Girls’ Perspectives on Gendered Violence in Rural Sweden: Photovoice as a Method for Increased Knowledge and Social Change

Lotta Brännström1, Sara Nyhlén2, and Katja Gillander Gådin1

Abstract
Research has shown for decades that gendered violence against girls and women is a major public health problem with devastating long-term health consequences for individuals and communities alike. Knowledge of gendered violence against girls and young women thus needs to be increased not only in urban, but also in rural areas, and from girls’ own perspectives. Research methods should also be developed that will facilitate the possibility of reaching policy makers, i.e. to reach those with the power to bring about social change. This study had two main goals. The first was to use photovoice as a methodology to gain increased knowledge about gendered violence against girls and young women in rural Sweden, while the second was to discuss the potential of reaching social change through photovoice as well as offer some critique. We worked with 35 adolescent girls enrolled in an upper secondary school in rural Sweden. Six workshops, which focused on (un)safety, different forms of violence, and the consequences of violence, were analyzed with an action-oriented approach and content analysis. The photovoice material also resulted in an exhibition that was used to reach policy makers. The findings show that the girls’ ability to control their own lives was limited and that a number of different situations in their everyday lives were related to a reduced sense of space and reduced sense of agency. The findings also highlight that the girls were constantly sexually harassed online, which created a feeling of being unable to escape. We argue that photovoice is suitable in mediating girls’ perspectives and in engaging and informing key policy makers, although the method alone cannot assure social change.

Keywords
online harassment, participatory action research, gender, mental health, adolescents

Date received: March 12, 2020. Received revised September 2, 2020; Accepted: September 8, 2020

Introduction
Gendered Violence Among Girls and Young Women
It is well known that on a global scale, an estimate of one in three women are affected by gendered violence (World Health Organization, 2017), and the problem is widely considered to be a violation of basic human rights and a serious public health problem (The World Bank, 2019). United Nations (1994) defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (p. 3). Exposure to gendered violence can have serious health consequences, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, suicidal thoughts, panic attacks, and alcohol and substance misuse (Buchianeri et al., 2014). Such violence can also have negative sexual and reproductive health outcomes (García-Moreno et al., 2013).

Although both the prevalence and health consequences of gendered violence against women are well known, existing research shows that levels of exposure to gendered violence are already high among adolescents, which positions many girls and young women on a lifelong path of violence (Lundgren

1 Department of Health Sciences, Mid Sweden University, Sundsvall, Sweden
2 Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mid Sweden University, Sundsvall, Sweden

Corresponding Author:
Sara Nyhlén, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mid Sweden University, Holmgatan 10, Sundsvall 85170, Sweden.
Email: sara.nyhlen@miun.se
Gendered violence is both cause and effect of social inequalities (Suzor et al., 2019) and is a central determinant of inequalities in health (Humphreys, 2007).

Existing studies on gendered violence predominantly focus on urban settings, while violence against girls in rural areas remains understudied (Sandberg, 2013; Schwab-Reese & Renner, 2017). The participatory visual methodology known as photovoice is suitable when working with either marginalized groups or sensitive topics due to its ability to allow participants to elaborate on topics that otherwise might be difficult to approach through discussions alone (Mitchell et al., 2017). We wish to add to existing research on gendered violence toward girls and young women in rural Sweden by allowing them to raise their voices and perspectives through the use of photovoice. We agree with Liebenberg’s (2018) argument that photovoice, as a participatory action research methodology, offers insightful and powerful access to “taken-for-granted” lived experiences. Based on girls own perspectives this study also provides increased knowledge of gendered violence. The study also provides a discussion which highlights strengths and weaknesses while using photovoice in relation to accomplish social change.

The present study is part of a larger project with the overall aim to increase our knowledge of gendered violence against girls and young women in rural areas, including both a photovoice study and policy analysis where key policy makers in the field of gendered violence were interviewed (Nyhlén & Giritli Nygren, 2019). An earlier paper based on the photovoice study conducted a thematic analysis using transcripts from the focus groups and workshops (Brännström et al., 2020). That study is more descriptive and shows how photovoice could produce rich data, even if it not reached a high degree of participation as discussed by Catalani and Minkler (2010). The present study focuses more on the themes the participants highlighted and on photovoice’s third goal, that is to reach policy makers.

**Photovoice and Gendered Violence**

Photovoice is a community-based, visual participatory action research methodology and the core of photovoice is that people are the experts of their own lives (Baker & Wang, 2006). The method, which is also known to be effective in engaging communities and policy makers in dialogue about issues central to social change, is often used in environments where youth participation is particularly valuable (Annang et al., 2016; Mitchell & Sommer, 2016; Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice was developed by Wang and Burris (1994). It has since been frequently been used in international research within a variety of areas related to inequalities and health issues, such as addressing gendered violence and rape culture on university campuses (De Lange et al., 2015), exploring contributing factors to girls’ well-being and school achievement (Gillander Gådin & Warne, 2018), examining school attendance based on students’ own perspectives and sense of belonging (Lieblein et al., 2018), and learning about the gendered violence that girls in rural Sweden face in their everyday lives and examining how such violence is experienced by the girls themselves (Brännström et al., 2020).

