transition planning and support, the two large state-funded homes recently developed transition units which serve both young women and men. The topics in the units' training manuals include

self-esteem, relationship building, financial planning, human sexuality and family planning. There is a large section on 'home economics' which includes meal preparation, housekeeping and laundry. But career goals and economic independence are absent. Without such training, young women are left vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse and disadvantaged in the workplace in a way that young men are not. Indeed, responses to transition challenges appear to draw very heavily on a male-centred view of the world. Preparing young women for sexual health while at the same time exposing them to sexual exploitation because of homelessness and economic dependence appears less than ideal. I suspect that young women everywhere, even in European, American and Canadian contexts, face different challenges than young men as they transition out of residential care. It is time to listen to their voices and consider a more gendered approach to thinking about such transitions.

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About the author

Petra Roberts is a social worker with years of practical and clinical experience from working in Canada (northern, rural and urban) and international practice.

Petra is currently employed at Ryerson University in the Faculty of Community Services, School of Child and Youth Care. Prior to her appointment at Ryerson, Petra taught in the Department of Social Work at Algoma University in northern Ontario. Her research interests are in the area of children and families, mental health, child welfare and out-of-home care for children in Canada and the Caribbean.