



# GIRLS ONLY.

The Public Good Initiative

A PROGRAM EVALUATION OF THE YWCA TORONTO GIRLS' CENTRE:  
THE CASE FOR GIRLS-ONLY SPACES

2018-2019



# ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this report is to present a clear and strong case for the benefits of girls-only extra-curricular programming. A comprehensive literature review investigating the importance of girls-only programming informs the basis for the program evaluation that follows in this report. Key themes in adolescent girls' mental, physical and emotional skill development, as observed during and after participation in girls-only programs, are explored.

The program evaluation consists of four focus group interviews with program participants, interviews with staff members, and surveys of parents and guardians at the YWCA Toronto Girls' Centre located in Scarborough, Ontario. The three major impacts that emerged in the evaluation are the development of leadership skills, confidence and social skills. Additional program impacts include the improvement of mental health and improved safety practices.

This report was prepared by policy consultants at the Public Good Initiative.

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# SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION



# 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Although Canada has made many social and political advances, gender inequality and inequity continue to persist in public and private domains. This includes, but is not limited to, social, professional and academic realms. With a persistent gender gap in salary and compensation, as well as the under-representation of women on Boards and C-Suites, STEM fields, and government, there is a strong need for greater women-centred skills development and leadership programs, especially for young women.

Empowerment can be defined as “a process through which individuals are moved to act on their own behalf,” which aims to encourage their specific strengths and resources, including social and relational competences” (Strömback et al, 2013, p. 3). Empowerment is central to girls’ development. In adolescence and beyond, girls are inundated with pressures to conform to gender-based stereotypes, norms and ideals. Additionally, girls are continually faced with social pressures, expectations, and personal challenges. Programs that empower girls are instrumental in helping girls understand and develop their personal strengths and capabilities. These competencies will transfer into other aspects of their lives - at school, at home, and in other social contexts.

Such is why there is a need for programs that provide girls with a safe space to meet and engage with one another, and that address the unique and diverse range of girls’ needs. More significantly, girls-only spaces provide a space that is separate from boys, and where girls can be free to be themselves without feeling judged, overshadowed, or dominated by the presence of boys. Girls-only programs allow girls to build their confidence and gain skills that will equip them for a bright future.



## About the Public Good Initiative

The Public Good Initiative (PGI) is a student-led initiative that provides pro-bono consulting services to socially-minded community organizations across the Greater Toronto Area. The mission of the Public Good Initiative is to make a positive contribution to the policy and research capacity of not-for-profit organizations. It does so by drawing upon the skills and expertise of policy consultants, in order to meaningfully engage with our partners and contribute to the good of the public.

The PGI research team that has produced this report is composed of policy consultants Kristi Kodama, Geneviève Tallmeister and Marjila Yousof. All three policy consultants are Master of Public Policy Candidates at the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto (Class of 2020).

## About YWCA Toronto

YWCA Toronto is dedicated to improving the lives of women and girls.

As the city's leading multi-service women's organization, YWCA Toronto reaches more than 13,000 women and girls every year across multiple locations in the Greater Toronto Area. YWCA Toronto helps women and girls secure safe and affordable housing, find jobs, escape violence, gain practical life skills, and develop greater confidence overall.

YWCA Toronto also engages in systemic advocacy to advance gender equity and end gender-based violence and poverty. The organization is funded by the City of Toronto, the United Way of Greater Toronto, the Province of Ontario and the Government of Canada, as well as numerous foundations, corporate sponsors, and individual donors.



## Overview of YWCA Toronto Girls' Centre Services

The YWCA Toronto Girls' Centre is located in Scarborough, Ontario, and serves a diverse population of girls.\* All programs offered by the Girls' Centre are free. YWCA Toronto provides TTC tickets, snacks, and meals to ensure that all girls are able to access services, barrier-free. The Girls' Centre partners with schools, community agencies and organizations to offer girls support, help and guidance. Programs can be customized to suit the needs of girls.

The YWCA Toronto Girls' Centre offers:

**Individual Support:** The individual support program provides one-on-one support to young women aged 14-19 assisting with goal development, increasing connection to community resources and support, and strengthening girls' capacity to manage stress in their lives, through a solution focused, strengths-based approach.

**Girls' Talk Mentorship Project:** Girls' Talk Mentorship Project is an opportunity for young women (ages 15-17) who want to be a positive role models for younger girls. Mentors acquire high school volunteer hours and gain leadership skills.

**Girls' Council:** Girls over the age of 16 are able to provide feedback and direction to the rest of the programs at the Girls' Centre, as well as help to facilitate some of the programming.

**Girls' Talk:** Girls' Talk is a free mentorship program providing girls (ages 9-13) with opportunities to be creative, have fun, and connect with other girls. In this program, girls learn about self-confidence and empowerment, develop new skills and knowledge, navigate the challenges of adolescence, reduce social isolation, and learn the importance of making smart choices.

**Drop-in:** For girls ages 9-18. A safe space for girls to relax, meet new friends, watch movies, check their email, have discussions and enjoy a meal.

**YWCA Toronto Girls' Centre Day Camps:** Girls' Centre Summer and March Break camps teach girls life skills and build self-esteem. Additional activities include yoga, swimming, bowling, day trips and other recreational sports.

\*Summary statistics of the Girls' Centre can be found in the appendix of this report.



## 1.2 TERMINOLOGY

“Gender roles” is defined as “the social construction of gender through prevailing ideas of what constitutes masculine and feminine behavior and identity” (Culp, 1998, p. 357).

“Self-concept” is defined in terms of individuals’ feelings about their strengths and weaknesses” (Kuperminc et al, 2011, p. 172).

“Mentoring” involves a caring and supportive relationship between a youth and a non- parental adult.” (Rhodes et al, 2006, p. 692).

“Youth Empowerment Programs” refer to “strength-based, participatory programming that engages young people in decision-making processes - as a strategy for increasing a wide range of potentially malleable protective factors among adolescents in order to help them reach greater well-being” (Morton and Montgomery, 2013, p. 22).

“Gendered Space” is defined as space which is predominantly occupied by a single sex (Spain, 2008, p. 14).

“Leadership” is defined as “a relational process combining ability (knowledge, skills, and talents) with authority (voice, influence, and decision-making power) to positively influence and impact diverse individuals, organizations, and communities” (MacNeil, 2006, p. 29).

“Self-Confidence” is defined as “confidence in oneself and in one's powers and abilities” (Merriam-Webster).



## 1.3 METHODOLOGY

This program evaluation employed qualitative research methods including focus groups of program participants, staff interviews, and parent questionnaires. The policy consultant team conducted four focus groups at the YWCA Toronto Girls' Centre, located in Scarborough Ontario, throughout February 2019. Printed parent questionnaires were produced by the policy consultant team and collected by staff members in February and March 2019. Staff interviews were conducted over the phone, and in person at the YWCA Toronto Girls' Centre in February 2019. The questions posed to girls, parents/guardians and staff can be found in the appendix of this report.

The primary focus of the program evaluation was to uncover how girls-only programs benefit all girls who attend the YWCA Toronto Girls' Centre. One of the preliminary steps prior to the collection of primary evidence was the production of a comprehensive literature review. This allowed the team to consider how girls and women experience gender inequality, and how girls-only spaces and programming, including mentorship, can help girls and women overcome barriers to full representation and inclusion in society. Leadership and the development of social skills and confidence are major outcomes of these intentional spaces.