The aim of the participatory aspect of photovoice is to disrupt the notion that research is for experts and specialists only and instead to inspire participants and researchers to work together (Gubrium & Harper, 2013). This disruption engages participants to reflect and voice their concerns on a broader scale, which in turn caters to the existence of multiple forms of knowledge and richer data (Van der Riet & Boettiger, 2009), something that Mitchell (2011) refers to as forming a collaborative partnership between researchers and communities. One vital goal of photovoice is to enable people to develop a critical consciousness of unfair systems and learn how to resist and oppose them (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005; Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988). Participants are invited to document their lived reality through photos and then are encouraged to discuss these images in groups or workshops. Photovoice allows for seeing “through the eyes” of participants and the methodology also involves participants in their own knowledge production and contributes to a sense of agency for taking action (Moletsane et al., 2007). This process engages participants to address social problems of importance to them. In so doing, they become part of creating a visual map that can be used to ask, “Why does this situation exist? Do we want to change it, and if so, how?” (Wang et al., 2004, p. 911). These questions often create the foundation for critical discussions related to the photographs and serve as tools to identify what the problem stems from, and also to develop strategies for change.

Theoretically, photovoice is based in Freire’s (1970) approach to education for critical consciousness and feminist theory. Photovoice is considered to be a feminist methodology through three main themes: (1) it builds on women’s knowledge, rooted in subjective experience, in which the belief is that women should be leaders of issues of concern to them rather than having changes made on their behalf (Wang & Burris, 1997); (2) it recognizes the lived experience of women as a valuable contribution to gender and health issues (Weiler, 1988); and (3) it challenges existing gender norms through its aim of influencing policy changes and improving women’s health and living conditions (Wang et al., 1996). Photovoice also allows for girls and women themselves to take control and decide what to photograph and highlight as important issues, instead of being subjects in others’ research and being photographed by others (Ingram, 2014).

Considering the alarmingly high prevalence of gendered violence towards girls and young women and the lifelong consequences that such violence might have (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2013), we need to broaden our understanding of such violence, since research many times focus on urban areas, and extend the knowledge on how to address and prevent the problem in a rural context. Furthermore, as Lundgren and Amin (2015) have highlighted, variations in gender positions tend to increase during adolescence, which is why adolescents are an important group to work with on prevention and emphasize the importance of addressing these problems early. Because photovoice
is intended to promote social change by reaching policy makers, we also wish to critically examine its ability to do so.

We have divided the aims of this paper into two sections. In the first section, the aim is to use photovoice as an action research participatory methodology for gaining increased knowledge about gendered violence against girls and young women in rural Sweden through the girls’ own perspectives, mainly based on photographs and workshops. In the second section, the aim is to discuss the method’s potential to reach policy makers and to bring about change.

Method
We have followed the three main goals of photovoice as described by Wang and Burris (1997), which are “(1) to enable people to record and reflect their community’s strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and (3) to reach policy makers” (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 370). Throughout the project, we have methodologically worked broadly to attain the three goals and to communicate our research to others. We have mainly worked in a local and regional context by showing an exhibition we co-constructed together with the girls. Throughout these efforts, our methodological focus continuously extended beyond the workshops and the material produced by the girls. As part of the photovoice’s goal of attaining social change and reaching policy makers, we collected data through one-time recorded interviews with policy makers after they had seen the exhibition, in addition to collecting field notes. We have also communicated parts of our research through a recorded and broadcasted podcast.

Research Context and Participants
The study was conducted in a rural location in northern Sweden. Data collection took place during September and October 2017, but the work of showing the exhibition to reach policy makers is ongoing. The study was situated within one of seven municipalities in the county. The area is a sparsely populated region of around 3,000 square kilometers with a population density of approximately three people per square kilometer. The study was conducted at an upper secondary school where eligible participants were 35 girls, aged between 16 and 20 years. Participants were each allocated a workshop group ranging from six to eight girls, based on their education program: Theoretical, vocational, and a special language group designed for newly arrived foreign-born girls, and each group consisted of participants from both first and second grade in a 3 year education. The composition of the groups was decided by the teachers, and time planning was done in collaboration with the teachers. During the study period, photovoice was part of the ordinary curriculum for the theoretical and vocational program; because the language group did not follow a set curriculum, we scheduled workshops with them separately. Although the use of photovoice was mandatory during the time of the study, participation in the research project itself was voluntary for all groups.

Procedure and Data Collection
We held five scheduled workshops, each of which lasted between 60 and 180 minutes, and we also met for two additional occasions for a later follow-up. The girls were asked to take three to five photographs of the given prompts and the photographs were then sent to the first and third authors, who made hard copies and facilitated the workshops. Our departure point was four different prompts, all created during the project, before we started working with the groups. The girls were asked to take photos of:

1) feelings and/or situations of being safe for girls in your community?
2) feelings and/or situations of being unsafe for girls in your community?
3) What are the different forms of violence against girls in your school or community?
4) What are the consequences of such violence?

The first two tasks were partly meant to serve as an introduction to the method and partly to gradually introduce the participants to the focus of the study. After discussing the photos during the workshops, the girls began to organize the photos into categories in relation to the prompts. The participants were specifically urged to avoid sharing any personal experiences and to instead consider situations for girls in general. All conversations and participant presentations were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder and then transcribed verbatim (in Swedish) by the first author, and the names that appear below are pseudonyms. The participants’ quotes have been edited lightly for clarity in English.

