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“you Want To Go Home”: Search For Home Among Young Trans Women Of Color

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“You want to go home”:
Search for Home Among Young Trans Women of Color

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of the requirements for the
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Abstract

A wealth of literature explains the existence of barriers to accessible housing for the trans community. However, none have elucidated the story of how young trans women manage and navigate these barriers as they experience finding not only a housing structure, but also a place to call home. The aim of this work is to describe the experience finding home for a group of young, trans, women of color. This is done via qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews of 17 trans women associated with the Ruth Ellis Center in Detroit, Michigan. Utilizing a grounded theory approach and coding with Dedoose software, data explored how the experience of finding home is shaped by (1) conceptualizing home as a place that will allow space to express one's gender, (2) the role social support plays in the establishment of home, (3) motivations to escape discrimination, and (4) the ability to assert bodily autonomy. These four themes suggest that home is distinct from housing and provide critical insight for successful home-establishment programs and initiatives in the future.

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Introduction

“I just, if I could change anything, just one specific thing, I just wish there was no homeless people”
-Ayana

Acquiring and maintaining stable housing proves challenge for transgender individuals¹. Estimates suggest that one in every five transgender person will experience homelessness at some time (Grant et al., 2011; Quintana, Rosenthal, & Krehely, 2010). The rate of homelessness in the trans community is approximately twice as large as in the general population (Grant et al., 2011). The initiation of homelessness is precipitated by 45% of trans women facing family rejection upon coming out (Quintana et al., 2010). After being rejected from their familial home, young trans women continue to face barriers accessing housing as they face discrimination and social safety nets that are ill suited for their needs. (Grant et al., 2011; Quintana et al., 2010).

Lack of housing has implications for health among trans women who are at significant risk for HIV as a result of both behavioral and structural factors. These include but are not limited to engagement in sex work, lack of familial support, drug and alcohol abuse, and barriers to accessing health care (CDC, 2016). Estimates of HIV prevalence among trans women vary widely, with reports ranging between 11 and 78% (Garofalo, Deleon, Osmer, Doll, & Harper, 2006). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention acknowledges the role of housing in HIV risk, pointing to transient housing as precipitating the need for individuals to engage in high risk behaviors for survival, particularly among trans women (CDC, 2016).

Young trans women of color face unique barriers in the search for housing. In fact, while transgender individuals make up 5-7 percent of the general youth population, estimates suggest that they constitute up to 39 percent of the homeless youth population (Quintana et al., 2010). For one, housing is difficult to attain during what Arnett (2000) describes as emerging adulthood. This developmental period encompasses individuals aged 18-25 and is characterized by the opportunity for a young adult to explore his or her identity past their teenage years (Arnett, 2000). There are a host of factors inherent to this developmental period, which makes accessing housing particularly challenging. When an emerging adult leaves home on inimical terms, their network of potential social supports is diminished and support from friends may be contingent upon engaging in risky or even illegal behaviors (e.g. drug and alcohol use) (Ammerman, 2004). Emerging adults often lack the time to amass substantial financial savings and rarely have many financially independent peers whom they can rely on for fiscal support (Ammerman, 2004). Thus for young trans women, whose identity is uniquely important and challenging to express and whose social supports may be particularly scarce, it is especially difficult to attain housing. Finally, these women face even steeper challenges given their race. In a national sample of trans persons, while only 1.7% of the overall sample was currently homeless, a striking 13% of Black respondents were currently homeless (Grant et al., 2011).

