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**ROMPIENDO EL SILENCIO: EXPLORACIÓN
DE LA MATERNIDAD Y DE LA
TRANSFORMACIÓN SOCIAL EN
UNA INVESTIGACIÓN DE
ACCIÓN PARTICIPATIVA CON
LAS MADRES ALTEÑAS.***

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Exploring motherhood and social transformation in a participatory action research with Alteñan mothers (accepted in: *Gender, Place & Culture: a Journal of Feminist Geography*)

In November 2012, a researcher, two social workers and five mothers embarked on a participatory action research journey with the aim to develop new ideas for interventions for children and young people in street situations of the city of El Alto in Bolivia. In this paper we attend to the topic of personal and social transformation in participatory action research. We explore how the mothers of young people in street situations perform and negotiate their subjectivities as mothers in their everyday life; how they create (new) subjectivities in exchange and in interaction with each other during the mother project; and how the performance of their (new) subjectivities can bring social change. The mothers in our group shared stories of being silenced by social services in their everyday lives, as their motherhood is declared not good enough or as they are perceived too guilty to claim for help. It was the first time the mothers shared their stories with other mothers of their lives with their children in street situations. By noticing that they all experienced or heard of similar events that their children were subjected to in the streets, the mothers grew confident enough to talk back. Mothers talked back silence by denouncing injustice and by transforming doubts into questions, providing them with more knowledge. Finally, as the mothers reached out to social services, mothers' presence, questions and stories confronted aid workers with their own flaws, and their comfortable discourse of blaming families, creating new paths towards social transformation.

1. Introduction

The first mother meeting started on a Wednesday afternoon on the 7th of November, 2012 in the premises of a local NGO (non-governmental organisation) working with children and young people in the streets in the city of El Alto, Bolivia. Together with a social worker, I [first author] transformed the 'boys meeting room'. We exchanged the big beanbags for seats. We covered a stained coffee table with an embroidered tablecloth and placed small plates, tea cups, cookies and cakes. Three o'clock. Finally, we hear women entering the room. Only two mothers arrived, out of five whom trusted me on the phone they would come. It is what I can come to expect in the following encounters. I rearrange my thinking. Two mothers are here, that is the most important. We say hello. I offer a drink and a cake. We present ourselves. This is the first time the mothers meet. We chitchat about the icy wind blowing in the streets of the city. I notice it is also cold in the room. An electrical heater is blowing warm air through the room, but the room is poorly insulated. [...] I wish the meeting was only this: a chitchat. But no, there are some expectations and social rules to obey when you invite people. I can see it in their questioning looks. But also, there is an idea for a project I want to share with them and hopefully carry out together. The clock is ticking. Let us start. (from field diary, 7th of November 2012)

This quote and the mother meeting are part of a larger research project on the subjective experiences of children and young persons in street situations, their home-based families and street educators, when searching for, or helping to find, a life outside of the streets. By examining and understanding the mechanisms of leaving street life from the perspective of those who are

involved, the research project wants to provide more knowledge to intervention programmes on how they can improve their programmes to support this transition. The research project began with encountering and interviewing street educators from five institutions (rehabilitation centres and street-based/outreach centres) based in La Paz and El Alto. It continued with an eight month ethnographic fieldwork phase where the first author participated in the daily activities of a street-based organisation in El Alto. The ethnographic fieldwork involved gaining insight into street life and coming into contact with young people in street situations and their home-based family members, with the aim to carry out participatory action research (PAR) projects. The quote above was written after the first meeting between mothers, a social worker of the street-based NGO and the first author. What followed would be a participatory action research project aiming to develop new ideas for interventions for children and young people in street situations, which the group of mothers called 'Proyecto de Madres'.

Literature on street children has stated that family members are hardly involved in interventions towards their children (Berckmans, Losantos, Villanueva, & Loots, 2014), although family problems are seen as the main reason for children to repeatedly return to the streets (Thomas de Benítez, 2007). Hence, in the public eye, family members are often seen as perpetrators. Social policies, influenced by a dominant neo-liberal discourse, have subsequently contributed to that image, by losing sight of the ways that broader structural processes, such as poverty, gender and race, interact at the individual/family level, thus ignoring these factors in their interventions (Gillies, 2007). Finally, there also exists an obdurate assumption that the problematic relationship between children and parents is irreversible, rather than temporary and dynamic (Schwinger, 2007). These all lead to a problematic tendency to exclude family members' voices, as they have not yet received adequate attention nor involvement in social policies and intervention (Balachova et al., 2009; Lam & Cheng, 2008).

Therefore, in November 2012, we embarked on a PAR journey that brought together mothers who struggle with finding better living situations for their children, a social worker and a researcher (first author). Research methodologies, such as participatory action research, are said to have the potential to fissure the domination affecting marginalised communities (Mejia et al., 2013). Participatory action research advances this work by integrating communities as research partners, emphasising the need to conduct research with communities rather than on communities. It encourages people to examine particular issues affecting them or their community. PAR is seen not only as a process of creating knowledge, but as a development of consciousness and of mobilisation for action (Freire, 1978). The process is an iterative cycle of reflection, planning and action that has social change in mind, which should ultimately benefit the wellbeing of the participants (Lewis, 2001).

In this paper, we will attend to the topic of personal and social transformation in participatory action research. As explained above, women whose children are in street situations are a muted group. However, as these mothers experience a variety of difficulties that emanate from having a child in the street, from a research perspective, it is worthwhile learning from the knowledge and an awareness they have acquired. Through collective dialogue, sharing knowledge and ongoing

reflection, the PAR process has the potential for the mothers to consciously negotiate and experiment with multiply situated positions, opening new discourses that interact in different ways with the mothers, and hence transform their personal lives (Cahill, 2007). However, Kesby (2005) raises critical concerns as to whether these new subjectivities live and are sustained outside of the participatory space, and whether we achieve social change with PAR, once we leave the supportive space and enter the social structures that are increasingly regulated and constrained (Cahill, 2007).