Photovoice as a methodology was designed in such a way that exclusion and hierarchies can be mitigated, and we ensured that all participants were given time to present their photos individually and to speak in turn before the group discussed each other’s photographs. After discussing all pictures, the girls continued to group photos under the prompts, in this case issues of (un)safety, different forms of violence, and the consequences of violence. The results were co-constructed and participatory, in accordance with photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice projects often result in exhibitions of the produced images as a means to give voice, reach policy makers, and promote social change (Liebenberg, 2018), as was the case with our project after we asked the girls if such an exhibition was something they could consider.

The last phase of the procedure, thus met the third goal of photovoice, to reach policy makers. Our focus was to pay attention to which people the girls wanted to reach with their messages and exhibition, and how their audience, and society at large, responded.

The high school where the research was conducted arranged an open evening event at school for parents, students, teachers,
and local decision makers such as municipal politicians and public officials, in which the exhibition was presented for the first time. To meet the third goal of photovoice, the exhibition has been displayed and discussed at the local, regional, and national level. During 2019, we worked together with the county administrative board to hold seminars and lectures and to show the exhibition, where officials from the seven municipalities of the county were present; they included the Swedish Public Prosecutor’s Office, the police, the Swedish Migration Agency, and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service, among others. We also displayed and presented the exhibition for the Head of education, Municipal Chief Executive and the County Governor in the region where the research took place.

According to the third photovoice goal, the results of a study should also be disseminated in such a way that social change may be achieved. One way of accomplishing that goal is communicating research results in ways that goes beyond traditional scientific publications. We decided to do so by recording a podcast. Approximately 1 year after finishing data collection, we contacted an external facilitator to lead the podcast, and we gathered four of the girls from the project who volunteered to participate. The theme of the podcast was online harassment. The girls chose to talk about being subject to rumors and gender rules, and, in particular, about receiving “dick pics,” which refers to when boys or men send pictures of a penis on social media. As a result, the podcast was named “Who hasn’t received a ‘dick pic’?”

Analysis

The analysis related to the first aim of the paper, what the girls discussed in relation to the photographs and their grouping of the photographs, is divided into two parts. The first part of the analysis is based on the given prompts and is action orientated, since the participants interpreted and discussed the material together (see Wang, 1999). This part is hence more descriptive. We have focused solely on what the girls said in relation to the various prompts and photographs, and also how they grouped the photographs. Due to the participatory character of photovoice, the participants were not only part of producing data through photography but were also part of contextualizing and defining their photographs.

The second part of the analysis is focused on the broader discussions, in which we applied content analysis, inspired by (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). As mentioned above, the girls grouped the photographs based on the prompts in the first step of the analysis, where different forms of violence were divided into (1) physical violence, (2) psychological violence, and (3) online harassment. At this point we noticed that a significant percentage of the photographs were related to online harassment, and the girls grouped these photos together. We also noticed that from the girls’ perspective, online harassment was a separate form of violence, so we decided to conduct a separate analysis of online harassment through content analysis. The discussions concerning online harassment were more intense and richer compared to the discussions of physical and psychological violence. The analysis of the latter followed the captions and photos the girls presented, and are just presented as manifest categories in the result section. We decided to pay attention to the girls’ perspective of defining online harassment as a form of violence separate from the other two forms and thus deepen the analysis.

Analysis of Online Harassment

When focusing on online harassment, we used Graneheim and Lundman’s (2004) four steps, starting with step 1: 
meaning units. The transcribed material was read through several times to identify meaning units, consisting of words or sentences related to each other by content to identify context. In our case such units related to photographs in addition to words and sentences. The focus was on finding condensed meaning units and organizing them into categories. During step 2, condensed meaning units, we abstracted and labeled the units to capture their content. During step 3, create codes, codes with the same content were merged, meaning that one category represented a collection of codes. A sense of insecurity among the participants was visible early on in our material. This related both to the issues that the online world provides anonymity to perpetrators which gives the participants a feeling that the perpetrator can be “anyone.” There was also insecurity related to how for example rumors can get spread fast online, which may affect perceptions about you. Step 4 is the creation of sub-categories and categories. Examples of such sub-categories, which will be elaborated further in the results, are the participants feelings of reduced sense of agency and reduced sense of space. Table 1 shows an example of how the analysis was conducted based on the theme “online harassment.”

| Meaning unit | Condensed meaning unit | Code | Subcategories | Category |
|--------------|------------------------|------|---------------|----------|
| Online harassment . . . might limit you, like “I don’t dare,” “I can’t,” and such | Online harassment limits you: “I don’t dare,” “I can’t” | Sense of insecurity | Reduced sense of agency | Lack of control |
| The phone makes a sound, and you pick it up. You can’t escape it | You can’t escape it | Unfree | Reduced sense of space | Lack of control |

Table 1. Examples of the Different Steps in the Analysis.
Ethical Considerations

The project was ethically approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board at Umeå University as being in accordance with ethical standards, dnr 2017/58-31.

Besides taking into account ethical standards in research such as consent, information, confidentiality and safety of the participants, we also followed photovoice ethics as suggested by Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001), Wang (2006) and Ponic and Jatagaonkar (2012). All students in five different classes were invited to participate and those who not wanted to be part of the research projects had lessons with their teachers when the other students had workshops with the researchers. All parts of the process were voluntary and they were informed that they could withdraw whenever they wanted. The four girls who in a late part of the project participated in the podcast volunteered, and they also had influence on the content. We informed the participants about the photovoice methodology and had a special session with all groups about the use of cameras, power and ethics, particularly stressing risks when taking photographs and to avoid taking photos where people could be recognized. We also encouraged the participants to take metaphorical rather than literal photos, as suggested by Ponic and Jatagaonkar (2012). This was particularly important as the photos were going to be disseminated in an exhibition. Despite our ambition to not put the participants at risk some girls took some challenging photos, e.g. on girls who took a photo lying on the railway. It is dramatic, but the girl who took it argued that it was an important picture, and it has caused a lot of attention among people watching the exhibition.