Focus groups of program participants were conducted with different groups of girls, with no overlap between the focus groups. The first two focus groups conducted included 5-7 participants aged 16-18 who act as "mentors" of the mentorship program, and who sit on the Girls' Council of the Girls' Centre. The remaining two focus groups included 3-6 participants aged 9-13 who are "mentees" of the YWCA Toronto mentorship program. Questions were structured informally, with different wording and language used depending on the age of the girls. All girls were asked direct questions about leadership and how the program helped them develop confidence. Older girls, for example, were asked more direct questions about workshops and their leadership roles in the programs, and younger girls were asked questions relating to friendship to evaluate social skill development and peer relations. Prior to conducting the focus groups, the major themes and questions posed to focus groups were carefully reviewed by YWCA Toronto staff.



Informed consent was gained through the requirement of signed consent forms to participate in the focus groups. Each consent form explained that the girls' participation in this evaluation was completely voluntary, and that their choice to opt-in/opt-out would not affect their participation in Girls' Centre programs. Each form stressed that the information collected would be kept anonymous, and that all reports will not include identifying information about the participants. Participants were informed that they did not have to answer any questions to they do not wish to, and opt out of the evaluation at any point. Consent forms were distributed directly to older girls aged 16 and over. Similar consent forms were distributed to parents of younger girls, below the age of 16. YWCA Toronto staff were consulted prior to the distribution of consent forms, to ensure clarity, comprehensiveness and consistency with YWCA Toronto's ethical guidelines. Although most responses were paraphrased, direct quotes were kept to brief statements in the interest of protecting individual identities.

Parent survey questions were centered around why parents/guardians signed their daughters up for after-school programs, in addition to questions about what they like most about the program and how they would like to see the program improved. Parents/guardians were also asked to speak to the development of confidence, leadership and social skills that they have seen in their daughters. This particular methodology aims to evaluate girls' development outside of the Girls' Centre, and how these skills translate into the household and school settings. Consent forms were also distributed to parents/guardians prior to their completion of survey questions to be included in the report. Short, direct quotes (without any identifying information) were included in the interest of protecting identities. Parent survey questions were carefully reviewed by YWCA Toronto staff prior to distribution.

The sample size of staff interviewed was limited to the four staff who currently work directly with the girls, in addition to the Manager of Girls and Family Programs at the Girls' Centre. Staff interviews included questions pertaining to demographics, challenges faced by the girls, what they believe to be the strengths and weaknesses of the program, and questions which spoke to girls' confidence, social skills, leadership and independence. Staff were also asked to comment on how interpersonal conflict between the girls is handled. The staff at the Girls' Centre can speak to the experiences and development of the girls because they work closely with the girls, and know

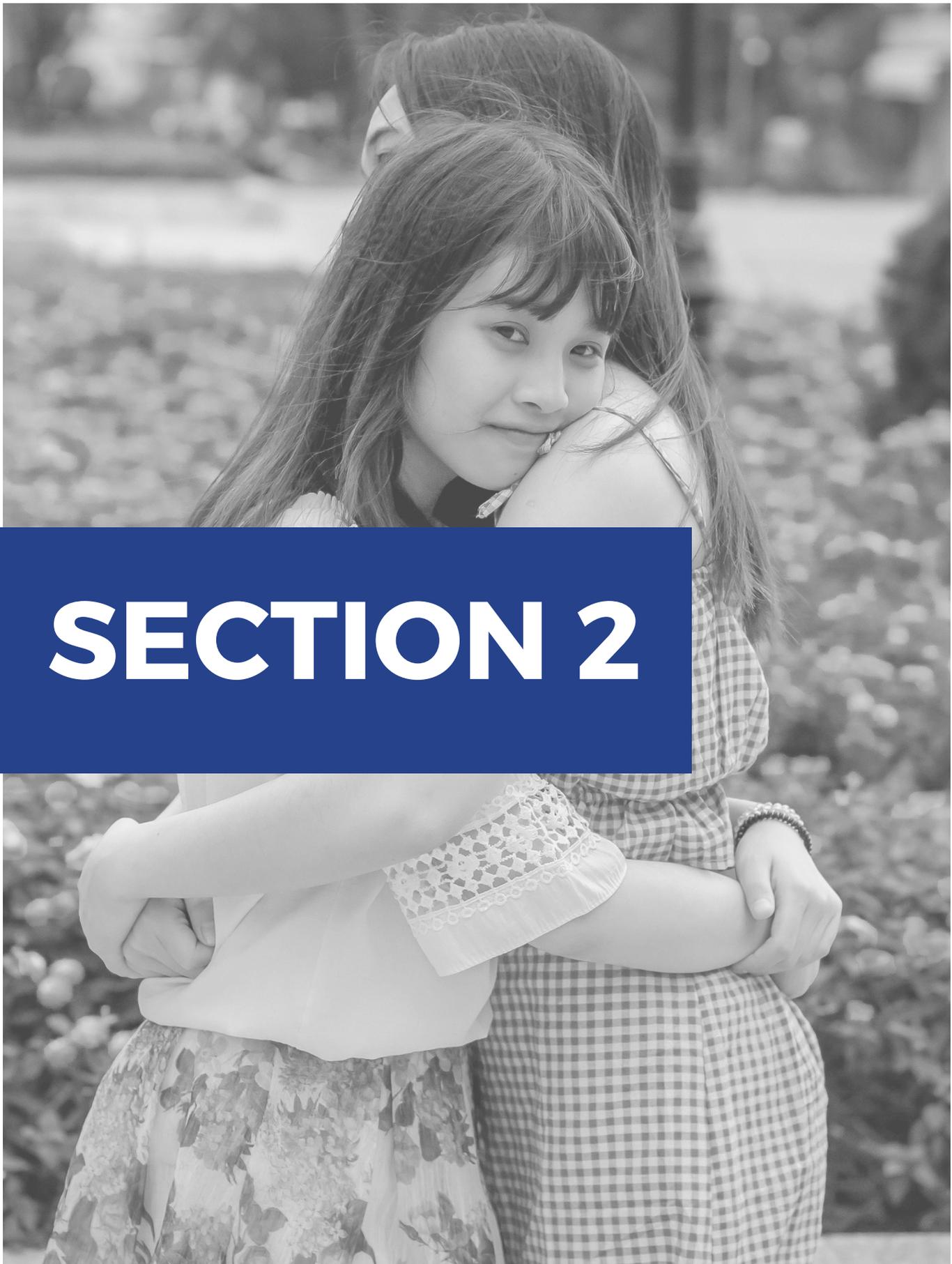


them on a personal level. As it is common for girls to remain in YWCA Toronto programming from childhood to late teenage years, staff witness the growth and change of program participants.

The policy consultant team utilized the predetermined focus on leadership, confidence and social skills to ask questions which inquire about the development and improvement of girls' skills in these areas. Additional questions consider mental health of girls, challenges that staff face in providing services to the girls, and what staff consider to be the greatest needs of the girls involved in the programming. Staff were also asked to provide feedback on the efficacy of the programming. Questions posed to staff were intentionally kept open-ended to encourage full and varied responses.

Permission to interview and record answers on paper was verbally obtained prior to the interview. Prior to staff interviews, staff was informed that participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous, and that no identifying information would be included. No direct quotes from staff were included in this report in the interest of further preventing identification of select staff members. Staff members were informed they could opt out of any questions they did not feel comfortable answering.

