

# Pressure, Judgement, Fear & Girlhood:

*A Girl-Centred Understanding of the Social Determinants of  
Girls' Mental Health and What We Can Do About It.*



## Dear Girl-Serving Professional:

In your hands is a précis representing a much-appreciated period of time spent engaged with girls and young women<sup>1</sup> as research participants and knowledge developers. The goal of our time together was structured so that we might understand, from girls' and young women's perspectives, what life is like for them and the impact on mental health and well-being. In focusing predominantly on *their* views and experiences, we hope you'll treasure this research monograph as much as you would the time sitting and listening to a girl or young woman in person. Their voices are embroidered here within.

In listening to the voices and experiences of a diverse cross section of self-identified girls and young women<sup>2</sup>, combined with the perspectives of girl-serving professionals, we learned much. Sadly, upon reflection, we realized that none of this is new for we

(and you) already knew that the conditions of girls' and young women's lives are negatively impacting their mental health. What became crystal clear to us was that girls' mental health has *social*, not individual, determinants. It is a world where sexism and gender pressures bear down on girls and young women creating the conditions wherein we see mental health erosion as almost a rite of passage.

It is our hope that in sharing girls' and young women's views and experiences, along with recommendations stemming from this study, this monograph can perhaps augment your own advocacy for girls and their rights to mental well-being and quality of life. They have a right to grow up without constant pressure, fear and judgement. They have a right to live authentically and safely. They have a right to be strong, smart and bold. And they have a right to mental health. As girl-serving professionals, all of you in your diverse roles, are most certainly a valued part of the solution. We hope that this monograph assists you in your own work and advocacy for and with girls and young women. They matter and so do you.

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<sup>1</sup> In using the terms girl or young woman we also wish to recognize that not all individuals self-define in this way. For this study, while all participants did self-define as a girl, young woman or trans female, we recognize that for some, gender is not experienced as a binary.

## Background

*"I feel like bad mental health is also kind of normal growing up." (Alex, age 14)\**

The mental health of young people is a serious concern with girls and young women facing gendered pressures that erode their emotional wellbeing. According to Children First Canada (2023), of the top ten health threats facing Canadian children, poor mental health factors is second only to preventable injuries. A 2021 study found that half of the Ontario girls surveyed reported experiencing emotional distress, with the lead author finding that girls are twice as likely as boys to report high stress and thoughts of suicide (CAMH, 2021).

The Covid-19 Pandemic created a *mental health* pandemic for Canadian children and young adults. According to Kids Help Phone's recent press releases and media interviews illuminate the enormity of the problem as evidenced by the large number of young people reaching out for help. From 1.9 million calls, texts and clicks in 2019 to 4 million in 2020. The pandemic has had an inequitable impact on Indigenous, racialized and poor communities with girls and young women being disproportionately impacted (Ndumbe-Eyoh et. Al, 2021; Samji, Wu, Ladak, Vossen, Stewart, Dove, Long, Snell, 2022). During this time girls and young women became more isolated and vulnerable to societal and familial risks including domestic violence, online bullying and sexual exploitation (UN Women, 2021). Greater use of social media further impacted girls' self-esteem and mental health suffered additional erosion (Cingel et. al, 2022). Girls and young women in particular, are reporting feeling depressed about the future because of COVID-19, rate their mental health as poor, perceive themselves as 'too fat' and report an unmet need for mental health support (CAMH, 2021).

Despite great provincial and national interest in the mental health of children and young people in Canada, there lacks a gender-based analysis that can account for the intersecting forms of oppression that girls, and young women experience. Even less common is research that actively involves girls and young women in defining their issues and what they themselves believe to be at the core of emotional distress and what needs to change.

Two key resources for girls' mental health in York Region, are Girls Incorporated and the Canadian Mental Health Association. In consultation with service providers in both organizations, the level of concern for girls', young women and transgender mental health has increased over time. Both organizations identify increases in self-harm, anxiety, depression and (at times) the use of substances to 'cope' with life. According to both organizations, the girls, young women and transgender youth they support, report high amounts of stresses in the home and report feeling like there is no one there to support them because their parent(s) are facing their own life stressors. A recent parent survey by

Girls Inc (2021) identified that parents are very concerned for their girls' mental health and are asking for an increase in service provision by the organization.