We do not know if individual girls in the workshops had own experiences of gendered violence as we asked them to discuss the subject from a general perspective, not reveal any personal experiences. It is nonetheless likely that some girls had experiences of more severe violence, and all girls were reminded of the possibility to visit the school nurse, the school social counselor or the youth health center in the municipality if they found the topic stressful. It is also possible that girls who had own experience of gendered violence could have been empowered during the process as photo elicitation and the discussion of violence in general could have enabled the girls to feel less ashamed and look at the problem in a new way, as shown by Sinko et al. (2020).

As not all girls knew each other in the groups we were aware that some girls may have had difficulties to speak up as much as they wanted. That is always a balancing act in focus groups, but as we followed the SHOWed process, asking the questions as recommended by Wang (2006), where each participant was able to discuss their photos, everyone had the possibility to give voice. It is also important to not push anyone to speak more than they want to, specifically as gendered violence is a sensitive topic.

Results

The results are divided into two sections, related to the study’s two aims. In the first section, we show what the girls discussed in relation to the prompts and their grouping of the photographs before moving on to an analysis of online harassment. Related to the second aim, to be able to discuss the potential of social change, we will now present how we distributed the work, as well as highlighting issues and reactions that arose in relation to the exhibition. We acknowledge that exhibitions alone can not lead to social change but we argue that they may be used as a method for reaching policy makers and in that way, in the long run, be a part in creating awareness and knowledge and in that way inspire social change.

Photovoice as a Methodology for Increased Knowledge About Gendered Violence

Prompts 1 and 2 (being safe/unsafe). The two prompts of feelings and/or situations of being unsafe/unsafe for girls in your community gave responses from the participants which showed how they fear gendered violence, the photos included photos of physical situations and places. The results showed a general fear of being outside after dark, whether alone or in smaller groups; in addition, they considered having to pass through deserted or closed-in areas such as tunnels, and waiting alone for public transport, to be unsafe. During a workshop discussion the participants said:

Olivia: (…) tunnels, and darkness (…) I wouldn’t want to go there alone.

Agnes: Especially tunnels, no one from the outside can see what’s happening inside.

Alva: It feels unsafe to wait alone for the train or the bus. Especially here at the train station, where a lot of things have happened.

Despite the links the girls mentioned between feeling unsafe in relation to time and place, several expressed having a sense of safety in the familiarity that rurality offers compared to larger cities, which they perceived as being more dangerous. They felt a sense of safety in the familiarity and the idea that “everybody knows you here” that rurality offers. Agnes stated that “it feels much better to be here than in Stockholm, for example—that’s a really big difference.”

This understanding was not equally shared, however, and a comparison of the results between the groups revealed a somewhat different understanding of feelings of safety linked to place. While the Swedish-born girls largely considered their rural location to be safer than urban areas due to its familiarity and sparse population density, where “everybody knows who you are,” the foreign-born girls discussed the familiarity differently. They considered larger cities to feel safer due to the anonymity and freedom they offer compared to rural areas, where lack of anonymity is the rule. Nour described Stockholm as beautiful and safe,
while Abella agreed and added that “being anonymous is to be free.” Figure 1 illustrates *feelings and/or situations of being unsafe/safe.*

A linkage of safety to home and family, and to having an education, was visible in all groups. The girls talked about the importance of reading books to gain knowledge about the world and having a degree to attain a safer future and freedom of choices.

Abella: Having a degree can be a safety assurance for girls. It makes them independent, and they don’t need anyone to support them financially (...) That is safety for all girls.

Amanda: Feeling unsafe, then I’m thinking uncertain future, and for me that’s getting an F [failing] and not being able to finish school.

Further into the discussion, Abella also stated that having a degree was like having a weapon that girls could use for protection as a way to be independent.

**Prompt 3 (different forms of violence).** The girls identified three different *forms of violence against girls in your school or community:* physical violence, psychological violence, and online harassment. Related to physical violence, the girls highlighted domestic violence as well as potential exposure to violence in contexts such as during festivals, at school, or traveling on the bus. Related to psychological violence the girls talked about bullying, the male gaze objectification and being subject to rumors and degrading comments. In other words, they highlighted a risk to girls almost everywhere. Figure 2 illustrates being exposed to unwanted touching by a stranger on the bus and being exposed to the male gaze.

**Online Harassment**

The analysis of online harassment resulted in the category *lack of control* and two subcategories, reduced *sense of agency* and reduced *sense of space.* We identified several factors that had an impact on the girls’ ability to control their own lives and different situations related to personal agency and sense of space. These factors were visible in everyday situations, both in school and during leisure time, and revealed distinct and unequal gender relations.

**Reduced sense of agency.** The girls talked about being called “whore” or “bitch” on a regular basis, and how such name-calling had become so normal that they considered it more or less part of their everyday lives. The girls showed examples of text messages where boys asked for sex, as illustrated in Figure 3 (translations of original texts in Swedish).