While the policy consultant team from the Public Good Initiative was brought on by YWCA Toronto to conduct the program evaluation and prepare this report, the team is a separate third-party that does not exist within the hierarchy or the organization of YWCA Toronto.



# SECTION 2

BACKGROUND



## 2.1 BACKGROUND

“Gendered Space” can be defined as space which is predominantly occupied by a single sex (Spain, 2008, p. 14). In the context of this report, the terms “gendered space” or “gender-specific space” will depict girls-only spaces. We explore gendered spaces in order to examine the benefits of girls-only spaces and whether such spaces support the development of girls’ skills. This section will consider parents’/guardians’ motivations as to why they sign their daughters up for these programs, as well as staff perspectives on how their programs meet a need and support girls in ways that is different and complementary to the skills they learn at school.

## 2.2 REASONS FOR PARTICIPATING IN GIRLS-ONLY PROGRAMS

### Why do parents and guardians sign their daughters up for girls-only programming at Girls’ Centre?

It was common across surveys that parents and guardians felt the YWCA Toronto Girls’ Centre is a safe space, which promotes empowerment and allows girls to engage in meaningful discussion with their peers, mentors and the Girls’ Centre staff. When asked why parents/guardians signed their daughters up to the programs, some of the responses were as follows:

*“I signed my children up for this program because it was the only all-girls empowerment program close to my home. Also, because it is a free program. Mentorship programs allow my child to be able to be more vocal about her ideas.”*

*“I signed my daughter up for the programs at the Girls’ Centre because I want her to build her self-confidence and to gain volunteer experience.”*



*“To improve her confidence and social skills.”*

*“To develop her social skills, as well as have a space to share freely ideas, and have discussion about issues she may not be able to talk about at school.”*

*“To build up her social skills with regards to self-confidence, in an environment where she feels safe to share her ideas and thoughts. At the same time, to have fun and meet other girls her age, and mentors who can help in overcoming her issues.”*

*“I feel my daughter needs to socialize and gain some leadership qualities.”*

It is clear that parents and guardians signed up their daughters so they can gain greater self-confidence, improve social skills, and meet new friends. Several parents and guardians also expressed that they wish to see improvement in their daughters’ public speaking abilities.

## Challenges faced by girls, as identified by staff

Staff members at the Girls’ Centre identified several challenges faced by program participants. These include, but are not limited to, identities surrounding gender, sexuality, race and class. Two of the staff members detailed how they and their colleagues strive to raise awareness of stereotypes and risk factors that many of the girls face in their daily lives, particularly those from racialized backgrounds.

Girls and staff members work together to develop inclusive and tolerant policies so that all participants feel comfortable and free to express themselves. By engaging the girls in creating these policies, the staff ensures that all are aware of the “safe-space” environment the Girls’ Centre strives to provide -- a space that is conducive to the sensitive topics the programs seek to address. One staff member articulated that feminist pedagogy is often not taught in schools, and that the programs at the Girls’ Centre seek to remedy this.

As the girls are at an age where they become more interested in, and aware of, social issues, the staff at the Girls’ Centre strive to provide educational resources, and girls are encouraged to discuss how they are personally affected by these issues. Staff facilitate active discussions



around sensitive subject matters and unpack stereotypes, all while encouraging girls to participate in these discussions. Staff members intentionally seek to educate girls about addressing oppression and judgement in their lives, something which one of the staff members said would not be as effective if there were boys present in the programs.

Furthermore, girls-only programming at the Girls' Centre is sensitive to, and embraces, perspectives from diverse cultures and religions. Staff members described how parents and guardians from certain religions and cultures were more comfortable sending their daughters to the programs at the Girls' Centre because of the safety practices and nature of the girls-only environment. One staff member expressed that some girls would not be able to participate in a similar program that involved boys and girls as their families would not allow it. Additionally, staff highlighted that the diversity of the girls in their programs enabled program participants to connect with, and learn about, other cultures and religions, promoting an environment of inclusivity, tolerance and mutual respect.

Staff members also expressed that since the programming at the Girls' Centre was free of charge, it was also accessible to different communities. Many youth programs have fees that present barriers to girls' participation. Girls' Centre programs often provide dinners and snacks for the girls as well to support girls facing food insecurity at home without treating them differently from peers. This demonstrates the all-inclusive nature of the programming, and that staff are sensitive to diverse needs and experiences.

One staff member highlighted that in other youth programs, safety is not so highly protected and ensured, and girls are vulnerable to harassment and violence from boys at these programs. Staff detailed that the girls themselves are more comfortable in the girls-only spaces because they could ask questions about female sexual health and consent without the fear of judgement from boys, as they might feel at school. Program participants at the Girls' Centre can access information regarding these topics and other matters from informed and qualified professionals that they might not otherwise have access to.



# SECTION 3

MAIN PROGRAM  
IMPACTS



# HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS

The intimate, inclusive environment at the Girls' Centre promotes empathy, respect and support for diverse experiences and personalities, while also promoting connections and positive peer relationships. Three major skills were highlighted as outcomes of the programming at the Girls' Centre: leadership, confidence and social skills. Trained, caring staff strive to provide emotional support to girls and contribute to their personal development and skill-building, laying the foundations for success. What follows is a detailed description of the experiences as reported by program participants, parents/guardians, and staff at the Girls' Centre.

## 3.1 LEADERSHIP

Many of the older participants aged 16 and over voluntarily join the Girls' Council where they take on a leadership role in planning Girls' Centre activities. As the girls become more comfortable assuming leadership roles, they arrive at the Centre with ideas about projects they want to work on and are able to influence activities and programming.

One of the Girls' Centre's programs that focuses specifically on leadership is the mentorship program, which involves matching older girl mentors aged 16-18 with groups of three to four younger girls (mentees) aged 9-13, throughout the duration of a school year. Mentors and mentees both benefit from these relationships, as they learn to work together, communicate and connect with girls from different ages and backgrounds. Mentors are selected through an application process, and are trained on several pertinent YWCA Toronto policies and procedures. They receive ongoing bi-monthly leadership training and coaching sessions on topics such as conflict resolution, strengths-based approaches to leading activities, and group management. In these sessions, staff regularly touch base with mentors to help them create strategies that best support their mentees.



Staff facilitate leadership activities in other programs at the Girls' Centre to foster the development of leadership for girls who are not mentors or Girls' Council members, with specialized workshops from outside facilitators and experts, in addition to regular programming.

Leadership skills are critical for girls and women to flourish in their public and private lives. Leadership benefits all aspects of life, including but not limited to academic and professional achievements, interpersonal relationship-building, and community involvement. Spaces created, led and inhabited by women provide an environment where women take charge and exercise agency in a way they might not otherwise be able to, as most public spaces have long been dominated by men (Spain, 2008). Poole et al. (2012) agree that gendered spaces allow for opportunities for girl/women empowerment that would otherwise be less available in a mixed-gender environment. While such skills can be acquired at any point in life, girls-only spaces promote such leadership development early on in life, which would benefit girls as they pursue different social, professional and academic endeavours.\*\*

## Experiences of Girls as Reported by Girls

### MENTEES

In each of the four focus group interviews the girls were asked "what have you learned here about being a leader?" The girls who are identified as mentees (aged age 9-13) reported that, through the mentorship program, they had learned the importance of being considerate of other people and to value their own opinion as a leader, as well as to have confidence in their leadership skills. They also learned the value of self-love and self-assurance, when faced with social conflict. The girls also expressed that they believe these skills were essential and the leadership experiences they gained from this program would help them in their future careers.