Yet, Cahill (2007) conceptualises the PAR process not as a space aside from everyday spaces, but rather sees it from a post-structural perspective, as a 'contact zone'. 'In other words, the development of new subjectivities need to be understood as partial, constituted within the PAR process, but also as a positioning that is developed "across" [spaces]' (287). In this way, not only do everyday lives enter the PAR process, but also the PAR space pushes out on everyday spaces, creating social transformation. Inspired by the writings of Cahill (2007), we explore in this paper the process of mothers' development of and struggle with different subject positions in their everyday lives and during PAR meetings in the 'Proyecto de Madres'. We attempt to uncover how mothers in exchange and in interaction with each other reflect, experiment, contest and grapple with different subjectivities of their motherhood and the multiple ways of caring for their children. Finally, as mothers reach out to new audiences and across spaces (through a video and an encounter with social services), the paper aims to uncover the influence of mothers' performances of new subjectivities on creating social transformation, despite the power of dominant discourses and social service practices.

1.1. Proyecto de Madres

The participatory action research project, which the group called 'Proyecto de Madres' or mother project, was developed in November-December 2012 and was continued in April-May 2013. Mothers were contacted through their children who were in contact with a non-governmental street-based organisation. At the end of August 2012, children and adolescents in street situations were given information on the research project with parents and asked if they allowed the first author to contact their family members. Throughout the mother project more mothers were reached as their children gave their telephone numbers. At the end, five mothers, two social workers of the organisation and the first author participated¹ on a regular basis (more than five times) and two mothers visited the project each on two occasions.

The project (see Figure 1.) started with the issues identified by the mothers and their critical reflections of their social context (Freire, 1978). The mothers conducted research on their everyday lives of having a child in street situations by sharing experiences. While many topics were of concern to the mothers (corrupt police, motels illegally receiving minors, dismissive child protection services), the mother group decided to interview a psychotherapist to learn more about drug addiction and drug abuse treatment in Bolivia. By sharing and reflecting on their experiences, the research team developed some messages they wanted to communicate to the social services.

¹Twenty four children gave their parent's telephone numbers and permission to call them. Five parents refused to participate and twelve parents were not reached because of a nonexistent number or because the call was never answered. Due to the small sample size of the parent group, we take into account the possibility of not having reached a large range of possible cases or more extreme experiences, in order to obtain data that might contradict or modify the analysis.

These messages were incorporated in a six minute video with the aim to show it at an encounter with Bolivian governmental and non-governmental institutions (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INSI4GMedk8>). During April and May, the group reunited and planned the meeting, reflecting on the expectations, on who to invite and how to organise the meeting. The meeting took place on the 29th May 2013 in the meeting room of the street-based organisation and was followed by a final meeting amongst the mothers and researcher. Every meeting was recorded on video or audio. From the beginning it was discussed that the group could use these recordings for PAR purposes, namely for the group to reflect on previous conversations. During the second meeting, the first author asked the group orally for permission to use the videos for academic purposes. After a discussion around the conditions the mothers agreed. In every meeting the permission was asked again. The data that informs this article draws from these recordings. Each encounter lasted from two to four hours.