The girls’ discussions and given examples revealed how harassment might escalate, even though the receiver had refrained from answering. The following example from Julia illustrate how harassment turned into threats, without a response from the receiver:

Julia: Boy: “Send a picture, you fucking whore, I know you’ve sent one to Adam! Why do you send to Adam but not to me? Fucking whore, I also want to see! Send to me or I’ll rape you! Fucking whore, your tits aren’t even good looking, and you have no ass either.”
Regardless of how they responded, they risked being the subject of shaming and name-calling. Below are two examples from Maja and Hanne illustrating how the situation might have developed with a response:

**Maja:**

Boy: “Nudes!” Girl: “No, I don’t want to.” Boy: “C’mon, you’re hot.” Girl: “I’m telling you, I don’t want to. Leave me alone!” Boy: “Fucking whore!”

**Hanne:**

Boy: “Heard you’re selling sex, can I buy you for one night?” Girl: “Where have you heard that?” Boy: “Everyone at school talks about it, can I? Please, I pay well.” Boy: “Answer me!” Boy: “Didn’t want a whore like you anyway. Die!”

The girls talked about the embarrassment connected to how “the whole school” talked about them in this way, and the frustration of not being able to affect the situation.

Julia: When you receive a text like that, it becomes difficult to go to school and attend other things because you know that everyone’s talking about you.

Agnes: We can’t do anything, really, because if a guy we don’t know decides to send [a text message or image], we can’t do anything.

A recurring theme during the workshop discussions was that girls are typically seen as objects, and that they are categorized by their appearance and behavior; their reduced sense of agency was obvious in how they understood their choices.

**Reduced sense of space.** According to the girls, it was not uncommon that boys, besides demanding nudes or asking for sex, also sent them “dick pics.” The girls expressed disgust about receiving these pictures, but it also became clear that they took responsibility for the action and were concerned about who might see what they had received. This situation was particularly evident through examples discussed by Nina and Helene:

**Nina:**

What if I spend Christmas Eve with the whole family gathered, and I suddenly receive a “dick pic” on my phone? Maybe they’ll [her family members] see my screen, or my little cousins will see it.

**Helene:**

If other people see it [the “dick pic”], like a family member or something, then maybe you feel ashamed, even though you never wanted it in the first place.
The girls described their situation to be very different from the boys’ situation regarding how to act, and they were also very aware of the possible consequences that applied to them.

Julia: Maybe a girl with low self-esteem thinks that she’s special when she receives one [a “dick pic”] and sends something in return. Then the guy can spread rumours that she’s a whore and stuff because she sent a picture of herself naked.

Alva: If we receive a dick pic, we’re responsible, but if we send a picture of our body to a guy, he’s not responsible.

When the girls further discussed receiving unwanted “dick pics” on their phones, they expressed frustration over their inability to avoid them; as Nina framed the situation, “the phone makes a sound, and you pick it up. You can’t escape.” When the girls talked about how they balanced school and homework with the inability to escape harassment and “dick pics,” Helene said that “well, if you know you’re probably going to receive something, you log out (…) or turn off your phone.” Many of the girls agreed that it was wrong to have to think about that and to take those precautions, but they did so in order to be able to focus on their schoolwork.

Prompt 4 (consequences of gendered violence). In relation to prompt 4, the discussions among the girls were primarily related to health, such as poor mental health in the forms of depression, social-anxiety disorder, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, as well as abusing medicine, drugs, and alcohol. The quote below summarizes different discussions about poor mental health, self-harm, and suicide:

Tina: (…) you feel dirty as a person; you want to escape, and you don’t want to be you, sort of, because of mental illness. Maybe you go through depression that makes you… well, that can lead to wrong paths.

They also discussed being insecure and feeling worthless, which led to skewed self-image, stress, and concentration difficulties and the subsequent risk of failing school, which the girls anticipated could negatively affect their future. Figure 4 illustrates a suicide attempt on a railway after being harassed online. Translation of the original text in Swedish.

**Showing the Exhibition and Reaching Policy Makers**

When we asked the girls which people they wanted to show the exhibition to, they immediately stated that they wanted the boys at school to see it, but at the same time one of the groups expressed general concern about boys in groups. The girls stated that boys should not be allowed to go in groups, and they needed to split them up, as they were sure the boys would otherwise ridicule the message. In this discussion, others added that the situation applied to the fathers as well.

Directly after viewing the exhibition at the school, various people spoke about the importance of making changes and implementing conversations about unhealthy gender structures and norms in schools, exemplified below by the Municipal Chief Executive and Head of education:

Municipal Chief Executive: I want to follow up on this [the research project]. We’ll talk more about basic values, and we’ll talk about sexual harassment. We’ll bring this to the organization.

Head of education: My thoughts are that we have to include gender-equality work much more deeply in the work we do at school.

The exhibition was repeatedly shown and presented at different platforms, and this research to date has received attention on several societal levels. The exhibition was combined with a presentation that led to a collaboration with the county government, where the first author became employed during 2019 due to the results from the research project. The aim with the employment was to hold seminars and lectures in the seven municipalities based on the project results and the girls’ photos.

**Discussion**

This study provides increased knowledge of gendered violence against girls from their perspective. In addition, the study highlights strengths and weaknesses using the photovoice methodology to achieve social change. The results related to concerns about (un)safety showed connections to physical places, where the girls related home and being together with family and friends to feelings of being safe, while they related public spaces such as parks and tunnels to feelings of being unsafe.

