

FROM COLLECTIVE EMPOWERMENT TO PERSONAL HEALING

The Impact of Social Activism on Sexual Assault Survivors

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INTRODUCTION

In 2013, the West Island CALACS conducted a qualitative research study among activists in sexual assault centres throughout Québec (known by the French acronym CALACS for Centre d'Aide et de Lutte contre les Agressions à Caractère Sexuel) to better understand the role of collective empowerment practices on the healing process of sexual assault survivors.

Eleven CALACS in different regions of Québec were involved in the project. Semi-directed interviews were conducted with 28 female sexual assault survivors who are now activists.

The findings of these interviews have provided us with a better understanding of the motivations and expectations underlying a commitment to activism, and information about the personal impact of this commitment.

Furthermore, we have inventoried the methods deployed by the CALACS to foster a group approach. Here, we present the findings of this study.

The CALACS: history, scope, and feminist analysis

The first Centre d'Aide et de Lutte Contre les Agressions à Caractère Sexuel (CALACS) in Québec opened its doors in the 1970s, in the wake of demands brought forward by the burgeoning women's movement. Faced with female sexual assault victims' experience of social and institutional injustice—especially in the legal system—women's groups were determined to develop a new vision of sexual assault.

The first CALACS opened its doors in 1975, and Québec now counts 42 sexual assault centres, 33 of which are CALACS.

Sexual assault centres or CALACS are feminist not-for-profit groups actively seekingto eradicate sexual assault. They provide services to women and prevention services for the community.

Across Québec, these centres provide confidential services, free of charge, and adapted to victims' needs. Services include counselling, public awareness, medical and legal advocacy, and humanrights advocacy. The CALACS also provide a space of social engagement for members of their communities.

The CALACS have adopted a radical feminist analysis of sexual assault. According to this analysis, sexual assault and sexual violence constitute a means of control over women's lives, and are used to maintain women in a state of fear and submission to patriarchal authority.

«These are acts of domination, humiliation, violence, and abuse of power, committed mainly by men against women, teenage girls, and children, with the aim of keeping them in a situation of inequality.»[1]

1.From the Regroupement québécois des CALACS' «Statement of principles», 2010.

FEMINIST INTERVENTION IS CENTRAL TO THE CALACS

All of the CALACS take an approach to intervention that is essentially rooted in feminist principles, the main goal being to help women regain power over their lives and develop their capacity to take action, at both the personal and social levels.

«Women in Québec began practising a feminist intervention approach during the 1980s, in a period of intense development in the Québec women's movement (...) Activists and practitioners here in Québec echoed the criticisms of traditional approaches to psychology voiced by American feminists who were living in a similar social and political context (...) In this way, during a period characterized by fundamental challenges to the social order and patriarchal institutions, the feminist movement formulated a new analytical framework for understanding social problems, and new forms of intervention in working with women.»[2][Trans.]

For the CALACS, the primary aim of feminist intervention is to help women increase their psychological, economic, and cultural autonomy. A further aim is to help women take back power and control over their lives in general and their healing process.

2. Corbeil, C & Marchand, I. «L'Intervention féministe: un modèle de pratiques au cœur du mouvement québécois» in «L'Intervention féministe d'hier à aujourd'hui: portrait d'une pratique sociale diversifiée.» Les Éditions du remue-ménage. 2010. P.23-24.

ACTIVISM: A DRIVING FORCE FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Without question, the CALACS' feminist intervention practices foster women's empowerment: by raising women's awareness of the unequal power relations and social oppression of which they are victims, setting up egalitarian relationships that counter patriarchal social structures, and promoting women's autonomy. The empowerment process or «development of the power to take action» seems to operate at two levels. First, the CALACS provide sexual assault survivors with an opportunity to reclaim personal power by embarking on a personal development process. In an individual or group support setting, women are encouraged to work on the consequences of their sexual assault in order to regain power over their lives, lives that up until then have been dominated by the aftermath of the assault(s) they have suffered.

What distinguishes feminist intervention from all other intervention approaches, and constitutes the second level of empowerment encouraged by the CALACS, is the development of women's capacity to take collective action. As feminist organizations, the CALACS of Québec strongly encourage, and have always provided the means for women to *«(...) become agents for change in their communities, by inviting them to become CALACS members or activists, or join other progressive groups and movements.»*[3][Trans.]

While all women are invited to become activists with their centres, CALACS workers recognize the key role of collective empowerment in the healing process of sexual assault survivors.