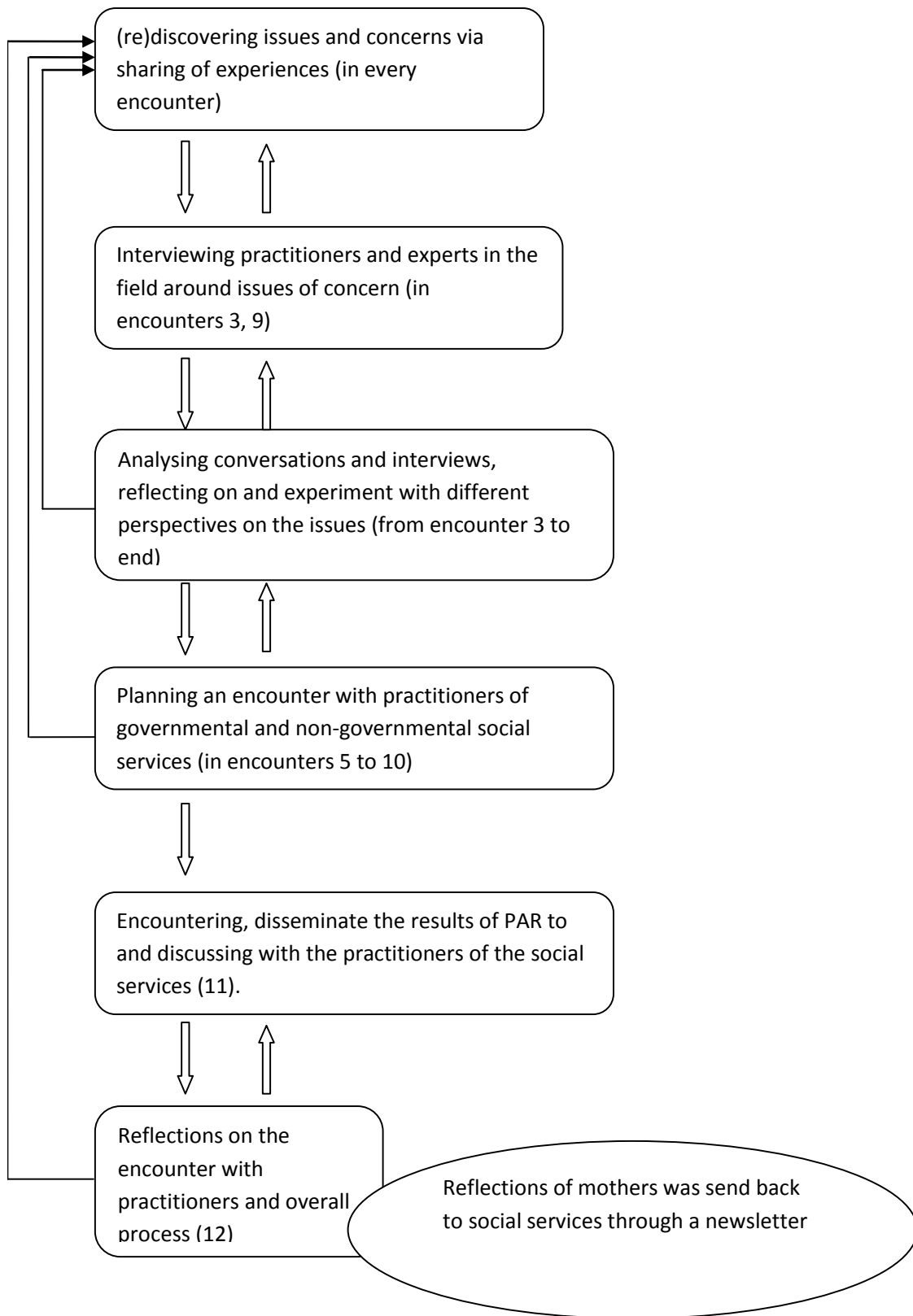


Figure 1. Phases of the Proyecto de madres

1.2. Participants

The five mothers who regularly participated were all born outside of the city of El Alto, originating from rural areas of the province of La Paz. They migrated in their teenage years for work or followed their husbands. They got pregnant before they were eighteen and all of their children (two to seven children) were born in the city. All but one separated from the father of their children, having children from different men. Four of the mothers had one of child that ran away to the streets, and for one mother two of her children ran away. Their children in street situations, girls and boys from sixteen to nineteen years, kept in touch with them by phone or visits, some mothers having more contact than others. All mothers struggled to a greater or lesser extent with street issues that surrounded their children's lives, namely teen pregnancy, drug addiction, other health issues and youth delinquency. Finally, all hoped and were searching for better lives for their children. From the first meeting, the mothers expressed their hopes of gaining knowledge on drug addiction, mother-child relationships and possibilities for rehabilitation. Other motives for participation were i) the opportunity to meet other mothers and families going through similar issues and ii) the hope to raise awareness and draw attention of the professional aid workers. Furthermore, the first author, who initiated this project, participated in every meeting facilitating the different encounters. She is a Belgian-Bolivian psychologist and researcher influenced by the framework of participatory action research. Previous to the mother meetings she followed the daily work of the street based organisation where she had many encounters with children and adolescents in the streets. Through her relationship with the children she was able to contact their parents. Marina and Ruzena are two social workers from the street-based organisation who alternated in participating in the encounters. Working daily in the streets, they have won the trust of many children and adolescents in street situations. Previous to the encounters, they had contact with parents, however brief, as the children requested in some instances a meeting with their parents through the auspices of the organisation.

1.3. Analysis

To uncover what happened with the subjectivities of the mothers during the PAR project, we decided to work with the Listening Guide method as transformed and used by Villanueva and Loots (2014).

More specifically, we used the Listening Guide to explore:

1. How the mothers of young people in street situations perform and negotiate their subjectivities as mothers in their everyday life,
2. How the mothers of young people in street situations create new ways of knowing about themselves in exchange and in interaction with each other during the mother project; and
3. How mothers, during an encounter with child-experts, generate new understandings on the issue of children and adolescents in street situations and create social change.

The Listening Guide (LG; Brown & Gilligan, 1992) is a qualitative, relational, voice-centred, feminist methodology. Its feminist grounding provides spaces to hear those who have been traditionally rendered invisible. Researchers listen to the multiplicity of voices, rather than categorising or quantifying the text or interpreting it in a framework. Hence, analysing the fluidity and multiplicity of subjectivities of mothers during PAR conversation with the use of the Listening Guide seems

appropriate. Our own understanding and use of the Guide and PAR consider subjectivity from a post-structuralist perspective (subjects are constituted through cultural discourse and practice) with an emphasis upon agency (the taking control of, and taking up of, positions as opposed to mechanistic or unconscious performances of existing socially structured position). Inspired by the post-structuralist perspective of (1) Cahill who engaged the potential of a PAR process for producing new subjectivities, and (2) Villanueva and Loots in their use of the Listening Guide, we expanded the Listening Guide by regarding the conversations in PAR as social performances; storytelling in PAR as generating new meanings. Both writings emphasise the embedment of subjectivity in its relational context and consider 'men and women as beings in the process of *becoming* – as unfinished uncompleted being in and with a likewise unfinished reality' (Freire, 1978, 61, italics original).