The girls’ understandings of safe and unsafe places were largely informed by gendered violence. In an earlier study,
based on the same material (Brännström et al., 2020), the gendered violence related to unsafety were predominantly the fear of rape and the fear of men. According to Ahmed (2004), this fear is largely created from gendered constructions of femininity and masculinity, and women’s fear is an embodied experience that largely controls their social space. Women’s and girls’ fears of sexual violence are often used as a reason for increased control and surveillance and largely influence spatial planning (Listerborn, 2016).

Gendered violence has been connected to negative mental health outcomes (Rinehart et al., 2017), and like a number of health conditions, poor mental health is highly affected by social factors, physical environments, the economy, work, and gender throughout various stages of life (Allen et al., 2014). One important social determinant of health is the feeling of having control over one’s own life and life choices, where lack of social participation and lack of being in control can negatively affect health (Donkin et al., 2018; Marmot, 2015) and can contribute to health inequalities (Whitehead et al., 2016). Reduced senses of agency and space were apparent in the girls’ general discussions related to safe and unsafe places and were also visible in the first two prompts, where the girls pointed out potential risks in both private and public spheres.

An examination of the examples of online harassment showed that this situation was also highly entangled in heteronormative ideas linked to sexuality, the female body, and the exercise of power. The photographs, texts, and quotes revealed a clear power imbalance in communication. The text messages showed the consequences of rejection, which often led to degrading, appearance-based comments, which could be interpreted as a form of exercise of power through objectification. This action, which positioned the boys in a superior position and reduced the girls to sexualized bodies, shows how gendered violence continues to enable and maintain an unequal gender order in which a girl’s sense of agency is reduced.

This action of bodily objectification plays a key part in upholding women’s subordination and fear (Listerborn, 2002). Online sexual harassment exposes women’s sexuality and conveys the message that attackers control the physical safety of the women they target (Citron, 2014). The girls talked about how they could not possibly escape online harassment. This state of affairs is also problematic because the abuser can be anonymous, which means that girls can automatically suspect anyone of being the abuser. One specific form of online harassment is the sending of “dick pics.” As Waling and Pym (2019) describe, in accordance with other feminist approaches, the sending of “dick pics” is an “unwelcome intrusion into the receiver’s offline personal space” (Waling & Pym, 2019, p. 76), which was obvious in our study in how and within what context the girls talked about receiving such images. In order to avoid being disturbed and to lose focus during school tasks, the girls might have felt the urge to turn off their phones, which in turn would have led to a reduced sense of space. The girls’ discussions showed a conflict between physical ideas of safe places and the ability of online harassment to infiltrate every situation. Our examination of the girls’ understanding of safe areas, combined with their understanding of online harassment, together presented a place-space binary where unsafe spaces were created in safe places.

The girls saw direct links between gendered violence and serious consequences, both in relation to school and to their general health. During the workshops, the girls connected concentration difficulties with negative effects on their school results, which shows how gendered violence and poor health are intertwined. Gender inequalities are strong determinants of health (Gupta et al., 2019), and our results have revealed how gendered violence is both the cause and effect of social inequalities in health due to the continuous interchange. Gendered violence is made possible due to already-existing inequalities, and in this continuum such violence generates inequalities because of the negative effect that gendered violence has on girls’ grades, future job opportunities, and health.

Photovoice, as a participatory action research methodology, offers insightful and powerful access to “taken-for-granted” lived experiences (Liebenberg, 2018). The workshop discussions and group interviews, combined with the stories attached to the photographs, provided both richer data and enabled a broader analysis of the lived experiences of the participants (Liebenberg, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2017). The workshops and conversations allowed the girls to elaborate on topics and situations that concerned them first-hand. In the process they also gained an awareness and collective understanding, as most of the issues they discussed and raised at the workshops were based on the collective knowledge of being a girl.

Despite our widespread dissemination of the work, and the keen interest and participation we experienced during our presentations and poster exhibitions, the third goal of photovoice, which is reaching policy makers, was the most challenging to achieve. The exhibition clearly engaged viewers, broader society, and decision-makers, so the challenge was not to create an emotional response from the viewers. Unfortunately, provoking strong reactions to the work are not enough on their own in order to spark social change, so the question remains of how viewers’ reactions can be translated into actual change. The responsibility for change cannot be the responsibility of the girls, and one cannot expect participants’ critical consciousness and photovoice alone to be powerful enough to create change.

To attain social change, the participants’ consciousness and work must be accompanied by two things: public opinion and political alliances (Johnston, 2016).

While tracking the effects of photovoice is challenging, we argue that the first two main goals of photovoice 1) record and reflect community strengths and concerns, 2) promote critical dialogue and knowledge based on group discussions of photos, were largely reached during our workshops and procedures. As an aspiration of bringing about awareness, the exhibition and our research collectively raised the participants’ voices and were well received by the community. As Fairey (2018), points out, as much as there is a politics of speaking out there is also a politics of listening, “who is listening and what they are prepared to listen to” (p. 112). In our material it is possible to see how politicians and civil servants do get emotionally engaged
in the exhibition but also connects the situation to building an planning, as if it is possible to administer violence away (see also Listerborn, 2016). We have also noticed several other limitations, however. Among the most challenging aspects of conducting gendered violence–related research is to make participants feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts and knowledge. To be able to speak about this topic is arguably challenging in general, but it might even be more challenging with a mixed group of teenagers in which some do not know each other. This vulnerability might also be stronger in rural communities, where “everybody” knows who you are. Despite photovoice’s participatory design the possibility remains that existing hierarchies within the groups could have limited the dialogues in our research. Some researchers (e.g., Patton, 2015) argue that dynamics may become more complicated when participants in focus groups know each other. Because our groups consisted of girls from different grades, we can assume that some individuals’ presence might have influenced others’ ability to speak freely (Patton, 2015).

