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Gaining Insight into Youth Programming and the Inclusivity of Girls

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Abstract

Boys dominate youth recreational programs in ways that control the conversation and the physical space, which impedes the ability for girls to participate. This is distressing, given that youth recreational and social programs, for example, those focusing on personal development or on health and well-being, improve girls' physical and mental health and serve as a protective buffer against negative health outcomes. We conducted a qualitative community-based Participatory Action Research (PAR) project in which we interviewed programmers responsible for social and recreational programs that cater to youth between the ages of 12 and 18 in a region of Southwestern Ontario, Canada. We examined factors influencing girls' participation through the lens of a modified Bronfenbrenner Ecological Model. The findings were unpacked with a view toward gender equity, particularly focusing on girls' health and well-being. Based on the findings, we created a knowledge mobilization gender-based toolkit, which, upon implementing, would make the benefits of recreational programming more accessible to girls.

Keywords: Girls, youth recreational programs, gender toolkit, knowledge mobilization, participatory action research, program delivery, gender equity

Introduction

Public spaces promote a sense of community by creating local social attachments. For instance, they offer a place for youth to spend their leisure time (Worpole & Knox, 2007). Girls who invest their leisure time in physical activities experience long-term physical benefits (Völgyi et al., 2010). However, boys have a tendency to dominate these shared recreational spaces (Shilling, 1991). Delamont (1983) argued that youth life is informed by sexist routines, noting that shared youth areas often become segregated by gender, as boys dominate the spaces intended for co-ed recreation.

This gendered difference concerning power over public spaces extends to group discussion. Arndt (2015) argued that there is a “skewed gender perception” (p. 30), in which the under-participation of girls is overlooked. Interestingly, when boys dominate co-ed discussions, the youth and the facilitators involved view these discussions as being equally controlled by both girls and boys (Arndt, 2015). Girls and boys are treated differently even by the adults who lead co-ed discussions and done so in such a way that perpetuates the existing traditional gender roles and societal stereotypes, where female youth are viewed as more submissive, and male youth are viewed as more authoritative (Arndt, 2015). This is assumed to be normative.

This gendered difference hampers girls’ participation in recreational activities that would otherwise contribute to their subjective well-being (Brajša-Žganec, Merkaš, & Šverko, 2011) and identity development (Shaw, Kleiber, & Caldwell, 1995). Recreational programming provides youth with access to a social network, and social support facilitates youth resilience against stress and depression (Dumont & Provost, 1999). These programs are an important function of youths’ social network, as they provide access to peers and supportive adults, which positively affect youth in academic, social, behavioural, and emotional dimensions (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011). Perceived social support also affects self-esteem and is associated with a positive self-image (Bolognini, Plancherel, Bettschart, & Halfon, 1996). In particular, girls who have relationships with supportive adults have higher levels of psychological and behavioural engagement in their education (Woolley & Bowen, 2007). Finally, relationships with supportive adults are also associated with lower rates of depressive symptoms in girls and an increased ability for female youth to cope with interpersonal problems (Leadbeater & Way, 1996).

According to Statistics Canada, 86% of children and youth between the ages of 6 and 17 participated in at least one extracurricular activity between 2000 and 2001 (Guèvremont, Findlay, & Kohen, 2015). On average, children are without parental care for two hours after school, leaving room for them to engage in delinquent activities and negative behaviours (Taheri & Welsh, 2016). This gap of unsupervised time can be better filled through participation in a youth program. Participating in a youth program was found to buffer against depressive symptoms (Armstrong & Manion, 2015; Viau & Poulin, 2015) and aid in emotional regulation, development of social skills, and interpersonal relationships (Denault & Poulin, 2016). The relationship between suicidal ideation and other risk factors is also moderated by meaningful engagement in youth programs (Armstrong & Manion, 2015).

The mental health of North American youth is a topic of concern, as many mental disorders emerge during this phase of development (Merikangas et al., 2010) and suicide is the second leading cause of death in Canadian youth (Navaneelan, 2012). According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, girls are more likely than boys are to report feeling elevated psychological distress (Paglia-Boak et al., 2012). The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) found that girls between the ages of 11 and 15 report higher levels of emotional problems and lower well-being compared to boys (Freeman et al., 2011). Girls also experience a notable decline in their confidence as they age through their teenage years that is not observed in their male peers (Boyce, 2004). Additionally, Canadian girls grapple with low self-esteem, poor body image, loss of self-efficacy, and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, all of which are intensified during puberty (Bailey, Wellard, & Dismore, 2004; Bean, Kendellen, Halsall, & Forneris, 2014; The Sutcliffe Group Incorporated, 2011).

