“She is very illusive”: Substance abuse, gender roles and motherhood among the teenage girls of the Sioux Lookout Zone, 1969-1996

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ABSTRACT

From 1969 to 1996, the Indigenous teenage girls of the Sioux Lookout Zone of Northern Ontario grew up surrounded by poverty and rapid societal change. Substance abuse, vandalism, and suicide rates were rising, and families and health care providers were worried about the health of adolescents in their communities.¹⁻³ This paper examines the instances teenage girls were mentioned in the collection of documents about the Sioux Lookout Zone Hospital at the University of Toronto Archives in order to analyze the challenges that these girls faced in gender role negotiations, substance abuse, and teen motherhood.

INTRODUCTION

The Sioux Lookout Zone Hospital was located in Northwestern Ontario. Up until 1996, it was funded by the federal government of Canada to provide racially segregated care to Status Indians. From 1969-1996, the Zone Hospital partnered with the University of Toronto medical school, Toronto General Hospital, and SickKids Hospital. University of Toronto physicians travelled to Sioux Lookout in shifts to staff the hospital, which allowed the university to teach its medical learners about Indigenous health.

METHODS

This paper uses an archival research method to study the collection about the Sioux Lookout Zone Hospital at the University of Toronto Archives. The collection contains numerous reports that analyze the challenges that the adolescents of the Sioux Lookout Zone faced during this era, which contributed to poor physical and mental health.^{4,5} This paper will analyze how teenage girls negotiated gender roles and dealt with substance abuse and the challenges of teen motherhood.

EMERGING THEMES

Teenage girls in the Sioux Lookout Zone lived in a gendered world, which reflected local social norms. A 1980 report on recreational activities for young people described community organizers taking teenage boys camping while “for girls there has been baking, making crafts, with the co-operation of the elderly ladies.”⁶ The teenage girls of the Sioux Lookout Zone were “expected to do work around the house” and were “less free to roam around” than teenage boys.⁵ Men enjoyed sports for recreation but women rarely participated.⁷ For example in one community, Pikangikum, “there were few organized evening activities and very little to do, for women, other than household chores.”⁷ From the

1970s onwards, “teenage girls were beginning to rebel against the traditional role of the woman.”⁷ It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze to what extent and according to what tradition these domestic gender roles were in fact “traditional.” What is clear is that in this era, teenage girls were rebelling against the gender roles that were expected of them.

This rebellion often took the form of fighting with parents, choosing one’s own partner, sniffing gas, or drinking alcohol. There is also one mention in the collection of “girl gangs” though it is left to our imagination to determine what happened in a girl gang.⁸ Substance abuse, especially alcohol and gas sniffing, was a major problem among teenagers in general in the Sioux Lookout Zone from 1969-1996, including among teenage girls. “For many young girls who worked hard at home, gas sniffing seemed an escape and outlet from the daily routine.”⁷ However, restrictive gender roles expected of young women protected them from the enormous burden of substance abuse that fell on teenage boys. A report about gas sniffing in the Zone says that “young girls who are less free to roam around and who are expected to do work around the house, were rarely seen sniffing around town although many said they sniffed occasionally.”⁵ Blood tests for lead levels confirmed that women sniffed gas less frequently than men,⁵ and women also drank less alcohol than men.⁷

Parents in the Sioux Lookout Zone often expected their teenagers to have an arranged marriage, and this was one of the gender expectations against which teenage girls rebelled.⁹ The collection describes several conflicts between young women and their parents over who and whether or not to marry. For example, one case study reports: “Her parents wanted her to get married but she didn’t want to. She was going out with a guy who was five years younger than herself. Her parents did not like that.”¹⁰ Another report describes a typical conflict between a teenage girl and her parent: “The parent, for example, wanted the daughter to marry a certain man and the daughter refuses. The child most often acted out by staying out late, not coming home, or sometimes making a suicide attempt.”⁷ The high stakes of this type of conflict are evident, especially as rates of teen suicide were rising in the Zone during this era.¹ However, arranged marriage did not always lead to peace between parents and their teenage girls because “younger marriages also lead to conflicts in the home,”⁷ such as exacerbating pre-existing tension caused by the generation gap between girls and their parents.

Resisting arranged marriage was often tied to teen pregnancy. Teenage girls would rebel “by pregnancy and later marriage with a person not considered appropriate by the parents.”⁹ In 1972 in the

community of Webique, women tended “to have their first child by the age of seventeen, and before they are married (in their mid-twenties) most already have two to four children.”¹¹ One case study of a teenage mother is presented in depth in a report on motherhood in the Zone from 1974, titled “Single (Unwed) Mother”:

“Eighteen years old, she was fairly fluent in English and was Anglican by religion. Although with other Indians she was relaxed and firmedly [sic], she felt the stigma attached to unwed pregnancy, a value imposed by white society when in white company... Like the other mothers, this mother thought that seventeen or eighteen was a good age to begin bearing children. She wanted a family of about four to five children, though she wanted to be married before having another child.”¹²

This teenage mother’s case study shows that teen pregnancy was common but that pregnancy before marriage was stigmatized, though also common in the Zone. The ambivalence of health care providers is evidenced by writings that indicated being a teenage mother was more acceptable in the Zone than being an unwed mother.

DISCUSSION

A limitation of my paper is that most of the writing about teenagers in the Sioux Lookout Zone focuses on the problems of teenage boys. Writers most often use the pronoun “he” when referring to teenagers in the Zone, and as a result, young women are excluded from the discourse. For example, “the teenager wanted to say what he thought and felt and was groping with identity.”⁷ In a 1969 report from the Ontario Ministry of Education, visitors to the Zone discuss the difficulties teenagers face finding work: “The amount of training he does possess doesn’t allow him to adequately compete.”⁹ This use of the pronoun “he” to refer to the adolescent in general may be a convention of English writing from the period, but it still demonstrates a clear gender bias on behalf of the report writers, who themselves were usually male. In some instances, when discussing teenagers in general, it is more explicit that the author means young men. For example, “the outlets for the non-student are few; some of these young men can be observed participating as musicians in the local rock bands.”⁹ In the 1969 report, visitors to Sandy Lake noticed that “teenagers” had long hair as part of their “hippy-type” fashion.⁹ Given that young women at the time would have usually had long hair, regardless of the current hippie fashion, this is another example of when “teenagers” was used by default to describe only teenage boys.⁹ Sociologist Gill Jones writes that it is common for the word “youth” to refer to young men instead of young people in general, and in the Sioux Lookout collection, this applies to the word “teenager” as well.¹³ The gender bias in the writing about teenagers makes it unclear when teenagers in general are being described compared to just teenage boys.

Teenage girls were specifically documented when they negotiated expected gender roles and arranged marriage. Studying these challenges that teenage girls faced is essential because rates

of suicide by teenage girls increased over the period that this paper studies, and in the present day, rates of suicide are very high among Indigenous teenage girls. They are even higher than among boys, in contrast to non-Indigenous Ontario communities.^{14,15} It is very unusual for suicide rates to be higher among girls than among boys in any population, and it indicates that teenage girls in the Sioux Lookout Zone are particularly marginalized.

CONCLUSION

The teenage girls of the Sioux Lookout Zone asserted themselves against the control of their parents by experimenting with alcohol and gas sniffing, by choosing their own partners and by becoming mothers. However, conforming to traditional gender roles protected young women to some extent from the scourges of gas sniffing and alcoholism that affected all teenagers in the Zone. Studying the historical challenges teenage girls faced is essential to understanding the health of young women in the Sioux Lookout Zone today.

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