We also experienced limitations related to time and commitment. An examination of similar projects in South Africa (e.g., Treffry-Goatley et al., 2018) reveals two very different contexts for carrying out the same method as in our Swedish study. In the South African study, they gathered the participants outside school hours and during vacancies. We are uncertain that we would have been able to recruit participants for this project if it were not part of the ordinary curriculum where sessions were scheduled within school time instead of the girls’ leisure time. The school’s collaboration was thus crucial for us, and we wish to acknowledge that without the teachers’ collaboration, we would have had difficulty completing the project.

Conclusion

We have highlighted the use of photovoice in a study where the aim was to increase knowledge of girls’ understanding of gendered violence in a rural context; we have also discussed the method’s ability to attain social change. We know that gendered violence against girls is a major problem globally, and we also know that experiencing gendered violence has numerous negative consequences for health, as well as contributing to an unequal gender order. Our study provides examples of how gendered violence is present in girls’ lives, and what that means from their perspective.

Gendered violence and sexual harassment should be taken into account in discussions about online harassment and the link to mental health problems among girls and young women. Working with photovoice has undoubtedly enriched this project through the method’s ability to enable participation, raise the girls’ perspectives, and elicit engagement from key policy makers. We argue that the use of photovoice to address the questions raised in this project created a greater awareness and understanding, among the youth in our study. We also claim that the method was key in helping us understand the significance of online harassment that occurs in girls’ lives, and that they define it as a separate form of violence compared to physical and psychological forms.

Photovoice can be an effective approach in challenging gendered norms and patriarchal structures and in working towards social change, although the method alone cannot guarantee either awareness or social change. These elements can only happen partly through a combination of how the process is applied—such as (in our case) how the school collaboration was essential—and how the different steps towards community engagement are put in place. Although photovoice has limitations, it proved to be a method that largely engaged people, at the local, community, and political level.

But considering the vast number of people and organizations that have been reached by the information from our study, we do not know if the viewers’ reactions led to any actions in the organizations they represented. According to Catalani and Minkler (2010) there are few photovoice projects who have evaluated the impact of photovoice on the policy level, partly because of the complex nature of policy making and also the long time frame of such work. A suggestion for a future study could be to investigate if there have been any changes in policies in the municipality or the county government regarding gendered violence against girls that can be related to our photovoice project. An earlier study in the region where the photovoice project took place shows that policies of gendered violence mainly focus on violence against adult women and so called honorary violence and overlook gendered violence against girls (Nyhlen & Giritli Nygren, 2019).

Furthermore, the participants’ immediate response was that no boys or men should be allowed to view the exhibition in groups, as they were afraid that the boys, as well as the fathers, could ridicule the message. Our research indicates that the distribution of findings related to gendered violence against girls through exhibitions should be problematized. The method’s aspect of including audiences remains understudied, despite the importance of communicating relevant messages (Mitchell, 2015). Changing patterns of communications, and the added space for gendered violence that the online arena provides, combined with our results, show the demand for more research.

Acknowledgments

We first and foremost wish to acknowledge the participants for their contribution and sharing of knowledge during the course of this research. We would also like to show our gratitude to the teachers and the school of collaboration, without them we would have had difficulty completing the project. We are also immensely grateful to our South African and Canadian colleagues in project TGRAN who provided insight and expertise that greatly assisted the research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
**Funding**
The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: TGRAN—Transnational Gender and Rurality Action Network is financed by Forte and South Africa Medical Research Council (SAMRC)