In general, self-esteem is strongly related with mental health, but self-esteem has a greater influence on depressive mood in girls than in boys (Bolognini et al., 1996). In girls, low self-esteem is associated with negative practices, such as disordered eating, self-harm, smoking, and “drinking when feeling badly about themselves” (Kearney-Cooke, 2008, p. 1). As girls move into adolescence, they undergo a severe decline in confidence, resulting in augmented levels of depression (Girls Action Foundation, 2011). Unfortunately, even the well-being of older girls suffers, as those between the ages of 15 and 24 are more likely to report an unmet service need related to mental health or substance use compared to boys (PHAC, 2006).

However, the types of programs and services available to girls tend to be supportive and can act as a safeguard or protection against the barriers these girls encounter (Taft, 2010). There are a variety of outcomes and purposes in girls’ recreational and social development programming, including teaching leadership skills, empowerment, developing confidence, fostering connectedness, and creating critical thinking skills (Canadian Women’s Foundation [CWF], 2014). Taft (2010) concluded that elementary and high school aged girls who regularly attended a youth program had higher levels of empowerment compared to girls who did not attend such programs. Given the prevalence of mental health concerns for girls, we asked ourselves, how could the needs of girls be better met?

Current Study

Our community partner, a representative of a well-known organization that provides services to women and girls, asked us to investigate the needs of girls in local youth programs, as there was a concern over the low-turnout of girls attending these programs. Much of the relevant literature has focused on aspects girls themselves think are responsible for generating successful youth programs (Taft, 2010). However, a gap exists regarding the perspectives of youth programmers. Given this, we investigated the perspectives and experiences of programmers of recreational and social programs aimed at youth between the ages of 12 and 18, with the goal of making these programs more attractive to and accessible for girls. Our participants were recruited via snowball sampling and mass emailing. We used a community-based Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework to better engage and collaborate with our community stakeholders and aid in the translation of our findings into a gender toolkit, which we intend to be utilized by our community partner and by the local community.

PAR is a dynamic research process that is applied by researchers in social and environmental justice contexts and is used as a vehicle for social change (Cahill, 2007; Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Kidd & Kral, 2005). PAR is a flexible, iterative, and bottom-up approach that focuses on local priorities and perspectives and incorporates a democratic process that promotes engagement from local community members (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). According to the principles of PAR, the population under study should be active participants in the research process, with ongoing communication between researchers and stakeholders (Mackenzie, Tan, Hoverman, & Baldwin, 2012; Penuel & Freeman, 1997). Researchers utilizing a PAR framework strive to solve problems that are defined in collaboration with community members (Penuel & Freeman, 1997). Within this framework, validity is determined by the extent to which research findings can be translated into real-world actions and utilized by local practitioners to tackle a need in the community (Chen, Weiss, Nicholson, & Girls Incorporated, 2010; Penuel & Freeman, 1997).

Method

Participants and Recruitment

Our participants were organizers of youth social and recreational programs, so henceforth we will refer to them as programmers. The university institution that sponsored this research project supplied a key contact who disseminated a recruitment letter to a network of youth programmers from local organizations. As per the research guidelines supplied by our community partner and by the university institution sponsoring this project, we did not collect detailed demographic information. Nevertheless, all of our programmers were cis-gendered women over the age of 18, and all but one were White. We recruited our 11 participants from 8 different organizations that administer social and/or recreational youth programs, of which 2 were girls-only service leaders, 4 were from co-ed programs, and 2 delivered both girls-only and co-ed youth programs. In addition, a service provider from 1 co-ed program spoke to serving non-binary individuals. In collaboration with our community partner, the specific geographic area was defined as the focus of the study, which eliminated potential participants on the fringe of that geographic area. Data saturation usually occurs when researchers begin to see recurring themes from participants, thus we capped the number of participants at 11, concluding we had reached data saturation.

Data Analysis

Data for this study were drawn from six one-on-one individual interviews and two group interviews, which were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed. A collaborative group-based process was utilized with five research team members to create a preliminary code book based on two transcripts, after which two of the team members manually coded the remaining transcripts and created two coding lists, one for girls-only programmers and the other for co-ed programmers. We developed themes using a grounded theory approach in accordance with the codebook that was devised by the larger group. Quotations were organized hierarchically by theme, sub-theme, code, and frequency.