### MENTORS

The same themes emerged in the focus group interviews with mentors (aged 16-18). When asked "What have you learned here about being a leader?" mentors went into great detail explaining and showing by example how the mentorship program at YWCA Toronto had encouraged the development of leadership skills for them individually. Similar to the mentees, the mentors reported that they had learned the importance of

\*\*Refer to associated Literature Review sections 2b and 3 for a more detailed overview of literature supporting girls and women-only spaces for the development of leadership skills.



being considerate of other people and their opinions as a leader, strength and confidence in leadership, and the value of self-love when faced with conflict. Another important avenue for leadership development that was identified by the mentors was the initiative mentors had to take to reach out to their mentees. They pointed out that many girls will not reach out for help on their own, and that as a mentor, it is their responsibility to connect with the girls and take the time to communicate. Making connections and communicating effectively were skills identified for successful leadership -- and a skill they had the opportunity to learn as part of this program.

#### GIRLS' COUNCIL MEMBERS

In the focus group interviews with the Girls' Council, they reiterated the theme of leadership through their understanding of their learning experience and development in the Girls' Centre. Additionally, they explained how being voted into positions on the executive team, the creative freedom to plan initiatives and execute them, and having the confidence to be independent, were leadership qualities that they were able to harness through this opportunity. Through activities, such as projects to raise awareness for homelessness, they expressed that they were able to be creative, plan a project and execute it, while working together with different people who have different opinions.

## Experiences of Girls as Reported by Parents and Guardians

The following responses include a rating scale, as to how parents and guardians would describe their daughters' leadership skills since entering the program. The majority of parents and guardians indicated that they agree or strongly agree with the following statement: "What ways (if any) do you think your daughter's leadership skills have improved from participating in the program?" Explanatory responses are as follows:

*"My daughter is able to take a leadership role in her school team/group work. At home, she is able to give positive direction to her younger siblings. She is also able to work independently, without supervision when she is by herself. At her school basketball team, she is able to mingle with her other teammates."*

*"My daughter is much more confident in public speaking and has improved a lot in her decision making skills."*



*"I find that she speaks with more conviction."*

*"My daughter joined this program recently so it is too early for me to say anything, but I am hopeful she will definitely gain leadership skills."*

It can be seen, from parents and guardians, that girls have developed the ability to lead others, and make decisions on behalf of themselves and others. Several parents and guardians noted that in becoming better leaders, they have seen that their daughters are more able to work independently. It was also expressed that girls' public speaking abilities have also improved their speaking skills, in conversation, and in small and large-group settings.

## Experiences of Girls as Reported by Staff

In comprehensive interviews, staff identified ways in which the programming at the Girls' Centre creates an environment that fosters the development of leadership skills. Staff members model positive leadership to girls exposing them to healthy role models on a regular basis. This normalizes women leadership and encourages the girls to take on leadership roles as well. Staff members mentioned the girls are intentionally exposed to diverse women leaders, such as the diverse, all-women staff and guest facilitators who lead and teach workshops. Staff members also facilitate discussions with program participants about the skills and strengths of people who demonstrate leadership. The staff regularly organize leadership-focused workshops for the older girls at the centre and incorporate leadership development into many of their activities. For example, staff might ask a girl to serve dinner at the centre, take on note-taking duties during workshops, or lead small groups discussion activities. According to staff, many girls are initially reluctant to speak out and participate actively in the programs. As time passes, they become more comfortable asserting themselves, and taking initiative without being prompted. Several staff members detailed how the girls are surrounded by support from their peers and staff, which encourages them to take on more active roles in the programs.

As the girls participate in Girls' Centre programming, they learn to exercise their voice. Some girls have become YWCA Toronto representatives, speaking at events, and participating in other organizations as volunteers. Girls regularly engage with the community and become advocates for themselves and for others.



## 3.2 CONFIDENCE

At the YWCA Toronto Girls' Centre, the building and promotion of confidence is of paramount importance. Broadly speaking, self-confidence can be defined as "a feeling of self-assurance arising from one's appreciation of one's own abilities or qualities" (Merriam-Webster). There has been a growing sentiment that the promotion of confidence and self-esteem is instrumental in the well-being and success of girls (Girls Action Foundation, 2013, p. 3). In a Canadian survey of Grade 6 students, it was found that 40% of girls reported having self-confidence, however these rates dropped to 18% for Grade 10 girls (Girls Action Foundation, 2013, p. 16). Interventions that address adolescent girls' confidence is essential, as low confidence and self-esteem can persist into adulthood (Girls Action Foundation, 2013, p. 8).

In girls-only programs, such as at the Girls' Centre, girls can address their insecurities and learn to build their confidence in a meaningful way. In girls-only spaces, girls feel more comfortable, safe and supported by their peers to open up to others by sharing their feelings and experiences (Whittington et al., 2011). Girls today are increasingly exposed to media which presents unattainable and unrealistic standards of beauty. They face pressures at school to perform well and conform to societal norms of identity and behaviour that are often racialized and class-based. Many of the programs at the Girls' Centre involve discussions and interactive activities around the acceptance of one's own outward appearance, as body image is a major aspect that affects girls' confidence in themselves. The girls at the Centre come from diverse backgrounds and identities, and through participation in the program, learn to celebrate these differences with confidence.

### Experiences of Girls as Reported by Girls

#### MENTEES

In the focus group interviews with the mentees, the girls were asked "what do you like most about being in the mentorship program?" Various responses drew on the freedom given to them in this program to "be yourself, be open and speak your mind." Girls also discussed that not only have they become more confident in speaking to others and making new friends, but they have also been able to step out of their comfort zones and practice public speaking.



The mentees also expressed that through the mentorship program, they have learned that when taking on leadership roles, you have “to be proud of yourself, accept yourself and be confident.” Confidence to them was a key trait in good leadership. Finally, comfort and the ability to freely and confidently express yourself were main sub-themes that emerged in the discussions. When reflecting on how the Girls’ Centre program was different from school, or how it would be different had there been boys present, the mentees’ main response revolved around the idea that in this space “you can be yourself.” They identified that at school they feel as though they have to be perfect; there is a great deal of stress related to academic performance. They also mentioned being put down by their peers. In contrast to school, at the Girls’ Centre, mentees’ expressed having feelings of “relief,” “more comfort,” “positive mental attitude,” “less restricted” and “not judged.” They also explained how if boys were included in the programming, they would feel uncomfortable and would not feel the same confidence to safely express themselves as they do when they are in an all-girls environment.

#### MENTORS

In the focus group interviews with the mentors, the key theme of confidence arose when asked the question “what does a safe space look like to you?”. When describing a safe space, all the girls expressed that safe spaces allow for the ability to have confidence when they speak, without fear of judgement. The program, according to mentors, creates a space where they can meet other girls of multiple races and ethnicities, who they can identify with, feel comfortable to talk with, rely on and trust. Confidence is a key outcome of this environment according to the girls, because every individual girl is “accepted, represented and celebrated.” Each girl is made to feel good about herself.

