LIFE GOALS, SOCIAL CAPITAL, SEX-AFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND GENDER VIOLENCE PERCEPTION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN YOUNG WOMEN IN FOSTER CARE AND YOUNG FEMALE UNDERGRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

In 2014, 3,037 of the 6,985 minors living in foster care placements and 332 of the 774 care leavers supervised on transition programs in Catalonia were girls. Little research has been done that focuses on these girls from a gender perspective, despite this population having specific problems. The scientific literature shows that 30% of them become adolescent mothers (Sala, et al., 2009; De Zárate, 2013; Courtney et al., 2005); more girls than boys are in care for sex abuse; and girls in foster care and adult females are more vulnerable to gender violence (Fundació Surt, 2013; Alldred i Biglia, 2015) and unhealthy sex-affective relationships based on the ideology of romantic love (Martín, 2015). That said, the social phenomenon of gender violence affects women (adults and young people) from different backgrounds and in different living contexts (age, social class, sexuality, race, and so on). Accordingly, the aim of this study is to determine the different perceptions held by young women in foster care or care leavers and young female undergraduates with regard to life goals, social capital and gender violence.

We used a qualitative methodology to compare these two groups by means of structured interviews. The sample consisted of 52 young women: 26 in the foster care group and 26 female undergraduates. All had participated in a peer–mentoring program. Finally, the Atlas-Ti software program was used to analyze data. Categories were created inductively in the content analysis.

The main outcomes showed that all participants were aware of the phenomenon of gender violence. However, women both groups displayed contradictions in their statements and practices, neither recognizing nor identifying some kinds of violence and sexism (neo male-chauvinism) in their relationships. For instance, a large number of them would give permission to their partners to check their social media networks. University students would have more tolerant and empathic behaviour with their partners in violence situations. In contrast foster care and care livers women reported more polarized answers.

Moreover an important number of women of both groups understand their relationship through romantic love ideology. This means to consider as normal some unhealthy and violence practices in the relationship.

At the time of the interview, all of the girls in care and care leavers identified themselves as heterosexuals, although in the university group some reported being open to other sexual options.

The social capital of girls in care and care leavers is mainly reduced to a narrow network: biological family or extended family, a few friends in the same situation, social educators at the foster care home, and partners. In fact, partners were reported as being one of the most important emotional supports at the time of the interview, even if these girls seek out the social educator, members of their families or a close friend when they have important problems. Female undergraduates have a wider, more diversified and more stable social capital, and if they have a partner, he is not generally the center of their network. Thus, when these girls need help they will ask their partner as the second or third option. Finally, a high proportion of the participants from both groups wanted to be mothers at some stage of their life, more than half of them thinking that it is important to plan for motherhood and that stability is a requirement for having   a   baby.

KEYWORDS: Young women, foster care, gender violence, romantic love, gender and sexual diversity.