The interviews were approximately one-hour in length, and took place in a private room at the sponsoring university institution, or in a private room at the participant's workplace. In two instances, we utilized a focus group format to conduct interviews with multiple participants from the same organization in order to be more efficient and for the convenience of the participants. As per the Research Ethics Board (REB) guidelines, participants provided written consent before being interviewed and were given a \$15 gift card for participating.

Knowledge Mobilization: Gender Toolkit

After analyzing the data, we created a draft version of a gender toolkit to aid youth programmers in ensuring their programs cater to the nuances of the needs of girls attending their programs. Our key contact arranged an information session where local youth programmers gained further insight into our research project. In this information session, we conducted a member checking session where we presented our findings and draft toolkit to local youth programmers (some of whom participated in the study, and others who did not) for further consultation and asked them to comment on the further development of our gender toolkit. This toolkit was informed by our research findings, verified in the member checking session, and then updated in a further reiteration process (see Appendix).

Results

According to the original Bronfenbrenner Ecological Model (BEM; Kloos et al., 2012, p. 19), it is vital to reflect on a range of levels of analysis (from the interpersonal to the political) in order to “understand and to enhance the lives of others” (Trull & Prinstein, 2013, p. 464). The BEM is a useful tool to examine the relationship between individual health and well-being and the expansive layers within one’s environment and larger society. However, the original model was unsatisfactory for our purposes because the programmers we spoke to referred to interrelated aspects surrounding individual well-being, funding, and policy, and not to the larger environmental contexts. As such, we modified the BEM (see Figure 1) to make sense of our findings and to unpack factors that influence the success of recreational programming targeted at girls. Those levels of analysis are as follows: (a) personal, (b) interpersonal, (c) programmatic, and (d) inter-organizational.

In the results section, we examine the Personal and Interpersonal levels of analysis, which encompass aspects relating to individuals and their experiences with one another. The Programmatic level of analysis was then examined, including traits of program facilitators to program structure and incentives. Afterward, the Intra-Organizational level of analysis was examined, and it comprises finances and recruitment qualities. The fourth and final level of analysis is the Inter-Organizational level, which covers partnerships and funding. Unfortunately, given our study population, our participants did not explicitly discuss aspects around policy, including governmental and larger-scale societal aspects, thus we do not report any results for that level of analysis.

Figure 1. An adapted version of the Bronfenbrenner Ecological Model that demonstrates the relationships between the main findings of this report at different interrelated levels of analysis. These findings influenced the creation of the gender toolkit.

Personal: The Diverse Needs of Girls and How to Meet Those Needs

Many programmers revealed that the girls attending their programs struggle with mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and addiction. One programmer spoke of the mental health issues that had arisen in the participants of her program: “usually substances [are] a coping strategy for something else, so we see a lot of trauma, anxiety, depression, um, family issues, things like that that are generally the problems that we’re seeing.”

While the topic of mental health was prevalent, the majority of programmers did not discuss any pending plans to deal with this issue. The programmers were providing more than

social and recreational activities – they were attempting to meet the mental and emotional needs of girls attending their programs. One programmer said, “We have in the past had girls who have told me, kind of on the side that they don’t really have any food - so I would bring extra for them to take home.” It is important to note here that the girls attending these programs may be from lower socio-economic backgrounds. These girls were turning to adults they trusted (i.e., the programmers) in the context of after school programming to fulfill basic needs, like the provision of food. Youth spaces where young people have established relationships with trusted adults may be more accessible for girls than traditional organizations, such as food banks.

Programmers seemed deeply concerned about the needs of the girls attending, and they provided suggestions to improve programs to better meet these needs. Overall, programmers thought an evaluation tool should be implemented to assess the demand for a youth program, and to evaluate girls’ progress while attending. Additionally, we discovered that program facilitators would benefit from group mediation and mental health training. For instance, when talking of the mental health concerns within their program, one programmer stated, “Our [facilitators] don’t necessarily have any specific training to deal with [...] more serious kind[s] of mental health concerns, or emotional concerns and that kind of piece.”

Programmers also strongly emphasized the importance of ensuring program facilitators are relatable to the girls attending, notably in gender, age, and ethnicity. One programmer observed that the ethnicity of the facilitator was directly related to the ethnicity/culture/religion of the girls who chose to attend the program: “The female staff was white and a lot of youth that came were white and now our [facilitator] is physically Muslim and a lot of the girls that come are physically Muslim.”

