WHY GIRLS ONLY?

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Girls in the U.S. and Canada today face vast and often intersecting challenges such as bullying, sexual harassment, barriers to academic and career success, unique health disparities, limited expectations and stereotypes, to name a few. Further inequalities associated with race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, and socio-economic status only exacerbate these issues. Girls also have strengths, positive experiences and potential to build upon. There is a tremendous need for programming that focuses solely on girls and young women, especially from low-income communities, in order to address the hardships they encounter every day while leveraging their capabilities.

Girls Inc. inspires all girls to be strong, smart, and bold through direct service and advocacy. Our comprehensive approach to whole girl development provides girls programming in healthy living, academic enrichment, and life skills instruction. A combination of long-lasting mentoring relationships, a pro-girl environment and research-based programming equips girls to lead fulfilling and productive lives, break the cycle of poverty, and become role models in their community.

The unique environment - explicitly pro-girl, girls-only, and physically, socially and emotionally safe - confirms that girls can succeed. In a pro-girl environment, girls' strengths and opportunities are celebrated, girls develop positive relationships with girl peers and women mentors. While girls may lack opportunities for leadership development in mixed-gender environments, in girls-only spaces, all leadership positions within the organization are filled by girls. At Girls Inc., girls are taken seriously for the persons they are now and the women they will become.

SUMMARY

- **Girls today face real and profound challenges** to their well-being and success, including sexual harassment and violence, inequitable access to education, mental health issues, teen pregnancy, and limiting stereotypes and messages.

- **Girls living in poverty** are at increased risk of chronic health and psychological disorders, higher rates of violence and crime, lower rates of high school completion, and limited access to economic and social capital necessary to thrive.

- **Girls-only spaces are designed with the unique needs of girls** in mind, provide girls physical and emotional safety, increase girls' self esteem and positive decision making, create social support networks, and allow girls to discover their strengths and their voices.

- **Pro-girl, girls-only spaces nurture and celebrate the strengths girls bring to the table** and confirm that girls can succeed. In pro-girl, girls-only environments, girls' concerns are valued and respected and all leadership positions are filled by girls, allowing for girls to develop and thrive as leaders.

- **Girls Inc. focuses our efforts on those girls who could benefit the most** from the comprehensive Girls Inc. experience: girls in low-income and under resourced communities. In doing so, we equip girls with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to improve their lives, break the cycle of poverty, and strengthen their communities as a whole.

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GIRLS TODAY

Frequently face bullying, sexual harassment, violence, and other forms of trauma.

Girls and young women experience many forms of violence and trauma. Girls are more likely to experience bullying than their male peers, both online and on school grounds and are also at a higher risk than male peers to experience dating violence.[1] Young women are also at especially high risk for forced intercourse, with 40% of rape survivors first forced to have intercourse before age 18, including 12% before age 11.[2] Girls who experience dating violence, are at high risk for substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and other mental and physical disorders.[3]

Experience inequitable access to education and economic opportunities.

While girls and women today are graduating from high school and college at higher rates than in previous decades,[4] girls continue to lack equitable education and economic opportunities. Girls of color are less likely than white female students to graduate high school on time[4] and are more likely to attend under-resourced schools and be involved in the Juvenile Justice System than white peers.[5] Girls in foster care and girls who are homeless are especially vulnerable to trauma, have higher rates of teen pregnancy, and are at a greater risk for being "pushed out" of school than their peers.[5]

Barriers to success persist as girls enter into adulthood. Women, especially women of color, are underrepresented in rapidly growing, high-paying sectors[6] and are typically paid less than men. If current trends continue, women will not reach pay parity until 2059, black women are not projected to reach parity until 2124 and Hispanic women until 2248.[7]

Have distinct health concerns

Mental health, teen pregnancy, and physical inactivity are of specific concern to girls and young women. Adolescent girls are more likely than male peers to have experienced a depressive episode[8] and to have considered attempting suicide.[1] Girls who experience traumatic incidents, such as sexual violence and bullying, are at greater risk for mental health issues.

The United States has one of the highest rates of teen pregnancy in the developed world.[9] In 2013, nearly 1 in every 20 teen girls in the U.S. ages 15-19 became pregnant, and Latina and Black teen girls were more than twice as likely as White teen girls to become pregnant.[10] Girls also tend to have lower rates of physical activity than boys, especially during middle and high school years. Physical activity and sports participation benefit youth in many ways, yet, girls are less likely to be physically active and participate in sports than their male peers.[1]

Encounter harmful stereotypes in their daily lives and in the media

Starting at a young age, girls receive messages about the sexualization and objectification of their bodies, which can cause them to believe that their appearance matters more than their internal qualities.[11] Media messages also pressure girls into believing they should conform to a specific, unrealistic body type, which can cause girls to have low self-esteem.

