

**"Barbie-ric" Girls:  
Supporting Gender Sensitive Youth Programming  
and Promoting Advocacy**

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**A THESIS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **“Barbie-ric” Girls: Supporting Gender Sensitive Youth Programming and Promoting Advocacy**

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This paper looks at the needs of middle school girls in the early twenty first century in Worcester, Massachusetts and the community’s response through the Investing in Girls Alliance (IIG). Through the Needs Assessment conduct by IIG we learned of girls’ growing concern around health, violence, relationships, education, and sexual health. IIG, a broad based coalition consisting of thirty core members from various youth development sectors requested research about the current best practice trends in girls’ programming.

While girl-centric programming can be an important component of a strategy to reduce violence among girls and improve their overall wellbeing, when examining the extent of the problems driving violence among middle school aged girls, it is clear that a reliance on programs to resolve such problems is inadequate. Because this paper highlights the community conditions that contribute to girls’ issues I hope that it becomes a tool for advocacy and activism.

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## **DEDICATION**

This paper is dedicated to feminist men everywhere; men who work to eliminate misogyny either through activism or through their daily awesome attitudes.

There are certain ones in my life that I want to particularly acknowledge: brother Ross, dad Clint, roommate Joel, and roommate Evan. All of them might laugh at this dedication but they would assure me that they are laughing with me.

And to the men who have passed on this year, Grampy and Michael, both who taught me so much.

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I wish to thank all my professors but particularly Professor Laurie Ross and Professor Cynthia Enloe for their continuing support. They have both greatly contributed to, well, everything. I will be forever grateful for their respect, their patience, their willingness to listen, and their willingness to teach.

Laurie and I spent a lot of time together this year, between our work together at the Investing in Girls Alliance and class, we saw each other almost daily. ☺ It's been a joy. I have learned so much from her, watching her shift easily between academia and practice, encouraging people to think more intentionally and critically, never discouraging but gently guiding people. I feel lucky to consider her a mentor.

I have always admired Cynthia, a feminist icon and an incredible scholar. Her work on militarization is revolutionary, but more importantly she has an amazing ability to work with all types of people, assuring them that whatever they contribute has value. She can take even the most complex feminist theory and describe it in an approachable way. I am honored that I have gotten the chance to work so closely with her.

And, of course, thanks to everyone who listened to me ramble on about the importance of girls' programming, in particular my mother Suzanne and friend Joanna.

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## Introduction

Adolescent girls have spoken. Spoken out about the issues they face as middle school girls. This paper address issues facing girls, in 2009, in Worcester, Massachusetts, a city that is experiencing a rise in girl violence. Girls, although struggling with more complex issues than ever before, often confront a societal silencing. Fortunately girls are speaking; it is our job as youth practitioners, researchers, friends, and adults to listen. Beyond listening comes the response, the strategies we implement as we attempt to address the gender-specific needs of girls, and the ways in which we mobilize to create a girl-friendly culture.

The Investing in Girls Alliance, of Worcester, asked for a paper that would explore the national trends in gender sensitive and girl-centric programming. The Alliance, made up of over thirty youth-serving agencies, came together in 2006 in response to a citywide concern about rising violence rates among middle school girls. As described in their mission and vision statements, the Alliance, through research and collaboration, hopes to advocate for a more complete understanding of the specific challenges middle school girls face. As the program manager for Investing in Girls, IIG, I embarked on a comprehensive assessment of the evidence-based programs and curriculums that are nationally recognized as being best practice.

The need for this review of evidence-based programs project came out of the results of the Alliance's first major project, a needs assessment, which was conducted in 2007, in order to better understand the challenges confronting girls in the City. The needs

assessment, which incorporated the perspectives of girls, parents, and youth providers, illustrated what we already understood via anecdotes. The girls spoke of five main conditions, education, health, sexual health, relationships, and violence. The ways in which adults, both parents and youth providers, respond to this call requires intentionality, an attitude whereby the proposed solutions truly respond to the needs of girls.

This paper ultimately tries to look at the link between girls' needs and the current evidenced-based girls' programs. By using the needs assessment as my primary lens, I look critically at the effectiveness of the best practice programs, asking whether they can truly address the complex challenges girls face. Programs, although effective at providing girls with tangible resources and skills, cannot completely address the complex conditions in girls' lives. Due to factors such as limited enrollment capacities and their non-critical frameworks, programs cannot provide a holistic strategy for improving girls' lives.

Often complex structural conditions shape the issues girls confront, to ignore these conditions represents a simplicity we cannot afford. The evidence suggests we need to expand our theoretical understanding of girls, incorporating the literature from the emerging Girlhood Studies field, looking at how these critical feminist theorists can contribute to our conversations. We need to better comprehend the discourses surrounding girls and the ways in which our programmatic strategies are shaped by and contribute to our understanding. Our popular American discourses surrounding contemporary adolescent girls shape our programs and our programs, in turn, have the potential to reinforce these

stereotypes. I conclude by suggesting that, in order to truly address girls' challenges we need to look at the ways in which girls' needs are rooted in systematic conditions.

By grounding the review of evidence-based programs in the context of findings from the needs assessment, I argue that Investing in Girls Alliance will need to both intentionally implement gender-sensitive programming while also advocating for change in community conditions that are driving violence among adolescent girls on a community-wide level.

## Methodology

The central task of this paper, as requested by the Investing in Girls Alliance, is to parse out the nationally recognized best practices for out-of-school girls' programming. A best practice program is one that has undergone extensive evaluation, proving that its curriculum has the ability to achieve certain outcomes, be it reducing teen pregnancy, increasing self-esteem, or preventing teen substance abuse. Youth developers view evidenced-based programs as pinnacle examples, demonstrating programs' ability to transform youth. The Investing in Girls Alliance through this best practice research hopes to implement more evidenced-based programming in the Worcester area, thinking that an improvement in curriculum would contribute to a more effective response to girls' needs. Programs, particularly the ones below, do provide girls with tangible skills and resources, to discount their effectiveness would be naïve at best. While I ultimately discuss the limitations of relying solely on programming to address community level issues, the ones described below do offer great examples of curriculums that intentionally cater to girls. I am hoping that my research helps the Alliance implement more gender-sensitive programming in Worcester; however, I hope my later critique of the programs supports emerging conversations about the need for advocacy and addressing underlying community conditions. Before I move to this critique I first give a detailed outline of ten programs described in federal and academic youth programming databases.

In order to complete this task, I first explored the distinction between gender-specific programming and coeducational settings, why, when addressing girls' needs,

coeducational curriculums often fall short. The best practices programming for middle school girls insist on being girl-centric and gender-sensitive, acknowledging that girls have specific needs; needs that cannot be met through co-education programming. The Girls Coalition of Greater Boston released a report (2005) that defines gender sensitive programs as, “those that not only pay attention to the multifaceted identities of participating girls, but also consider the unique and development needs and strengths of girls” (*Where are the Girls?* 9). Gender-sensitive and girl-centric programming prioritizes girls and recognizes that often times the needs of girls become marginalized in co-educational settings. Coeducational out-of-school programming often moves towards being gender neutral, in our society that privileges men and boys this often means that coed programs intentionally or unintentionally silence girls. A 2004 report stated that sixty-one percent of teens enrolled in Boston programs were male. On a national scale coed programs serve three times as many boys as girls (*Where are the Girls?* 2005). Coeducational has become synonymous with programming for boys; gender-sensitive frameworks seek to correct that.

Youth development has historically taken a monolithic approach, treating all youth as the same and assuming that their challenges have commonalities (Cammarota, Ginwright, Noguera 2006). As feminist theory has taught us this kind of generalization often further silences the already marginalized. Kathryn Wheeler, formerly of the Girls Coalition of Greater Boston, begins her report, *Where are the Girls?*, by stating we lack gender-sensitive data; the data available about girls, their development, and programming is scarce (Wheeler 2006). This paper hopes to contribute to that much-needed data.

## **The Databases and Programs**

No one agency acts as the expert on girls' programming. No clearinghouse exists that exclusively tracks programming for adolescent girls. Various databases catalogue these programs, for the purposes of this paper, and in the interest of academic credibility, I outline programs found on the three federally recognized databases, Helping America's Youth Community Guide (now referred to as Program Tool), the Office of Juvenile Justice's Model Programs Guide, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practice, and the academically maintained Harvard Family Research Project. The three federal databases and Harvard's database cast a wide net, providing a spectrum of services and programs available to youth in this country. Within the field of youth development a trend has emerged that emphasizes the importance of indicators and measuring outcomes, evidenced-based programming shapes and informs our expertise and the new emerging programs.

The federal government does maintain a fourth database within the field of youth development. Nevertheless, this database, "What Works Clearinghouse," helps educational practitioners find in-school programs (Institute of Education Sciences 2009). This paper focuses on out-of-school programs, because of this; I did not include information from that database.