The impact of individual empowerment has already been the subject of much study, and the suitability of this type of intervention with male and female sexual assault survivors no longer needs to be demonstrated. Yet, despite the fact that women in the CALACS have been practising collective empowerment for many years, the impact of this group process on survivors has never been studied. Our interest in understanding the actual impact of our specific practices gave rise to a research project led by the West Island CALACS, the object of which is the impact of a collective approach on the healing process of sexual assault survivors.

3. Ibid, p.153

METHODOLOGY

DEFINITIONS

Survivor

Any woman who has experienced sexual assault at some point in her life. The assault(s) may have occurred recently orin the past. This term is preferred to «victim» because victim is more evocative of the vulnerability and powerlessness of someone who has been sexually assaulted. In contrast, «survivor» is less like a label and more evocative of the possibility of resolution following a traumatic event.

Women receiving counselling

Rather than speak of «victims», «clients» or «users» the CALACS refer to the women who use their services as «women receiving counselling.» This choice more accurately reflects the process of women helping other women to overcome the consequences of a social problem of which all women are victims, directly or indirectly: the problem of sexual violence.

Activist

A woman who volunteers at a CALACS. The word «activist» is preferred to «volunteer» because, in addition to the voluntary contribution of her time, it implies that she is engaged in a social and political struggle to put an end to sexual assault.

Collective process

Process by which a woman becomes an activist, and as such, is actively involved in making collective and social change.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Eleven CALACS in different regions of Québec contributed to the project by promoting our study to activists in their centres. In all, 28 women participated in the study. Participants were recruited from the following CALACS:

- CALACS La Passerelle (Drummondville)
- CALACS L'Élan (Mont-Laurier/ Sainte-Agathe-des-monts)
- CALAS Outaouais (Gatineau)
- CALACS Entraid'Action (Shawinigan)
- Centre D'aide Aqua-R-Elle (Victoriaville)
- CALACS de Rimouski
- CALACS de Châteauguay
- CALACS La Chrysalide (Terrebonne)
- CALACS de l'Ouest-de-l'Île (Montréal)
- CALACS Point d'appui (Rouyn-Noranda)
- Trêve pour Elles (Montréal)

PROCEDURE

Data collection was conducted by means of a telephone interview. This method was chosen because the participants were from different regions of Québec and face-to-face interviews would have involved much expense and travel time. The interview format was semi-directed. It included sociodemographic questions and open-ended questions, in particular, initial motivation for becoming an activist, expected personal impact, and actual impact of activism on the participants we interviewed.

MEASURES

After completing the 28 interviews, the interviewers met with each other to determine units of meaning in the interview findings and arrive at an inter-coder agreement. Next, a person who had not conducted the interviews performed the first round of listening and coding the interviews.

The interviewers then met a second time to clarify the categories. The final codification was completed based on the new units of meaning determined by the group.

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC DATA

The average age of the 28 participants interviewed was 46,5. They had been activists in a CALACS for an average of 4,9 years.

FINDINGS

Responses to the open-ended interview questions provided illumination on:

- initial motivations to engage in activism
- expected personal impact
- actual impact

Initial motivation to engage in activism

The answer to the first question seemed straightforward for most of the women interviewed. They did not hesitate to say what initially motivated them to become activists in a CALACS:

The initial goal for most was to give back to the CALACS, or give back to society what they had received after calling a CALACS for help (n=22).

In addition, two other initial motivations mentioned by participants were also external in nature:

- promote the CALACS to women survivors and society at large (n=8)
- denounce sexual assault/break the taboo (n=7)

This excerpt of an interview with a participant illustrates the external nature of her initial motivation to become an activist which was her desire to give back by uniting with other women to denounce sexual assaultand break the taboo:

«Women, stand up and speak out. End your silence, because by keeping it inside, you are protecting the attacker (...).Yes, it's hard, but as a group we can support each other. With strength, courage, and determination we can do it (...) the more women get involved, the more impact we will have on people. Compared to how I was before, today I stand tall, and I know I'm strong. I want to share that with others. I want other women to feel good about themselves. They have the right to live and be who they want to be.»