Gender stereotypes also prevent girls from achievement in certain fields. Girls are often thought to have less aptitude in math than boys and are often discouraged from pursuing fields that require advanced mathematics skills.[12] These and other attitudes place artificial limits on both girls and boys, as girls and boys are more biologically and psychologically similar than different, yet are socialized to believe otherwise.[13]

GIRLS GROWING UP IN LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES

Girls living in low-income and under-resourced communities are uniquely exposed to the limits and dangers of poverty. Nearly 1 in 5 girls in the U.S. lives in poverty.[14] Living in poverty negatively impacts the health, safety, education, and overall well-being of girls, making it difficult to break the cycle of poverty later in life. Child poverty disproportionately affects girls of color. In 2016, 27% of Hispanic children and 31% of Black children lived in poverty, compared to only 11% of White children.[14] And across all age and race groups, women and girls in the United States experience the highest rates of poverty.[15]

Girls growing up in low-income communities experience greater health challenges than their wealthier peers. Children in poverty are significantly more likely to be food insecure,[16] putting them at an increased risk of chronic health and psychological disorders, as well as internalized experiences of depression, anxiety, and poor self-esteem.[17] Children in poverty are also less likely than their wealthier peers to have health insurance[18] and have fewer opportunities than higher income peers to be physically active.[19] And adolescent girls in poverty are more likely than wealthier peers to become pregnant.[9]

Girls living in neighborhoods characterized by concentrated poverty are also exposed to higher rates of violence and crime. Living in a poor household more than doubles the rate of violent victimization compared to high-income households.[20] Growing up in areas with high levels of gendered violence negatively impacts girls' development, mental health, educational attainment, and long-term financial stability.[21]

Girls from low-income families are five times more likely to drop out of high school than their financially secure peers.[22] Those girls who do graduate high school and go on to higher education are more likely to have student loan debt upon graduating from college and are more likely to experience financial struggles due to student loan repayment.[23] Without the social and economic capital afforded to their higher income peers, girls in poverty often grow up to be women in poverty, perpetuating this cycle into further generations.

PRO-GIRL, GIRLS-ONLY ENVIRONMENTS AS A SOLUTION

The Girls Inc. Experience and our girls-only environments equip girls with the tools they need to combat the struggles faced in their daily lives to grow up strong, smart, and bold. As part of the 2016-2020 Strategic Plan, Girls Inc. aims to increase the number of girls served in low-income communities, as girls from low-income and under-resourced communities experience the damaging impacts of poverty and typically lack access to opportunities during the out-of-school time. The pro-girl, girls-only environment is a critical piece of the Girls Inc. Experience, as girls-only programming has been proven to positively impact adolescent girls' overall well-being. This type of environment provides a safe, supporting space where girls can resist gender stereotypes, take risks, and discover the power in being a girl.

Girls who participate in girls-only programs express that improvement in self-esteem was one of the most significant factors in their experience, as they feel comfortable and less judgment in these environments as compared to mixed-gender environments. Girls stated that these programs helped them to create social support networks, build new friendships, and develop mentoring relationships with girls and women who have gone through similar experiences.[24] In doing so, girls programs can create a space where young women feel safe, which is essential to empowerment.[25]

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Girls-only spaces help girls live healthier, more productive lives. Girls who participate in girls-only programs have demonstrated outcomes such as improved problem-solving, conflict resolution, critical thinking, anti-bullying, and refusal skills[26] and increased levels of physical activity.[24] By aiding girls to make healthy choices, girls programs also prevent risky behaviors amongst adolescent girls as well as promote overall physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

Girls groups and programs enhance girls' leadership abilities. While girls may lack opportunities for leadership development in mixed-gender environments, in girls-only spaces, all leadership positions within the organization are filled by girls. Program leaders and mentors within girl-serving organizations also tend to be women, providing girls with female role models. When exposed to a variety of female leaders and leadership styles, girls better understand their leadership potential and are more likely to define themselves as leaders.[25, 27]

Girls state that they desire spaces where their voices can be heard. In girls-only spaces, girls' concerns are valued and respected. Girls express frustration with their communities' inability to meet their needs and want to find a place to have a voice in matters that concern them, without being "shut-out" by male perspectives.[28] Girls also say that in all girls groups, it is easier to talk about certain issues, to look how they want, and to be themselves.[29] Girls-only programming meets these needs by providing such a space where girls' perspectives are welcomed and embraced.

Historically, mixed gender programming within youth-serving organizations have not been designed with the unique needs of girls in mind.[30] By nature, girls-only programs are designed to address girls' concerns in a safe, supportive manner. Such spaces allow girls to resist and escape societal barriers such as prejudice, discrimination, expectations from others, peer pressure, and violence. Through emphasizing girls' self-esteem, mental and physical well-being, and leadership potential, pro-girl, girls-only environments equip girls to navigate gender, social, and economic barriers in today's world.

THE GIRLS INC. DIFFERENCE

Due to limited resources and a time-intensive program model, Girls Inc. has chosen to focus efforts on those that can most benefit from the comprehensive Girls Inc. experience: girls living in low-income and under-resourced communities. Girls Inc. is uniquely positioned to equip girls to navigate gender, economic, and social barriers. Knowing that girls in poverty lack equitable and safe opportunities in the out-of-school time,[31] Girls Inc. provides a pro-girl, girls-only environment where girls can access the resources and supports they need. In partnership with schools and at local organizations throughout the U.S. and Canada, we provide long-lasting mentoring relationships, a pro-girl environment, and research-based programming to equip girls to grow up healthy, educated and independent and break the cycle of poverty.

It is critical that we invest in girls' futures. In doing so, we will not only improve the lives of girls, but the communities in which they reside as a whole. Girls today face many barriers to success, from violence, to health disparities, inequitable opportunities, and biases, yet these challenges also present opportunities. Society typically does not view girlhood as a position of strength or agency. However, pro-girl, girls-only environments at Girls Inc. encourage girls to embrace the power of being a girl and to grow up strong, smart, and bold.

END NOTES

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