Although other organizations may conduct self-evaluations, the external review process conducted by federal researchers or academics ensures another level of legitimacy

and objectivity. To avoid any and all conflicts of interest I did not explore the research published by individual youth-serving agencies. For example, the Girl Scouts produce research based on best practice methodologies; however, only programs listed in nationally maintained databases appear below.

Many co-educational programs do incorporate gender sensitivity, catering to the needs of both the male and female participants. Nevertheless, for this paper I report exclusively on girl-only programming, and geared towards urban population, thus guaranteeing a foundational level of being girl-centric and appropriate for Worcester. As previously stated co-ed programs often fail at being gender-neutral, often playing towards the status quo, a norm that is decidedly masculine and favors the needs of boys. With those limitations in mind the following review represents as a comprehensive list of current best practices for middle school girls' out-of-school programming. Before detailing those programs I explain the databases which catalogue them.

### **Helping America's Youth Community Guide**

The White House directly maintains this federal database, the HAY Community Guide began under George W. Bush's 2001-2008 administration, however, with Barack Obama's 2008 election the database has changed slightly. Launched under George W. Bush's 2001-2008 administrations, the creators and managers of this database aimed to publicize the positive youth development framework. Laura Bush spearheaded a national initiative, an initiative urging adults to better connect with youth, particularly at-risk boys, in school, family, and in the community ([www.helpingamericasyouth.gov](http://www.helpingamericasyouth.gov) 2008). The

original HAY Guide highlighted risk prevention and intervention models and programs, the Obama broadened the focus slightly, re-labeling the site, [findyouthinfo.gov](http://findyouthinfo.gov). Although the interface has changed with the Obama transition the program listing remains the same. In order for a program to gain eligibility to be posted on this site it must meet four qualifications, “the conceptual framework of the program, program fidelity, strength of the evaluation design, and empirical evidence demonstrating the prevention or reduction of problem behaviors” ([www.findyouthinfo.gov](http://www.findyouthinfo.gov) 2009). Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, while federally sponsored, directly maintains the database. Out of two hundred programs listed, five of them exclusively serve middle school girls.

### **Office of Juvenile Justice and SAMHSA**

The national Office of Juvenile Justice and SAMHSA’s databases both repeat many programs recognized by the HAY Community Guide, proving consistency but also proving the overall lack, both numerically and topically, of girl-centric and gender-sensitive programming. The Office of Juvenile Justice administers the Model Program database, listing best practices that focus on delinquency prevention and intervention. SAMHSA’s National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices catalogues mental health and substance abuse interventions. Two programs did not overlap with the Hay Community Guide; those two programs are described in the Findings section.

The three federally maintained databases all heavily favor intervention models, particularly worried with at-risk youth and youth that have previously been apart of the Juvenile Justice system. Because of this bias I also researched an academic database.

### **Harvard Family Research Project**

Programs eight, nine, and ten listed in the Findings section come from Harvard's Out-of-School Database. Harvard University researchers conduct these evaluations; because of this distinction, the evaluations listed here have a slightly more academic approach. By creating a program clearinghouse Harvard hopes to spark a larger conversation about the importance of uniform evaluation, encouraging programs to evaluate common indicators and outcomes. Proving that programming prevents risky behavior is almost impossible; however, field experts continue to make the links between out-of-school involvement and healthy development. Despite this evaluative challenge, we understand the importance of out-of-school programming and our need to improve it. The Harvard database also includes programs initially described in the federal lists, for example, Friendly PEERsuasion appears in both lists. Described in the Findings section are three, chosen because of their diverse frameworks and their widespread popularity, out of the eight girl-centric programs listed on the Harvard database. In the interest of brevity the additional five Harvard programs are listed in the Appendix.

All four of these databases outline too few girl-centric programming, reflecting not only the co-ed bias but also the undeniable lack of options for gender sensitive alternatives. Nevertheless, each of the ten girl-centric programs listed below takes the first step towards ensuring that girls' needs are met in a gender sensitive approach.

## **Findings from Review of Girl-Centric Evidenced-Based Programs**

The ten programs listed below illustrate the scope of girl-centric programs. Each description in the findings section outlines the programs' name, origin, history, desired outcome, strategy, framework, and evaluation. This comprehensive outline of nationally-recognized programs provides the information necessary to develop an understanding of the available and revered gender sensitive curriculums.

### **I. Girls Circle**

Girls Circle, geared towards girls ages 9-18, began in 1994 under the direction of two women in Northern California. Meeting in small groups for ten weeks the girls and the trained facilitators create safe spaces to discuss gender-sensitive issues, including body image, sexuality, drugs, and friendships. In addition to guided discussions the girls express themselves creativity, through visual art, role-playing, and dance. The curriculum very intentionally follows the relational-cultural theory (RCT). RCT suggests that healthy relationships are essential to human development and a lack of such relationships results in psychological problems. The founders of Girls Circle specifically applied RCT to girls, according to HAY, "the theory views a girl's connections with others as a central organizing feature in her psychological makeup. The quality of these connections determines her overall psychological health, self-image, and relationships" (Interagency Working Group 2009). The curriculum has undergone extensive evaluation since 2004, observing girls of diverse racial backgrounds in both the United States and Canada. Statistical improvements occurred in four main areas, self-harming behavior, alcohol use,

attachment to school, and self-efficiency. The program continues to measure its outcomes and provides resources to ensure it's replicable.

## **II & III Friendly PEERsuasion and Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy**

Two Girls Incorporated programs appear in the HAY community guide, the Friendly PEERsuasion program and the Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy program. Girls Incorporated strives to “inspire all girls to be smart, strong, and bold” (www.girlsinc.org 2009). Girls Inc. specifically serves girls, running after-school programs and summer camps for girls of all ages. Through their National Research Center, Girls Incorporated has the ability to continuously adapt their programming, ensuring that their programmatic tactics reflect the current trends. Because of this many best practice databases list Girls Incorporated programs.

Friendly PEERsuasion, geared to girls ages 11-14, addresses issues of substance abuse and peer pressure amongst middle school girls. This curriculum, developed in 1998, takes a two-tiered approach to combating substance abuse. First the girls participate in 14-hours of programming with a trained adult, looking specifically at the social and media expectations and messages surrounding substance abuse. After the completion of this initial phase the girls become certified PEERsuaders. Next the adolescents work with younger girls, ages 6-10, acting as older mentors and role models to them. Through this peer mentoring approach girls positively use peer relationships to discourage each other and their younger peers from using drugs and alcohol. Girls Incorporated approaches substance abuse as a peer issue, teaching girls to, “to advocate for themselves and to serve

as role models for those who are younger” (www.girlsinc.org 2009). Evaluative measures prove that girls participating in the program are more likely to disengage from peers using substances and are more likely to leave situations where drug and alcohol are present.

Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy, the second Girls Incorporated program listed on the HAY Community Guide, aims to prevent early motherhood. This program has two curricula, one for girls ages 9-11, Growing Together, and one for girls ages 12-14, Will Power/Won't Power. The program encourages girls to make healthy sexual choices, either postponing sexual intercourse or using protection to prevent disease and conception. The current leaders of Girls Inc believe in four foundations of preventing teen pregnancy, “family communication about sexuality, skills in resisting pressure to be sexually active, motivation and resources to postpone pregnancy, and overcoming barriers to effective contraception for sexually active teens” (Interagency Working Group 2009). Growing Together works with girls ages 9-11 and a guardian. The girls participate in the program with a trusted adult, through five sessions this program aims to open the door to better communication. Will Power/Won't Power caters towards girls ages 12-14, through ten sessions the girls talk about the positive aspects of postponing sexual activity. Both curriculums rely on foundations of the positive and strengthening aspects of abstinence and girls as each others support mechanisms. This program has undergone heavy evaluation, the results proving that, participants are half as likely to engage in sexual activity as their non-participating counterparts (www.girlsinc.org 2009).

#### **IV. Movimiento Ascendencia**

Movimiento Ascendencia provides programming for 8-19 year old at-risk or gang-involved girls. With an emphasis on cultural understanding this Colorado-based program, Spanish for Upward Movement, seeks to provide alternatives to substance abuse and gang involvement. The curriculum revolves around three main components, conflict resolution, cultural awareness, and self-esteem or social support. Taking a very holistic approach to providing girls with safe spaces the program includes mentoring, athletic activities, cultural enhancement activities, academic support, gender-specific life skills courses, parental involvement, and case management. This is a long-term program; the girls meet with their mentors at least two hours a week for 9 months. The outcomes show that participating girls are less likely to commit crimes and witness a rise in their academic performance (Interagency Working Group 2009).