Interpersonal: Connections with Supportive Adults and Busy Girls

Programmers spoke about the importance of a positive facilitator relationship: “They need to know that you genuinely care for them [...] and about what’s going on in their lives and I think that’s the starting point, and then finding out what are these kids good at, what are they passionate about.” Programmers saw social interaction as a positive component of their program and advocated for the positive impact that social youth programs have on the girls attending:

The girls really crave that connection and that interaction and that social element. It takes it from sitting and being talked at [...] to being in groups that are loud, and laughing and having a lot of fun with a topic even when it is a serious topic, they can still have fun and engage with one another [...] and it makes it a much more enjoyable experience [for] the girls.

While programmers were aware that youth programs benefit girls, not all girls are able to reap these benefits. Given this, some programmers reported that girls struggle with competing priorities and overscheduling, thus hindering their ability to attend these programs:

I think from a more [...] systemic level, everyone is just so busy [...]. They have to go to school and do hours of homework and do all of these extracurricular activities [...] it can make it a challenge and we often find that [youth programs] are often the first things to

go because where do you put that on a college application? [...] I think we have a situation where kids are so over scheduled that if they are going to find a night off, often times it comes at the expense of the voluntary things like youth [programming].

Programmatic: Empowering Girls and Inherent Sexism

In conducting our interviews, we found that the programmatic level of analysis was most discussed by the programmers. This was unsurprising, given that programmers are most familiar with this area and focus on program curriculum as their vocation. There are four themes in this level of analysis: (a) empowering girls through programming, (b) promoting gender inclusivity in programming, (c) inherent sexism in programming, and (d) successfully developing and delivering programming to girls.

Empowering girls through programming. Programmers often spoke about empowering girls and some sought to give a voice to the girls attending:

We're not going to tell them that they're wrong for thinking a certain way, or try to persuade them to think in a certain direction, so we're gonna stay open and let everybody's voices be heard.

By encouraging girls to express themselves, these programs helped them become active and empowered members of society. Unsurprisingly, small group size was an important factor for positive group mediation and helped youth benefit the most from group settings. Additionally, programmers perceived skill building and education as another form of empowerment for the girls attending. Sexual education was one form of education mentioned most often by the programmers, as this type of education empowers girls to make informed decisions about their health, sexuality, and bodies.

The programmers felt it was important to ensure girls have a space to learn and speak openly, but some encountered difficulties with the boys attending. Many programmers referred to the challenge of dealing with boys who, inadvertently or not, dominate co-ed spaces:

Sometimes the space in the facilities that we utilize [is] not welcoming to girls [...] and trying to balance that with a large percentage of boys in the program who are also not wanting to give up their space for their activities.

Boys have been socialized to dominate the spaces that are meant for both girls and boys to express themselves, and this socially constructed behaviour limits the voices of the girls in the programs, subsequently disempowering them.

Some programmers discussed the importance of challenging stereotypical gender roles and the use of gender inclusive language. For example, when discussing the activities available in their program, one programmer stated:

[We] offer things that are on the opposite side [of] what is considered stereotypically girls' activities, like dance or craft classes are awesome, but also making some sort of

programming or collaboration, where there's also a building component or math contest or things that girls are typically dissuaded from that they could become involved in. Another programmer spoke of promoting non-gender conforming language, saying: We've tried to degenderize the language that we use [...] so we generally just say "teens" and we try to not use genderized [*sic*] language because one of our [...] sideline goals is to be a safe space regardless of how kids identify in terms of their gender and sexuality.

Programmers believed that key components of a successful program for girls include interactive and engaging activities, and involving girls in the program design and implementation:

We've designed the program so the boys can't do anything unless the girls want to do it, right? So we kind of put our staff in that bind so it's their responsibility to engage the youth. Like this program would not run without the youth engagement so we kind of tried to create that as part of the design.

Inherent sexism in programming. Some co-ed programmers openly stated that they do not specifically consider girls when marketing their programs, or that they do not consider barriers to participation that affect girls. This implies that the needs of girls are not being properly addressed within these programs, as girls are not being catered to specifically. These findings illustrate that not all programmers are thinking through a gendered lens when developing and delivering programs. Program facilitators also spoke about spending funds on activities and products such as hair elastics, lip balm, glitter, baking supplies, a spa day, or organizing a fashion show for the girls in their programs. While some programmers justified these purchases, stating that the girls wanted to participate in these activities, others did not provide a reason as to why such stereotypical programming was offered to the female youth.