#### GIRLS’ COUNCIL MEMBERS

In the focus group interviews with the Girls’ Council, they reiterated the theme of confidence when asked “what have you learned about yourself here?” Two key themes emerged from the focus group, including self-love and independence. Given the pressures of being a girl, sentiments that the program “teaches you self-love” and “nourishes your soul” were clearly stated by the girls as positively contributing to their overall confidence. They further explained that, through the Girls’ Council, they have learned to be independent and do things on their own. They expressed that they have learned to be confident about who they are, the colour of their skin, and what they have to say. They also discussed that by being part of the



program, they are able to confidently take the lead on charity and fundraiser activities.

## Experiences of Girls as Reported by Parents and Guardians

The following responses include a rating scale, and feedback as to how parents and guardians would describe changes in their daughters' confidence since entering the program. The majority of parents and guardians indicated that they agree or strongly agree with the following statement: "In what ways (if any) has your daughter's confidence improved from participating in the program?" Explanatory responses are as follows:

*"She speaks with more conviction and has more self esteem despite her physical limitations."*

*"I find that she speaks with more conviction."*

*"My daughter is improving in this area. She feels comfortable to ask questions when she needs to. She is also able to express herself better."*

*"My daughters are able to stand-up for themselves when need be."*

*"I think her confidence has improved a lot after participating in the programs at the Girls' Centre because she makes decisions confidently, without any hesitation about her decision-making skills."*

*"She is able to present in front of her class."*

## Experiences of Girls as Reported by Staff

In interviews, staff members at the Girls' Centre all indicated that program participants became more confident after participating in their programs. They identified confidence as one of the most important skills their programs seek to develop. They expressed the importance of creating an inclusive environment where girls learn to develop confidence in terms of appearance and ability. By tackling issues together as a group, girls are better able to connect with others and not feel alone in their struggles to find self-acceptance. Staff articulated that low self-esteem is a major issue



for many of the girls in their programs, and described how much of the programming seeks to teach, build and improve self-esteem. Improved self-esteem is directly tied to the development of a healthy, positive body image. Staff also provided support to the girls in accepting and expressing their identities, including sexual and racial identities. Staff intentionally gives credit to diverse personalities, traits and strengths that the girls exhibit, to demonstrate to the girls that everyone is worthy of love, respect and happiness.

One staff member communicated that a lot of young girls' self-worth is commonly externally-focused, based too often on the opinions of others, such as their peers, parents or teachers, or their grades at school. Staff focuses on teaching the girls to look inwardly and cultivate their self-worth instead. One staff member explained the manner in which girls-only programs benefit the development of confidence as girls express feeling more comfortable being vulnerable and demonstrating their intelligence without the worry of being made fun of or judged by boys. Another staff member stated that since the space is limited to girls, the girls are not as concerned with their clothes or their appearance, which they might be concerned with otherwise in other spaces.

Another staff member said that she continuously seeks to understand and connect with the girls, in order to better understand where their confidence level and modify supports accordingly. Staff regularly engages program participants in discussions around the importance of building confidence, and asks the girls for regular feedback in order to evaluate the effectiveness of specific methods and/or activities. A staff member reported that as girls become more confident, they are better equipped to stand up for themselves and others when facing opposition at school and in other environments.

Staff expressed that as many girls struggle with confidence in their abilities to succeed, staff helps bolster levels by encouraging and supporting participants in applications to jobs, scholarships and post-secondary institutions. The Girls' Centre strongly promotes taking ownership of one's future and encourages the pursuit of personal goals and ambitions.



## 3.3 SOCIAL SKILLS

The programming at the Girls' Centre promotes healthy social behaviours and skill development for girls to better relate to their peers, families, and others in their lives. Program participants benefit from staff modelling healthy social behaviours and relationships, as well as positive influences from their peers in a caring, supportive environment. Girls learn to communicate and work with others with different experiences and identities apart from themselves, as well as those with shared experiences and identities. Girls also learn how to stand up for themselves and confront negative behaviours and attitudes to maintain healthy boundaries. Staff regularly invite professionals to lead workshops centred around conflict resolution, interpersonal and communication skills, and how to work well in a team that is composed of diverse members with diverse skills and abilities.

The importance of young girls developing strong social skills is widely supported by existing literature. Henneburger et al. (2013) refers to relationally-based programming as especially important for improving adolescent girls' experiences with their peer groups. Strong peer relationships promote feelings of connectedness and acceptance, and represent a vital source of support for adolescent girls as they develop. Mentorship programs, such as the one at the Girls' Centre, also serve as a resource for the development of strong social skills that benefits mentees in the present and future. Mentorship is linked to improved social capital for adolescents, which translates into increased success in academic advancements and employment (Shier et al, 2018; Fruht & Wray-Lake, 2013).\*\*\*

### Experiences of Girls as Reported by Girls

#### MENTEES

One of the main questions asked in the interviews as related to social skills was "What have you learned here about being a friend?" The girls responded in a variety of different ways including:

- *"Always being honest."*
- *"Always being loyal."*
- *"Always being respectful and supportive."*
- *"Not bullying."*

\*\*\*Refer to sections 2 and 3 of the associated Literature Review for more information on how girls-only programming and female mentorships promote social skill development.



- *“Helping friends when they need you.”*
- *“Being more open to ask for help when you need it.”*
- *“Don’t pretend to be someone you are not.”*
- *“Accept others for who they are.”*

When discussing the mentorship program specifically, participants expressed that they liked having a mentor and someone to look up to and learn new things from. The social aspect of the program was mentioned unanimously as one of the aspects the girls loved most about the program. The ability to socialize, meet new people, engage in fun activities with other girls -- and all in an environment where they feel safe -- is very important to participants.

### MENTORS

The same themes emerged in the focus group interviews with the mentors. When asked “what have you learned about yourself here/what you learned about being a friend?” the mentors enthusiastically shared their experiences. Responses of participants can be categorized as follows: learned about personal strengths and weaknesses; group diversity helped with learning how to connect with different people; learned how to approach people and have good conversations; learned to connect with girls who were younger and find ways to relate to them, and so forth.

### GIRLS’ COUNCIL MEMBERS

In the focus group interviews with the Girls’ Council, when asked “what have you learned about yourself here/what have you learned about being a friend?” girls discussed themes of independence and confidence followed by individual growth and relationship building. Participants expressed that in terms of relationship building, in every relationship they form at the Centre, they learn positive lessons that can be applied to relationships with family members and friends external to the Centre. The program “helps you grow from inside out” explained one of the girls. The program also “teaches you to accept everyone” and to not “be judgmental and to respect yourself” added another girl. They further discussed accepting diversity of background and thought, particularly accepting those who face life challenges such as social or mental disabilities. They girls also expressed that the program does not change who they are but brings forward the best possible version. The environment they try to build should be “inviting, comfortable and warm” so that the people in it “feel cared for.”



