Adolescent Girls in Israel: An Analysis of Data from Selected Studies

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Executive Summary

1. Background
Studies of adolescent girls reveal that they do not express their distress openly. Instead, many girls tend to internalize distress and anger, and direct them toward themselves. This is in contrast to adolescent boys, who often express their distress in violence and vandalism, which attracts social or public attention (Steiner, 1979 in Berger & Shechter, 1989). Adolescent girls attract public attention only when their situation is acute. This hinders their rehabilitation (Kahan-Strawczynski et al., 2005). It is, thus, important to map the well-being and needs of girls in different areas of their lives along the continuum of risk – from the stage in which they are not at risk but experience distress and need preventative responses in order to deal with it, to the stage in which they are in crises in many areas and need the care of the services system.

This analysis is a part of a series of studies conducted within the framework of "Girls on the Map". The studies were initiated by, and conducted in partnership with, the Service for Girls and Young Women of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Ashalim – the Association for Planning and Development of Services for Children and Youth at Risk and Their Families. The current study maps the characteristics of adolescent girls from different groups in Israel. The series comprises two other studies: One focused on adolescent girls in severe risk situations. It examined the characteristics and needs of girls in the care of the Service for Girls and Young Women of the Ministry of Social Affairs (Kahan-Strawczynski et al., 2005). The other study maps the services and programs in Israel for adolescent girls along the continuum of risk (Kahan-Strawczynski and Yurovich, 2006).

This report presents a secondary analysis of findings from a number of studies of youth that were conducted in recent years by the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute and other organizations, as well as data from the Central Bureau of Statistics. Findings were analyzed from the point of view of adolescent girls in an effort to highlight similarities and differences between adolescent girls and boys in various areas that are central to adolescence, such as social relationships, perception of school, relationships with parents and perception of health. This was done in order to pinpoint unique needs and strengths of girls. In addition, we aimed to identify needs that are unique to girls of different ages and population groups and that require special attention when planning responses and programs for adolescent girls.

In order to present the needs of girls in the many areas of life in a concise way, we constructed a set of summary measures. These measures are intended to capture many facets of the lives of adolescent girls and to facilitate the comparison among studies and populations.

2. Principle Findings
The analysis reveals areas of strength as well as areas in which girls have more needs in comparison to boys. Moreover, in many areas, differences were also found among girls of different age and population groups. These findings can assist policymakers and professionals who work with youth, in general, and with girls, in particular, in identifying the areas in which girls experience the most difficulties. In addition, it can assist professionals in empowering adolescent girls by using their strengths and in relating to the different characteristics of different groups of adolescent girls.

The Girls’ Areas of Strength, in Comparison to Boys

Girls form more relationships than boys do. Larger percentages of girls have close friends and are able to converse and form new close relationships with friends or peers. A smaller percentage of girls have experienced social isolation, and a larger percentage participates in group activity in a youth movement.

A summary measure that examines the social situation of the youth, and which includes the above-mentioned social aspects, indicates that 86% of the girls, versus 81% of the boys, present strength in at least three out of the five areas. The difference between girls and boys is particularly pronounced among Arab youth (the social situation of three-quarters of the girls, versus two-thirds of boys, is good according to this measure).

Girls perceive school more positively than boys do, both in terms of their attitude toward school and teachers and in terms of their feelings of connectedness to and engagement in school.

Girls’ attitudes toward school were examined by two summary measures. One measure summarizes several feelings of alienation from school and includes aspects of evaluation of teachers’ conduct, feelings toward school, the degree to which they feel they belong and the degree to which they perceive school as being fair. The second measure summarizes expressions of the hidden drop out phenomenon and includes truancy, feelings of alienation, scholastic achievements, violent behavior and being a victim of violence, and social rejection.

The findings indicate that, overall, girls are less alienated from school than boys: 11% of the girls, versus 16% of the boys, exhibit at least three of five feelings of alienation.

Among non-immigrant Jews, Arabs and immigrants from the FSU, girls’ feelings of alienation from school tend to increase with age.

The findings regarding hidden drop outs indicate that there are gender differences in all of the populations examined: smaller percentages of girls exhibit expressions of the hidden drop out phenomenon in comparison to boys. Still, a considerable percentage of girls (over one-half) exhibit at least one of these expressions, a fact that merits attention. Expressions of hidden drop out do not vary with age uniformly in all population groups. Among adolescent girls in general, and non-immigrant Jewish girls in particular, expressions of hidden drop out increase with age; among girls from the FSU, the trend is mixed: expressions of hidden drop out peak at
age 14-15 (33%) and at the age of 16+ it declines (26%). Among Arab girls, girls from the Caucasus and girls from Ethiopia, expressions of hidden drop out decrease with age.

**Relationships with, and perception of, parents** are more positive among girls than among boys, both with regard to girls' ability to speak with at least one of their parents and with regard to perceiving parents as willing to help in various areas.