Participant 19

Women mentioned a number of internal motivations, but during the interviews these came up much less frequently :

- personal development (n=7)
- unlocking of potential (n=6)[4]
- need for solidarity and sense of belonging (n=xx)
- acquisition of job experience (n=5)
- furthering knowledge of feminism and collective functioning (n=4)

(see table 1.1)

Expected personal impacts

Participants answered the question about their initial motivations to become activists promptly and with certitude, but this was not the case when we asked them about what personal impacts they expected from their activism with the CALACS. Some women were unable or could not yet say what the expected personal impacts were. Many of them said they had no initial expectations (n=8). Others, after thinking more about it, did list a few expected personal impacts, in particular, increased self-esteem (n=13); reduced isolation/finding a place to belong (n=8); furthering personal development (n=7); acquiring intervention skills (n=5).

(see table 1.2)

In general, the participants were hesitant when it came to answering this question. The answer seemed to be less obvious here, than it was for the first question.

Actual impacts

The interviews conducted with the participants in this study shed light on several important practical impacts of activist engagement on sexual assault survivors.

(see image 1.3)

Among these, of particular note are personal gains, especially increased self-esteem (n=22). The following excerpts from the interviews provide a good illustration of this gain:

«I received lots of appreciation (...) It made me feel competent. It increased my self-confidence. These are all things I wasn't expecting.»

Participant 2

«The positive impact was that I learned to assert myself and got to know myself better… For someone who always felt worthless, that's a lot.»

Participant 26

When they became actively involved in a CALACS many participants experienced improvement in terms of their social ties and sense of belonging. Some women mentioned that their activist engagement in a CALACS had provided them with a sense of belonging and had brought them out of their isolation (n=9). Others identified as an impact the development of a sense of solidarity and belonging (n=15), as we see from this participant's story:

«I'm probably not the only woman to come from a background in which it wasn't a good thing to have a sense of belonging. It was a very unhealthy environment, violent, and there were assaults. Being able to find another kind of environment helps to undo all that and helps me continue on a new path (…). It's like my little nest. Knowing that it's always there makes it possible for to me to spread my wings and flybecause I know I have a place to come back to.»

Participant 10

Many participants mentioned that their activist engagement with a CALACS had allowed them to grow as individuals. They listed as actual impacts the continuation of the personal development work they had begun when receiving services at the CALACS (n=13); and the unlocking of their potential (n=9).

Participant 18 had this to say about continuing her personal development:

«My activist involvement has allowed me to continue the work I had begun in individual therapy and my support group.It enables me to go further. Volunteering my time has a leveraging effect for me.»

Participant 18

Participant 9 talked about unlocking her potential:

«The assaults and their after-effects had reduced me to nothing. By working on it, I was able to rebuild. Now, by helping other women, it's as if I can finally see something positive coming out of it. I'm no longer simply a victim, it's become a source of strength.»

Participant 9

Other positive practical impacts were mentioned somewhat less often:

- acquiring more political awareness (n=8)
- learning about the feminist approach and collective functioning (n=7)
- better family relationships (n=8)
- giving back (n=6)
- denouncing sexual assault/breaking the taboo (n=4)
- promoting the CALACS to women survivors and society in general (n=3)
- developing job skills (n=5)
- developing intervention skills (n=3)
- job retraining in intervention (n=1)

In all, the interviews demonstrate that for sexual assault survivors, their activist engagement has real, positive impacts at different levels. Still, it appears that some participants also experienced negative impacts. Negative impacts mentioned by participants were mostly connected with intervention with other sexual assault survivors.[5]

Of the 28 women interviewed, nine (9) of them mentioned working with sexual assault survivors as part of their activist engagement. The interviews reveal that each of them had experienced different issues in the course of their intervention work.

According to the interviews, participants mentioned three negative impacts in particular: resurfacing memories of their own sexual victimization leading to psychological distress (n=4); feelings of being an impostor, sense of inadequacy (n=3); and strong tendency to project(n=4).

(see table 1.3)

This excerpt from an interview shows the distress associated with intervention work and the significance of the projection mechanism[6] in this participant:

«I feel so much for the callers. It can really get to me. It depends on the caller. I often go home and feel sad and cry for days. I have this feeling of sadness inside me, a sadness that isn't really mine, but that's there all the same (...) If these women want to talk to me for 8 hours straight I'll give them 8 hours straight. Even if at the end I'll be completely burnt out. (...) Maybe these callers remind me of myself, make me think this might make the difference for them. (...) With all the support I have now, I'm going to give her 100% and more if it will help her, if it's going to make even a small difference (...) I try to be, for them, the person I would have wanted for myself.»

Participant 15

For some women, the fact that they are sexual assault survivors themselves seems to give them the impression of being impostors or somehow inadequate when they are in a counselling relationship with a survivor who has called the CALACS for help.