Literature has identified barriers that exist in accessing housing including social stigma, family rejection, and both interpersonal and institutionalized discrimination. The lack of affordable housing, difficulty accessing employment, insufficient education, and high rates of poverty, drug use, and incarceration have also been highlighted as salient barriers to housing within this population (Grant et al., 2011; Quintana et

¹ The term transgender refers to any person who identifies as a gender different than the sex they were assigned at birth. Transgender women (trans women, male to female, MTF) are individuals who identify as women, though at birth their biological sex was not female. Gender identity is distinct from sexual identity. Sexual identity is a person's attraction to others (e.g. homosexual). Instead, gender identity describes how a person feels like a man, woman, or something else (American Psychological, 2011).

al., 2010). It has been shown that 90% of trans individuals report discrimination at work, that there are no federal regulations to protect trans individuals from discrimination in shelters, and that 46% of trans individuals do not feel comfortable seeking assistance from police (Grant et al., 2011; Quintana et al., 2010). While barriers are known to exist, no known work has examined how women navigate them. Little is known about the daily lives of these women as they confront, manage, and conceptualize these barriers.

Given this aim, it is important to delineate the concept of home as disparate from housing. The women interviewed describe their experience not as a search for housing, but instead as a search for the intangible elements inherent to a home. Matthew Desmond describes home as “the center of life... a refuge from the grind of work, the pressure of school, and the menace of the streets” (Desmond, 2016). Padgett offers that home is distinct from housing in that a home provides “ontological security,” which is fostered by the constancy of one’s environment and the ability for that environment to facilitate self-exploration (Padgett, 2007). Home can be understood as something greater than just a roof; it is a refuge and a source of security. This work seeks to elucidate how trans women experience finding home in the face of pervasive barriers.

Methods

The data used in this work originate from a larger study entitled “Economic Crisis, Residential Instability, and Changing Sexual Geographies of Detroit Youth,” which works to understand and improve the structural factors related to sexual vulnerability among underrepresented youth in Detroit. This project is a collaboration with the University of Michigan School of Public Health and three community-based organizations in Detroit (Graham et al., 2014). The data examined here were extracted from one of these community-based organizations, the Ruth Ellis Center. The Ruth Ellis Center is a social service agency serving runaway, homeless, and at-risk youth, specializing in the needs of LGBT young adults. The center provides residential services, a drop-in center, and outpatient mental health care (“Ruth Ellis Center,” 2016). This paper draws on 17 semi-structured interviews conducted with youth served by the Ruth Ellis center. The interviews were conducted in the fall of 2011 by a University of Michigan co-investigator and three colleagues. The Institutional Review Board at University of Michigan granted approval for the collection of interview data and the Institutional Review Board at Yale University granted approval for the analysis of interview transcripts.

Participants were recruited by a transgender-identified project coordinator at the Ruth Ellis Center via social networking sites and by word of mouth. Eligible participants were between the ages 18 and 24, living in Detroit, and identified as transgender (currently living as a woman, assigned to a male sex at birth). Participants provided consent to be recorded anonymously. Interviews took place in a private office in the center, were digitally audio-recorded, transcribed, and de-identified. Participants were compensated with \$20 upon completion of their interview. All participants self-identified as black or African American and approximately half were unstably housed.

In order to understand the housing experiences of transgender youth, authors analyzed interview transcripts and coded for themes related to housing. Open coding was performed in Microsoft Word while reading through the transcripts in order to understand broad themes and potential codes. These were reviewed by two authors (RP and DK) to identify those which best captured the entirety of data. The codebook was created by one author (RP) and reviewed and edited by all authors. After authors’ feedback was incorporated into the codebook, a qualitative researcher unfamiliar with the data reviewed the codebook both independently and also as it related to a sample transcript. Upon incorporating relevant modifications and consulting with the authors, one author (RP) used the final codebook to code the 17 interviews in Dedoose. Upon completion of coding, all excerpts with a housing code were pulled and instances of double coding were noted. The review of coded data provided the framework to answer two questions: (1) how do women experience finding a home and (2) what are the elements of home that make it different than simply a housing structure. When including quotes in the paper, nonverbal utterances were removed and participant pseudonyms were applied.