Inter-Organizational: Working Together to Benefit Girls

Programmers emphasized communication and maintaining connections as key aspects of running a successful program. The most essential connections discussed concern the families of the girls, cultural leaders in the community, other existing youth programs, and potential community partners. Networking is vital for sharing ideas, engaging with diverse participants from the community, and for obtaining funding and expanding youth programs. While programmers recognized networking to be an integral part of running a successful youth program, the majority reported dissatisfaction with the structure of the current networking system. One reason being that programs and organizations appear to operate in separate silos: "It would be great to have more connections in our community rather than just you deal with this, we deal with that and never do they meet."

The Need for a Gender Toolkit

After conversing with the programmers, we realized a gap existed in the current literature relating to inclusive programming for girls in our geographic area of Southwestern Ontario. One programmer spoke about a desire for more girls to attend youth programs and strategies to keep girls engaged when they do attend, as this area of research is often overlooked:

I'm really excited to see the results of this [study] and ways that we can better engage the girls that we do service and also how to make sure we get more girls attracted to our program that we offer; [...] even beyond that, looking at [...] how can we keep bringing [the girls] out and keep them engaged – whatever that looks like. That's great that you [...] are doing the work cause it's under-resourced.

Based on the above, we believe a knowledge mobilization tool, in the form of an easily accessible gender toolkit, is the best way to address this gap in the literature, as it includes commonly recommended methods for implementing programs that are more inclusive for girls. In accordance with the values set out in the PAR framework, we created this toolkit in collaboration with programmers to increase the inclusion and engagement of girls attending youth programs, as this is an under-resourced area of research and development.

To make the gender toolkit easily accessible to programmers and facilitators, we re-named the levels of analysis used in our Results section. That is, items in the Personal, Interpersonal, and Programmatic levels of analysis were condensed into Program Planning and Program Delivery in the toolkit itself. Similarly, items in the Inter-Organizational level of analysis were condensed into Capacity Building (see Appendix).

Discussion

Youth programs are valuable as a means of filling one's time, but they are also imperative for the well-being of youth. According to our results, youth programs are useful spaces for social and emotional support, fulfillment of basic needs, forming relationships with peers and trusted adults, and the opportunity to engage in recreational activities. These programs provide more than a space to spend time, but are fundamental to the development and well-being of girls. Nevertheless, there are important systemic factors that contribute to the active engagement of girls that must be considered when developing effective youth programming.

Boys Dominating Spaces

Boys are accustomed to an imbalanced power structure, in that they expect their voices to be heard and validated, sometimes over that of their female peers. These gender inequities were prominent in our research; echoed from the literature review, boys often dominated physical spaces and overpowered discussions. This is unfortunate, as discussions help youth to “promote social skills, foster one's understanding of himself or herself and the world, and create a sense of ownership and deep knowledge of content matters” (Arndt, 2015, p. 28). Arndt argued, “If girls are systematically not partaking in discussions, they are disempowered from these benefits” (p. 28). Not only that, but if girls feel as though their voice is unwelcome in a discussion, it builds on society's existing prejudiced notion that females should be submissive (Arndt, 2015). Consequently, if girls are unable to participate in discussions, this enhances a biased position some adults hold that male youth are more capable, a stereotype which can negatively influence girls' self-efficacy and achievement (Leaper & Friedman, 2007).

Even in our research, some programmers perpetuated gender stereotypes, as they supplied girls in their programs with girl-typed activities such as cooking and fashion. This is problematic as it enhances stereotypes that can influence girls' participation and achievement in historically masculine fields, such as mathematics and science (Leaper & Friedman, 2007). Additionally, some programmers did not consider girls when marketing their program, or the barriers girls encounter when participating in such programs. Given that these particular programmers were not actively recognizing the specific needs of girls and were promoting gender conforming rhetoric, it is not surprising that many programmers reported that boys in their programs tended to dominate co-ed spaces. The prominence of gender inequality in programming and the incidences of programmers not considering gender when developing programs suggests a need for a gender inclusive framework for youth programs. Without this framework, important feminist issues around social structures and empowerment will remain outside the conscious awareness of the programmers, resulting in girls not benefiting as much as boys (Mead, 2001). Social action and change will be extremely difficult to achieve without this appropriate knowledge firmly in place.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, as conceptualized by Crenshaw (1991), is a reflection of the diverse ways that identities, such as race and gender, interact with the construction of the social world. Among our findings, the intersectionality of gender, race, and class contributed to the attendance and participation of girls in youth programs, although gender was the predominant focus of our study. Unfortunately, many youth programs do not advocate for a feminist perspective and as a result, those programs fail to address intersectional oppression (CWF, 2005).

