

**Girls on the Verge of Exploding? Voices on Sexual Abuse, Agency and Sexuality at a Youth Detention Home**

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**ABSTRACT**

The present thesis investigates the dilemmas and difficulties the staff at a youth detention home encounter and struggle with when working with young women who are understood to be victims of sexual abuse. At the center of attention is talk about the problems of talking about sexual abuse and other difficult experiences. The overall aim in conducting the study was to open up an arena that has been neglected and little investigated – youth detention homes for girls and young women, by talking to staff and the young women at the detention homes, and talking about sexual abuse. Also in focus was the young women's own thinking about the body and sexuality.

The findings are presented in five articles. The first article examines what discursive devices are employed when using the focus group method when talking to the young women in forced care. The study shows in what ways the focus groups is a fruitful method for studying marginalized young women and their views and thoughts about being young women today. The second article addressed the issue of how the staff form narratives of sexual abuse. Stories of sexual abuse were "power stories" as well as "work identity stories" and were considered to have the power to heal as well as the power to harm. The third article examines the process leading up to the definition of sexual abuse. The study is concerned with the process in which the staff members define whether or not a young woman has been a victim of sexual abuse. A determining factor was whether or not the act involved a person who was defined as a victim. A core issue was an evaluation of the credibility of the alleged abused girl and the degree of consent. The fourth article addresses the issue of how the staff and the young women at the detention home talk about sexuality. The article compares the different views of the staff and the young women and concludes that the staff talk about the young women as asexual children and as victims of sexual abuse, and the young women talk about themselves as having sexual agency. Finally, the fifth article shows how the young women talk about childbearing and motherhood.

The study shows that the issue of talking about sexual abuse and other difficult experiences is complex. The different views of *how to talk* about sexual abuse, *whether to talk* about sexual abuse, *when to talk* and to *whom*, as well as the question about whether there is a *need to talk*, makes the issue of talking about sexual abuse multi-layered and contradictory.

Keywords: Sexual abuse, youth detention home, agency, sexuality, institutional care, narrative