Findings

This section aims to describe the experience of finding home for young trans women of color. The data allows exploration of how the experience of finding home is shaped by (1) conceptualizing home as a place that will allow space to express one's gender, (2) the role social support plays in the establishment of home, (3) motivations to escape discrimination, and (4) the ability to assert bodily autonomy.

1-Gender expression: The space to explore the often non-linear coming out process.

Home is intimately related to the process of gender expression. Often, the ability to express one's changing gender expression is contingent upon having a safe home to explore that shift. Serena describes that because her familial house did not provide that platform, the expression of her gender motivated her decision to leave: *"I was running away a lot because I just, I felt like, I don't know. I – I was coming out. So, I learned about being gay, so I was enjoying that a lot. I wanted to be with others all the time. So, it was like, you know, and I wanted to hang around my friends all the time, and I couldn't do that. So, I started running away."*

Coming out and leaving one's house are not always linear processes. Keisha describes that her transition began at a time when she was still living with her family of origin. Without the independence of her own home, she was forced to navigate two genders depending on the context. *"I didn't fully transition until I left my mother's house. I would do it, you know, when I wasn't with her. And then I would go home as a male."* In a more extreme example, Jaylyn explains what can happen when women are chronically unable to find home. She says that *"most of my friends that's transgender that end up in homeless shelters, they don't be in their transgender form by the end. They got such a burden... they're back resorting to their butch form."* This suggests that when women are consistently unable to attain a sense of home, they see a reversal in their coming out process, such that they no longer identify as women, but instead return to identifying as men. Given research on the effect of homelessness on allostatic load and subsequent weathering from stigma and stress, it appears that a lack of home may compromise the resources available to a woman to facilitate her gender expression (Geronimus, 1991; Juster, McEwen, & Lupien, 2010; Keene & Geronimus, 2011; Worthman & Panter-Brick, 2008).

Additionally, women describe the significance of physical beauty in their coming out process and relate this to their ability to find home. This is seen in beauty competitions, women's aspirations of ideal body image, and the social competition between women based on appearance. Amidst a culture, which puts such a heavy demand on physical beauty, being homeless erects additional barriers to a trans woman fully embodying her gender. Emma describes her experience with this challenge: *"And even though I was homeless, you know, no one would have ever known it because I was always dressed nice and smelled good... And, um, even though I didn't have a place to stay, I managed to find a place to wash up, a place to change and get myself together. So, but the biggest issue was just bringing clothes and stuff back and forth, having to catch the bus and everything."*

2- Social support: The establishment of home via engaging and disengaging processes.

Social support plays multifaceted roles in the experience of finding home. Home offers potential as a place of social support and home is often found through the help of social supports. However, not all forms of support provide home, in fact being engaged in certain social groups can erect challenges to accessing home. Each of these three experiences will be described in turn.

Home offers potential as a place of social support.

A woman's familial house provides the first place in which she may experience social support. For some, the familial house is rich with social support and affirmation. Jaylyn describes this saying *"I, personally, have never been homeless because I always had accepting parents."* She goes on to say: *"I met a friend who I thought that was homeless—and she was living in a shelter downtown. And I couldn't understand it, so, I had to experience it for myself. So, I stayed at the warming shelter over one night, and after that one night, I automatically brought her home with me because I couldn't understand how could somebody just go through that."* Jaylyn's familial home is so rich with support she has trouble conceptualizing others' homelessness.

Conversely, many women are removed from their familial home, often as a result of abuses related to their gender identity. Here, women are kicked out or run away from their family of origin and are denied the social support and affirmation described above. Upon being asked about the first night she was kicked out, Athena describes the precipitating circumstances: *"Well, she—cause before that, my mother putting me out, I was staying with my grandfather, and he was in a bad accident, and I had moved back with her. My mother was just on drugs. And she couldn't take care of me, as for her habit, so she put me out. And I had to fend for myself."* In another example of the failure of family to provide a supportive home, Aisha explains, *"My mom has – my adopted mother has never, never gave me that stability, you know? You know, that safe environment. It was always, um, here and there. Or if I absolutely needed it or, you know what I'm saying? It was never, 'oh, you're my child.' You know, 'come here'. 'Come, you know, come here be safe; I want you here and be safe.' It's not that. It's the total opposite...It's very hard."*