## Experiences of Girls as Reported by Parents and Guardians

The following responses include a rating scale, as to how parents and guardians would describe their daughters' social skills since entering the program. The majority of parents and guardians indicated that they strongly agree or agree with the following statement: "In what ways (if any) has your daughter's social skills improved from participating in the program?". Explanatory responses are as follows:

*"She is very social with the teens in her school basketball team because she is the youngest in the school."*

*"My daughter began to participate actively with her friends and is confident enough to communicate with her friends and peers."*

*"She is not afraid to share her ideas or have opinions regarding different issues, no matter the audience. She easily makes friends."*

*"She is more open to sharing her ideas, without being judged. She's a bit of an introvert, so most times she would rather not say anything, but being in an environment with other girls is helping her overcome some of it."*

*"My daughter is an introvert, and I can see that she feels okay to be around people."*

## Experiences of Girls as Reported by Staff

Staff members emphasized that the development of strong social skills is critical to the overall well-being of participants at the Girls' Centre. Staff detailed how they seek to establish environments where the girls can test out and strengthen interpersonal skills, including making new friends, communicating with peers and authority figures, and conflict resolution. Staff members articulated that encouraging and teaching empathy is essential to the success of Girls' Centre programs. The diversity of participants at the Girls' Centre presented opportunities for the girls to connect with individuals from different backgrounds and identities. The staff encourages participants to question their underlying biases and promotes respect and inclusivity.



Staff identified the mentorship program as a valuable way for older girls to model healthy interpersonal relationships and communication to the younger girls. Mentors are able to encourage their mentees to get along with their peers, and provide guidance when their mentee has a conflict with another girl in the program.

Staff works to create an environment that manages and teaches conflict resolution, using non-violent communication approaches. One staff member highlighted that pre-teen and teenage girls are often in conflict with one another, and that it is essential for them to learn how to be positive and support each other without tearing each other down. Another outlined her approach to mediating conflicts between girls, which includes the facilitation of discussions between the girls in unpacking the underlying reasons for the conflict, helping them come to a resolution and developing a joint plan for the future. Many of the staff expressed how there is a no-tolerance policy for racism and harassment at the Centre, and that participants are actively involved in the formation of rules around safety and respect at the Girls' Centre.

When girls experience racism at school, or conflict with their teachers, one staff member described how she helps girls develop communication skills to be their own advocates and assert themselves in a respectful fashion. She mentioned that when these strategies are not sufficient, she steps in to support the girls by personally advocating for them at school and to their teachers.



# SECTION 4

ADDITIONAL  
PROGRAM IMPACTS



## 4.1 EXTRA-CURRICULAR VERSUS SCHOOL SPACES

Public schools are likely to be mixed-gender but often include gender-specific clubs, sports teams, gym and health classes as part of current curricula. However, Kuperminc et al. (2011) highlight that the environment provided by extra-curricular programs, outside the traditional school environment, provides young people with a space where they can establish and strengthen healthy behaviours, gain skills and connect with peers. Girls-only spaces outside of school are often regarded as more accessible and common than girls-only schools or girls-only sports teams at school. Private girls-only spaces (i.e. girls-only private schools) may be infeasible for the majority of participants due to financial barriers. Additionally, girls-only competitive sports teams have specific physical requirements and abilities that are not possessed by every girl. Focus group participants were asked either, “how would you have felt differently about the program if it was mixed with boys and girls?”, or “how would this program be different if there were boys here?” The findings are summarized below.

### MENTEES

When asked “how is this different than school?” the girls responded unanimously that “there are no boys” and/or “it’s only girls.” They discussed differences including no homework at the Girls’ Centre, more freedom to move around and make choices, and less judgement. In the Girls’ Centre they feel less pressure because they do not have to conform to a rigid school schedule and they have more freedom to move around. The girls also discussed that mentor support, compared to teacher support, is more focused and personal. When asked about how they would feel if there were boys here, the girls expressed that they would not feel as comfortable and would not be able to express themselves the same way. They mentioned that this program is unique because it offers a place of relief, in which girls can more openly talk about things that relate to girls specifically.

### MENTORS

Similarly, the mentors expressed that if the program allowed boys to participate, they would feel “a lot less comfortable,” change how they talk, and what they talk about. The presence of boys would also increase concerns about their appearance, what they look like. They expressed that inclusion



of boys would change the group dynamic because they cannot relate as well to the boys, especially in a mentorship situation. Most of the girls also expressed that one of the reasons they come to the program is because it offers an entirely different environment for them, in comparison to school, home and other spaces.

#### GIRLS' COUNCIL MEMBERS

The Girls' Council members unanimously agreed that had this program included both boys and girls, it would be a very different environment for the girls, as there would be different expectations and pressures. Their main concern was that their ability to express themselves would be limited in the presence of boys. The council members viewed the presence of boys in their all girls environment to have a negative effect. During their developmental years, when they are dealing with personal struggles, growth and physical development, the inclusion of boys would disrupt the safety and comfort they feel in the program to navigate through these challenges. The girls expressed that the inclusion of boys would bring the "problems" and "dramas" experienced in school into their safe space.

## 4.2 MENTAL HEALTH

This section discusses the manner in which girls-only programs support mental health of girls. As girls move through adolescence, they often endure mental health challenges related to self-esteem, depression, anxiety, body image, and so on (Whittington et al., 2011, p. 2). As a result, adolescents are at risk of experiencing numerous psychosocial risk factors, including hopelessness, low self-esteem, and trauma, and are more likely to engage in delinquency, violence, drug use and sexual activity at a young age (Morton and Montgomery, 2013, p. 22).\*\*\*\*

Girls-only programs are instrumental in providing a safe space for girls in their formative/early developmental years (late childhood-late teen years), when they are most susceptible to mental health challenges. In the focus groups with the Girls' Council, several girls noted that they feel as though their peers are accepting of all backgrounds, and of any challenges that girls may face in life. This includes mental illnesses and disabilities.

\*\*\*\*Refer to section 4a of the associated Literature Review for more information about mental health and girls-only programming.



Mental health is a central consideration of staff at the YWCA Toronto Girls' Centre. While the Girls' Centre provides one-on-one support services, it does not have the capacity to provide clinical psychotherapy to girls with significant mental health challenges. However, YWCA Toronto staff can and do direct girls in need of additional support to mental health resources.

## Experiences of Girls as Reported by Staff

In the interview setting, staff members at the Girls' Centre identified key challenges associated with mental health, which they have observed at the centre. Several staff members noted that such challenges are commonly seen across the older demographic of the Girls' Centre, however mental health challenges are seen in girls as young as 9 years old. It was stated that by the time girls get to high school age, they begin to disclose the personal issues and experiences that they have never expressed before, which they do not know how to talk about. These challenges are commonly related to depression and anxiety. Additionally, staff work with girls to help them navigate healthy relationships and practice consent in sexual relationships. Boundary-setting has also been identified by staff as one of the areas in which they work on with girls.

Staff also report that body image dissociation (the separation of one's mind from one's body - often supplemented with unhealthy or disordered behaviours) is a key challenge faced by girls at this age. Staff noted that such issues are furthered by the presence of social media in girls' lives, which are a major contributor to poor body image and negative self-esteem.