For many girls and young women, the experiences of continued societal and relational pressure to look, act and sound a certain way, i.e., to perform gender-based expectations while at the same time experiencing judgement and devaluation due to sexism, racism, sizeism and a myriad of other marginalizing pressures, leaves many girls feeling disparaged, fearful and without options. For many, life feels like a lose-lose situation with troubling outcomes no matter how girls and young women act, sound or 'be' in the world. Add to this, the fact that girls are socialized to locate the blame for not measuring up squarely on their own shoulders, further silencing their own questions about "*what they've done*" to create feelings of anxiety, sadness and fear.

Girls are socialized to strive to meet everyone's **expectations**, to make themselves **smaller** and quieter, and to **accept their devaluation** as somehow their fault.

With all of this in mind, our girl-centred project focusing on girls' rights to mental health was born.

## The Girls' Rights to Mental Health Project:

*Mental health "touches like the deepest part of human rights. It's the heart. It is the emotional side." (AC)*

**9** focus groups

**23** individual interviews

**62** participants

**1** common goal:

*To learn what's really impacting the mental health of girls and young women - and what we can do about it.*

With knowledge of the above, out of concern for the well-being of girls and young women, Girls Incorporated of York Region, the Canadian Mental Health Association of York and South Simcoe and two researchers from the Faculty of Health at Toronto's York University partnered in order to:

Explore (i) girls' and young women's views regarding the current state of girls' mental health, (ii) understand the issues impacting mental health; (iii) understand what they deem helpful models of mental health support; (iv) and hear and document their views regarding what needs to change.

\* All names are pseudonyms

In this research, we used a participatory engagement model, working collaboratively with girls, young women and some transgender youth to hear about the key issues they experience, and the facilitators and barriers to mental wellness and quality of life from their perspectives. We were fortunate to also hear from girl-serving professionals.

### Purpose of the Research

To enact a girl-centred exploration of girls’ own views regarding the issues they face which enhance or erode mental health and to determine girl-centred models of support and prevention strategies.

We wanted to get a first-hand account of the mental health struggles that girls and young women are facing today - so we conducted research with girls in elementary school and middle school, teens in middle school and high school, and young women of post-high school age. We also met with girl-serving professionals and asked them for their views and experiences.

### Meet the Girls and Young Women

The girls and young women who participated in this research all live in the GTA. Their ages range from 8-21. Within this group of participants, some individuals used she/her pronouns, and others used she/they pronouns. Participants also identified as: Canadian, Chinese Canadian, Vietnamese Canadian, Asian, Caucasian, Middle Eastern, “mixed,” Trinidadian and White, Scottish/Finnish, Jamaican, Black/Half-Jamaican, Persian (from Iran), Iranian, Italian, Russian, “from a Muslim country”, Jewish, “no religion”, and trans-female. A smaller percentage of participants live in rural communities, and a larger percentage of participants live in suburban areas in York Region.

### Meet the Girl-Serving Professionals

The girl-serving professionals who participated in this research all work in the GTA. Their job descriptions included: social worker, peer support worker/specialist, gender-affirming care, youth mental health worker, nurse practitioner, program coordinator, and program facilitator. Within the group of girl-serving professionals, there were individuals who identify as: LGBTQ+, Black, Bi-racial, White and Sri Lankan.

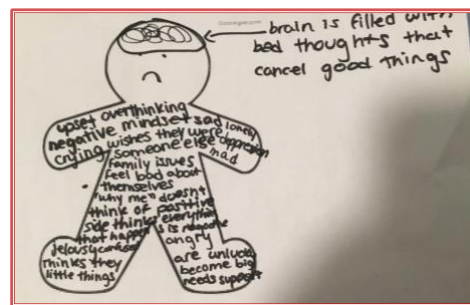
### What Mental ‘Health’ is for Girls and Young Women

A clear mind

Mental health for our participants involved being happy, being able to have a clear mind and having a lack of worry and stress. Interestingly, mental health was equated with how one is treated, with some participants commenting on the centrality of being treated fairly, being understood and respected. It involved having support, being viewed as equal. There was consensus with the young women in their view that mental health declines as girls become young women. Many linked mental health with gender specific pressures,

seeing societal expectations placed on girls resulting in low self-esteem, body image issues, fears of being judged – with anxiety and depression viewed as the outcome. Finally, mental health was linked with no longer having to look, act and behave in gender-specific ways.