«It can be really challenging.One of my first clients left after the third individual counselling appointment, and I hadn't made a non-suicide contract with her. It was my second client in individual counselling. I had to call the police because she had mentioned suicide and I didn't have the contract, not even a verbal agreement not to commit suicide or call me when she was feeling suicidal. I can tell you, it was really upsetting. It made me question myself—had I done the right thing? In terms of self-confidence, it was really hard for me because I had taken it personally from the start (...) It's not always easy.»

Participant 9

Although all the participants who had done intervention work mentioned negative impacts during the telephone interview, nearly all of them had nevertheless taken something positive from the situation, as this participant recounts:

«At the emotional level, it's clear that right now my involvement in different groups (...) affects me personally. Sometimes I am emotionally affected by what the women say, but at the same time, it's so rich. I was scared I would dwell on it, but it has pushed me to move forward. I notice that when I'm moved by what the women tell me, it points to things in me that I need to work on.»

Participant 21

4. When we use the term «unlocking potential,» we refer to the idea of transcending the impact of a sexual assault by transforming this negative experience into something positive or constructive.

5. Three participants characterized feminist organizational process as a negative impact; they were critical of consensus decision-making and power sharing. Their biggest concern were related to the complexification of the decisional process and the fact that truly equitable power sharing is difficult to achieve and maintain.

6. Projection is a defence mechanism described by Freud. It has become a term of general use in the fields of psychology and psychiatry. It refers to a mental operation (usually unconscious) in which an individual projects their own feelings onto someone else in order to escape an emotional situation they experience as intolerable. The individualis usually unaware they are doing this, precisely because they refuse to acknowledge the feelings they are «projecting» onto the other person.

FINDINGS

Finding 1: a revelation

The feminist analysis proposed by the CALACS seems to have been a revelation to many participants. The feminist perspective appears to have helped them make sense of their experience.

This revelation was something they wanted to share, both with other survivors and society at large. It explains the three initial motivations mentioned by the participants: give back, denounce/break the taboo, and promote the CALACS.

It should be noted that the CALACS' individual counselling services are rooted in a feminist analysis of sexual assault and most of the participants used these services. The experience of revelation therefore preceded the decision to become involved in a collective process; it is connected with their personal development and not the consequence of the survivors' social engagement.

Finding 2 : unlocking potential

At the beginning, participants talked about getting involved as activists for reasons of a social nature (e.g., giving back, denouncing/breaking the taboo), but the survivors referred much less frequently to that as an actual impact. The consequences of their activism rather appearto be personal in nature, which was not what participants had expected; the impact of such involvement on self-esteem was not mentioned as an initial motivation by participants.

So, while their initial motivations were social in nature, the actual impact of their activism was experienced more at the personal level (e.g., increased self-esteem). From this, we can postulate a continuum between the personal and the collective processes.

Their negative personal experience as sexual assault survivors is transformed into an asset in the collective process, creating a possibility to unlock potential.

Finding 3 : sense of belonging

The recognition and valuing of their experience, coupled with the experience of shared understanding, gave rise to a sense of belonging among the participants. Many of them have the impression of being included, of having a place, especially those from dysfunctional families. They view the CALACS as their chosen family.

Women often refer to this feeling of belonging. They use the pronouns «us» and «we» when referring to the CALACS, reflecting their sense of collective empowerment. This collective empowerment enables women to continue their personal development within a groupframework.

What can we draw from these findings?

The CALACS provide a space for women to share with each other, and assert their rightful place in the world; this supports their individual empowerment and encourages survivors in their personal development process. Individual empowerment begins with a sense of regaining power over one's life. These survivors began this process in the course of individual counselling provided by the CALACS after they had suffered a sexual assault.

Survivors want to share the revelation of their new understanding of what happened to them by giving back to others; this motivates them to engage in a collective process that in turns leads to collective empowerment. Women move from the passive role of the person being helped to the active role of helper, thereby unlocking their potential. This also generates a sense of belonging and the development of a collective identity of «us.» According to the participants, giving back to society through activism generated impacts at both the collective and personal levels. Consequently, there appears to be a synergetic relationship between collective and individual empowerment.

SHORTCOMINGS

There are several shortcomings in this study. First, because we specifically targeted sexual assault survivors who are now activists in a CALACS, we lack information about other groups of women (those who have received services from agencies other than a CALACS, those who abandoned their personal development process in a CALACS, those who did not become activists following their personal work, and those who stopped being activists).