In addition to these two polarizing experiences, some women have familial supports that may provide housing, but its transience and unstable-nature fail to make it a home. For instance, Emma lives with her mother most of the time, but describes. *"I could go somewhere...if she needs the break. And that's why I'm glad I do travel a lot—For it to be a break for me and my mom. But she doesn't really look at it as a break. She looks at it as, you know, me going on a vacation. And I try to tell her, like, you know, 'while I'm gone, this gives you time to yourself—and time to me, for myself.' But she doesn't look at it like that. So, I never get to enjoy myself."* Here, Emma is provided the structure of a house, but in order to maintain permission to stay there, she leaves home for short stays to sustain her relationship with her mother.

Social supports can help find home

In addition to, or in spite of familial support, various non-familial social resources are critical in women's experience finding home. When women are unable to find support from family, their social networks may become a safety net to protect against homelessness. Several participants describe a unique group of friends close enough to be considered family, which are referred to as their "gay family." This constructed network is common among gay, bisexual, and trans individuals of color, often as a result of being outcast from their families (Horne, Levitt, Sweeney, Puckett, & Hampton, 2015). In many cases, a woman finds her gay family as she struggles to attain a sense of home from her family of origin. In fact, Keisha defines her gay family as the individuals who helped her access a home. *"My gay family, I would have to say, will be the Red Boys. Um, because those were, that's my backbone. That's who pull me in at 16.... And they really guided me and made sure that I wasn't into trouble. Make sure I wasn't out in the streets—and did the necessary, a lot, and some of them had let me to live with them and helped me through that."*

Emma repeats the importance of friends in finding and maintaining home with advice she provides to other women who might struggle to find home. *"But my best advice is, just find good friends, because a good friend can, help you out with a lot of stuff...You know, if you're homeless and you don't have a place to go, you don't really have time to wait and wait and wait for them to try to fit you into the place. You need a place to hurry up and go...I would just say talk to someone and then try to find some friends or people that are comfortable with you and are willing to help you out. And make sure they're not crazy. Not gonna throw your stuff out when you leave."*

In addition to friends and gay family, romantic partners play a large role in finding home. Many women, directly upon leaving their familial house, will move in with a romantic partner. Serena describes her story, which is representative of many others like it. *“I: Where did you go when you moved out? R: Um, I had a boyfriend. He had his own apartment. He (inaudible 0:08:27), and I moved in with him, and we were together for, like, probably like a, a year or within the year.”* For some, like Seneka, this move involves a woman’s first sexual experience with a man. *“R: When I was fifteen, I ran away...I went to some boy house, house I was talking to. The boy that ended up being my first experience, like, with everything—sexually.”* Here, home is created through the gender affirmation of a sexual relationship coupled with a partner with a physical house.

It is important to note the reciprocal nature of the social safety nets. Women often describe an emphatic willingness to help other’s struggling with this search. For Keisha, this is realized in the form of a mentor relationship. When she has an 18-year old boy staying with her, she offers advice on how to navigate living as a gender or sexual minority. She says she does this because: *“I feel like our children shouldn’t have to go through stuff they don’t need to go through. If I could talk to him, lie back and tell you that’s not the route that you want to go. Been there, done that. I got – this is what happened to me. And they’ll understand that. They’re gonna be like, “well, I don’t want that to happen to me.” So. Like, and then he see firsthand what’s going with, in my situation now. So, it gives him a better understanding of how he want to carry hisself at, how he wants to live his life.”* For others, the help comes in the form of sheltering women, offering resources, or even helping to pay for rent. Sydney explains, a unique reciprocity where she partners with her mother to support those without a home: *“I’ve had a, um, a few friends that didn’t have anywhere to go—due to their personal situations. Um, and a few I’ve sheltered. Um, you know, as long as it was OK with my mom.”* Dynasty describes that independence allows for this shared reciprocity saying, *“I mean, we’re all independent, so, it’s like we’re there when we need each other. Like, so, if they call me and stuff, it’s just, ‘I need you to, um, let me borrow \$50 to put towards the rent.’ ‘Can you pay the other \$50?’ ‘OK, yeah, sure, I’ll do it.’ ‘Just, you know, pay it when you get it.’”* In its many forms, the social support inherent in the search for home is a reciprocal process.