**ORCID ID**
Lotta Brännström https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6937-7274

**References**
Ahmed, S. (2004). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Routledge.
Allen, J., Ballfour, R., Bell, R., & Marmot, M. (2014). Social determinants of mental health. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 26(4), 392–407.
Annang, L., Wilson, S., Tinago, C., Wright Sanders, L., Bevington, T., Carlos, B., Cornelius, E., & Svendsen, E. (2016). Photovoice: Assessing the long-term impact of a disaster on a community’s quality of life. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(2), 241–251.
Baker, T. A., & Wang, C. C. (2006). Photovoice: Use of a participatory action research method to explore the chronic pain experience in older adults. *Qualitative Health Research*, 16(10), 1405–1413.
Brännström, L., Nyhlén, S., & Gillander Gådin, K. (2020). “You are so ugly, you whore”-girls in rural Sweden discuss and address gendered violence. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, 15(1), 1695308.
Bucchianeri, M. M., Eisenberg, M. E., Wall, M. M., Piran, N., & Neumark-Sztainer, D. (2014). Multiple types of harassment: Associations with emotional well-being and unhealthy behaviors in adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 54(6), 724–729. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2013.10.205
Catalani, C., & Minkler, M. (2010). Photovoice: A review of the literature in health and public health. *Health Education and Behavior*, 37(3), 424–451.
Citron, D. K. (2014). *Hate crimes in cyberspace*. Harvard University Press.
De Lange, N., Mitchell, C., & Moletsane, R. (2015). Girl-led strategies to address campus safety: Creating action briefs for dialogue with policy makers. *Agenda*, 29(3), 118–127.
Donkin, A., Goldblatt, P., Allen, J., Nathanson, V., & Marmot, M. (2018). Global action on the social determinants of health. *BMJ Global Health*, 3, e00603.
Fairey, T. (2018). Whose photo? Whose voice? Who listens? “Giving,” silencing and listening to voice in participatory visual projects. *Visual Studies*, 33(2), 111–126.
Foster-Fishman, P., Nowell, B., Deacon, Z., Nievar, M. A., & McCann, P. (2005). Using methods that matter: The impact of reflection, dialogue, and voice. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 36(3–4), 275–291.
Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Seabury.
García-Moreno, C., Pallitto, C., Devries, K., Stöckl, H., Watts, C., & Abrahams, N. (2013). *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence*. World Health Organization.
Gillander, Gådin, K., & Warne, M. (2018). Photovoice as a method for increasing Swedish high school girls’ wellbeing and school achievement. *European Journal of Public Health*, 28(suppl 4), 385–385.
Graneheim, U. H., & Lundman, B. (2004). Qualitative content analysis in nursing research: Concepts, procedures and measures to achieve trustworthiness. *Nurse Education Today*, 24(2), 105–112. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2003.10.001
Gubrium, A., & Harper, K. (2013). *Participatory visual and digital methods*. Left Coast Press.
Gupta, G. R., Oomnan, N., Grow, C., Conn, K., Hawkes, S., Shawar, Y. R., Shiffman, J., Buse, K., Mehra, R., & Bah, C. A. (2019). Gender equality and gender norms: Framing the opportunities for health. *The Lancet*, 393(10190), 2550–2562.
Humphreys, C. (2007). A health inequalities perspective on violence against women. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 15(2), 120–127.
Ingram, L.-A. (2014). Re-imagining roles: Using collaborative and creative research methodologies to explore girls’ perspectives on gender, citizenship and schooling. *Educational Action Research*, 22(3), 306–324. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2013.872574
Johnston, G. (2016). Champions for social change: Photovoice ethics in practice and “false hopes” for policy and social change. *Global Public Health*, 11(5–6), 799–811. https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2016.1170176
Liebenberg, L. (2018). Thinking critically about photovoice: Achieving empowerment and social change. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17(1), 160940691875763. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918757631
Lieblen, V. S. D., Warne, M., Huot, S., Laliberte Rudman, D., & Raanaas, R. K. (2018). A photovoice study of school belongingness among high school students in Norway. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, 77(1), 1421369.
Listerborn, C. (2002). *Trygg stad: diskurser om kvinnors rådsla i forskning, policyutveckling och lokal praktik [Safe city: Discussions on women’s fear in research, policy development and local practices]*. Chalmers tekniska högskola (Chalmers University of Technology).
Listerborn, C. (2016). Feminist struggle over urban safety and the politics of space. *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 23(3), 251–264. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506815616409
Lundgren, R., & Amin, A. (2015). Addressing intimate partner violence and sexual violence among adolescents: Emerging evidence of effectiveness. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 56(1), S42–S50.
Marmot, M. (2015). The health gap: The challenge of an unequal world. *The Lancet*, 386(10011), 2442–2444.
Mitchell, C. (2011). *Doing visual research*. Sage Publications.
Mitchell, C. (2015). Looking at showing: On the politics and pedagogy of exhibiting in community-based research and work with policy makers. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 4(2), 48–60.
Mitchell, C., De Lange, N., & Moletsane, R. (2017). *Participatory visual methodologies: Social change, community and policy*. Sage.
Van der Riet, M., & Boettiger, M. (2009). Shifting research dynamics: Addressing power and maximising participation through participatory research techniques in participatory research. South African Journal of Psychology, 39(1), 1–18.

Waling, A., & Pym, T. (2019). “C’mon, no one wants a dick pic”: Exploring the cultural framings of the “dick pic” in contemporary online publics. Journal of Gender Studies, 28(1), 70–85.

Wallerstein, N., & Bernstein, E. (1988). Empowerment education: Freire’s ideas adapted to health education. Health Education Quarterly, 15(4), 379–394.

Wang, C. (1999). Photovoice: A participatory action research strategy applied to women’s health. Journal of Women’s Health, 8(2), 185–192.

Wang, C. (2006). Youth participation in photovoice as a strategy for community change. Journal of Community Practice, 14(1–2): 147–161.

Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1994). Empowerment through photo novella: Portraits of participation. Health Education Quarterly, 21(2), 171–186.

Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. Health Education, 24(3), 369–387.

Wang, C., Burris, M. A., & Ping, X. Y. (1996). Chinese village women as visual anthropologists: A participatory approach to reaching policymakers. Social Science and Medicine, 42(10), 1391–1400.

Wang, C., Morrel-Samuels, S., Hutchison, P. M., Bell, L., & Pestronk, R. M. (2004). Flint photovoice: Community building among youths, adults, and policymakers. American Journal of Public Health, 94(6), 911. https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.94.6.911

Wang, C., & Redwood-Jones, Y. (2001). Photovoice ethics: Perspectives from Flint photovoice. Health Education & Behavior, 28(5), 560–572.

Weiler, K. (1988). Women teaching for change: Gender, class, and power. Bergin & Garvey.

Whitehead, M., Pennington, A., Orton, L., Nayak, S., Petticrew, M., Sowden, A., & White, M. (2016). How could differences in “control over destiny” lead to socio-economic inequalities in health? A synthesis of theories and pathways in the living environment. Health & Place, 39, 51–61.

World Health Organization. (2017). Violence against women. Retrieved February 20, 2020, from https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women