Findings indicate that, among all populations, adolescent girls' relationships with their parents are better than adolescent boys': 86% of the girls, versus 79% of the boys exhibit a positive perception of their parents and/or report feeling able to speak to at least one of them. Only among Arab girls, the relationship with parents varies by age: relationship with parents and/or the way they perceived their parents decline with age. For example, a summary measure that examined the issue found that 76% of girls aged up to 13 reported at least three of the following four aspects that comprise the measure: that they find it easy to speak with at least one of their parents, that their parents are willing to help them when they have a problem at school, that they are willing to come to school to speak with teachers, and that they encourage the youth to succeed. This, in comparison to 70% among girls ages 14-15 and 63% among girls ages 16+.

Another aspect of the youth-parents relationship is the frequency of disagreements on various issues. In a study of Jewish youth in Petach Tikva, no significant differences were found between non-immigrant adolescent girls and boys in the extent of disagreement with parents (Kahan-Strawczynski and Yurovich, 2004). In contrast, among youth from Ethiopia (Lifshitz et al., 1998) and Arab youth in Tamra (Cohen-Navot et al., 2006), differences between girls and boys were found: larger percentages of girls reported disagreements with their parents on issues such as curfew time, going out, clothes, relationships with the opposite sex and sibling rivalry.

**Adolescent girls seek help** when they encounter a problem or a difficulty, more than boys do. Moreover, a larger percentage of girls than of boys receives help with schoolwork and would like to receive additional help.

Data from the study on youth in Petach Tikva reveal significant differences between adolescent boys and girls in patterns of seeking help: when they encounter a problem, larger percentages of girls than of boys turn to friends (75% versus 50%, respectively), or to other sources of support such as coordinators of after-school activities, older siblings or other family members (12% and 7%, respectively). Note that large percentages of both girls (70%) and boys (65%) turn to their parents when encountering a problem or a difficulty. Larger percentages of girls (29%) than of boys (19%) reported needing to consult a professional.

The findings of the study in Petach Tikva also indicate that a larger percentage of adolescent girls (59%) than of boys (42%) receive help with schoolwork, and a larger percentage of girls would like to receive additional assistance. Nonetheless, note that no differences between boys and girls were found in these areas in the studies that were conducted among Arab youth in Tamra and Nazareth.
At-risk behaviors are less prevalent among adolescent girls than among boys, with regard to level of violence and use of addictive substances, such as alcohol, drugs, cigarettes and smoking a water pipe. This is not to say that girls do not exhibit such at-risk behaviors at all; moreover, sometimes the situation of girls who do exhibit these at-risk behaviors may be worse than that of boys who exhibit the same behaviors.

Violence
Girls are less involved in violence, both as active participants and as victims, in comparison to boys. In this area also, the most marked differences were found among Arab youth: 49% of the boys, versus 15% of the girls, were involved in violence; 39% of the boys, versus 22% of the girls, were victims of violence.

Analysis by age among girls demonstrates, in general, that involvement in violence, both as participants and as victims, decreases with age. This trend is also apparent among adolescent boys.

Drug and Alcohol Use
In all of the populations examined, smaller percentages of adolescent girls use alcohol and drugs than of adolescent boys. Six percent of all the girls used drugs during the year preceding the survey, versus 17% of the boys; 21% of the girls drank an alcoholic drink at least once during the month preceding the survey, versus 40% of the boys. The most marked differences were found among Arab youth: 8% of the girls, versus 30% of the boys, reported drinking alcohol.

There is a clear trend of increase in alcohol consumption with age among non-immigrant Jewish girls and girls from the FSU. This trend is not apparent among Arab girls and girls from Ethiopia or the Caucasus.

Smoking Cigarettes and Water Pipes
Girls smoke cigarettes less than boys do (11% versus 19%, respectively). More notable differences by gender were found among Arab youth (6% of the girls versus 26% of the boys) and among youth from the Caucasus (7% of the girls versus 35% of the boys). As in the patterns of alcohol use, cigarette smoking increases with age among non-immigrant Jewish girls and girls from the FSU.

More boys than girls have ever smoked a water pipe and the incidence of water pipe smoking is also larger among boys. Among both adolescent boys and girls, the incidence of water pipe smoking increases with age.

The Areas of Weakness among Girls, in Comparison to Boys
The health perception of adolescent girls is worse in comparison to boys, both in terms of their body image (e.g., believing that they are too fat or too thin), and in terms of the incidence of physical and mental symptoms (e.g., headaches and stomachaches or bad mood and anger).

In order to examine health perception among adolescent girls, we constructed a summary measure of perceptions, feelings and facts relating to various health issues, which can indicate certain physical and mental health problems of youth.
Data reveal that, in all of the populations examined, a larger percentage of girls (21%) than of boys (10%) exhibit three out of seven negative aspects of health perception. Among non-immigrant Jewish girls, negative health perceptions and self-image increase with age.