In our study, the programmers believed girls were overwhelmed with prioritizing their various activities, resulting in a barrier to participation in recreational programs. Given the benefits recreational programs can have, it is concerning that girls do not have the time to reap these benefits. Additionally, programmers described youth, in general, as being overworked and overscheduled (e.g. with school commitments, recreational activities, etc.), potentially causing excessive stress. As per the diathesis-stress model (Igram & Luxton, 2005), this excessive stress may be the catalyst to the mental health issues that the programmers noted.

The intersection of class, race, ethnicity, religion, and gender are important topics when discussing youth. In 2016, over one third of food bank users across Canada were children (Food Banks Canada, 2016). Consequently, it is unsurprising that programmers were supplying the girls participating in their programs with meals. Programmers were taking on a larger role than simply providing social and recreational programs, which may be attributed to the supportive relationships that develop between facilitators and the girls. Our findings suggest that girls are reaching out to individuals they trust to satisfy basic needs, as opposed to using an existing resource, such as a food bank. In previous research, children from low-income families who attended youth programs exhibited both a reduction in obesity and an increase in other positive health outcomes (Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005). Taken together, our findings and previous literature demonstrate the importance that youth programming has on the wellness of girls and youth in general.

Racial marginalization is another factor one must consider when creating programs for girls, as ethnicity and religion are significantly associated with program attendance (Eime, Harvey, Craike, Symons, & Payne, 2013). Programmers must reflect on the specific cultural and religious needs of their participants, and must go further to accommodate the differing needs of girls. For example, programmers should create spaces in which girls of all races, creeds, and beliefs can feel comfortable participating. Our findings indicate that girls from diverse cultures related better with a facilitator of the same race or culture as them. Therefore, encouraging more racial and cultural diversity in the facilitators themselves supports the participation of a wider range of girls in youth programs. This finding emphasizes the importance of employing a diverse group of facilitators who relate to all types of girls, as doing so will help maximize the benefits associated with supportive adult connections.

Funding

Unfortunately, the youth programmers we interviewed spoke extensively about concerns over funding allocation. According to our findings, funding is based on the priorities of funding cycles and the quantity of youth attending, rather than on the quality of the program itself. One consequence is that programmers are not being trained to evaluate the success of their programs in terms of quality, or to adequately deal with the impact of gender imbalances within their programs. Our findings indicate that programmers should be provided with training on gender non-conforming practices that do not perpetuate stereotypes about women, especially within co-ed contexts. By examining gender practices in this way, programmers can create a more effective program for both girls and boys (Mead, 2001). There is also a specific need for mental health related training for youth programmers. In one study, the skills learned in a mental health training workshop, SafeTALK, were still being used by over half of those who received the training, three months after completing the workshop (Niagara Suicide Prevention Coalition and Distress Centre Niagara, 2015). This suggests that mental health training is positively affecting communities and is being actively used by the individuals who received such training.

Ultimately, there exists a vicious cycle in which programs remain underfunded, facilitators and youth programmers remain under-trained, and girls remain underserved. When girls are underserved, they will likely stop attending the youth programs being offered and, because the program's funding is based on quantity of participants over quality of program, funding will be further restricted, and fewer programs will be offered, thus continuing the cycle (see Figure 2). Given that the literature has demonstrated how important recreational programs are for the self-esteem and well-being of youth, especially for girls, it is difficult to understand why governments are not willing to invest more into these programs.

Networking & Toolkit

Networking is an important vehicle for sharing ideas and ideal approaches, for obtaining funding and expanding programs, and for engaging more diverse participants from the community (CWF, 2005; The Sutcliffe Group Incorporated, 2011). Many benefits of networking are intimately connected to available funding; therefore, it is important to share resources, with the goal of making such programs more effective for the attending youth. Our findings suggest that programmers are not adequately interacting with one another, and so the various systems

currently in place that deal with funding, partnerships, and knowledge mobilization are lacking. It is vital that more programmers be encouraged by their employers through appropriate remuneration to collaborate with one another to share ideas and practices in order to optimize strained resources.

Figure 2: A demonstration of the current state of funding for youth social and recreational programs in Southwestern Ontario.

Given the above, our toolkit is intended to be used as a practical tool to increase gender equity in youth programs on the ground level. It was part of a knowledge mobilization effort to encompass what youth programmers spoke to within our findings. As a practical outcome, the toolkit aims to empower programmers to become more conscientious of the needs of girls when designing and implementing youth programs and optimizing strained resources.