We completed the Listening Guide by conducting rounds of guided reading of the transcribed encounters through five steps: (1) Listening for the plot, (2) Listening to the I poems, (3) Listening for audiences, (4) Contrapuntal voices and (5) Composing an Analysis. Although Gilligan and colleagues described the creation and analysis of the I poems in the second step as an important component of coming into relationship with what a narrator knows of herself, we also focused on other pronouns (one, we, they). According to Villanueva and Loots (2014), these stanzas (personal pronouns with accompanying verb and important text) open the possibility to take into account the social context and broader discourses more profoundly, providing a dynamic that permits focus on how mothers perform and position themselves within their social context. In the third step of listening for the audiences, we examined the mothers' conversations as continuously responding to the social context (Villanueva and Loots, 2014): (1) 'To what and whom are they responding at that moment? And (2) *with* whom are they responding at that moment?' The following step involves listening for contrapuntal voices from the musical form of counterpoint, which brings the analysis back into relationship with the research questions (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003). In the next section, we will illustrate further our use of the Listening Guide, highlighting the ways in which it prompted us to read the transcripts and to derive particular insights about, on the one hand, how mothers negotiate and explore (new) meanings and subjectivities while engaging in a PAR process and, on the other hand, how child experts transform their understandings while engaging with mothers in a PAR.

2. Results

2.1. First part: Voices of motherhood

'Ay, it is difficult being a woman. It is sad, being a woman. It is bad' (Anselma).

Listening to the plot, we were struck by the hardships from the past that surround the stories of the women's construction of motherhood, as all seven mothers disclose the difficulties, they experienced as children, such as violence and poverty. During the tenth meeting, in a conversation with Anselma and the first author about the place they were brought up, Emitteria, says:

I come from the countryside. I must have been in my teenage years when I came to El Alto. Alone. My mother lives in the countryside. She is now 85. My dad has left us when I was a young child. Nor did he know me. They did not inscribe me in school. Nothing for

me. I regret it. At least up to the fifth year of primary school they could have placed me. I said to my children: study, study. One of my children is already in the fourth year of high school. But, I am not. My mother did not raise me well.

Prudencia also drew on her past hardships during childhood to explain her motivation to have a different kind of relationship with her children than what she has known:

Love is what they [children] want. *I have never known love* of my father. Beatings and beating/ *But I'm not going* to do the same. *I think differently*. It is not like that. That [love] is why we have children. This [love] will make them stronger.

In order to further examine the impact of past hardship on the women's construction of their motherhood in their stories, we continue with the second listening of the Listening Guide that focuses in on the voice of the 'I' who is speaking (see italics). We re-read the women's stories of their experiences of motherhood, this time focusing on the women's conversation of how they position themselves as mothers. Looking for patterns in the I poems, we found that there were different voices from those women who spoke about their experiential realities.

We hear a first voice of motherhood which we called 'repairing the past'. It comes from the experience of a void created by parents not giving the right education and a father's lack of ability to show love. Mothers relate how they compensate for the void and regrets experienced in their childhood, by reflecting on and discovering another idea of what motherhood for them means, namely giving love and encouraging their children to go to school. The mothers reveal how they use memories of a negative childhood, as driving forces to be a different parent than what they have known as children. Merely perceiving these women as purely 'transmitting' past behaviours into the present, denies their reflecting ability in constructing their own meanings of motherhood (Buchbinder, 2004).

The second voice of motherhood we identified was the voice of 'being strong and acknowledging vulnerability'. The following story is situated in a conversation Prudencia had with Anselma and Emiliana during the fourth meeting. All three of them dealt with abusive husbands and shared it with the group as one new mother, Sofia, revealed in tears how she and her children endure her husband's violence. Prudencia tells her:

I will tell you [to Sofia]. You have to be strong. You should not bear that type of man. If you and your children suffer, leave him. Even if they don't receive love from their father, from the mother is much better. You have to say to your children: '*I'm father and mother* for you. Your father is not around. *I will give you love of father and mother*'.

In this account, Prudencia explains the vulnerability that comes when leaving a violent husband. While it appears that leaving the husband is the right thing to do ('you have to be', 'you should not', 'leave him'), the lack of the father figure, however, creates a void of love ('*Even if they don't receive love*'). Therefore, she feels that she needs to compensate and fill the void with love as a father and mother. Emiliana steps into the conversation saying that:

Emiliana: You need to be strong. We need to be brave. We must not be cowards. A friend told me this. I was crying, crying, crying. My self-esteem, everything dropped. But that wasn't it. We need to appraise ourselves.

Anselma: as a woman.

Emiliana: *As women respect ourselves. And also our children will support us*

Hence by sharing her thoughts and going from 'you' to 'we' to the personal exclamation of 'I', Emiliana recognises the struggle and uncertainties that goes along with being a mother without the support of a husband, in this way also empathising with the mother, Sofia, who did not dare to leave her violent husband. Although this voice acknowledges vulnerability, or even because of this vulnerability, it seems as though this voice is powerful. Being powerful and vulnerable are not dichotomous, since it requires courage to overcome low self-esteem when the odds are stacked against you. At the end Emiliana knows it is worthwhile as her children supported her decision to file for divorce at the time, while bearing in mind that with this choice her family could have ended up in even greater poverty.

When talking about their children in street situations, Jannet's and Anselma's dialogue below exemplifies how the women in the mother project know, are aware and are scared of the dangers their children, being in the streets, are exposed to.

Anselma: My son in La Ceja. *I am scared* when my son is not with me at night. *I cannot eat nor sleep.*

Jannet: Me too. At least these six months that my son is in [in juvenile detention centre], *I feel calm. I sleep peacefully.* But before, *I was listening. I know* that they can catch them [children in street situations]. They want to burn them. They want to hurt them. Ay [= sound]. *I am already watching* the television. *I am alert.* If it is my boy or if it is not my boy. Really. Now *I feel calm.*

Prudencia: *We need to be patient*

Anselma: Yes, me too, *I am very patient. I am already well accustomed* with my son. When he arrives late in the evening, *I ask him: son what has happened? But when he arrives, I am happy.*

Prudencia: When they do not arrive, *it worries us, desperation.* Will she arrive home? *It traumatized me, seeing* Miriam like that with her wool in her little hand [thinner is sprinkled on threads of wool and in such a way the thinner is inhaled]. *That broke my heart.* It was something *I never wanted* for my daughter.

