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PANEL I

**Key Policy initiatives to eliminate all forms of discrimination and  
violence against the girl child**

**Written statement\***

submitted by

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

## **Is it Possible to See the Girls?**

**Abstract: Discrimination and violence against adolescent girls takes place in the absence of attention to the situations of young girls. This paper first presents three reasons that explain this reality: girls are not seen, intervention methods with girls are not responsive to their needs, and girls' dreams and horizons are restricted. In the second section, the paper describes an innovative initiative that is intended to make girls visible by establishing a base of knowledge about girls in distress, and by encouraging cooperative efforts of government ministries and NGOs to address the needs of young girls.**

**Dr. Michal Komem**

### **Discrimination and Oppression Faced by Young Girls**

1. As we come to promote policy to end discrimination against adolescent girls, we must remember that the answer to the question "Do young girls suffer from discrimination, oppression and violence?" is not clear to many people, including many professionals. Rather, there exists a lack of awareness of the unique life situations in which girls find themselves and of the effect that their everyday reality has on their lives and futures. This essay will address the Israeli reality and will describe how discrimination, oppression and violence against adolescent girls are manifested. It will conclude with a presentation of the "Girls on the Map!" initiative that is successfully influencing policy by raising awareness of the needs of young girls and by developing interventions on their behalf, and in cooperation with them.

2. In Israel, there are an estimated 600,000 youth between the ages of 12 and 18, of whom about half, 300,000, are girls. An estimated 10% of adolescent girls are considered to be "at risk" or "in distress," and they are eligible to receive services from the social services. Most youth in Israel, including adolescent young girls, study in the co-ed public education system. Israel's population is socio-economically and culturally heterogeneous, with disparities between centrally located cities and geographically peripheral areas, and with a mosaic of people from different faiths, ethnic, cultural and national backgrounds – Jews and Arabs; immigrants from around the world, including Ethiopia, Caucasus and the former Soviet Union.

3. Discrimination occurs when there is a lack of attention to girls' unique needs and desires or when basic conditions necessary for girls' development are absent. Similarly, adolescent girls face oppression when they are held back, contrary to their wishes, from continuing their studies or when their horizons and dreams are limited. In addition, in their homes and communities some girls face more blatant forms of violence, including emotional and verbal abuse, rape, incest, physical and sexual harassment.

4. In this paper, I will focus on those girls who are defined as being "at risk" and "in distress" – exposed to neglect by their families and communities, suffering physical or sexual violence, and denied the right to a nurturing childhood. The primary response by government ministries has been by the Service for Adolescent Girls and Young Women operated by the Ministry of Social Affairs, however continued occurrences of

discrimination, oppression and violence indicate that this service was not reaching all the girls in distress and was not sufficiently responsive to the girls' full range of needs. The situation facing young girls in distress described in this paper is based on findings of a study conducted by the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute as part of the "Girls on the Map!" initiative, as well as on other studies conducted in Israel.

5. I will assert that there are three main reasons for discrimination against and oppression of young girls:

- Girls are not "seen" by many people, and since they are invisible, there is no attention to them and to their needs. Violence against them becomes permissible, and their distress is imperceptible. Since they are raised while being socialized towards self-silencing, a coalition of invisibility is woven between them and society.
- Intervention methods with girls and the solutions offered them do not respond to their needs.
- Girls' horizons are restricted. Girls have difficulty dreaming because, among other reasons, others dream for them.

### **Why are girls not seen?**

6. Four main reasons prevent us from seeing young girls: a) relating to both sexes as one unit blurs the difference, b) there is a preoccupation with the "young girl" as an object in society and in the media, c) girls undergo socialization to put themselves in the background, and d) adult women perceive young girls as "the other."

- A. We are accustomed to viewing girls as part of a group of youths – adolescent girls and boys (with the exception of special services for girls in distress). While this is indeed true, relating to both sexes as one unit blurs the separate and unique traits of girls. Moreover, in the Hebrew language, the word for youth (of mixed gender) is in the male gender, and so the mixed group can likewise be thought of as a male group. In relating to the sexes in common, the differentiation becomes lost.