**The general sense of well-being is poorer among girls than among boys, in terms of happiness, self-assurance and helplessness.**

Data reveal that, in almost all of the areas, the situation of the girls is worse than that of the boys. For example, one-third of the girls feel helpless (always, often or sometimes), versus one-quarter of the boys; 59% of the girls reported feeling confident (always or often), versus 71% of the boys; 80% of the girls, versus 85% of the boys, reported feeling very or fairly happy.

These measures vary by population. For example, more non-immigrant Jewish girls reported feeling happy than did girls from other populations, and feeling lonely characterizes more girls from the FSU and from Ethiopia and Arab girls than non-immigrant Jewish girls.

According to all measures, these feelings worsen with age.

**Intentional self-poisoning and legal drug abuse are more prevalent among girls that among boys.**

Intentional self-poisoning in adolescence is usually a genuine or demonstrative suicide attempt by taking dozens of various legal drugs, such as paracetamol, antibiotics and psychiatric drugs, or by ingesting other toxic substances, such as cleaning fluids, that are readily available at home (Amitai, 2003; Lifshitz & Garilov, 2002).

The findings of Lifshitz and Garilov's study, which examined the characteristics and causes of self-poisoning among youth, indicate that this phenomenon is eight times more prevalent among adolescent girls who attend school and reside in urban areas than among similar boys.

**Sexual intercourse may be more prevalent among adolescent boys, but a larger percentage of girls report having unprotected sexual intercourse.**

Data from the 1998 (Harel et al., 2002) study reveal that smaller percentages of adolescent girls (10%) than of adolescent boys (44%) reported ever having sexual intercourse. These differences characterize all of the populations examined (except Arab youth, who were not asked about this subject).

Still, larger percentages of girls (25%) than of boys (17%) reported not using a condom during sex. A significant disparity was found among youth from the FSU (56% of the girls versus 26% of the boys), and among youth from Ethiopia (67% of the girls versus 25% of the boys).

**Pregnancies and childbirth among unmarried adolescent girls are relatively rare phenomena, but are still an at-risk characteristic that is unique to girls.**
Data of the Central Bureau of Statistics reveal that in 2002, the rate of childbirth among adolescent girls ages 19 and under stood at 15.9 to 1,000 girls. The marital status reveals that the vast majority (83%) of childbirths are of married adolescent girls. Correspondingly, the rate of abortions is affected by the girls' marital status: 94% of the single girls choose to terminate the pregnancy, while a similar percentage (96%) of the married girls choose to give birth. That is, the phenomenon of childbirth by single adolescent girls in Israel is relatively limited.

The rates of pregnancy and of applying to a commission for an approval of termination of pregnancy vary by population group. In 1998, the estimated pregnancy rate among Muslim adolescent girls was 3.5 times higher than among Jewish girls. Probably, most of the pregnant Muslim girls are married, and therefore almost all (99%) of them do not appeal to a commission for termination of pregnancy; in contrast 53% of the pregnant adolescent Jewish girls appeal to the commission. 1993-1994 data reveal that the pregnancy rate among Jewish girls who were born abroad is higher than among Israeli-born Jewish girls.

An international comparison among developed countries reveals that according to a pregnancy measure that excludes miscarriages, Israel has a comparatively low teenage pregnancy rate of 27.9 to 1,000 girls. In addition, the study indicates a decline of 12% in the teenage pregnancy rate in Israel over the years (Sikron at el., 2003).

3. Directions for Action
The findings of the current analysis identify, on the one hand, the girls' areas of strength and, on the other hand, areas in which their status is worse than that of adolescent boys. The directions for action that derive from these findings suggest building on these areas of strength while addressing areas in which girls have more needs. It is also important to focus attention on the areas in which the needs of girls are greater and to develop adequate and gender-sensitive responses.

The report focuses attention on the need to develop such responses in the following areas: health promotion, particularly in the areas of proper nutrition, drug and alcohol use prevention, smoking prevention, physical fitness and safe sex, and mental health, such as programs for prevention of toxin use. These programs should be adapted to different age and population groups among girls. In addition, although at-risk behaviors are less prevalent among adolescent girls, the phenomenon of violence among girls should be examined in depth in search of additional expressions and forms of violence that may characterize them more, such as social ostracism and emotional abuse.

As noted, the girls' areas of strength should be addressed and used to empower them. In this regard, several directions for action arise: strengthening and capitalizing on girls' social skills, both for the girls' and for the community's sake, and using girls' positive and favorable disposition toward school as a lever to improve the relationship of all students with school. In addition, because girls tend to seek help, it is important to expose them to services and activities for youth, in general, and for girls, in particular, both in and out of school.

The findings of this analysis were presented to the "Girls on the Map" forum, which is conducted by Ashalim, and served as a basis for discussion and for planning services for girls who attend school.
This analysis was conducted in partnership with Ashalim – the Association for Planning and Development of Services for Children and Youth at Risk and their Families, and the Service for Girls and Young Women of the Ministry of Social Affairs and was made possible by a special grant from Annie Sandler of Virginia, USA.
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