Networking between organizations and programmers is an essential step for an adequate dispersion of our gender toolkit. Through networking, the toolkit will reach individuals who are in need of it, including youth programmers of various organizations and, indirectly, the girls themselves. On an inter-organizational level, by fostering partnerships between youth programs, programmers would have the opportunity to disperse the gender toolkit to other organizations that may be unaware of the toolkit's existence. On a programmatic level, distributing the toolkit to youth programmers who may not currently have access to it would help programmers from a variety of youth programs influence more girls. This would foster a welcoming and empowering environment for girls through the implementation of the various recommendations laid out in the

toolkit. By using the toolkit both on an inter-organizational level and on a programmatic level, programmers would be able, albeit indirectly, to affect girls on an interpersonal and personal level as well. For example, if staff is trained to be more gender inclusive, girls may experience more supportive connections with the adult staff, and thereby feel their diverse needs are being met, which may increase their self-esteem and promote higher well-being, as evidenced in the literature (Bolognini et al., 1996; Leadbeater & Way, 1996).

Some researchers have suggested that girls-only programs are necessary for girls to flourish. They provide a safe environment where girls feel more comfortable and empowered, thus increasing their self-esteem and fostering open discussion of important issues like gender roles and self-image (CWF, 2014; LeCroy, 2004; Munro, 2014; Shen & Armstrong, 2008). Successful girls-only programs have implemented strength and assets-based approaches, where these programs provided girls with employable skills, increased physical and mental health, leadership skills, and others (CWF, 2014; Fullwood, Davis, & Debold, 2000). The literature indicates girls-only and co-ed programs have the capacity to provide positive experiences for girls (Denner & Griffin, 2003; Mead, 2001), and co-ed programs may be more effective when they examine issues surrounding gender norms and stereotypes (Mead, 2001). If co-ed programs can be adapted to successfully meet the needs of girls, then perhaps a wider range of programs could be offered, whereby girls-only and co-ed programs would have the capacity to reach a wider range of local girls. Consequently, we created our gender toolkit to adapt existing co-ed and girls-only programs to empower and better meet the needs of girls.

Our findings indicated that for girls-only programs, small group sizes, ground rules, and interactive activities were essential for encouraging participation from girls and for providing a safe environment where girls could express themselves while creating friendships, which is in agreement with past literature (Bean et al., 2014; CWF, 2005; Shen & Armstrong, 2008). Additionally, our findings support literature suggesting girls from both co-ed and girls-only programs benefit from the opportunity to help with program design, as it allows them to assume a leadership role (CWF, 2005; Chen et al., 2010; Fisher, Browne, & Kohutiak, 2014). All of these findings contributed to the development of the gender toolkit.

We propose that youth programs can be better adapted to encourage more participation from the girls attending such programs. Many factors influence whether a girl will attend youth programming, including economic, cultural, and gendered structures. Certainly, programmers should seek to create a unique space that encourages girls to be themselves and to live authentically outside patriarchal and systemic expectations (Bean et al., 2014). The proposed toolkit aims to address the above themes in a simplified manner that is easily digestible by youth programmers. To be more efficient and responsive to the needs of youth, a strengthened network of service providers to communicate and share best practices is essential. In light of this, one participant illustrated the importance of bridging local services available to youth: "I think that's more the issue, how to actually be a community [...] instead of being segregated agencies trying to patch together a piece of clothing from nothing. How can we all [...] find our place in one whole approach?"

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation of this study is that the majority of our participants were recruited from co-ed programs, and not girls-only programs. Out of eight units of analysis, only three specifically addressed girls-only programming. This is a limitation as co-ed programmers may be unable to speak directly to the needs of girls to the same extent as girls-only programmers. Additionally, due to our relatively low number of participants it is possible we did not hit data saturation, and if so, this would indicate a need for additional recruitment and further study. Given the nature of this research project, it is also conceivable that participants may have unintentionally skewed their responses regarding the successes and/or failures of their youth programs as a means of portraying their respective organizations in a more positive light.

A further major limitation is that we did not consider gender non-binary, trans, or LGBTQ+ youth programming when designing and implementing this study. We opted to use the definitions of “girls” and “boys” outlined by programmers and while one participant did discuss the needs of trans-youth in programming without prompting, the topic was not explicitly addressed – or inquired about – within the interviews. Hence, the results lack important information and guidelines regarding the particular needs of trans- and non-binary youth and can only be applied to cis-normative and hetero-normative individuals. Given that there is a paucity of research examining the programming needs of queer and gender non-binary youth, future research should further explore the needs of this often-silenced population.