An interesting example is the professional approach towards youth in distress, where the risk situations and characteristics discussed reflect the experiences of male youths. Boys tend to drop out of the educational system and to be involved in criminal activity. Yet, these behavioral responses do not characterize the distress of young girls. The drop-out rate for young girls in Israel is four times lower than that of boys, and the number of young girls involved in criminal activity in Israel is insignificant compared to the number of boys involved in such. Yet, by basing discussion on dropout and criminal activity, one can be led erroneously to conclude that girls are not in distress.

However, when looking through gender-adjusted lenses, one sees a complex picture, whereby the distress of adolescent girls is characterized differently and manifested in self-inflicted injury. Those girls who experienced violence or neglect tend to internalize their experiences and to then continue to neglect or injure themselves. Even girls who have not experienced violence or neglect exhibit other signs of distress: girls lead in

dieting, engage in limited physical activity, and tend towards depression and borderline mental health risk situations.

- B. Instead of focusing on the individual girls – their experiences, needs and the significance that they attach to their lives – attention is focused on socially acceptable or desirable norms. For example, when a young girl begins the maturation process, focus is shifted from her individual experience and feelings to her future role as a mother, or to the social regulation of her behavior and appearance. A preoccupation with the girl as an object is also seen when studying the “young girl” persona and social messages emanating from the media: a thin girl, fashionably dressed, and white. In sum, there is greater importance placed on the dangers, social obligations and ideal images that come hand in hand with her sexual development, rather than on the significance that she herself attaches to her sexual development, her experience of it or in how she actually wants to be or could, in all reality, be.
- C. Girls are also "not seen" in some situations because they undergo socialization to put themselves in the background. For example, a study of religious public school graduates found that the young women ranked their identity as a woman last among the four given identities: a woman, a religious person, member of a nation, and a citizen. Similarly, they perceived their identity as a woman as being ranked last by their school. The study concluded that the similarity in rankings reflected a process of socialization in the school which includes silencing their feminine world, and that the girls internalize and are acquiescent to this.
- D. An additional factor making it difficult to see the girls is that adult women perceive young girls as “the other.” Despite the fact that we were all girls and young women at one time, something happens to us as we get older. A discussion of a young girl becomes a discussion of “the other” – different and distant. Adolescent experiences become dissociative for women, and thus we find it difficult to actually notice the girls rather than to examine them, and we tend to criticize them instead of being amazed by them.

7. It seems, therefore, that the "invisibility" is a result of a combination of factors - the lack of social readiness to see the girls, socialization processes that the girls undergo and internalize, and perhaps even alienation of the girls from their own experiences and inner world. As a result of this invisibility, girls reach severe states of distress. They come to the support services once they have reached acute stages of distress, are in crisis, and are suffering greatly.

**Practice methods with girls are not tailored to them, and the solutions offered do not respond to their needs**

8. Girls at risk and in distress who reach support services encounter professionals with a great deal of professional knowledge who are part of the support establishment. Within this establishment, a process takes place whereby professionals influence and are influenced by conventional systems that offer support. A practice perspective develops as well as customary ways of offering assistance, and services are then provided within this context.

9. This process can be illustrated with regard to a group of young girls defined by us professionals as “runaway girls” in acute distress and at high risk. These girls live away from home or on the streets due to severe neglect at home, exposure to physical and sexual violence at home or charged and conflict-ridden relationships with their parents. Upon leaving home, they are open to the dangers of the street: hunger, lack of personal security, violence and rape.