(From the eighth meeting)

The third voice is a voice of 'worrying and being silenced'. The mothers experience anxieties, uncertainties and broken hearts. The mothers sleep peacefully when they know where their children are. When they do not know, they do not eat or sleep. The mothers' experiences shift depending on the wellbeing of the child, being well aware that their children's wellbeing is jeopardised in the streets. Mothers fear aggressions of police raids and others towards their children, searching attentively for information about their children. Even though the mothers are on the lookout for their children, they are not able to protect their children from aggressions. The mothers' agencies to protect their children collide with barriers. One, they cannot control their children as they run back again to the streets. Two, the mothers are at the sidelines of interventions. Valeria, for example, shares a story of how she sought the help of social services and how quickly the lens turned on to barriers for help.

At the brigade *they told me to be patient*, that nothing could be done. So *I brought* my daughter back home. Now, from my home she disappeared again. *I went to* the police. *As I was there, they asked me* how many years my daughter has. This year she has reached

sixteen. Fifteen she was then at the time. 'Ah, I thought she was ten. If she is fifteen, perhaps she is with her boyfriend. What are you crying for, madam. Don't cry. While she is happy, you are crying.' That is what *he told me*. So *I returned* from there. So now, *where am I to go, who am I going to ask for help?* And so *I cried*. Also *I tried interning* in [name of NGO]. And there *they told me I needed* to go to the child protection services. The child protection *services didn't agree with me* either. 'We cannot force her. First it should be asked to her if she wants to go to [name of NGO]. If not we cannot force her.' And so from the protection services *I came back, without any help* from them. So *I returned home and I left it there*.

(from the 6th meeting)

As Valeria's daughter has reached teenage years, as the police do not recognise Valeria's worries, and as her daughter needs to give her consent for entering a therapeutic centre, the mother is made silent. Valeria tells about her motherhood being silenced, which we see in her words 'I left it there'.

Another reason to silence the motherhood stems from the blaming of parents.

Because, *they have always blamed me*. 'You did not give her a good education' Always *they have told me* that *I was not disciplining* her enough. *I did not teach* her (Prudencia, second meeting).

Blame is regularly attached to the mothers for failing to protect their children from abuse or for not disciplining them enough. Moreover, the mothers' narratives reveal some cruel actions of authority figures and society's rejection. It reminds us of the photographs taken by the children in street situations in La Paz, Bolivia (Losantos, Berckmans, Villanueva, & Loots, 2014) and the ethnographic study of Kovats-Bernat (2006) in Haiti. Emiliana recalls a time when she went with her husband to pick up their daughter at the police station after a raid.

So well, they told [us]: 'these who are in the streets, they are stealing all the time. They should be soaked with gasoline and be burned. So it should be. They wouldn't be wandering around like that in this life. This you should learn her. Things like that they said to us. [...] They [the young people in street situations] are going to kill each other. In these mountains, you know, sometimes they die like dogs.

(6th meeting)

The stories show a de-humanisation of children and young people in street situations. As their children are perceived as criminals, the women's good mothering cannot be measured by the success of their children. Hence, the women in the group told about many instances of being silenced. They are not being given voice and they are not being heard when they do speak, as they are perceived to be too guilty to claim the help of the social services. Their mothering is silenced, because their motherhood is declared not to be good enough.

2.2. Second part: Performing motherhood in PAR encounters

In this second part we explore the process of mothers coming together, in an attempt to uncover how mothers in exchange and in interaction with each other reflect, experiment, contest and grapple with different perspectives on motherhood and the multiple ways of caring for their children. We will discuss the ways in which the mother project triggered reflection on, discussion

of, and experimenting with different narratives of motherhood. In previous fragments we touched on some of those moments of what we consider 'weaved stories', or collective storytelling. This recognition of weaving stories came as we focused on the verbalisations of 'I', 'you', 'we' and 'the other versus we' in dialogues, building on what was said before. However, in this second part, we go further by arguing that this collective storytelling, gave the mothers a chance to engage in a critical reflection and to talk back against silence. We found three ways in which the meeting encouraged the mothers to talk back.

Collective performed voice: Talking back against the silence by talking boldly

It was the first time the mothers shared their stories with other mothers of their lives with their children in street situations. By noticing that they all experienced or heard of similar events that their children were subjected to in the streets, the mothers grew confident enough to talk boldly of fathers, police, child protection services, community, and associated them with 'worsening the situation'.

Valeria: *I think* that police men tell to the young girls: 'I will put you in prison'. And thus, they put so much fear to the girls that sometimes they abuse the young girls. So the young girls have to put up with the abuse too.

Prudencia: *They*, how can they do that? *Instead of helping us, they are* fostering them to take drugs, and they are also encouraging stealing and prostitution. The government has to take charge. Because the police are there *to defend us*, not to influence with more bad things.

(2nd meeting)

Here, Prudencia and Valeria jointly narrate different experiences of injustice in society, in this case at the hands of the police and motel owners. Valeria begins carefully to speak with 'I think' using the pronoun 'I'. Prudencia elaborates further on how the police misbehave. It indicates that she agrees with the story of Valeria, and that these experiences of unfair treatment towards their children is shared by more mothers. The sentences of 'instead of helping us' and 'the police are there to defend us,' indicate that Prudencia knows what the police should do and what she normally can expect from them. Both mothers are reinforcing the idea that there is injustice and that it is right to denounce it.