#### **V. Urban Women against Substance Abuse**

The Urban Women against Substance Abuse, working with girls ages 9-11 originally in Harford Connecticut, stands out because of its specific focus on urban girls. Although many of the listed programs occur in cities, very few best practices integrate a specific urban lens into the curriculums. This twenty-eight week program targets Puerto Rican, Latina, African-American, and Caribbean-American girls. This school-based program integrates art, mentoring, recreation, and cultural activities into their intervention. A parallel curriculum exists for the girls' mothers or female caregivers, thus ensuring their participation as well. The unique approach to mother-daughter relationships has proven

important in the development of self-identification and healthy behavior. UWASA grounds its strategy in the social learning theory, “which suggests a strong connection between certain risk factors and the absence of positive female role models within a young girl’s immediate family, community, and culture” (Interagency Working Group 2009). Through evaluation UWASA proves its effect on girls’ knowledge of HIV, their sexual self-efficacy, and decreased use of substances. Most statistically significant, though, was the curriculum’s impact on strengthening the mother-daughter relationship amongst girls of color.

## **VI. Reaffirming Young Sisters’ Excellence**

Reaffirming Young Sisters’ Excellence (RYSE), a community intervention model works with girls age 12-17, aims to reduce recidivism. This wrap-around program evaluated by the Office of Juvenile Justice focuses on holistic intervention originated to address the disproportionate number of girls of color in the prison system. The RYSE founders developed this program in 1997 rooting it in the theory “that girls’ lives revolve around relationships and that a relationship with a probation officer could be a significant and effective factor in a youth’s life” (OJJ 2009). This program works continuously to provide vocational, emotional, social, and academic skills to the adolescents. Daily activities include community services opportunities, pregnancy prevention courses, and therapy. Funds also exist available for girls in emergency situations. The program emphasizes the relationship between each girl and her probation officer, hoping to achieve a positive mentoring framework, one that encourages the girls. Participating girls were

more likely to complete the duration of their probation. Unfortunately the program did not statistically reduce recidivism (OJJ 2009).

## **VII. Emergency Room Intervention for Adolescent Females**

The Emergency Room Intervention for Adolescent Females is a program, specifically for girls ages 12-17 who have been admitted to the emergency room because of suicide attempts. Beginning in 1992 in New York City this SAMHSA approved program worked with suicidal Latina girls and their families, helping families understand the girls' motivation and the best ways to support them. This intervention model acknowledges the intersecting identities within girls, providing bilingual family therapy and treatment. This holistic familial intervention takes a culturally sensitive approach to mental health issues amongst adolescent girls. RYSE works with families to pave a path of understanding thus hoping to reduce future mental health crises. After the girls and their parents participated in this four-hour training girls were three times more likely to complete their outpatient treatment as their non-participating counterparts (SAMHSA 2009).

## **VIII. Girlfriends for KEEPS**

Girlfriends for KEEPS, Keys to Eating, Exercising, Playing, and Sharing, a program for low-income African-American girls age 8-10, focuses on obesity prevention. Beginning in 2000, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, this curriculum looks at all the reasons for low participation in fitness activities by African American girls and addresses those barriers. Meeting over the course of 12 weeks in small groups, between eight and nine

participants, the girls engage in discussions about healthy eating and engage in physical activity: dance, step, jump rope, and tag. Focusing on the physical issues of obesity the program helps girls engage with fitness activities while simultaneously teaching them about healthy foods and nutrition. The facilitators, African-American themselves, encourage attendance through incentives, be it attendance beads or other merchandise. Family involvement reinforces the program's principles. Families participate in family event nights and receive weekly packets to supplement the education their daughters receive. This program witnesses high levels of parental involvement, 88% of parents and 95% of girls attending at least one family night. Although physical indicators, Body Mass Index for example, did not change, girls' knowledge of physical health and healthy choices did significantly increase (Harvard Family Research Project 2009).

### **IX. Go Grrrls**

The Go Grrrls curriculum, initially implemented in 1995, focuses on girls, age 10-14, focuses on girls' psychosocial development. Also called the Empowering Adolescent Girls Program, this program addresses seven topics over seven weeks, meeting a total of twelve times. Throughout the sessions the girls address what it means to be girl in today's society, body image, positivism, independence, friendships, sex, and planning for the future. The curriculum, citing the importance of girls' relationships, emphasizes learning within groups (LeCroy and Mann 2008). The program ultimately aims to help adolescent girls navigate through the challenging obstacles to healthy development. Tested over eight years in Tucson, Arizona this curriculum has statistically significant impacts on girls'

positive body image, assertiveness, self-efficacy, and self-liking. Nevertheless, friendship esteem did not change based on the intervention (Harvard Family Research Project 2009).

### **X. Young Women's Leadership Alliance**

The Young Women's Leadership Alliance, YWLA, a social justice curriculum for girls age 14-18, emphasizes girls as agents of change, capable of challenging the structural issues shaping the issues in their lives. Offered at school sites the program runs twice a year, meeting once a week for 15 sessions. Developed in Santa Cruz, California, by the ETR, Education, Training, Research, Association it aims to advocate for educational equity, focusing on research, equity awareness, and social action. YWLA promotes leadership and social justice through youth-adult partnerships and action research. Instead of separating the girls from adults this curriculum blurs those lines, suggesting that youth and adults should work together towards paradigm shifts. During evaluations participating girls vocalized their desire to focus more on the social justice aspects of the curriculum. The journal entries submitted by the girls demonstrated a statistically significant increase in their confidence and their ability to stand up for what they believe in. The youth adult partnerships allowed for girls to "create a place to be authentic" (Harvard Family Research Plan 2009). This authenticity translated to a comfort to speak up, to disagree with their peers and with adults (Harvard Family Research Project 2009). Because of YWLA's lens of social justice this program stands apart from the other best practices, all of which remain rooted in positive youth development.

### **Summary of findings from evidenced-based programs**

The ten programs described above reflect the current trends in girls' youth programming. All of the programs have been subjected to extensive evaluation, proving that they effectively meet their desired outcomes. While it would be hard to categorize the ten curricula, generally they approach girls' development relationally, teaching gender-specific life lessons in group settings. The ten programs represent the most effective programs in terms of catering to the specific needs and responses of girls. Although my initial task simply asked me to research and describe best practice programming for middle school girls, I decided to apply a theoretical lens to these programs; I root my analysis in the literature of critical youth developers and feminist theorists. By linking the programs to the needs and examining that connection I look carefully at the implications of these programs and the ways in which programming is a direct reflection and product of societal views surrounding adolescent girls. The next section outlines the needs identified by girls themselves in Worcester, Massachusetts. The girls' voiced concerns about various challenges, illustrating the complexities in their lives and the urgency in which we need to respond. After detailing the needs I revisit the programs and their frameworks exploring the shortcomings of these best practices.

## **The Needs of Middle School Girls in Greater Worcester**

Before analyzing the programs described above it is important to return to the original mission of the Investing in Girls Alliance, to respond to the specific needs of girls as they identify them. Investing in Girls spent the time and money prioritizing the local and specific challenges girls face by conducting a comprehensive needs assessment. Through this research we as an Alliance and as a community better understand the lives of middle school girls in the Worcester area. The next challenge arises when we try to address those needs. Do our current available programs adequately address the needs of girls? Do the gender-sensitive best practices really address girls' needs, do those nationally acclaimed curriculum address both the tangible, concrete issues and the community conditions that shape girls' lives? In order to answer these questions I first outline the needs of local adolescent girls. To truly analyze programs we need to examine whether they directly connect with the needs identified by girls themselves, if not, we need to examine the cause behind that disconnect. The next section summarizes the needs of girls, ages 10-14, in the greater Worcester area.

In 2007 the Investing in Girls Alliance under the direction of Kathryn Wheeler and Jessica Greenstone conducted a needs assessment of middle school girls in the Greater Worcester area. The needs assessment, *From Gaps to Opportunities Meeting the Needs of Middle School Girls in the Worcester Area*, recorded the challenges facing local adolescent girls, while also capturing perceptions of girls from parents and youth providers, thus providing us with more holistic and complete data. The research team, via surveys and

focus groups, interviewed over four hundred and fifty girls, parents, and youth workers. Girls accounted for over fifty percent of the participants, thus guaranteeing that girls' voices remained the priority. Published in 2007 the needs assessment report highlighted five main conditions local middle school girls confront. Girls identified education, health, violence, relationships, and sexual health as being central in their lives. Each of these conditions are seen by the girls themselves as issues, problems needing collective solutions. Often, however, other people in girls' lives have not acknowledged these conditions as issues. Boys struggle with similar challenges; nevertheless, the specificities are deeply gendered. The needs assessment hopes to shine light on that distinction.