- The first problem arises in our definition of these girls as “runaway girls.” First, the word “runaway” has pejorative connotations. Second, while professionals view these girls as “runaways,” the girls describe themselves as having been evicted from their homes or as having no home in which to live. Viewing a girl as a “runaway” hints at a need to restore her to the place from which she has fled. Yet, viewing the girl in a manner in which she describes herself could lead to a different work approach as well as to other forms of proposed assistance.
- In addition, while girls described by professionals as being “runaways” are perceived to be a small group at the “extreme end of the risk continuum,” an examination of existing data reveals that about half of the girls in the care of a service dedicated to adolescent girls spent at least one night outside of their homes. Hence, the need to leave home due to hardship and violence, defined as running away, is not a marginal phenomenon among girls at risk, but just the opposite.
- Further, a study that compared the helping relationships between the “runaway girls” and women professionals attests to the invisibility of these girls and to the lack of appropriate work approaches and suitable responses. The girls clearly described a variety of desires for help – a significant, existent helping relationship of a flexible nature, able to adapt itself to their needs and situation, caring, powerful though not necessarily coercive, and sensitive to their needs. In addition, the same “runaway girls” wanted the helpful relationship to offer significant outputs that would positively impact on their lives. In contrast to the assortment of needs and desires expressed by the girls, only a limited variety of responses were offered by the women professionals and the support systems. Also, the women professionals described their roles narrowly and with limitations, and differentiated between the girls’ needs and desires, with assistance programs determined according to needs rather than to the girls’ desires. The practices which the women professionals described using to assist the girls left the professionals uninvolved, and placed them in positions of observer, supervisor or interpreter. Examination and analysis of the helping relationships between the girls and the women professionals revealed gaps that warned of the likelihood that no helpful encounter would actually take place at all, despite the fact that both sides desired it.

**Restricted horizons – to what extent girls can dream, or who dreams for them?**

10. Girls attain high achievements at school, sometimes even higher than their male counterparts. Nonetheless, girls at risk often do not take these accomplishments further, as the following examples illustrate:

- A survey conducted in therapeutic educational frameworks for youths who have dropped out of the formal educational system (called *Miftanim* in

Hebrew) revealed that although the girls tended to complete *Miftanim* with a greater measure of success than the boys, a much lower percentage of girls than boys managed to continue their studies or find a regular job. Moreover, a higher percentage of girls than boys could report no plans for the future in any area. The absence of future plans and dreams became an immobilizing, oppressive and diminishing factor.

- Women in continual, longstanding social and economic distress have described marriage and mothering as the only opportunity for them as young women to break away from their difficult past and present and to build a future that will hold for them something of their own. Marriage and mothering was perceived by them to be their sole outlet, even when they knew that they were heading into a bad relationship. They saw no other options and had not experienced the possibility to choose in their lives.

11. The inability to dream is expressed in various ways in different populations. For example: some girls are taken out of school by their parents already in the lower grades, in order to help the mother with housework and raising siblings. Girls contemplating professional studies are steered into conventional women's professions, such as child caregivers or hairdressers, professions which make it difficult for them to support themselves in the future and which limit social mobility. The traditional routing and the lack of ability to choose indicate a lack of choice, limitations and discrimination.

12. A question that preoccupies me is that of our role as women to act for the benefit of these girls. To what extent do we, having already matured, become patriarchs ourselves, discriminating against and limiting these girls who are “the other” to us? Do we do their dreaming for them, or do we expose them to a variety of options and enable them to choose? Does our concern and love protect or limit them? Do we help to make them visible, to turn the noise into a clear voice? I do not have the answers, but the questions must always resonate.

**“Girls on the Map!” – An innovative initiative for the development of services and programs to meet the unique needs of young girls**

13. In this section, I will present the "Girls on the Map!" initiative that began in Israel in 2002 to better confront discrimination and violence against, and oppression of, young girls in distress. The initiative developed as a broad coalition of NGOs and government offices. Its objective is to overcome the three difficulties described above by a) providing tools with which girls can be seen, through establishing a knowledge base about girls' unique distress situations, b) developing intervention methods tailored to girls' needs, especially for situations where responses do not exist as yet, and c) increasing girls' capacity to dream, make choices and plan for their future.

14. The "Girls on the Map!" initiative relies on the existing Israeli governmental service infrastructure for work with and care of adolescent girls, using it as both a basis and a departure point. Only two ministries have established units for young girls: the Ministry of Social Affairs has been operating a nationwide Service for Adolescent Girls and Young Women for 40 years, and the Ministry of Education,

Culture and Sport has an Unit for Equality Between the Sexes that has been operating programs within the schools to advance adolescent girls for the last ten years.

15. The "Girls on the Map!" initiative came into being at Ashalim, an NGO founded by Israeli government ministries, JDC-Israel and the UJA-Federation of New York to develop and plan services for children and youth at risk and their families in Israel. The fact that government ministries are partners in Ashalim, an organization committed to development and innovation, positioned them to recognize the need for change in services on behalf of girls in distress. Furthermore, their participation in the "Girls on the Map!" initiative facilitated the progress of the initiative and opened an important opportunity to think about and with young girls.