In view of the fact that we did not collect detailed demographic information on either the programmers themselves, nor on the girls attending the youth programs, as per the research guidelines outlined by our community partner and sponsoring university institution, there is a need to replicate our findings with more diverse groups of programmers and youths. Additional quantitative measures (i.e., demographic surveys) may also be useful to glean further insight into this area of research and development. By utilizing a PAR framework, we ended up with findings that are useful for key stakeholders, programmers, and to the community at large, but our findings are limited in the representation of youth voices and opinions on the topic, ironically due to the research restrictions applied by those same community members and key stakeholders. Even so, our findings aided in the contextualization of the factors that influence the participation of girls attending youth programs in this region of Southwestern Ontario.

In the future, researchers should use a broader, more diverse range of participants, as well as interview programmers who are in upper management positions. Doing so will maximize the available perspectives that influence the youth attending programs, and the utility of the proposed toolkit. Due to the increases in youth identifying as gender non-conforming, trans-identifying, and LGBTQ+, it is imperative for future investigators to widen the scope of research and to examine how gender and sexual identity factor into inclusive youth programming. In addition, future researchers ought to examine whether structural sexism is a factor in the lack of funding and seeming lack of equitable perspectives in youth programming. While our study mainly concentrated on the programmatic level, it is important to consider gender equity at all levels of the BEM, including the broader systemic and policy issues that affect both cis-normative and non-conforming genders.

Social Work Policy, Practice, and Knowledge

On the surface, programmers emphasized empowerment and noticed a discrepancy between the participation of boys and girls. However, some promoted gender-typed activities and failed to consider the needs of girls when developing youth programming. Thus, while programmers are in the early stages of understanding gender inequities in their communities and society, there is still work to be done in creating full gender equity in youth programming.

Programmers should utilize an equity lens to critically examine the disempowering social structures within their local communities at different levels of analysis, and as a means to shift the dominant culture within their programs to empower girls – programmers should be addressing the systemic factors that affect girls in their communities. For youth programs to be fully effective, they must address the intersecting class, race, and gender inequities that encourage boys to dominate recreational spaces, and which prevent girls from full and meaningful engagement. As part of addressing these inequities, programmers should acknowledge and attend to their own biases, and seek to empower those who are disenfranchised.

Through active participation and engagement in recreational programs, girls will be better equipped to reap the various benefits associated with recreational programming. The gender toolkit should be used to probe the facilitators and to encourage them to consider whether their programs are successfully implementing best practices for girls and should be implemented as a means of responding to the evolving needs of girls living in different communities.

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Appendix A

Gender Inclusion Toolkit

Created by: Erinn Barry, Shannon Vokes, Victoria Pulla, and Jora Shacter
(Updated March 2017)

This checklist was developed to help promote the active participation and meaningful engagement of girls in social and recreational programming, as well as to support youth programmers in ensuring that the unique needs of girls are being met.

Program Planning

- ☐ * Did I perform a needs assessment to determine the local needs of the girls attending my program?
- ☐ * Have I adjusted the content of my program to reflect the unique and evolving needs of girls in my program?
- ☐ * Did I implement ground rules that were created collaboratively with the girls attending my program?
- ☐ Have I acknowledged that the girls attending my program all have diverse value systems and perspectives?
- ☐ Have I challenged the stereotypical gender roles and norms of the youth attending my program?
- ☐ Have I included images of girls in marketing materials?
- ☐ Did I implement an evaluation tool to assess the progress of the girls attending the program?

Program Delivery

- ☐ * Have I provided my program facilitators with thorough training to meet the differing needs of girls?
- ☐ * Did I hire facilitators that are relatable to the girls attending my program? (e.g., facilitators are same gender, ethnicity, and similar age of the girls)
- ☐ * Have I encouraged the girls to help with the design and implementation of the program's activities and to have a say in the decision-making?
- ☐ Did I train my program facilitators to use gender inclusive language?
- ☐ Did I provide facilitators with adequate training to mediate conflict and dominant behaviours between and within genders?
- ☐ Did I take into account the feedback of the girls when adapting the program design?

Capacity Building

- ☐ * Have I connected with existing youth program networks and councils?
- ☐ * Have I communicated and collaborated with local service providers and community partners? (e.g., to share ideas, knowledge, resources, and best practices)
- ☐ Did I collaborate with family members, cultural leaders, and other members of the community to promote girls' attendance and engagement in my program?

(* Indicate points to prioritize if limited on time and/or resources)

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