### **Health**

Girls cited health, defined by the girls as mental health, fitness, stress, substance abuse, body image, and puberty, as a central issue to girls in Worcester. Mental health issues often go untreated in adolescents. Girls acknowledged the stress that puberty brings; the physical and emotional changes coupled with changing expectations can often negatively impact girls. According to United States data (2006), "thirty-seven percent of 9th grade girls report feeling sad or helpless almost every day for more than two weeks" (Wheeler and Greenstone 2007, 27). When parsing out this statistic, one finds that this is disproportionately true for Hispanic girls. The mental health issues identified in middle school girls often can be attributed to other more societal barriers. Wheeler and Greenstone write, "mental health challenges in girls often reflect larger cultural problems such as gender, racial, and socioeconomic inequalities, and a media-based culture that devalues

and sexualizes women and girls” (28). The mental health issues conditions widely imagined to be personal are better seen as indicators of the influence of society’s structural forces. Adults agree that mental health needs our attention; one third of both parents and providers cited mental health as one of the two top conditions negatively impacting girls (Wheeler and Greenstone 2007).

The media’s attention and our cultural expectations around physical appearance adversely affect middle school girls. The pressures surrounding physical health impact girls’ mental health and their attitudes to their bodies. One Caucasian girl in a Worcester focus group stated, “Girls feel pressured to be model thin, and go about it all the wrong ways” (29). The needs assessment goes on to say that over ninety percent of Americans with eating disorders in clinical cases are female; most of those habits begin in adolescence. While pushing towards the thin extreme obviously has detrimental consequences for girls, girls in contemporary Worcester simultaneously do not understand of healthy eating habits, this lack of knowledge leads towards obesity. More Massachusetts youth are overweight or obese than ever before (Wheeler and Greenstone 2007).

The Worcester girls also spoke about sports at length, saying that they wished more fitness opportunities existed for girls in the City. National studies point out that American girls participate in sports at half the rate as their male counterparts. Urban girls especially struggle to find fitness opportunities. Suburban youth have three times as many opportunities to participate in sporting activities than their urban peers (*Where are the*

*Girls?* 2005). Sports can help girls not only with physical health but also fitness activities positively affect girls' mental health.

### **Violence**

Violence, a concern identified by experts across the country, has increasingly become an issue in Worcester. Dr. Howard Spivak and Deborah Prothrow-Stith, in their book Sugar and Spice and No Longer Nice: How we can Stop Girls' Violence (2006), describe how recently American girls have engaged in aggression and physical violence typically displayed in boys' behavior. Parents and youth providers in Worcester have become increasingly concerned as this trend has also become a pattern in the City.

Violence refers to physical, emotional, and sexual violence, all variants prohibit girls from feeling secure, and this lack of security prevents girls from living to their full potential. As experts point out the rise of girl violence not only personally disrupts girls' lives but also the rise of violence contributes to the overall culture of violence in our society.

The girls surveyed by IIG spoke at length about girl-on-girl violence. Girls "perceive violence, including physical fighting and gangs, as a dominant concern in their lives and want adults to prioritize it" (Wheeler and Greenstone 2007, 39). Girls, as national studies have described, are both victims and perpetrators of violence, this pattern can be a self-fulfilling prophecy for girls that experience violence often resort to violence themselves.

Adolescent girls face violence in their domestic lives. According to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey conducted in 2006 twelve percent of African-

American high school girls and nine percent of Hispanic high school girls experienced dating violence in the past year. Youth, ages twelve through age nineteen, experience rape more than any other age demographic. Even girls who do not experience violence first-hand suffer; simply witnessing violence can lead to post traumatic stress disorder and other physiological problems (Wheeler and Greenstone 2007, 40).

Girls have also become more frequent perpetrators of violence. Looking for causality pushes us to acknowledge the complexities behind these recent trends. Wheeler and Greenstone write, “Many times, girls’ criminal behaviors can be viewed as acts of resilience to the abuse and victimization they are experiencing” (41). Seventy percent of girls in the Massachusetts juvenile justice system have reported being victims of abuse; the correlation between victim and perpetrator speaks volumes. The rise of girl violence threatens community safety. More girls resort to violent behavior as a way to communicate and problem solve, Worcester has witnessed a rise in girl gangs and a rise in girls bringing weapons to school.

Parents, providers, and girls all ranked violence as a major issue for girls in Worcester. Forty-three percent of girls surveyed identified violence as being an “extremely important” issue in their lives (Wheeler and Greenstone 2007, 46). Parents and youth providers echoed this sentiment, sixty-eight and seventy-one percent wrote that this is an “extremely important” issue respectively (46). All over the country communities struggle to respond as the number of girls committing acts of violence increases.

## **Healthy Relationships**

Middle school girls, like any demographic, have complex relationships. Due to the particular challenges of the middle school transition years relationships especially cause stress. Girls, in the Investing in Girls focus groups, spoke of relationships as a source of anxiety; relationships as the girls described them can refer to peer, familial, and romantic relationships. Peer relationships can be the source of great joy and support; however, during the tumultuous transitory years of middle school, they can also be a primary cause of pressure and hurt. Relationships act as an example of gender specificity, according to a national study conducted by the Ms. Foundation over half of girls view being a “good friend” as their most important trait, this compares to thirty-three percent of boys (Wheeler and Greenstone 2007).

Academia has grappled with identifying the causality behind a rise in girl on girl fighting. Popular culture reflects these complexities; Rosalind Wiseman’s research on Queen Bees provided the evidence for the acclaimed movie “Mean Girls”. As girls develop they confront the contradiction within the victim and perpetrator dichotomy (Wiseman 2002). This dichotomy also appears in the exploration of violence as described above. As I move into a critique of girls’ programmatic resources later in the paper, I will parse out the complexity of this juxtaposition, its implications, and the importance of addressing causality.

Girls’ romantic relationship also might start around this age. Girls spoke with excitement about their romantic explorations they also spoke of the anxiety and confusion

that accompanies those initial emotions. Thirty-eight percent of girls surveyed felt that boys were a significant source of stress for them (Wheeler and Greenstone 2007, 56). Girls exploring non-heterosexual relationships have historically been even more unsupported.

Finally, the relationships girls have with adults can be very complex. Many girls felt that their parents simply did not understand what issues they were facing. Only 52 percent of girls surveyed reported that their families make them feel good about themselves. While this majority is encouraging, it is also worrisome. This means that over 40 percent of girls do not have as positive relationships with their families. (Wheeler and Greenstone 2007, 59) A disconnect exists between many parents and their adolescent daughters, parents often misunderstanding. Girls ranked friends as more important than family, however, parents ranked family as the most important person or thing in their daughters' lives.

The issues of race and ethnicity intertwine with gender in a way that makes it impossible to suggest that one impacts girls more than the other. The Investing in Girls needs assessment study quickly points out that immigrant girls have a much different experience trying to negotiate their family life with the pressures of peer friendships. Wheeler and Greenstone write, "Girls of color, in particular, receive indirect and direct messages about their racial and cultural groups and negotiate the multi-faceted aspects of their identities in relationship with others" (52). Accounting for the nuances in girls' identity proves necessary and demonstrates the complexity of girls' development.

Girls often stop sharing ideas and experiences with the adults in their lives during the middle school transition. A fear of judgment stops girls from openly sharing. While breaking away from parental figures falls in line with most youth development theory, examining the more hidden causes of girls' self-silencing might allow us to better understand the true complexities of the problem as well as provide us with a better understanding of gender roles throughout society. Like all the needs described above I will be exploring them in a more structural context later in the paper.

### **Education**

Girls taking part in the Worcester needs assessment study identified education as a major issue in their life, seeing educational barriers as blockading their paths towards careers and college. One of the girls surveyed by Investing in Girls, a Latina eighth grader, commented, "Education is the most important challenge girls face—you need it to be successful in life, and to have a good job" (Wheeler and Greenstone 2007, 60). These girls view school as both a source of anxiety and pride. The pressures that accompany adolescent transitions often cloud the potential positive effect schools have. The middle school transition years often catalyze the challenges that follow girls through high school. For example, achievement gaps often emerge in the sciences between American girls and boys at this time. Although significant drop-out rates do not occur until the high school level, it is easy to see that elementary and middle school success directly link to high school achievements. Worcester especially witnesses high dropout rates. Latina girls, on both a state and national level, statistically drop out of high school more than their white or

black counterparts. During the 2006-2007 school year, Worcester had a 70% graduation rate, this compares to the 81% statewide rate. Sixty percent of Hispanic high school students in Worcester graduate within four years, compared to the overall student rate, of seventy percent; this indicates a crisis, one connected to race, class, and gender (Massachusetts Department of Education accessed 2009).