#### **“Girls on the Map!” – A Conceptual Umbrella**

16. The “Girls on the Map!” initiative encompasses two simultaneous processes:

- Knowledge base – The establishment of a knowledge base, through research about distress situations characteristic of girls and about differences between girls and boys in various avenues of life that can then be employed in the development of new programs. In areas where research revealed gaps between the girls' needs and existing solutions, new interventions have already been developed; for example, the lack of solutions for girls' needs in the health sphere led to intervention in the realms of nutrition and in the care of girls with an unwanted pregnancy.
- Professional, inter-organizational forum – Both government and non-governmental professionals participate. The forum serves as a platform for raising awareness of the need to conduct differentiated thinking about young girls, discussing professional issues related to girls, and creating professional relationships and partnerships among staff of the various organizations working with and on behalf of girls.

17. These simultaneous processes serve as a conceptual umbrella for the development of intervention programs which advance the assistance provided to girls in various areas and which operate through various cooperative organizational arrangements. The following work principles are common to all "Girls on the Map!" programs:

- The creation of “us” – a partnership between women professionals and young girls, and among girls, in order to reinforce common life experiences.
- Exposure of the dissociation – recognition that girl's situations of distress cause us to disconnect, to dissociate and not to really see them.
- Viewing the girls as possessing strengths with which to cope, and finding ways to view their behaviors as expressive of their strengths.
- “The personal is the political” – the reality of these girls' lives does not attest to any type of pathology or deviation on their part, but reflects an oppressive and discriminatory social structure.
- Identification of the oppressive factor, the "patriarchy," while attempting, as a professional with authority, not to become a patriarchal women professional.

### **“Girls on the Map!” Pilot Programs**

18. In all of the following eight current programs, girls from different sectors of Israeli society and socio-economic backgrounds participate: native-born Israelis, girls from immigrant families, Israeli Arabs, Bedouin, and Druze. The gender-based joint encounter serves as a strong cohesive factor, blurring, momentarily, the conflict-ridden life reality in our region.

19. **ADI Center** – an intensive community-based day center for work with and treatment of girls at high-risk. The girls who arrive at the center are defined by professionals as girls in distress: living outside the home, using drugs, and exposed to rape and risky sexual relationships. The feminist work approach at the center is innovative. Until the establishment of the ADI Center, these girls did not find a meaningful response or were referred to authoritative, coercive treatment frameworks, often under court order. The ADI Center offers the girls a safe, accepting, enabling and varied environment where their strengths and their desires to enact significant change in their lives are related to. Indeed, the girls attend and express interest in leaving their situations of distress behind.

The ADI Center is a prime example of the influence of new alternative practices on government policy. It is gaining recognition as an alternative best practice for working with girls at high risk. Intervention methods being developed at the ADI Center which rely on the girls' voluntary participation will influence future work with girls, focusing efforts on work with girls in their communities, rather than removal to authoritative, coercive facilities.

20. **Girls for Girls Mentoring** – a two-sided program, intervention and training, for girls in distress. The program offers girls who “have been there,” those girls who have dealt with harsh life situations and distress and have moved on, to participate in a one-year program at a university at the end of which they function as mentors assisting younger girls who are in the midst of dealing with severe distress.

The mentoring girls are a new and important human resource for work with young girls, and they form relationships with younger girls who find it hard to get help from professionals. The Girls for Girls mentoring program also represents a revolution in the thinking about girls in distress, as it views the older girls who are dealing with difficult life situations as a driving force to advance and aid younger girls in acute distress situations. The program also serves to minimize the hierarchy between professionals and girls in distress and creates a discussion of “us” and not of alienation. In reality, this program is helping to create a new, supplementary and different type of staff to further improved work with girls.

21. **Warm and Creative Homes** – afternoon therapeutic educational frameworks for girls at risk of dropping out of school. This service was already in existence, and the “Girls on the Map!” initiative has upgraded it by increasing personnel, and also by introducing fresh work concepts and emphasizing feminist work principles.

22. **Girls in Distress Perform National and Civil Service** – volunteer community work by girls in distress. Israel's National Service program was conceived as an alternative to military service for young women; however, girls in distress were typically not accepted to the program due to their backgrounds. The program enables the young women who were not accepted into regular National Service to be integrated as volunteers into the service in educational and therapeutic roles, receive a stipend and support in their communities.