## 4.3 SAFE PRACTICES

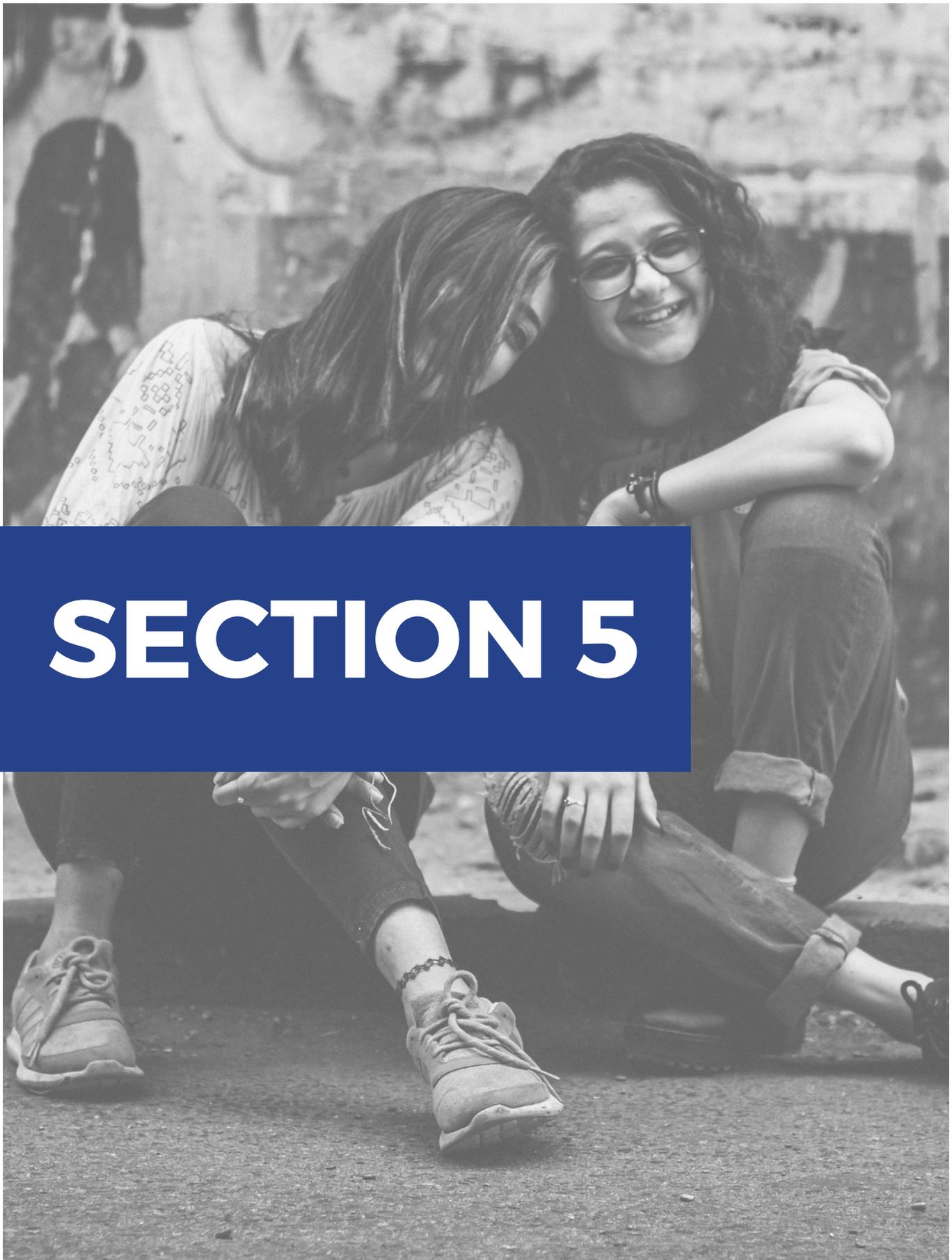
An additional program impact that was not intended to be asked about in the interview guides, but arose in staff interviews, was the education and empowerment of girls to take control of their internet presence and safe practices to protect themselves online. Girls' Centre staff are not only challenged to improve outcomes for the aforementioned skills, but also regarding skills in safety and the internet. Teaching and empowering girls to protect themselves on the internet, as well as utilize safe internet practices, is incredibly important. A challenge that the Girls' Centre staff have articulated



for the girls in the program is learning safety in navigating social media. Girls are often not educated in ways to protect themselves on the internet, which is why the staff seek to educate girls on safety and identity, and help them deal with instances of cyberbullying. Workshops centred around cyberbullying and safe social media practices, as well as how social media impacts body image and self esteem are all issues and challenges staff seek to address in the program.

Girls' Council members are given opportunities by the Girls' Centre to attend events and workshops led by social media companies to discuss certain policies and procedures that relate to them. Girls are also provided with opportunities to attend self-defence workshops, to learn physical and verbal methods which help them protect themselves in the community (i.e. catcalling, other forms of harassment, etc.).

The staff at the Girls' Centre seek to promote awareness and education amongst the participants in consent, bullying, violence against women, domestic violence, sexual assault, women's movements and feminism. Staff also help expose girls to issues and movements which interest girls, and which girls can relate.



# SECTION 5

FEEDBACK



## 5.1 FEEDBACK ON PROGRAMMING

Girls, parents/guardians and Girls' Centre staff were asked to provide feedback on YWCA Toronto programs through focus groups, surveys and interviews. This presented the opportunity for participants, parents/guardians and staff to express what they envision improved YWCA Toronto programming to look like, and what improvements they hope to see. It also presented the opportunity for parents and guardians to comment on what they most like about the programming.

### Feedback from Girls

#### MENTEES

Near the end of the interviews, the mentees were asked if there was anything they would like to change about the program. Responses were as follows:

- *"Having more space"*
- *"More mentors so that mentors do not have to be shared with too many other girls in order to foster more personal connections"*
- *"More outdoor activities"*
- *"Field trips"*

#### MENTORS AND GIRLS' COUNCIL

The mentors and Girls' Council members were also asked if there was anything they would like to change about the program. Responses were as follows:

- *"Have more girls"*
- *"More space, bigger building"*
- *"Girls don't know about this beneficial program - more awareness about the program"*
- *"More outreach - being able to include more communities"*

Some noteworthy responses from the girls referred to the program as "a hidden gem" and "a great program every girl should be a part of". It was also expressed that exposure of the program and more availability of it in different communities "can help so many girls."



## Feedback from Parents and Guardians

In the feedback survey, parents and guardians were asked “What do you like best about the programming at the Girls’ Centre?” Responses were as follows:

*“I like that it is fun and they get to be creative. Plus, having mentorship of the older girls is really an asset. It’s nice that different individuals would come in to share and discuss different issues.”*

*“I like that it’s fun. They look forward to going each week and doing different things. and it’s a safe space to have discussion to broaden their horizons on girl empowerment.”*

*“Girls-only programs are a safe space. Girls are able to meet mentors and connect with other girls.”*

*“Self development and empowerment. My girls have been able to be more verbal/vocal, self aware. Girls interact in group settings.”*

*“I like the way that everyone is treated equally, and have the opportunity to explore themselves. My daughter is getting more confident after attending the Girls’ Centre.”*

Parent/guardian surveys also provided insight into how parents and guardians would like to see the programs improve. When parents and guardians were asked “What do you like the least about the programming at the Girls’ Centre?” the responses were as follows:

*“It [the drop-in program] is once a week. It should be two or three days a week.”*

*“The Girls’ Centre needs more space to accommodate more pre-teens.”*

## Feedback from Staff

The feedback received from the staff was resoundingly positive; all staff members wanted to see the program expand to reach more girls and more



communities. One staff member expressed her desire that the program expand its outreach to LGBTQ+ youth, as well as to those of Indigenous backgrounds. Another staff member noted that outreach was often difficult to do when school is not in session, such as during March Break or the summer. Geography is also an accessibility challenge. Several staff members communicated that the hours of the program, and its location, make it difficult for some girls to access the Girls' Centre. Many of the girls come to the centre after school and face varying amounts of travel time that make participation difficult. Staff members emphasized the need for more resources to improve the accessibility of girls-only programming. As some of the girls are willing to travel from other areas inside and surrounding Toronto, such as from Markham and North York, this demonstrates the need and demand for more services like the Girls' Centre in the Greater Toronto Area. Another staff member expressed her desire for expanded programming to be targeted to certain marginalized and disadvantaged neighbourhoods to provide support and resources to girls most in need.