The stark contrast between girls' desire for high school completion and the dropout rates in Worcester suggest that external challenges prevent girls from fulfilling their educational dreams. One parent from an Investing in Girls focus group commented, "[I worry that] she is so worried about the social aspects of school that she will lose focus on the work" (64). National studies confirm this sentiment, citing that girls often feel that school is not a safe space for them socially, intellectually, or physically. Wheeler and Greenstone cite a 2003 study released by the Girl Scouts of America that asked girls about their emotional safety at school, a disheartening forty-five percent of the 13-17 year olds interviewed said class participation compromised their emotional safety (61). The social anxieties accompanying the middle school transitions accompany girls into the classroom compounding their ability to succeed in educational settings. Many girls struggle to connect with school authority figures; the switch from one central teacher to numerous ones often negatively impacts girls. According to other studies girls draw support from their relationships; the middle school structure often challenges those preexisting relationships with teachers.

A majority of girls surveyed, eighty five percent, listed education as of major importance. In response educators and youth providers must struggle to help girls grapple with external issues that impede their success in the classroom. The issue of education demonstrates how interconnected all the issues are, and, for that matter, how connected individual needs are to each other. If we do not address the issue of violence, a survival need, girls cannot thrive in other sectors of their life, such as education. All types of needs must be addressed to ensure healthy development; we must approach issues holistically to guarantee that girls receive support.

### **Sexual Health**

Girls, parents, and youth providers identified sexual health as the number one issue effecting middle school girls in contemporary Worcester. Girls said that sexual education is the number one challenge that adults should help them to address. This issue, and the education around it, has many layers. Girls cited that often they simply do not have the adequate information they need to make healthy sexual choices. According to psychologist Deborah Tolman (2002) sexual education that simply focuses on biological explanations of contraception often provoke further confusion and isolation in girls. Tolman advocates for a more comprehensive sexual health approach, one that permits the discussion of positive female sexuality and desire. The silencing around sexual health in educational settings can lead to silencing elsewhere. For example, many girls spoke of the disconnect between their sexual activity and their parents' perceptions (Tolman 2002).

Girls, similar to adult women, face sexual violence and harassment. Adults have failed to address both the positive aspects and negative realities of sexuality. Girls have articulated that they feel pressure to become sexually active and do not feel adequately equipped to make such decisions. In a national survey, cited by Wheeler and Greenstone, twenty percent of girls say they worry about this pressure. Thirteen percent of girls who engaged in sexual intercourse before age fifteen reported that was involuntary. Even more sexual violence goes unreported. Girls, both in a 2006 Girls Incorporated survey and in the Investing in Girls needs assessment, asked for more information about sexual health (Wheeler and Greenstone 2007, 37).

Worcester, in particular, fails to address issues of gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, and questioning adolescent youth. Providers especially spoke about this gap, saying that more programming needs to exist that address the needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLBTQ) youth. Safe Homes, an after-school center, for GLBTQ youth age 14-23 attempts to provide a safe space for teenagers. It is the only place of its kind in Central Massachusetts ([www.safehomesma.org](http://www.safehomesma.org) 2008). Unfortunately, no such place exists for younger adolescents. .

The recent explosion of teenage and adolescent sexuality in popular culture further complicates the issue. A 2007 report released by the American Physiological Association explored the mental health impacts of this trend. Countless studies have proven the sexualization of women, looking at tangible evidence that the media portrays women, more than men, in an overtly sexual way. This trend has trickled down, now imposing sexual

images on adolescent and teenage girls. Although the media acts as the main perpetrator of this trend, parents, youth providers, and other adults contribute to this culture. Girls can also sexualize themselves. The APA defines this as self-objectification; a “process whereby girls learn to think of and treat their own bodies as objects of others’ desires” (2). Eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression represent the three main mental health issues found in young women, experts link all three to the sexualization of girls and women and society’s failure to address these issues proactively and positively. The mental health consequences both indirectly and directly impact physical health and sexual development.

The controversy surrounding sexual health stems partially from adults reluctance to deal with the issue. Although parents identified sexual health as the number one challenge in their daughters’ lives, only seven parents, of the sixty surveyed, thought sexuality should be a top priority of adults in the community (Wheeler and Greenstone 2007). Adults shy away from the topic, pointing fingers of responsibility far away from themselves. The girls surveyed were very aware of this disconnect. Wheeler writes, “Girls indicated that adults need to be willing to believe girls about what is really happening, what is best for them, and what they need” (36). Girls, regardless of adults’ perceptions, deal with the gamut of sexual health issues daily: sexual desire, sexual activity, as well as sexual harassment and the threat of sexual violence. The issue of sexual health brings up issues of security and identity. Girls need feel safe from sexual harassment, sexual assault, and

sexual inadequacy. Without providing them with the information they demand we cannot expect them to feel secure.

The five challenges detailed here all help paint a more complete picture of the lives of contemporary American urban middle school girls. While the issues expose deep and complicated needs, the encouraging news lies in the fact that girls identified these conditions themselves. Self-awareness drove these responses. If parents and youth providers willingly work with girls and continue to listen to them perhaps we can better address girls' needs. Investing in Girls hoped that incorporating more best practice programming would allow for a more complete response to the conditions outlined in the needs assessment study. While the methods and curriculums of the evidenced-based programs will certainly improve our programmatic approaches the conditions described by girls would not disappear. Investing in Girls has always been committed to this research and advocacy. As we built the foundational base necessary for our sustainability programs took center stage, now as IIG moves forward into its third year it is reprioritizing advocacy, looking back again to the bigger picture. The next section utilizes a critical and feminist lens to analyze the programs and the needs they seek to rectify. I hope this section supports IIG as they move forward. Not only do I explore the limitations of programming but I also use feminist analysis to look more closely at the frameworks sculpting our programs, looking at whether those frameworks really acknowledge the community conditions that influence girls.

## Critical and Feminist Lens

The following section analyzes the extent that programs, particularly the best practice models, can address the complex challenges in girls' lives. Using the needs assessment study as a lens I critically look at the programs described in the beginning of this paper. While recognizing that these programs do provide tangible benefits to the participants, I also parse out their limitations, describing their shortcomings in terms of breadth and frameworks. Ultimately a reliance on programs, as an avenue for community change, leads to an inadequate response. Instead I call for a much more holistic approach to the local and gendered conditions confronting girls. I recommend that Investing in Girls incorporate best practices while simultaneously engaging in the difficult discussions about systematic barriers confronting girls. We need to continue to improve our agency-based gender-sensitive response as we also explore the root causes that drive the conditions described by the girls in the IIG needs assessment. Looking beyond programs to more abstract factors can prove difficult, however, the strength of Investing in Girls lies in its ability to collaborate and tackle complex issues.

At the risk of being simplistic, programs primarily reach only their participants. All of the best practices detailed in this paper suggest working with a small amount of girls, intentionally keeping their program enrollment to a minimum. Much of girls' programming intentionally maintains small class sizes in order to emphasize the importance of relationships and one-to-one mentoring. Although this is very important, it means that programs cannot be our only avenues to reach girls across the City of

Worcester. For example, the local Girls Incorporated annually reaches 1,500 youth grades kindergarten through eighth grade ([www.girlsincworcester.org](http://www.girlsincworcester.org) 2008). In Worcester proper there are 5,500 girls age ten through fourteen (US Census accessed December 2008). No best practice program can impact all of those girls. As we attempt to create citywide change we need to think practically about enrollment obstacles. While programs can be lifesaving, their influence only reaches so far; a more foundational change will require us to tackle some of the community conditions impacting girls. Creating a citywide, or regional, strategy must move beyond programs, looking at ways the Alliance can effect change through collaboration and advocacy.

In line with this numerical concern is the lack of urgency that accompanies programs. As I wrote this paper I struggled with how to frame the question of urgency. In the Investing in Girls needs assessment the girls spoke with their own sense of urgency, whether they spoke of their confusion around mental health, their challenges around school, or the violence in their families, recognizing the desperation of themselves and their peers. Nevertheless, solely focusing on this urgency can disempower girls, stereotyping them as passive, weak, and in need of protection. I return to the importance of striking this balance, between responding with insistence while also not discounting girls' strength, later on in this section.

The second limitation of programs lies in their frameworks. The needs of middle school girls span from the very tangible to the more abstract systematic conditions. Programs offer concrete solutions to the most tangible needs, providing outlets for physical

activity or information about sexual health; however, programs cannot address some of the more insidious factors. Programs not only fail to question some of the structural conditions in girls' lives but also, can at times, reinforce these negative stereotypes. In order to counter these stereotypes, through Investing in Girls advocacy, we need to first understand them. I turned to feminist theorists for a more comprehensive explanation of these more structural issues. The following section looks at the popular discourses, and perceptions, American society has of middle school girls.