The impact of these factors (e.g., involvement with a CALACS or lack thereof) could not be assessed. It is also impossible to assume a causal link between the different factors studied; the links we propose are hypothetical and require further study.

Last, it was extremely difficult to separate women's personal process from their collective process; in their eyes, the two are closely linked, making it impossible to establish a clear distinction between the two.

CONCLUSION

At first, most sexual assault survivors need to tell their storyand be listened to in a non-judgmental way. Most of the participants used the services provided by a CALACS. They discovered an explanation for sexual assault that they described as a revelation, and which they wanted to share with other women. Next,they felt the need to listen to and support others.

In becoming activists, these women embarked on a collective process and moved from the passive role of service users to the active role of service provider. In so doing, they were encouraged to unlock their potential. The collective «us» or «we»became evident when they began to feel a strong sense of belonging to the CALACS.

Unsurprisingly, this has a positive collective impact, but it also generates significant personal impacts (e.g., increased self-esteem) that have helped these survivors in their healing process.

Table 1.1

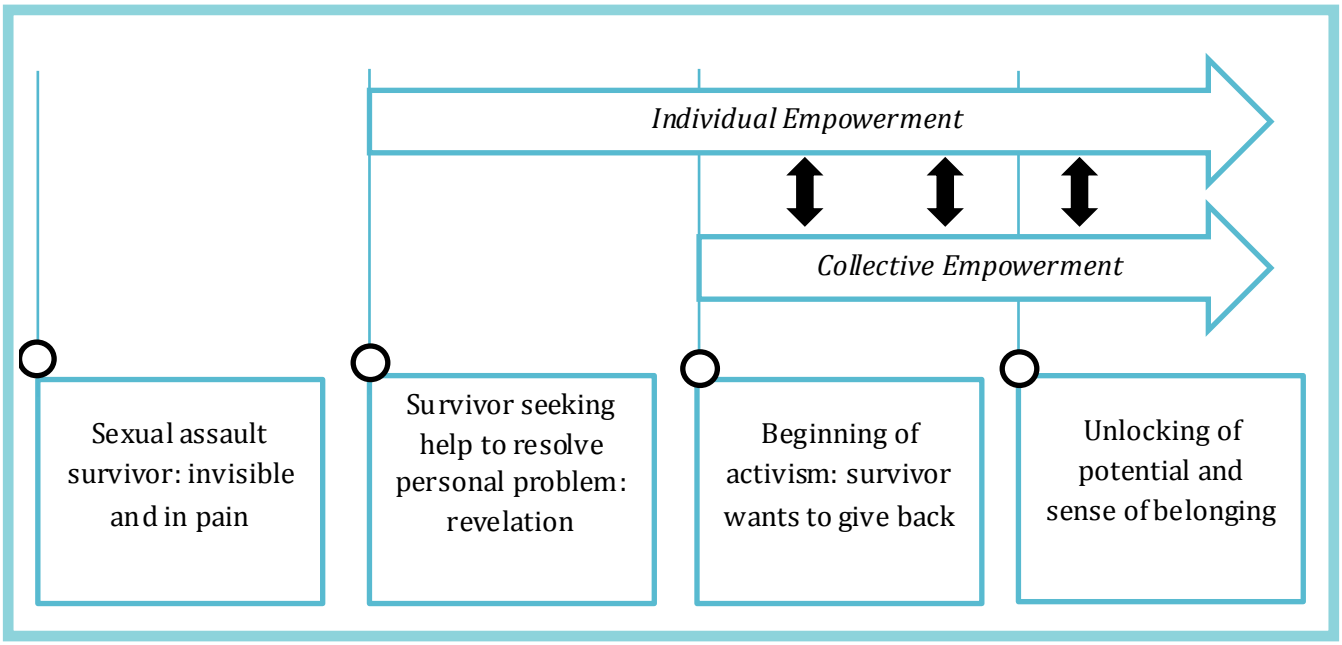
Initial motivations	N total = 28
Give back	22
Promote the CALACS	8
Continue the personal development process	7
Denounce sexual assault/break the taboo	7
Unlock potential	6
Need for solidarity	6
Develop job skills	5
Learning about feminist intervention or feminist organizational process	4

Table 1.2

Expected personal impacts	N total = 28
No expectations/no expected impact	8
Break isolation/find a place to belong	8
Increase self-esteem	13
Continue personal development process	7
Develop intervention skills	5

Image 1.3

Revelation, unlocking of potential, and sense of belonging in relation to individual and collective empowerment in sexual assault survivors who engage in a collective process.



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