Not all social support provides home.

In some instances, despite the generosity of social supports in providing housing options, staying with friends or one’s gay family may not be stable, comfortable or ideal. Serena introduces this concept saying: *“And after that, I started staying in, like, rooms where I be knowing, I know other transsexuals. And, you ...know this person, know that person. Go to their house. Go to their house. Stuff like that. Never just like one place. But in the end, like, me and my best friend, we had an apartment together where I be, where I go home... I don’t like staying place to place to place like that. I guess OK—I:Not having, like, your space. R:Yeah.”*

In some instances women actively reject social support as a means to access home and instead prioritize the value of independence. Saneka is adamant not to rely on social supports to find a home saying, *“I don’t want to lay up on nobody. I don’t want to ask nobody for nothing. I don’t want to give nobody the opportunity to just say, “get out of my house.” You know what I’m saying? So, therefore, I live in rooms, hotel rooms... I just live in a hotel room. I have had apartments, since I’ve been like this and stuff like that, but I live in hotel rooms.”* Her distaste at the notion of dependency is evident when she goes on to say *“So, I mean—it would be easier to get all the money at once and pay for it in advance but, you know what I’m saying, as far as – it would be easy if you were chicken and you were staying at [the place of] somebody’s else.”* In this instance, Saneka’s quest for a home independent of social supports is so important to her that she seeks it despite its deleterious financial effect.

Though women seek social support through their search for home, some social support structures may provide some aspects of home but not others. Houses and balls have provided a space for young men who have sex with men and trans individuals of color to meet. House affiliation offers familial support and the ball scene provides events and competitions to unite the trans community (Phillips et al., 2011). While having a house affiliation allows for gender expression, social support, and a physical roof, some women still seek a separate home. Dynasty describes that the Ebony house wants her to come back, but she continues to seek home, saying, *“yeah, they wanted me to come back, but I don’t think I can do it. I have to get myself together and...worry about my personal life first then worry about house stuff because a house can’t pay my bills. A house – I can’t go to the real estate company and say, ‘oh, well, I’m an Ebony, so can I get a house?’ So, no. I have to get myself together first.”*

In a similar way the ball scene offers many aspects of home, but some women continue to seek home elsewhere. The beauty competitions of a ball provide an opportunity to express one’s gender very openly with parties that would suggest the provision of social support. For instance Lakara indicates being very active in the ball scene and falling in love with her ability to express her female identity in competitions saying, *“it’s basically just – who has the prettiest face—basically. You put your makeup on. You make your makeup look right. You blend everything... If you look pretty that night or nice that night, you’ll probably get the trophy. And it’s just all about glamour in my category”* However, for Imani finding a home required distancing herself from the ball scene. When asked about where she spends most of her time, she says *“at home. I don’t really – I don’t go out nowhere...I mean, I go to – I go to a mall. I go to a movie. I do regular stuff. I don’t – as far as the clubs and crowds and stuff like that, I don’t – I’m straight. I don’t do all that. I’ve been doing it for years. So, I’m over it.”* In fact, some women, largely those who have been active in the gay community for a long time, seek home as respite from the ball culture and describe enjoying being at home. The provision of home allows them to identify as a homebody, giving them the flexibility and independence to enter and exit the ball scene at their discretion. Sydney explains: *“But I don’t have a problem with going nowhere. Like I said, I like trying new things. I like doing a little bit of everything, but I more so, I like to stay at the, um, home. I’m a homebody. I like to stay at home.”*

3- Safety from discrimination

Home provides protection from discrimination both in the sense that it removes the stigma of homelessness but also in that it provides respite from interpersonal and structural sources of discrimination.