Collective performed voice: Talking back against silence by transforming doubts into questions

One of the more intentional activities introduced during the meetings was inspired by the PAR methodology: the transformation of doubts into questions. These questions were afterwards directed to the person the mothers wanted to talk to. In this instance, mothers chose to interview a family therapist, specialising in addiction problems. Many mothers in the group considered the drug addiction of their children as the greatest stumbling block for their children to leave the streets. They were therefore interested to know more about dealing with: 'what do I do when my child inhales in the house?' 'What do I do when my child arrives stoned and aggressive?' 'How can my child forget the drugs?' This action gave mothers a platform to consolidate their doubts. As the mothers were the interviewers, their questions were heard. In such a way, mothers could view situations from a range of possibilities on top of the group's knowledge.

In this process of mothers transforming doubts into questions and seeking answers from professionals, they inevitably came into contact with a particular socio-cultural setting of values brought forward by the professional they encountered. Following a question that one mother asked to the therapist about children doing labour, the therapist expressed that the children's studies must be top priority. Nonetheless, the therapist followed their demand and heard how mothers are confronted with a reality whereby children are home alone for many hours. The group continued with a debate around the appropriate age for adolescents to work and appropriate labour per age.

Prudencia: The doctor, he says that one is adult from eighteen years old. But for us, we think at sixteen people are already adult. But for them it is not. They are minors who cannot work. He just says that they can do some home work. At home, one can assign each child to do a work depending on what can be done.

Sofia: But it would be good having tasks in the day. They could help us for example.

Emiliana: During the day, so they won't be bored.

Marina (social worker): Yes, that they distract themselves. Tasks that they would help them grow too. Perhaps helping family members who have some work that needs to be done.

Prudencia: Yes, you are more confident with people you know, family members. But, when you do not know, we cannot send our children to work, I think.

(4th meeting)

In this dialogue the mothers and social worker negotiate on children working, which does not fit the therapist's constructions of good mothering. Nevertheless, the mothers were interested to debate this topic. Having half a day of school in El Alto and nothing to do at home, mothers perceive their children to be bored at home. In this dialogue the motivation for work did not emanate from solely economical reasons. The mothers fear their children will be tempted to look for more exciting things in the streets or to look for work in the streets. Throughout this dialogue Prudencia, Sofia, Emiliana and others presented themselves as active agents by negotiating and adapting possible work situations for their children. They did not conform to the stereotypes on which good mother discourses are premised. Their ideas and experiences are diverse and non-stereotypical, and they were comfortable discussing it further in the presence of the therapist.

Talking back against silence by sharing

Using Freire's (1978) conceptualisation of raising consciousness as a starting point for debate and reflection, we come to see the encounters as a site where boundaries of what it means being a good mother can be challenged and reconfigured and ultimately where there is room for innovation. In this instance, there was an openness to think creatively about children working. It showed how collective participation, gave mothers a chance to weave stories and create knowledge on the topic of children working, as a possible meaningful solution against boredom, however without ignoring the risks. Hence, through the different encounters with professionals the mothers remark that they see things more nuanced than social services.

Prudencia: It is not easy. Sometimes I understand moms. As a woman, although I have not many children myself, I understand. Nor can one judge mothers. It is not easy to get ahead in life. Even with two children, I did not succeed. It takes a while. So they [social services] have to understand us, women who have many children. Because they want that things

stop immediately [is talking about leaving husbands], but that is not it. Things have to go gradually. Or we should be going to therapy, husband and wife. It may be like that. In that way we can restore the family. Because the children come from the man and the woman. They are both the parents and sometimes children suffer when they separate. My child has suffered badly, and it's not easy, but I understand the mothers. And child protection services do not understand that. They easily judge us, like 'why are you with this man? And why are you doing that?' That is not how it goes. We suffer when we see our children suffer. There are bad men, but also there are men that are not bad.

(7th meeting)

It was not from her own experience but by listening to other women's testimonials, Prudencia gained a sensitivity and understanding that she hoped social services would adopt. This last way of talking back against silence covers all voices. Through piecing together the voices of 'repairing the past' (*in that way we can restore the family*), 'being strong and acknowledging vulnerability' (*It is not easy to get ahead in life*), through talking boldly of social services (*they easily judge us*), and through negotiating and reconstructing on new knowledge (*they want things stop immediately – children sometimes suffer from separation*), mothers have information worthwhile to transcend to others (*On cannot judge mothers, things have to go gradually, or we should be going to therapy*).

Throughout the encounters it became more and more clear that some difficulties are so extreme that it is not in the mothers' powers to overcome them. The mothers were conscious of which changes are possible via their own efforts and which changes may take more than policy to have a lasting impact.

First author: And you [plural] too, no, that perhaps you can do, so that your children will change.

Prudencia: But for that you always need the support of other people. With that support I think it will work out. For example, if they [the police] have taken them, they cannot beat the children, nor grabbing away what they have stolen. Because this child has a mother and father, he has his family. Immediately they should contact us, because the children know our telephone numbers and the police should have it too [when parents declare their children missing they give their telephone numbers with pictures of their child]. They should call us and make an appointment with us.