American society has struggled with the interpretation of adolescent girls and the challenges they face. The following paragraphs outline the historical approaches society has taken towards middle school girls. Explanations of these historical and popular discourses, read perceptions, emerged from the new field of Girlhood Studies, a new niche within women and gender studies. As Investing in Girls moves forward with advocacy the foundations laid by Girlhood Studies scholars can help facilitate our discussions of structural conditions in girls' lives. The language employed by Girlhood scholars provides the tools need to engage in these difficult conversations.

By contextualizing girls in this new field I hope to contribute to the Investing in Girls discussion of strategy and advocacy. My review of the emerging Girlhood Studies field led me to believe that, although best practices do provide tangible positive outcomes, ignoring the structural power, or denying the role of social injustices, in girls' lives means that we are denying the complexities of their lives. By writing the following section I hope to catalyst a conversation within the Investing in Girls Alliance, one that critically

examines the best practices outlined above, sparking a conversation that leads to more radical advocacy and programming.

Although the intentional study of girls began in 1990, the creation of Girlhood Studies, with the work of Carol Gillian and Lyn Mikel Brown, the interdisciplinary field only gained legitimacy in the last five years, becoming an extension of feminist theory. What began as a primarily psychological response to the girl's development has expanded to a truly interdisciplinary field. The inaugural issue of Girlhood Studies: an Interdisciplinary Journal in the summer of 2008 marked the recognition of the importance of girls, their culture, and the implications of our societal response (LeCroy and Mann 2008). The publication of the Girlhood Studies journal represents an acknowledgment from the academic community that girls' issues do not simply belong within the realm of youth development, that the issues that adolescent girls confront can be extrapolated to a feminist context.

The challenges listed in the Investing in Girls needs assessment study do not represent isolated incidents unique to middle school students; instead they represent complex issues, issues deserving our attention. The three founders of the Girlhood Studies journal summarize their understanding of this new academic niche, "a new area that combined advocacy, interdisciplinary, and of course the voices of girls themselves... exploring girlhood in all its possible manifestations" (Mitchell 2008). Girlhood Studies, similarly to gender studies, includes developmental studies, cultural studies, literary studies, communication studies, and much more. More and more feminist scholars,

adolescent psychologists, educational theorists, and youth practitioners contribute to our theoretical and practical understanding of girls.

Feminist theorists have identified three dominant stereotypes of American adolescent females, girls in crisis, girl power, and s/hero. All three of these discourses reflect a simplistic and often sexist understanding of adolescent girls. Although outlining these popular perceptions may seem irrelevant, a foundational knowledge of these discourses is important as *Investing in Girls* moves forward towards advocacy. Many Girlhood scholars have identified these trends, writing extensively about each discourse, Jessica Willis's dissertation (2008) clearly synthesizes the discourses, for that reason I rely heavily on her research. We are familiar with these concepts even if we are unfamiliar with Willis's academic analysis. As the Alliance shapes its message about middle school girls it is important to offer an alternative to these mainstream and toxic interpretations.

Girls in Crisis, the more traditional discourse, portrays girls as victims and in need of protection, this is indicative of previously accepted rigid definitions of gender and femininity. Mary Pipher's book Reviving Ophelia (1994) catapulted this conservative discourse from its historical roots into a modern context. Girls, Pipher argued, needed protection from the social world; they often fell pray to societal pressures, victims of violence and sexism. While the presence of violence is a reality, the emphasis on girls as victims further negates their agency. Even Pipher's first chapter, *Saplings in a Storm*, illustrates her singular focus as girls as casualties of their environment. This book and ones that followed Pipher's lead cultivated a culture of fear, suggesting that girls due their

passivity and malleability required adult intervention. This patriarchal approach reinstates traditional gender roles and founds itself on assumptive attitudes of girls' incapability of shaping their own lives. Labeling girls' identity as primarily that of victim negates girls' agency and reinforces the idea that girls ultimately represent innocence and moral purity. Feminist activists have long fought to deconstruct this myth; however, through the internalization of this victim discourse girls' programs still reflect this conservative framework.

Girl Power, the second discourse, though founded in girls' empowerment, also offers an overly simplistic explanation of girls. The girl power discourse became culturally dominant in the 1990s, iconically represented through the infamous Spice Girls. While some responses to girl power did attempt to integrate a political analysis, the concept of girl power has become overly commercialized. The Riot Grrrls act as an example of the overlap between political empowerment and girl power. The Riot Grrrl movement, an arm of Third Wave feminism in the 1990s, channeled girls' anger in a healthy political way. Geared towards young adults the Riot Grrrls popularized a new type of girl power, the San Francisco Weekly reported that, "Riot Grrrl is more of an infectious idea than a formal organization. It's the hurt and rage of young women determined to create a take-no-shit culture for the female half of their generation" (Kauffman 1992). The Riot Grrrls publicized their ideas through rock concerts, magazines, lipstick, and spray-paint alike. Although this West Coast group merged lipstick and politics, most girl power movements simply focused on the lipstick. Willis writes that through this commercialization girls and

their parents received the message that through products, songs, and catchphrases they could successfully battle the challenges posed to them. Willis points out that this may instill a fleeting sense of empowerment but does nothing to challenge the sexist power forces at play. She writes, “in fact, each discourse offers very little in the way of challenging traditional notions of what it means to be “female” (15). The girl power discourse, though it did introduce concepts of female empowerment into the main stream, it ultimately commoditized girls’ issues failed to encourage a critical analysis of sexism.

Advocating for girl power does not necessarily translate to social justice. Amy McClure (2004) defines girl power similarly to Jessica Willis, “that girl power is an innovative way to address gender inequality but it tends to rest mainly on the assumption that the problem with gender inequality is purely individualist in nature” (4). This individual emphasis places responsibility, and therefore blame on the individual girl, preventing a structural understanding and also a collective response.

S/hero, the third discourse, standing for she-hero, a modern day heroine, reflects contemporary views of femininity. This framework suggests that women can juggle multiple positions, that of mother, protector, sex goddess, and warrior. While this does acknowledge that women simultaneously fulfill multiple roles, it does so at the expense of contradiction. This awe of the Supermom or Superwoman does not necessarily translate into more choices, often times it means more responsibilities within the traditionally rigid gender role. Willis comments that this like the girl power discourse fails to confront the structural aspects of gender expectations. Willis concludes, “neither the modernized

portrayal of women nor that of popular cultural portrayals of postmodern-girls signifies a significant structural challenge to traditional constructs of femininity” (16). The s/hero discourse acknowledges the new challenges women manage; however, it comes at the expense of new equally rigid expectations.

The international attitude towards adolescent girls has also adopted the s/hero discourse, elevating girls to a savior-like status, suggesting that girls can solve the economic deficits in developing countries. While acknowledging the atrocities committed against girls international humanitarian workers have also started to see girls as part of a greater solution to worldwide famine, disease, homeless, and inequality. The Girls Count report published by the Center for Global Development suggested that girls might be the key to successful microcredit loans. As depicted on the Girl Effect website the international humanitarian community has suggested that adolescent girls might have the capacity to transform developing nations’ economic struggles. The website suggests that twelve year old girls can change the world because they are statistically more likely to invest a microcredit loan into their families than their male brothers.

An entire paper could be written on the growing international response and interest to adolescent girls. The World Economic Forum held their annual meeting at the end of January 2009. For the first time this global conglomerate, in the midst of conversations about the global financial crisis, hosted a session on girls in development. Girls receive half of one cent of every dollar channeled through international aid. The Girl Effect on Development paused to look at the girls’ lack of global voice and their ability to positively

shape a country's development. The panel, led by Dr. Helene Gayle, President and CEO of CARE USA, concisely outlined their three main points, "better metrics are needed to quantify the girl effect, helping girls has proven to be the most effective way to financial help communities, and it is important to start with programs that focus on adolescent girls" (World Economic Forum 2009). A global cry for girl-centric and gender-sensitive programs and frameworks echoes the one we hear domestically. Although this seems to advocate for girl empowerment, it fails to study up, to look at more structural influences responsible for a developing country's struggle with poverty. It places responsibility, as it deflects responsibility from international political players, on girls to save the world based on gender stereotypes of female dependability and passivity.

I argue that both domestically and internationally many programmatic approaches borrow from all three of these discourses, especially the s/hero discourse. Many programs root themselves in relational theories, asking girls to strengthen their peer support system as a way to resist substance abuse, early sexual activity, and other risky behavior. By failing to question these stereotypes the curriculums can run the risk of reinforcing them.

To demonstrate this nuanced hypothesis I turn to a Boston-based program, run by the TenPoint Coalition, which because of its new approach to youth violence has received a lot of media attention. The TenPoint Coalition draws upon all of the discourse described above; ultimately placing the programmatic framework of relational cultural theory, mentioned in the best practice section of this paper, at its epicenter. Relying on traditional interpretations of male-female relationships this program makes girls s/heroes; asking them

to utilize traditional femininity to encourage non-violence. The following section first details two articles about the rise of violence girls' lives and then goes on to outline the TenPoint Coalition, its frameworks, the controversy surrounding it, and it relates to theory and other best practices.