The discrimination of trans individuals is described as existing “at every turn,” with hundreds of examples of anti-transgender bias existing in work, housing, healthcare, law enforcement, and leisure. For instance, 78% of trans individuals report being harassed at school, 90% have experienced harassment at work, and 28% delayed medical care because of discrimination (Grant et al., 2011).

This discrimination is articulated by Dynasty who acknowledges that finding a safe neighborhood will depend on the acceptability of non-concealed gender and sexual minorities. *“I like the west side better because it’s like, it’s more opportunities around there. They’re more, more open to gay people than the east side. Like, where I stay at, they are--um, even though I really don’t have problems when I go out in public because, like I said, they don’t – they think I’m a girl, so it’s like I don’t really have problems, but I do have brothers that I live with that look more gayer, so it’s like they have to be careful where they go because, you know, in Detroit, it’s like very hard to go somewhere and just be gay when you’re around a lot of straight guys. Because it’s gonna be a lot of name-calling. Sometimes they might, might want to fight you. So, stuff like that.”* Here, Dynasty seeks more than the structure of a house, but she wants the contextual safety that a home would provide.

Trans individuals are four times as likely to make less than \$10,000 annually than the general population. Further, 40% of trans individuals report temporarily living with family or friends suggesting the insecurity of housing (Grant et al., 2011) Women who are unable to afford the upfront costs of long-term rent often opt to rent hotel rooms. Thus discrimination from hotel owners, though common, with one in four trans individuals reporting it (Grant et al., 2011), is a particularly troublesome. Kimani explains that reliance on temporary forms of housing exposes women to discrimination: *“hotels don’t let you check in because – just because you a tranny and just because of the, that, of what another bitch did. They, you know stereotype and a lot of stuff.”* Ayana continues on to illustrate her lack of agency in seeking justice from this discrimination. *“Sometimes I be wishing – sometimes, sometimes I be wishing that I have, like, another one used to have a lawyer, like, whenever something, when something like that come across, I could sue the fuck out of somebody just real quick.”*

The search for safety from discrimination is even described when imagining a shelter that would exclusively hold trans women. Jade articulates the need for trans-specific resources, including a trans-only shelter. Here, even in a hypothetical haven for trans women, its location remains a determinant of safety. *“It should be in an area like this or the Palmer Park area or off of Woodward, somewhere off of Woodward because I guess those areas, we feel more comfortable in. Uh, it’s like this area, the Palmer Park area and anywhere off Woodward, you feel like its Ferndale, because they’re gay-friendly there. So, that’s how it feels. And I feel like it should be in one of these areas. I personally can’t go on West 7 Mile or East 7 Mile and have a house full of transgenders. I feel like the damn house might get caught on fire or somebody might do something to us.”*

The unfortunate paradox is that though home will protect trans women from many instances of discrimination, there are structural policies in place that maintain the discrimination of these women and make it increasingly difficult to attain even the structure of a house. For one, institutional discrimination is seen when women apply for housing. For instance, when transitioning, women usually decide to change their name to a female form. The challenge, expense, and burden of this process results in a third of trans individuals who have transitioned not having any of their IDs or records updated; approximately 40% do not have an ID that matches their gender identity (Grant et al., 2011) If a woman has not yet changed her legal name, applying for housing can be uncomfortable if not inhibitory. Ayana describes the discomfort she felt in legal forms using her male name, though she wanted to be referred to as her female name. *“When I went to see someone at Detroit Housing Commission—she knew my name...and I went to her (laughs) and I put on the paper my trans name. And they called me by the name, and she was like, ‘well, how can I help you?’ And I told her what my name is such-and-such and this is, you know, what I’m supposed to do. And, uh, she said, ‘oh, OK.’ And she saw me from there. And I was like, ‘why can’t I do that on the application?’ Or not even the application, why can’t I do, fill out the application, them knowing my real name and when it comes to time to work, they identify me as the girl name. Because they let people do that with nicknames. I know that for a fact. You know? Why can’t I do that?”*