(7th meeting)

How could mothers inform others of these ideas and their concerns while at the same time fashion this knowledge? How to introduce the messages of the mothers, which have been ignored or – when talking about their children – glossed over by institutions claiming to 'save' street children? During the fifth meeting, we decided that mothers would express anonymously what mothers want. It shows how mothers want immediate help when their child runs away. This means they want an orientation without judgement and with understanding towards their children's and their own situation. During April and May 2013 the mother group prepared an encounter with nine non-governmental and governmental organisations and authorities dealing with children in street situations (lawyers, social workers, educators, psychologists and coordinators). It must be said that the representatives of the nine organisations were benevolent in encountering the mothers. Some organisations who were known by the mothers as hostile, but that were nevertheless invited, did

not show up at the meeting. Consequently, the encounter did not reach the full spectrum of social services.

2.3. Third part: Social services responding

In the following fragment an aid worker engages in different and tentative ways with reflections following the mothers' testimonials.

Aid worker: *I mean they* are not the mothers who have left their children, isn't it? But *our vision that we have - I include myself* in that before knowing the problem - is that there has been domestic violence, disaggregated households, unstructured households and as there is no protection 'pucha' [damn, Spanish], they ran away, isn't it? And moms, well thank you. But it is not like that, isn't it? *I mean the reality* is that this vision is very easy/lazy [Spanish: comodona]. *I include myself in that*. It's easy to say the home has failed and well, that is why one is in the streets. So, in this situation *I will save* and do things. But it is not like that. It is assumed that *you* are part of a society where there are institutions that should help that family living in poverty, the person who may not have a job, - *I do not know what problems have happened* - that they will help you to get ahead, no? [...] But what has been the trigger for your sons and daughters to go to the street, which has led them to go to street? *That would help us and me* a lot to understand, something that pulls them out, that is not the home that is the problem. *I don't know*. It is very difficult and *I don't know* if the institutions know well, but *I feel total emptiness, I feel as if I know nothing*. Because *seeing you here, confronts me* with a very hard reality that *we are often just there* with the institutions. You have gone here and there. You want a closed centre. What has really happened *in there*? That seems for me so valuable *to learn from you*.

Looking at the story of this aid worker, her account is both a question she wants to ask to the mothers and an internal conversation she has with herself, regarding what has happened that triggered children to run to the streets. Possible answers are managed in this aid worker's account by negotiating culpability. She starts her account by admitting she had the idea that the home failed to give protection to the children, and hence children ran away. Aid workers *save* the children and that is it. She acknowledges that this vision is 'very easy'. Being confronted with mothers and their stories, she is confronted with a 'very hard reality' that what she thought is not certain anymore. 'I feel as if I know nothing'. At one point in her account she switches the blame towards a society that 'should help that family living in poverty', and institutions that 'we are often just there', while mothers are trying to find help. The aid worker's final negotiation, ending her account by reiterating her question may be interpreted as she is indecisive and conflicted about who to blame. She finds it valuable to learn from the mothers 'what really happened in there' which is not the fault of the mothers or the home, but must be something else. There is still this question of why children go to the streets. But why do we want to ask this question and know the answer to it? The motivation to ask this question seems to come from a need to find the guilty person, the responsible person. The person who needs to fix this problem or who needs to be fixed: the stereotype abusive parent. On the contrary, the whole process of the encounters with the parents led to the acknowledgment that there is no simple linear causality between parents and children in street situations. Moreover, this idea of causality leads to discrimination and marginalisation of

parents who are struggling and fighting for their children. Finally, if we hear the mothers storytelling it is as social services have the power to decide who is worthy of help, who is the 'worthy-of-help-parent'. By their presence and their openness for sharing their experiences and reflections, mothers do not seem to be the stereotypical careless and violent mother. It seems that the aid worker in her story is dealing with conflicting views. The conflict may very well be between blaming mothers and saving children, and at the same time understanding the role of society, institutions - and herself - in lacking the appropriate answers for the families dealing with issues such as poverty.

Meeting social services brought back the discrimination, marginalisation and power issues, except that this time around mothers talked back, creating new discourses and representations for professionals. Understanding parent's perceptions regarding the problems of their children, themselves and of their family, enabled aid workers to think not as detached professionals, but from an insider's perspective. 'Hearing these mothers confronts me with my own flaws and uncertainties' (aid worker).

The accounts of the aid workers during the meeting showed us how they can work together with children in street situations for years without understanding just how much their own perceptions and beliefs are grounded by larger discourses and how it shapes practice, how it narrows reality and impedes inviting family members who want to be part of interventions. Centralising the voices of mothers through storytelling, and giving this priority, is not the norm for services used to placing the work with children on the frontline. Hence, this process and the meeting, gave mothers the opportunity to be heard and it raised awareness of the diverse and complex storylines of the pathway of children getting in and out of street life. Ife (2009, in Taylor, 2013) stated that stories like that of the mothers give life to our being and connect us with others. The presence of the mothers, their questions and stories confronted social services with their own flaws, their own perceptions and shatter a comfortable vision. On the other hand, by hearing the flaws and the uncertainties of interventions, the mothers became aware that social services have no clear cut solution for them. Hence, in the last meeting mothers expressed their disappointment. The mothers showed on more than one occasion that their process of looking for solutions for their children did not involve their own child, but the whole community of children in street situations. And even though they realised that it was not expressed in their expectations during previous encounters, somehow, they still hoped that this meeting would bring answers and alleviate their personal hardships.

Jannet: *I was thinking*, as 'Don' Ricardo has said. He said that *we need to give* them [their children] trust. He said that *they need this liberty*. Trust them. And it is good to give them trust. *I think that would be it: give them trust. Fight with them.*

First author: Fight with them.

Prudencia: In the good and bad times.

First author: In the good and bad. Yes, that is true.

Jannet: Yes, because. But there are times too where, *how can we give this trust?*

First Author: Yes. Give trust, but how. Because it is hard, isn't it.