In December, 2008 and January, 2009 and both the Boston Globe and New York Times published articles describing a particular approach to girls and violence, the two articles both identify the rising problem and offer girl-centric solutions, utilizing all three of the discourse, crisis, girl power, and s/hero. While the New York Times article outlines the specific issue of violence against girls in a digital world, the Boston Globe article outlines the TenPoint Coalition, a programmatic manifestation of these concerns.

Elizabeth Olsen's New York Times article, *A Rise in Efforts to Spot Abuse in Youth Dating*, described in graphic detail the rise of dating violence amongst teens and adolescents, citing experts to explain that much of the unhealthy behavior begins in the middle school years. Olsen's article paints a bleak picture, focusing on girls that have passed away due to such violence, in particular citing a mother's grief in the wake of her murdered daughter. Today violence partially manifests itself through digital media, abusive text messages and harassing cell phone calls. William Pollack, of the Harvard psychology department, explains that excessive texting is usually an attempt to assert or regain control. Pollack explains that adolescent boys usually, "fall into the societal model which we call 'macho,' where they need to show they are the ones in control" (Olsen 2009). Texting as a means of surveillance represents a fight for that control, for

confirmation of the boy's masculinity. General trends suggest that boys are still the primary perpetrators of dating violence. In 2007 the Center for Disease Control and Prevention released a study, ten percent of the surveyed adolescents reported experiencing physical abuse from a romantic partner. The same survey revealed that eight percent of teens reported that they have been forced to have sexual intercourse. Olsen attributed girls' silence around dating violence to embarrassment, citing that many girls associate shame with being a victim (Olsen 2009). Even more girls misinterpret the mistreatment as attention, as love, and not abuse.

Cramer's article, *Girl Power*, looks at recent actions taken by the Boston TenPoint Coalition. The Coalition in conjunction with the Boston School Police, speaks directly to girls; leading workshops in local high schools about girls' roles in violence prevention. Through poetry, plays, and "I Choose Me" bracelets the Coalition asks girls to appeal to their boyfriends as a mechanism to reduce violence. The play captures the essence of the campaign. Rochelle's boyfriend, a drug dealer, hits Rochelle after she spends some of his money on clothes. Patricia, Rochelle's best friend, encourages her boyfriend to seek revenge on Rochelle's boyfriend; the scene ends with the assumption that they boys shoot each other. This scene blames the girls for instigating a violent dispute; this message can discourage girls from reporting incidents of domestic violence, a very dangerous point. By telling girls they have a responsibility to prevent the violent behavior of their boyfriends the campaign simultaneously suggests that we can blame girls for the violence.

Placing such responsibility on the girls risks denying the role boys, and men, have in these situations. Michael Hennessey, the assistant chief of the Boston School Police, reflects on the program's objectives, "It's the girls who have a shortcut to the way these kids will react, and it's a very important thing for them to know and a lot of them don't realize it" (Cramer 2008) Cramer also interviewed Toni Troop of Jane Doe Inc, who suggests this blame game further hurts and pigeonholes girls, Troop instead suggests that combating violence is a community-wide issue.

The TenPoint approach to violence prevention draws directly on the s/hero discourse, suggesting that girls, and women, can simultaneously channel passive, peace aspects of femininity while also asserting themselves as warriors in the campaign to end violence. This manifestation of the s/hero discourse relies heavily on traditional gender stereotypes while also suggesting that girls have a responsibility to fix the mess, to be accountable to mending complex societal issues.

Feminist scholars have responded to this dangerous implication. Activists echoed Toni Troop's concern by pointing out at this approach reinforces assumptions that men are uncontrollable and women are responsible protectors. Nowhere in the TenPoint campaign is there room for structural analysis, for a critical examination of power and drivers of violence. Due to this thoughtlessness Courtney Martin, a representative from Lyn Mikel Brown's Hardy Girls Healthy Women organization, angrily concludes that, "Our short-sightedness and sexism is, in itself, a sort of violence." Even the title of the Globe article,

Girl Power, when examined through Dr. Willis's lens suggests that we have sorely missed the mark.

The TenPoint example proves how some programmatic approaches can often overly simplify social issues because they fail to ask more critical societal questions. Although the TenPoint campaign has not undergone the evaluation the nationally recognized curriculums have, it is rooted in similar programmatic frameworks, representing current trends in girls' programming. Instead of examining issues of power and the causality of violence the TenPoint campaign dichotomize girls, girls as victims and as instigators. A seventeen-year-old girl responded to the play positively, "School teaches you education but it doesn't teach us how to be young women. They don't teach us how to survive in the real world." This suggests that girls should be taught how to merely survive in the real world instead of questioning the very premise of a violent reality. The idea that girls should not only play a romantic/sexual role in their boyfriends' lives while also adopting a maternal and parental role falls within the s-hero discourse, it asks girls to assume responsibility for their boyfriends' actions while also working towards an equal partnership.

This fervor around youth violence has only increased since the publication of these two articles. The publicity around pop singers Rihanna and Chris Brown and the alleged dispute between them has given teens a platform to discuss domestic violence. The response to this very public incident, that occurred between the two celebrities in early 2009, demonstrates our need to act and advocate with urgency. Indicative of other

community conditions and societal views of violence against women girls have struggled to understand this brutal aggression. The New York Times published an article about teenage girls' response on March 20, 2009. This article, "Teenage Girls Defend their Man" by Jan Hoffman captures the sexism and structural issues that drive the conditions Worcester girls identified in the Investing in Girls needs assessment study.

Chris Brown, 19, allegedly choked, bit, and hit his girlfriend Rihanna, 21, after she reacted negatively to a text message he received from another woman. The Los Angeles Police responded to the incident, arresting Brown and admitting Rihanna's to a hospital for her injuries. Because of their celebrity status this story has received excessive media attention, giving girls an opportunity to discuss their reactions to domestic violence. Alarming, girls, in general, sympathize with Brown, blaming Rihanna, citing her jealousy as just cause for his behavior. Hoffman cites a survey conducted within weeks of the incident, out of 200 Boston high school students surveyed 46 percent said that Rihanna was responsible for what happened. Fifty-two percent said that Rihanna bore responsibility, the surveyed teenagers responded as such despite knowing that Rihanna's injuries resulted in hospitalization. Experts attempted to explain these disturbing statistics. Professor Morgan hypothesizes that girls' reactions reflect a learned social signal. Many girls believe that if they speak out against an abuser they will destroy his future. Morgan says, "We have to appreciate that this is not simple for them" (Hoffman 2009). This philosophy embeds itself in a misogynistic attitude towards abuse. Undoing this societal

attitude requires us to sit with the complex mentioned by Professor Morgan, acting with urgency but not reinforcing that girls are in crisis in constant need of protection.

The challenge of Investing in Girls arises as we attempt to respond to the girls' problematic interpretations of domestic assault. Clearly, implementing more best practice programs will help some girls, however, I worry about ability to reverse this concerning trends if we continue to solely rely on curriculums and after-school programs. The quotations presented in the Hoffman's article seem founded in problematic understandings of gender and violence. This insidious sexism cannot be addressed through programs alone; we need a collective community effort that works to reverse it.

My critique of the TenPoint campaign can be extended to some of the best practices listed above. Many of the evidenced-based programs maintain an individualized approach, "saving" girls from their surroundings instead of critically questioning the roots of those issues. For example, even the acclaimed Go Grrls curriculum, priding itself on empowerment, describes that their program helps girls "cope" with the challenges in their lives. Coping suggests a survival instead of a direct engagement with root cause. Programs' emphasis on coping denies the structural sexism that impacts girls' lives. Even curriculums focus on relational support simplifies the complexities. We know middle school girls have very complicated peer friendships at this transitory period of their life, often times relationships can be a significant source of stress. Asking girls to navigate the serious conditions they have identified by strengthening their peer support systems seems to deny the complexity of both their friendships and the issues the girls confront. Jessica

Taft a feminist scholar explains that many girls' programs focus on raising girls' self-esteem, falling in line with Pipher's depiction of girls as perpetual victims. Simplifying girls' challenges as indicative of low self-esteem diminishes the complex realities. While focusing on a simple causality does allow for direct and tangible intervention, it does not address the root of the problem, thus running the risk of reinforcing gender stereotypes responsible for the issue in the first place.

This is not to say that intervention and prevention based programming is ineffective, quite the opposite. Traditional programming approaches have proven to help girls, and boys, navigate the various obstacles of adolescents, helping students go on to college, find jobs, get out of violent households, and develop a healthy confidence that enables them to thrive as adults. The scope of traditional programming has expanded; they have become gender-sensitive, racially conscious, and class aware. Getting rid of these traditional approaches would be punitive, and shortsighted.