4-Bodily Autonomy

Home is a place that allows a woman to exert her independence over her body. In many narratives, one’s story of home was influential to and was influenced by whether she engaged in sex work. Jade explains how women with a similar history of social rejection, may turn to prostitution, *“Um, honestly, a lot of the girls do turn to prostitution because situations like what I’m in. You know, they can’t – they don’t have family members or friends who will let them stay over, so they do turn to prostitution. Just to make a day by day living.”* More often, the description of home as a determinant of autonomy around sex work is much more subtle. For instance, for Aisha, the absence of stable housing caused her to sleep with men in order to have a place for the night: *“If I don’t have money to, um, get a hotel room or anything, I would just, I guess I would, um, just being honest, I would just have to do what I have to do. You know?...I*

mean, I may, I may, you know, call some friends. Maybe ask for a favor or—I have plenty of male, male friends who, you know—would maybe help me out.”

Makayla provides a contrasting example whereby because her familial home was supportive, she struggles to understand why a woman would decide to engage in sex work: *“I think that people think it’s easier to have sex for money than it is to take the time to clean, cleanse yourself. Um, detox, um, being in a stable environment, being in a positive environment. So, I think it’s easy. But at the same time, I’ve never been put out of my house. I’ve never been, um, cut off from, like, my support systems. So, I don’t know – I don’t know. For me, I think it’s easy.”*

Women explain that at times sex work is sought to provide a place to stay for the night. While it may provide a roof for the night, Imani describes the precarious nature of safety on these nights. When asked if some having clients in certain hotels is safer than other hotels, she says: *“it’s not the hotel. It’s the people...It’s the clients, yeah. I mean, you know what I’m saying, you might, it might be such thing called as a dangerous hotel, but it’s not, when you just talking about your clients, it’s not the hotel, it’s the, it’s the dates. Hotel don’t have nothing to do with it. It’s the people that’s coming to see me. Because I could be at a fabulous hotel out in Belleville somewhere and a date can come and see me and stick me up or something. As a matter of fact, I’ve been robbed out there before at the Red Roof Inn on Christmas Eve.”*

Engaging in sex work makes women particularly vulnerable to interactions with law enforcement. Given that 38% black trans individuals who have interacted with law enforcement report harassment or assault, any activity that increases the likelihood of these interactions is problematic (Grant et al., 2011). Ayana is asked whether her interactions with police have prevented her from getting jobs she says *“I know it do because they straight run a background check on whatever, anything...Even when I try to get my own apartment, they – yeah, background check. I don’t got time for that.”* In a tragic irony, while engaging in sex work can provide a roof for a night it may reduce a woman’s ability to have a home in the future.

Discussion

Summary

These findings provide a description of the experience of young trans women of color finding home, given that home is distinct from structural housing and that enumerable barriers exist in the process. Home provides the space to explore one's gender identity and the capacity to embody it. Finding home is imbued with complexities as social supports both foster a sense of home, but also can inhibit the attainment of home. It provides a haven from physical and emotional danger while enabling women's autonomy over their bodies. However, these stories demonstrate the challenge of attaining home. Home offers gender affirmation and social support, but often at the expense of each other. It promises independence but also threatens financial instability. It offers respite from discrimination but its attainment is imbued with bias.

Implications

Understanding what women seek in a home and realizing the barriers they face help to elucidate the issue of unstable housing among trans women. These stories provide evidence that they are looking for something greater than a roof. They are searching for the elements of a home that are often absent in the lives of these young, trans women of color. Understanding and applying these elements of a home will offer guidance in future housing programs and initiatives.