Jannet: Yes. *Sometimes I say: yes I can do this, but there are times that it is not possible.*

There is no time. [...] So time passes. [...] And that *I was thinking*. Sometimes, he [son

who ran away] tells me that when he gets out he will enter the army. But it is going to be difficult. Or will it be true?

Prudencia: We don't know, is it?

Jannet: Because *he called me* two, three times, when 'sas' [sound] things go awry. And he does not call me after that. Time has passed by and now it seems he is in the detention centre. And recently he called me. I went to see him. Every Sunday I want to go. Sometimes a Sunday I go, another Sunday no. So time passes by. Time.

The encounter and dialogues with the aid workers triggered again reflection in the mother group. Jannet wants to trust her child, as don Ricardo suggested, however it is difficult. On previous occasions her son begged her to pay a significant amount to get him out of the detention centre, but ran back again to the streets. Now she does not know if she can and how to give trust. Even if her story is very personal, to express this sentence she uses the 'we' pronoun: *but there are times too where, how can we give this trust?* Will the child do, what he says he will do? And Prudencia agrees 'We don't know, is it' using also the 'we' pronoun. The use of 'we' voice a notion of the mothers that this is a common insecurity and struggle for many other mothers who have their children in street situations. Jannet does not leave it at that, but looks at ways to build this trust. It seems as though she needs time with her children to build and work on trust. But, time is something she - as a single busy mother - does not find easily. How to give trust? Another mother added further on the dialogue: 'How to show love?' Mothers are expected to, which can be also interpreted as embedded in their mother role, to seek advice, to get clear cut guidance from childcare experts in order to be able to fulfil their mothering roles. Instead the meeting gave new understandings of where both mothers and aid workers are situated towards each other: both as equally struggling experts.

3. Discussion

'Seeking out and sharing the stories around us helps restore life's meaning' (Pyrch and Castillo, 2001, 384). Not only is the telling of one's story crucial, but also the being heard. Through the testimonials of the mothers we have heard how the existence of their children in the streets is characterised as a form of marginalisation and even dehumanisation. 'As their suffering has become routine and then normal, it has slipped into the urban field unnoticed, a regularised feature of the urban milieu' (Kovats-Bernat, 2006, 51). And the mothers' voices have gone unnoticed.

This paper has explored how mothers perform and negotiate their subjectivities of being a mother of a youngster in street situations. We heard a voice of *repairing the past* and a voice of *being strong and acknowledging vulnerability*. On a more abstract level, these two voices correspond with findings of other research on battered women that mothers are active meaning makers whose existence in the world is reflective and intentional toward the self and others (Buchbinder, 2004). The mothers expressed how they do not want to repeat the mistakes of their childhood, get ahead with life and at the same time have awareness of the vulnerability that goes along with it. When talking about their children in street situations another part of motherhood was revealed. We named it *the voice of worrying and being silenced*. Barriers that transcended the mothers' powers silenced their agency as mothers and possibilities for care. The mothers in our group shared stories

of being silenced discursively, in terms of not attending to the discourse of 'good' mothers, and being silenced socially, as people who are denied proper attention.

One of the greatest shifts for mothers was their ability to engage in dialogue and critical thinking in the process of PAR. 'It is in speaking... that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is an existential necessity' (Freire, 1978, 69). Indeed, during the PAR process we encountered a huge leap from surrendering to the current way of being silenced, to talking back in multiple ways. Mothers talked back against silence, by talking boldly, transforming doubts into questions and reaching out to social services. Agreeing with Van Wijendaele (2014), we view these 'different' ways of talking and doing, as an embodied experiment. As mothers experienced how things can be and feel different when they get the possibility to take up other positions (mothers criticise, mothers initiate, mothers lead), new forms of subjectivities were cultivated. Finally, the mothers became more confident to wanting to share their new subjectivities with the social services, paving the way for new discourses. The encounter between the mothers and social services showed the power of meetings and of sharing stories. This recognises again the idea that our ways of thinking and feeling can be transformed, in part, through critical analyses and discourse, but also that new ways of thinking and feeling can be cultivated by using alternative methods that directly engage with emotions as embodied (or affective) knowledge (Van Wijendaele, 2014). Through the group's storytelling (by sharing their messages through a video, writing testimonies and just through their physical presence), it directly engaged with the emotional registers of the aid workers during the encounter. The mothers' testimonies conflicted with aid worker's thinking and feelings as they admitted in the presence of the mothers that listening to the mothers made them realise that blaming family is too easy and therefore the perception of wanting to 'save the children' is simplistic and even embarrassing. 'Storytelling is no longer a state of being, but becomes a plane for the emergence of other becoming. It makes new things happen' (Deleuze, in Villanueva and Loots, 2014).

Simultaneously with developing new subjectivities, the mothers and the group in general, became aware that social change for the wellbeing of their children in street situations and their families will not be realised overnight. The pathway to having a happy family life is now, after the project, wider with more alternative possibilities as aid workers seem motivated to work further on meeting parents. However, it is also covered with uncertainties and many more questions as mothers realise that social services do not have all the answers. Taylor (2013) wrote that positive social change happens when people are comfortable with uncertainty, multiplicity, tension and difference, and when they are willing to extend their boundaries beyond the familiar. There is a hope that in meeting and understanding each other more, inviting others and larger segments of society along the way, it will further 'trigger(ing) or intensify(ing) certain unconventional emotions creating an affective "openness", that only then paves the way' (Van Wijendaele, 2014, 277) towards social transformation for the wellbeing of children and young people in street situations and their families.

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