Interestingly, when asked to describe what it looks like when a girl is not mentally well, links were made to clothing suggesting the wearing of dark and/or baggy clothing. Some focus group participants were given a gingerbread person and asked to illustrate what poor mental health ‘looks’ like and how it is experienced by girls. We saw scribbles inside the brain representing stress, anxiety, a cloud of confusion and negative thoughts. The image below illustrates the myriad of pressures impacting girls’ mental health that fill the brain with bad thoughts canceling out good things, culminating in a desire to be someone else.



Some participants used words like self-doubt, overwhelmed, scared or afraid to illustrate girls’ mental health. Many used ‘overthinking’ in their illustrations, indicating, even there, a belief that girls are to blame for their struggles. Although we asked what it looks like, the girls illuminated for us that many will hide how they’re feeling – explaining that pretending is a survival tactic to cope with feeling overwhelmed, lost and optionless.

*“I feel like most of the time when a girl is mentally unhealthy, she feels as if she needs to pretend to be alright.” (George)*

### The State of Girls & Young Women’s Mental Health

There has been a rise in mental health concerns. Girls are struggling.

Girls, young women and girl-serving professionals all indicated that the state of girls’ and young women’s mental health was poor and was expected to worsen as girls became young women. There was consensus regarding a rise in mental health concerns, with countless descriptions of gendered social pressures impacting mental health and wellbeing. Conversely all the GSPs reflected on the strength and ‘resilience’ of the girls and young women they work with. Despite the cloud of pressure, girls and young women are strong, smart, forward-thinking, compassionate, and strive to set boundaries in order to practice self-care. They are, however, bombarded with messages that challenge these

efforts to authentically self-define and think about their own well-being. All of our participants noted that while many new efforts continue to emerge, of which they are appreciative, many contributing factors to poor mental health are intensifying. One promising development is that many girls are helping their friends reach out for help when struggling with powerful emotions and difficult situations.

### Pressing Issues Facing Girls and Young Women

*"I think girls should be respected. Like I think boys should treat us more respectfully. And they shouldn't make fun of us, like the way we are and our gender." (Lucy, age 9)*

Girls' lives are full of worry.

While our participants varied in age, experience, cultural background and other aspects, below represents the top three pressing issues identified by the girls and young women that impact their mental health and well-being:

- 1  
anxiety/depression related to judgement from others
- 2  
social expectations and the constant comparison to others
- 3  
hatred of their own bodies/wishing they were (like) someone else

### Causes of Poor Mental Health

*"Not being appreciated. Being treated unfairly." (Alex)*

*"The government and society are putting lots of things on girls. Like if you see ads, it will show what society thinks a perfect girl looks like. And if you don't look like that, the pressure is coming from everywhere." (Maddie, age 13)*

When asked about the causes of poor mental health, **pressure** in multiple forms emerged as the key contributor: Pressure from peers, school, family and society with a key contributor being body size and beauty standards. Some girls also identified societal pressures stemming from gender stereotypes where girls are pressured to look and behave in certain ways leading many to feel like they are "not girl enough." (Sadie)

The pervasiveness of judgement and pressure

Too Much/Not Enough

Some girls identified the catch-22 inherent in gender-based expectations for girls. 'Be good' but 'not confident'... where being 'over' confident is construed negatively as 'too bossy, cocky or 'bi\*%y.' While girls are routinely seen as 'less than' others, routinely compared to boys or other 'better' kinds of females, many participants identified "biased opinions", "unfair rights" "sexualization" and "sexism" as causes of mental unwellness. The most salient catch-22 discussed in this project illustrates how girls are simultaneously viewed as not enough and too much. Girls are made to feel they are not smart enough, thin enough, pretty enough and at the same time are viewed as too much and in need of quietening down. Girls are confused and left to try to figure out a 'sweet spot' within which to confine themselves in order to avoid being judged.

Girls routinely hear negative comments.