As Investing in Girls we have committed to addressing the needs of girls. To truly listen to the voices coming out of the 2007 IIG needs assessment study. The complexities of the conditions suggest that we need to look beyond programmatic solutions. My description of best practices and Worcester girls' needs suggest that there is a disconnect, that programs, due to their capacity limitations and failure to critically question, cannot fully address the multifaceted challenges confronting girls. Part of bridging this disconnect can occur through our willingness to critically reexamine programming, our willingness to sit with these difficult realities, and finally our willingness to advocate for community

change. Investing in Girls has already taken great strides to begin these conversations, the work of Girlhood Studies theorists can help equip us with the language need to continue such a task.

One of the strengths of Girlhood Studies scholars is their ability to link girls to women, and vice versa. Lyn Mikel Brown, in the inaugural issue of Girlhood Studies, argues that, “if we take away girls’ anger, then, we take away the foundation for women’s political resistance” (5). Brown has written that to truly create change we need to synthesize our academic understandings of girls, girls’ voices, and our praxis. Brown suggests that practitioners and academics alike engage in the “radical act of listening well” (3). It is inherently political to listen to girls, to acknowledge not only that they are their own experts but also that they have a nuanced understanding of the driving factors behind their challenges. Brown reflects on her and Gillian’s reaction to listening to girls in 1990, “we were awed at their ability to articulate their resistance to a dominant culture that marginalized, idealized, and subordinated them” (3). This analysis links directly to Willis’s assertions that girls have social agency that they, through their development of their adolescent identity, shape our understanding of femininity. Brown’s insistence of girls’ resistance suggests that Investing in Girls can turn back to girls themselves as we continue advocating on their behalf (Brown 2008).

## Conclusions

Looking at the best practice programs for middle school girls sparks a larger conversation about girls' needs and the most effective way to address them. What began as an exploration of best practice programs turned into a close analysis of girls' needs, our programmatic approaches, and a recommendation for a continued dedication to advocacy.

In conclusion, I recommend the following steps:

1. Continue implementing girl-centric and gender-sensitive programs, however, engage in critical conversations about them, preventing the curriculums from reinforcing negative stereotypes surrounding girls
2. Look beyond programs, be willing to tackle the community conditions driving issues of violence and other complex issues in girls' lives
3. Develop a concrete strategy for advocacy, taking the theories presented in this paper and translating them into action steps, for example, beginning a media campaign to gain community support for middle school girls.

This paper does not aim to dismiss the importance of traditional program frameworks. While they do have limits, to deny girls athletic activities, mentoring, and girl-centric educational opportunities does them a disservice. Nevertheless, to stop the conversation there also harms girls and often reinforces the very structural barriers responsible for the challenges. By writing this paper I am hope to contribute to the Investing in Girls knowledge of best practices while also furthering the conversations around advocacy that the Alliance has already begun.

## Appendix: Complete List of Best Practices

### Federally Recognized Evidence-Based Practices

There are four federally sponsored online resources that assist practitioners and communities in implementing evidence-based programs:

*Helping America's Youth (HAY) Community Guide*, administered by the White House  
*Model Programs Guide (MPG)*, administered by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

*What Works Clearinghouse (WWC)*, administered by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. Not applicable to IIG research

*National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP)*, supported by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

#### Helping America's Youth (HAY) Community Guide

- **Girls Circle**
  - o They run support groups for adolescent girls, 9 activities booklets accompany the small group discussions
  - o Based in Northern California
  - o Girls Circle does facilitator trainings all over the United States
- **Girls Inc. Friendly PEERsuasion**
  - o For ages 11-14
  - o Girls Inc. developed its Friendly PEERsuasion program to help girls acquire knowledge, skills, and support systems to avoid substance abuse.
  - o The program has two phases, the first phase consists of 14 hour-long sessions, after that the girl is a certified PEERsuader; the second phase involves her mentoring younger girls, ages 6-10.
- **Girls Inc. Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy**
  - o This is an abstinence plus program that seeks to prevent kids from having kids, giving girls choices and options while hopefully preventing pregnancy and diseases
  - o There are two curriculums within this program that work with middle school girls:
    - **Growing Together**
      - For girls ages 9-11
      - Five interactive sessions between a girl and a trusted adult
      - The talks focus on puberty, growth, and sexual development
    - **Will Power/Won't Power**
      - For girls age 12-14

- 10 sessions that focus on resisting peer pressure around sex
- **Urban Women Against Substance Abuse**
  - This program ended in 2001 but still distributes the curriculum: Empowered Voices: A Participatory Action Research Curriculum for Girls
  - Community-based program that targets Puerto Rican, Latina, and African- and Caribbean-American girls (ages 9-12) and their female caregivers
  - The program works with girls and their female caretakers (mother), dual sessions happen with both the girls and the adults
  - The program lasts 28 weeks, working with 30 girls in two groups of 15
- **Movimiento Ascendencia**
  - This program, meaning Upward Movement, was established in Colorado (by the Youth Services Bureau) for girls ages 8-18
  - It aims to provide alternatives to substance abuse and gang involvement
  - The program's activities are designed around 3 main components: cultural awareness, mediation or conflict resolution, and self-esteem/social support
  - The program includes mentoring, organized sports, academic support, cultural enhancement, gender specific life skills training, case management, parental involvement, and places an emphasis on providing safe spaces for girls.

#### Model Programs Guide (MGP)

- **Girls Inc. Friendly PEERsuasion**
  - See description under HAY
- **Girls Circle**
  - See description under HAY
- **Reaffirming Young Sister's Excellence (RYSE)**
  - Intensive community treatment and invention for adjudicated girls
  - For ages 12-17
  - The primary goal is to reduce recidivism
  - Specifically tries to address the needs of girls of color that are in the court system, girls of color are disproportionately represented to in prison
  - The program also incorporates the mothers or female caregivers
- **Urban Women Against Substance Abuse**
  - See description under HAY

SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration  
National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices

- **Emergency Room Intervention for Adolescent Females**
  - A program for girls ages 12-18, so middle school girls are not the primary focus but are still included

- Works with girls who have been admitted to the ER for suicide
- The program aims to decrease a repeated incident and help the family and girl understand therapy and the needs around it
- The program began in 1992 in NYC working predominately with economically disadvantaged Latina girls
- The program has been replicated in Arizona with tribal populations and in Central America
- Program materials are available in English and Spanish
- **Urban Women Against Substance Abuse**
  - See description under HAY

### Harvard Family Research Project

#### OST (Out of School Time) Database

- **Girlfriends for KEEPS**
  - Girlfriends for KEEPS (Keys to Eating, Exercising, Playing, and Sharing) is an obesity prevention program for low-income African American girls in Minneapolis, Minnesota.
  - 12 week program, meets after-school twice a week for an hour each time
  - For ages 8-10
  - The program was developed by the Girls Health Enrichment Multi-Site Studies (GEMS), a National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute-sponsored multi-center research
  - Run at 3 sites, serving 26 girls in one year.
  - Incentives are built into the programming, i.e. attendance beads and merchandise.
- **Girls Inc. Friendly PEERsuasion**
  - See description under HAY
- **Go Grrrls**
  - Go Grrrls (GG) is a preventive after school intervention program focusing on the promotion of middle school girls' positive psychosocial development to help them navigate through early adolescence.
  - Developed and run in Tucson, AZ
  - Focuses on the prevention of risky behaviors, such as drug use and sexual activity. Aims for healthy development
  - The curriculum consists of 12 meetings of 8-10 girls, led by two female leaders, with a background in mental health, the focus of each session is on healthy psychosocial development
- **Pilates After School Classes**
  - A pilates program for girls in Houston, Texas

- Hopes to provide an appealing exercise to middle school girls.
- Conducted after-school at two different school sites
- Offered at the YMCA, 5 days a week, for 4 weeks, one hour each day
- **SECME RISE (Raising Interest in Science & Engineering)**
  - Conducted in Miami, FL
  - Program to increase middle school girls' self-esteem and confidence in learning mathematics and science, reducing the attrition in advanced level mathematics and science coursework that occurs as girls move from middle school to high school.
  - Occurs during the summer, school vacation, and weekends, lasted 3 years
  - Took place in 44 out of the 52 public schools in Miami
  - Involved parents with special Engineering Days
  - Also published a website about their program
    - <http://www.miamisci.org/rise/>
  - Particularly seeks to serve girls of color
- **Youth Net**
  - Conducted in Waterbury, CT
  - This project was developed in response to the lack of after school programs located in the target neighborhoods.
  - One target group is middle school girls, for this program recognizes that there is a serious lack of programming for girls
  - Served 464 students in one year
  - Youth Net programs consist of a range of after school activities including music, drama, computer instruction, and homework help.

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