First, when seeking to provide a home for trans women it is critical to understand that home is a place for gender expression. This implicates the need for flexibility around gendered sleeping quarters in shelters. The understanding that many youth leave home because of their changing gender identity, inform why they leave and under what circumstances they would feel comfortable returning home. The demand on gendered beauty should not be overlooked; the need to pass as a woman is foundational to these women's stories. This suggests opportunities for housing initiatives to partner with beauty companies in a campaign to provide cosmetics, positive body image support, or beauty tips for women without stable home.

Social support is a critical but complex element of home. The narratives around the role of support in housing demonstrate that each trans woman has a unique constellation of actors that provide her support. This is essential to understand where she may leverage help and how these actors influence her search for home. The importance of gay family and support from friends paired with the commitment to reciprocal support provides promise for peer mentor programs within housing programs. Here, women can help each other navigate the process of finding home.

Home provides much needed protection from interpersonal and structural discrimination. Women's narratives provide insight on acts of discrimination that often go unnoticed. This suggests the need for targeted policies that inhibit the discrimination of trans individuals in these spaces. Further, given the description of women's lack of agency, initiatives aimed at providing mechanisms to report discrimination may be well received. Practices such as allowing trans women to use their preferred name and pronoun on housing applications would facilitate their search for home.

Finally, home provides bodily autonomy. This provides evidence that proper housing programs (those that provide the elements of a home) will improve trans women's sense of empowerment and ability to choose their means of employment. The provision of home will prevent women from feeling the need to engage with clients whom they fear will compromise their safety and will likely prevent their interface with the criminal justice system.

Given that the barriers to accessing housing have been well established, this work provides a glimpse into the experience of the women who navigate these barriers daily. Research has suggested the period of

emerging adulthood is defined by the search for identity (Arnett, 2000). This work suggests that this is uniquely the case for young trans women as they seek a home that allows for the exploration of their changing gender identity. With almost half of young trans individuals being rejected from their home (Quintana et al., 2010), this work suggests that turning to non-familial social supports may provide a means to re-form one's establishment of home. While a wealth of literature describes that discrimination against young trans women occurs (Grant et al., 2011; Quintana et al., 2010), these experiences elucidate how women manage this discrimination. Understanding home as a respite from these experiences, allows for the understanding of home as a place of psychological safety (Padgett, 2007). In a similar way, when home allows for autonomy over bodily-decision making, it becomes a place of physical safety. The combined findings of this work provide hope for the ability of home to improve mental and physical health in young trans women. Whereby the elements of home synergistically provide a place of psychological and physical safety with the resources to demand the sustainability of this safety.

Limitations

Though rich in depth and contextual understanding, the stories of this study are unique to Detroit. The provision of housing and experience of homelessness are vastly variable on the basis of geography. In the same way, discrimination to transgender individuals is highly context dependent. For these reasons, the stories of these women should be understood in relation to their position in Detroit, Michigan the US city with the highest population of black individuals (Rastogi, 2011). For example, 99% of clients at the Ruth Ellis Center identify as being of color (Ray, 2006). The demographics of Detroit provide the context to understand why the discrimination described was largely based around gender and drastically less on race.

It is also, important to note that the women interviewed were sampled through their association with the Ruth Ellis Center. As such, their stories are unique to a population that has either directly or through their social network have accessed the resources of such a center. The stories of those who have not accessed aid (e.g. the chronically homeless, those who feel trapped in abusive homes) remain unanswered.

Despite these limitations, the broader themes reveal commonality in the experience of finding home. They provide insight into the shared needs of this community and the barriers to accessing an ideal sense of home. With this understanding, these findings hold the potential to change the way housing initiatives are implemented. It provides the understanding that the housing crisis among trans women is not defined by women lacking a roof, but instead by women lacking a home.

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