*"I feel like especially for girls, there's a lot of pressure to be valuable and to be valued." (Olivia)*

When asked about the causes of poor mental health, some participants said that the answer could be different "for each kind of girl." One participant indicated that girls can be marginalized in different ways – and this can lead to them feeling like they are inadequate, flawed and deficient. Ariana told us that "Pressure from society to fit into a specific role. Stereotypically perfect and beautiful" was a key source of distress. Others commented on the ways in which girls are educated, including at home regarding their roles and expected ways of being, stating it makes them "feel pressured to please others and they always have to smile. So, it's kind of generational, passed down." (AC). Others, especially the young women, commented on double standards including attire and sexuality, noting how girls are blamed for being a distraction because of their bodies and clothing, yet being expected to act and dress a certain way.

*I find a lot of the time, the way society is, that those women who are confident in themselves are often pushed down. It's like, oh, you're just being bossy and being dramatic. Just told to keep it inside. Play the picture-perfect person. And that's really harmful to a lot of people" (KM).*

*"I think girls can really worry all the time about different things and this prevents them from doing things or talking to people." (IT)*

The routinization of negative comments emerged alongside pressure and gender stereotyping. Social media was viewed as a source of routine negative comments that also contributed to an ongoing need for external validation. While some participants stated they benefited from social media and the connections it fostered, most identified it as a key source of unrealistic standards that reinforced girls' value lay only in appearance.

*"I'm constantly worried about my body... and anxious all the time ... about what other people think of me." (HG)*



As the timing of our engagement with girls and young women was during the Covid-19 pandemic, we asked about its impact on mental health. Intensifying a life where fear was a common experience, our participants described fears relating to catching the virus, being judged for wearing a mask or alternatively being judged if they chose to/not to be vaccinated. Some girls spoke of feeling lonely, stuck at home and depressed. Additionally, some girls and young women talked about not feeling safe at home and feeling unsupported by parents and family. Learning online was a challenge for all resulting in real or perceived falling behind academically. Many spoke of the increased anxiety related to returning to public spaces, with particular fears about being seen.

*“Isolation has made it harder and more awkward to talk or interact with other people and has created more anxiety around this.” (AH)*

Some indicated parental expectations also contributed to poor mental health, including the need to make parents proud. Some also spoke about parents not understanding or believing their mental health concerns or stressors.

*Overall life is just overwhelming. ...not only do you have to figure out your career path, but you also have to figure out how you're going to overcome disadvantages you already have because of your gender. And you're pretty much going into a society in a world that's built to make you feel pressured, or just stress to do stuff, or to fit into standards is a terrible feeling.” (KS).*

### What do girls need in order to feel mentally well?

*“Being treated with respect.” (Alex)*

When asked this, the girls and young women explained that they need family, friends, safety, love, gender equity, supportive parents, mentors, acceptance, and freedom. They indicated that they “needed to be treated fairly”, to “be valued” and to “have more rights.” When treated unfairly or poorly, some participants like Ellie explained that this makes them feel like they “don’t matter.” Many participants also commented about the role of being validated by others as helpful in fostering positive mental health. How they are viewed by others was of primary importance. Some indicated how helpful it would be to have better self-awareness and personal boundaries as well as tools to grow better self-esteem and body confidence.

### Insights from Girl-Serving Professionals

*“The lack of positive relationships is a big one. If they don't have that, they seek them outside. And sometimes they're willing to do anything to get someone to believe them or to like them, or to accept them for who they are.”*  
(Girl-serving professional)

The need for external validation leaves girls’ mental health vulnerable.

While this community-based research deliberately sought to create space for the voices and perspectives of girls and young women themselves, we invited girl-serving professionals (GSP) to share their lens on the state of girls’ mental health, their concerns, and the issues they see as pressing. An increase in mental health concerns was a shared concern expressed including anxiety, worry, with relationships, and weakening self-esteem. The relationship between not being liked, accepted or valued and girls’ mental health was evident to all GSP we listened to. GSP understand that anxiety is a symptom of social pressure and not of inherent flaws or poor coping skills in girls and young women.

Anxiety is a symptom of gender-based devaluation and social pressure, not ‘poor coping skills.’