23. **Interventions with girls who appear before the committees for the termination of unwanted pregnancies** – accompanying girls who are experiencing an unwanted pregnancy through the hospital committee process and the abortion, and incorporating volunteers to provide support. Israeli law allows a minor to undergo an abortion without her parents' consent in order to prevent severe conflict between the girl and her family and in certain cases murder in the name of family honor. As a result, girls often arrive alone for medical procedures and committee hearings. The program is intended to support these girls as well as to prevent additional unwanted pregnancies.

24. **"Girl-Space"** – the educational system has difficulty detecting cases of distress among girls and responding to their needs because of the different ways in which girls' distress is manifested. The program suggests focusing the systems' attentions on girls by having a group of older girls operate a social girls' space within the school. This space will cast spotlight on the girls and will allow the girls to get to know each other, facilitating open and more personal discourse. The program assumes that this type of intervention will support and strengthen the girls, while at the same time, facilitate the detection of girls who are in distress.

25. **Health promotion for girls** – the rate of girls dieting or starving themselves in Israel is among the highest in the world. Preoccupation with dieting starts when the girls are very young and intensifies with age. Also, the rate of those engaging in physical activity decreases with age. The program combines psycho-educational group work on the topic of body image and eating, combined with physical activity of the girl's choice.

26. **Professional training program** – alongside the direct work with and for the girls, it is important to increase awareness among male and female professionals as to the special needs of girls and proper work methods with them. Increasing awareness must be accompanied by imparting knowledge and by working on existing perceptions and prejudices. The program currently offers a basic course that exposes professionals who work with youth to various issues from the world of the young girl. The course also offers training to enhance potential for creating an identity of "us" among girls and their mothers, which will then be an opening for creating support, bonding and camaraderie between mother and daughter.

#### **"Girls on the Map!" Achievements**

27. The "Girls on the Map!" initiative has succeeded in effecting change in a number of realms:

- It has created an "us" among the education, welfare and health services, government ministries and NGOs for the benefit of young girls, and is increasing the ability of the various assistance services to respond differently and develop new practices than those conventionally in use to date. For example, the Girls on the Map initiative encouraged the Ministry of Health to take a fresh look at the needs of girls with unwanted pregnancies and to participate in piloting a new program on their behalf.
- The professional and organizational cooperation inherent in the initiative is encouraging greater funding, from both government ministry and philanthropic sources, to strengthen and upgrade responses and for girls in distress. For example, with the upgrading of the Warm and Creative Homes by

the Girls on the Map initiative, originally supported solely by the Ministry of Social Affairs, now receive additional Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, the Sacta-Rashi Foundation and Israel's National Insurance Institute.

- Additionally, the professional and organizational cooperation is influencing government policy by involving government ministries in the joint development of innovative models to respond to previously unmet needs. These pilot models, which are accompanied by research studies, receive government funding and are implemented with the understanding that, if successful, they will be disseminated by the ministry through a combination of shifting priorities and budget allocations. For example, groundwork is being laid currently with the Ministry of Social Affairs to replicate the ADI Center in additional locations.
- The initiative is motivating government ministries to develop their own training program for personnel working with adolescent girls. For example, the Ministry of Education is now training staff who work with teenagers to identify and care for high-risk adolescent girls.

### **“Girls on the Map!” – The Challenges Ahead**

28. Despite the achievements and the successes of the “Girls on the Map!” initiative to date, we still confront three primary challenges. The first challenge is further strengthening the initiative and stabilizing the programs so that these opportunities and interventions become standard in the package of services offered to young girls. Moreover, the programs must be established as responses available to all girls who might require them, interventions practiced countrywide rather than a unique model applied in one location. The second challenge involves extending gender-sensitive approaches to all services and frameworks that work with children and youth, as well as educating professionals as to the differences between boys and girls and to the unique life situations of young girls which mandate sensitivity and appropriate responses. Finally, we need to address the reality that while girls from different backgrounds and cultures living in Israel share many common experiences, they also live in different worlds and hence have different needs. Therefore, we must improve the cultural sensitivity of our program for young girls.