The GSPs saw a readiness of girls to self-diagnose and apply powerful psychiatric labels to describe their experiences. This was troubling because of the ways in which it individualized and pathologized mental distress. While GSPs described girls and young women as ‘pushing through’ and being resilient, they also shared concerns that girls downplay their own struggles for fear of what their friends or families would think or say. They have witnessed the troubling trajectory of girls noticing the maltreatment and the swift internalization that it must be ‘their fault’ followed by ardent attempts to change themselves.



*“There is a lot of negativity (they hear) .... but on the other hand, there's not the same number of resources or empowerment that they get .... that 'you're good the way you are, you're capable.'” (Girl-serving professional)*

While there is more dialogue about MH, girl-serving professionals indicated concerns about girls self-diagnosing that while it may lead to more reaching out for support, it can also lead to girls thinking that they need medication or more intensive treatments as a solution. Concerns were also raised about some young women (i) downplaying their challenges; (ii) pathologizing and internalizing societal narratives; and (iii) not believing that they can ever overcome their issues, even with help. GSP shared strategies they enacted to

demonstrate their belief in the girls and young women they sit beside and listen to. Being both devalued and disbelieved was identified as another contributing factor to mental health erosion and the GSPs saw the practice of overt *girl-centeredness*, i.e., affirming, believing and validating girls' voices, perspectives and inherent worth, as a critical best practice approach. GSP told us that in order to support girls' mental health, that their families would also benefit from being supported. A **wrap-around model** that consists of multiple interconnected supports was seen as having much value where dedicated resources to support the girl's entire family, where relevant, would be required in order to enact.

### Confirming what we already knew

**How girls are viewed, referred to, and treated determines their mental health and well-being.**

What we discovered is not new, nor a shock. For many girl-serving professionals, we know that girls continue to feel undervalued, unheard, judged, pressured and fearful. The constant **pressure**, from every area of their lives was identified by all participants as the key reason for mental health concerns. The routinization of **judgement**, combined with the internalization of these messages leading girls to judge themselves, further erodes girls and young women's mental well-being. Girls' quality of life is impacted by continual **fear** of not being good enough, smart enough, feminine enough, thin enough, or quiet enough. Once a girl realizes that she is not enough as she is, and that nothing she does seems to change that, self-esteem drops, and external validation efforts take over. Similar findings were exposed within the (2017) *Strong Girls, Strong World* study facilitated by the YWCA Canada overseen by Plan International Canada. Of the more than 100 girls aged 16-19 across Canada who were consulted, one in two said that gender stereotypes impact their daily lives and their career path decisions. Thirty-nine percent of them said that they rarely or never feel safe from sexual harassment and that they'd be blamed for it if they came forward. Fifty percent felt safe in school, meaning half of the girls do not. One in three of the girls identified having poor body image, stating it affected all areas of their lives. Finally, ninety-three percent of the girls reported a devaluation of their voice and indicated that they have to work far harder than boys to have their voices heard an/or to be respected.

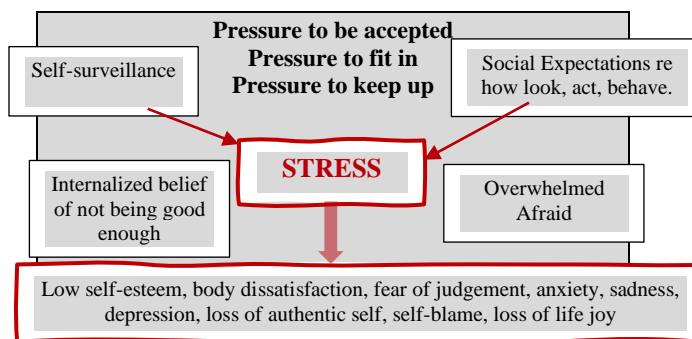
### The Danger of Seeking External Validation

Our findings from interviewing girls and young women about mental health and the causes of its' erosion, indicate that nothing has materially changed. We are increasingly concerned that girls (are socialized to) need external validation in order to have emotional stability. Rather than being self-defined many girls continue to be other-defined and in so being leaves girls' mental health and wellness at the whim of others. We view this as a clue regarding helpful practices for girl-serving professionals.

### Constant Comparison

*"I feel like I have to compare myself with others."* (SM)

Girls and young women are socialized to be their own oppressor – to believe and reinforce the negative messages and rules about what a good enough girl or young woman is. The ubiquity of pressure and judgement, grounded in gender-based expectations culminate in inordinate stress leaving girls afraid and scrambling. Attempts to change, adapt, and 'act' a certain way has an impact on mental wellbeing and quality of life. Without messages to the contrary, girls believe the messaging not only about themselves, but about other girls and young women.



Central to mental health is the right to be authentic – to live according to one's own values and priorities. Girls and young women want to be 'free to be me.' The multitude of social pressures foisted upon girls prevents authentic selfhoods leading to a life lived in the continued pursuit of elusive acceptance.

### Helpful Practices

*"Girls need a place to go, with no questions asked."*

The girls particularly appreciated being asked about the kinds of services, supports and programs that would be helpful to support mental health, telling us that the main reason they don't ask for mental health support is because they don't want anyone to know. They feel embarrassed about their feelings, embarrassed to ask for help, and they fear being judged by others. They may have had difficult experiences with professionals in the past and want assurances that they'll be treated with dignity and respect. They told us that feeling like professionals don't care or can't help will stop girls from asking for support. We also asked them about barriers to help-seeking, with Fiona explaining that "sometimes it would be difficult to pinpoint what exactly is wrong. So, you don't know what kind of help to ask for." Other barriers, identified particularly by the young women, included fear of a lack of confidentiality, judgement, and being *talked at* instead of listened to.

*"If girls could feel like talking about mental health issues were normal and that we didn't have to worry about what other people thought, then maybe it could be better."* (AL)

In many of the focus groups with girls, they were invited to design a brochure for a program that would be helpful to girls

their age. This creative exercise illustrated that girls need a place to go, with no questions asked and where their safety and comfort was central. There would be food, therapists and/or peer support. Some wanted arts and crafts, hypoallergenic therapy pets and a set up where anything said would be confidential. Supports would be free, accessible, inclusive to all including, according to the girls, for people who “do not identify as girls.”

“Adults should let girls direct the conversation about mental health .... Not being overbearing or pushy.”

While the girls and young women would like to get support from other girls “going through similar things” they also want professionals who are “approachable, non-judgmental, kind, reliable, trustworthy, a good listener and an advocate.” They indicated that the environment where supports were offered needed to “feel safe and non-clinical.” They want services to come to girls, at schools or in their communities where transportation and privacy were not a barrier. Peer and informal groups, drop-in programs (geared specifically to girls) as well as mental health workshops on topics identified by girls, were thought to be helpful. Others noted that individual, private support was important where care and support can be individually tailored. Confidentiality was key with many young women indicating that having the option to not involve parents was important.

“An organization or a club that can give a sense of community and welcoming.” (AC)

We also learned that the girls felt more comfortable going to friends than they did adults but also shared an awareness that their friends may also be “dealing with stuff” and that they didn’t want to overburden them. Similarly, many girls told us that they’d like to go to another girl or young woman – seeing a model of peer support to be of value.

Girl-serving professionals would like to see increased programming in schools, and also identified the value of peer mentoring as well as leadership development opportunities. Asset mapping, working with community leaders and early intervention, in particular with girls who are rendered marginalized and vulnerable through their living circumstances. GSP spoke of the need for both individual supports and group supports for girls and young women – ensuring that choice and individualization was factored in. Programming should be free, low cost or subsidized, accessible to all, focus on girls’ individuality and be directed if not led by girls and young women themselves.

**The Social Determinants of Girls’ Mental Health**

“What would make girls mental health more positive would be if more people would say more positive things to me and not make fun of my body.”  
Layla, age 11

The social determinants of girls’ and young women’s mental health have surfaced in this project, with sex and gender being central. The lived experiences of gender-based exclusion and marginalization, involve powerful social expectations regarding how girls are to look, act, and sound being strictly controlled. Further complicating and reinforcing these social pressures are that girls themselves are being expected to self-police these rules through persistent self-surveillance.

“It’s a lot to keep up with.” (BL)

What struck the research team is how the mental health of girls and young women is related squarely to how they are viewed, considered and treated. We understand now more than ever that girls’ mental health is a not only a right, but that the erosion of girls’ mental health is linked to a **breach of their rights**. More than 25 years ago, Girls Incorporated developed a bill of rights for girls believing that when these are respected, girls’ quality of life will be protected. Within these are the circumstances to affect change. These include:

**Girls Inc. of York Region Bill of Rights**

- 1** Girls have the right to be themselves and to resist gender stereotypes.
- 2** Girls have the right to express themselves with originality and enthusiasm.
- 3** Girls have the right to take risks, to strive freely, and to take pride in success.
- 4** Girls have the right to accept and appreciate their bodies.
- 5** Girls have the right to have confidence in themselves and to be safe in the world.
- 6** Girls have the right to prepare for interesting work and economic independence.

Infusing a rights-based lens into the 1:1 and programmatic group work of GSPs that explicitly attends to these six rights can affect the change we all want for girls.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS for Girl Serving Professionals:**  
*Keep doing what you’re doing!*

“Investing in girls now is like investing in the future.”  
(Girl-serving professional)

While we didn’t ask our participants to evaluate any services that they were engaged with, what we heard is that GSPs are diligently trying to support them. It is GSPs who are standing beside, bearing witness and affirming girls’ true selves. Keep doing this! You play such an important part in countering the storm of social messages thrust upon girls. If you haven’t already, think about girls’ and young women’s mental health in terms of their rights and consider, if it’s a fit for you, the six rights identified by Girls Inc as a place to start your advocacy. Indirectly and directly, attention to these rights gives way to improved quality of life and mental well-being. Understanding the *social determinants of mental health* and the role of marginalization in mental health erosion and working to actively counter these structural messages of ‘otherness’ through *consciousness raising* is one kind of strategy to undue the bombardment of negative messaging that otherwise seeps into girls’ self-appraisals.



From listening to girls, young women and girl-serving professionals, the following **recommendations** emerged as essential to consider when our work seeks to support girls' and young women's **rights to mental health**:

- ☞ Believe, affirm and validate girls' appraisals of their lives and experiences. They want to be believed.
- ☞ Girls are afraid that others will find out they went to talk with someone. Help them find you or access other supports in ways that feel safe.
- ☞ Help them talk about girls and young women's mental health in ways that make sense to them.
- ☞ Don't focus on the symptom nor infuse girls with psychiatric labels through which to view themselves-language matters!
- ☞ Help girls, through consciousness raising, situate and validate the actual cause of how they're feeling (e.g., pressure, judgement) rather than as a symptom of an inner flaw, poor coping or the need to be more 'resilient.' Indeed we need to be wary of this word and reinforcing pressure on girls to believe its how they cope that is the problem.
- ☞ Girls want comfortable girl-friendly spaces to be heard, affirmed, valued and believed – not fixed.
- ☞ Help girls (and others) understand that anxiety is a symptom – an outcome of constant pressure and judgement that may be created by gender-based expectations.
- ☞ Empower girls to actively remove self-deprecating notions of themselves and other girls through individual and group activities that protect girls' social vulnerabilities.
- ☞ Girls (are socialized to) internalize messages about their supposed flaws. Be their voice of reason.
- ☞ Girls told us they most often would turn to other girls for help and that they also like helping their friends. GSPs may wish to explore a **peer mentoring model** driven by girls themselves with young women supporting girls.
- ☞ Remind girls about their right to authenticity, safety, bold expression, achievement, body appreciation, confidence, and future self-reliance. Help them achieve these rights. Speak out when girls' rights are breached.
- ☞ While there is ample evidence to support the fact that transgendered youth experience a disproportionate burden of mental health problems, in our study we did not have enough trans female participants to fully represent their concerns. We recommend that further research should be done to better understand the mental health strengths and needs and concerns of trans girls and young women.
- ☞ Girls come from diverse backgrounds – recognize this and how girls' race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, ability, etc., intersects with gender to impact their mental health
- ☞ Girls need you. Keep standing beside them.



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For more information on the study or the services provided by the partnering community agencies ... or to join in on the conversation regarding girls' mental health, please contact [www.girlincnyork.org](http://www.girlincnyork.org); [www.cmha-vr-on.ca](http://www.cmha-vr-on.ca)  
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