A major benefit one staff member highlighted was the flexible nature of the Girls' Centre programming. As staff are not required to closely follow a curriculum or reference guide, they are free to continuously change and adapt the programming to fit the needs of the girls at the Centre. This allows staff to orient programming that is sensitive to the girls specifically in their program, and help girls in areas where they need support.

Budget constraints were highlighted as a major limitation to the programming, not only in expansion, but in improvement and maintenance of the programming at the current Girls' Centre. Staff are challenged to exercise their creativity to stretch limited budgets, which continues to be a major barrier to expanded programming.

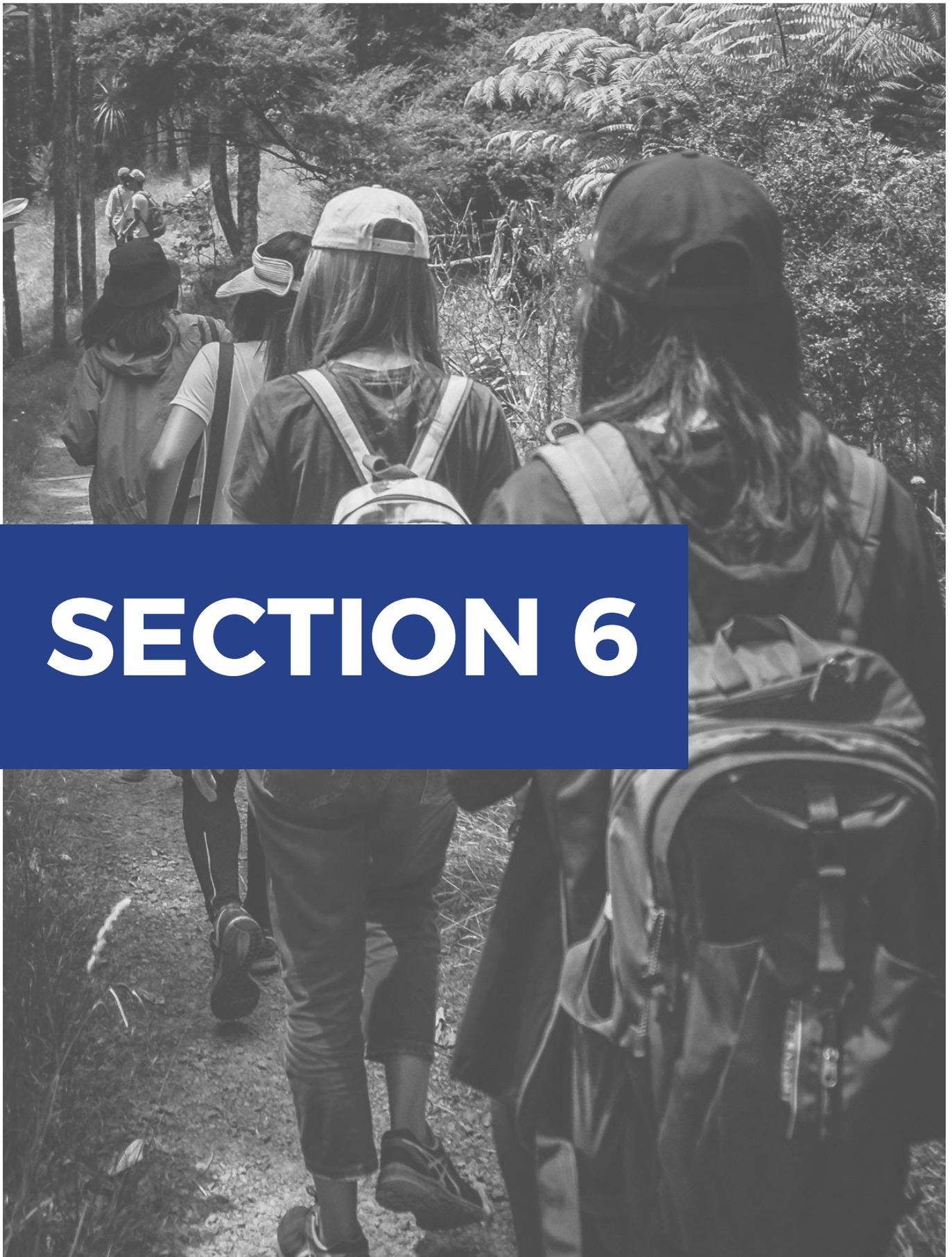
Another staff member described the limitations of the physical indoor space at the Girls' Centre. Since the common areas are located inside an office unit, there is no outdoor or gym space available for programs that focus on physical activity. Staff highlighted that there is a great deal of research and evidence to support the relationship between physical activity and leadership. One staff member mentioned that they occasionally take the girls to a nearby park in the summertime, however that is dependent on the weather and the number of staff on site.\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*Refer to section 4b of the associated Literature Review for more information on physical health and girls-only programming.



Another limitation, as highlighted by one staff member, is the varying hours of the current four staff on site. Three out of the four program facilitators and coordinators work part-time, and all four are only on site together once a week, which poses challenges to cohesive planning and communication amongst staff members.

Finally, several staff members expressed the need for greater awareness of the benefits of girls-only programming. One staff member mentioned that she would like to see more programming outreach to communities with diverse languages. Families and parents/guardians with little English-proficiency makes communication with staff challenging. Additionally, many families may not be aware of the Girls' Centre programs in their area.



# SECTION 6

YWCA CAMP  
TAPAWINGO



# YWCA CAMP TAPAWINGO

While this study did not evaluate the impact of all-girls summer camp, it is a key consideration in the study of all-girls programming, in relation to leadership, confidence and social skills.

Located in Parry Sound, Ontario, YWCA Toronto's Camp Tapawingo is a traditional overnight summer camp for girls aged 6-15 years old. Camp sessions vary from one, two, or three weeks. The camp facility also offers day camp, family camp and women's weekends as well as off-season rentals for groups, weddings and retreats. The camp has experienced, well-trained counsellors to lead and support girls for the duration of their experience at camp. Camp Tapawingo also offers a 4-week Leadership Training program (CIT) for 16 year old campers, as well as leadership development for 15 year old campers.

Camp Tapawingo provides several programs that promote friendship, leadership and skills-development at an all-girls summer camp. Programs are designed to meet the needs of girls of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities. Girls thrive as they adopt leadership roles, gain confidence and try new things in a girls-only environment. YWCA Toronto's Camp Tapawingo is one of the few remaining all-girls summer camps in Ontario.

In an interview with YWCA Toronto's Manager of Camping and Outdoor Education, the Manager noted that self confidence is one of the most positive outcomes of camp: "Most parents and guardians comment that they notice increased independence and maturity in their daughters." The manager also mentioned that "parents say that their daughters come back much more grown up and mature, and comfortable in themselves." When asked if there are programs to make camp more accessible to girls from marginalized backgrounds, the Manager explained that "Camp Tapawingo offers subsidies for eligible campers, and raises money every year in order to subsidize as many girls as possible. We reach out to other YWCA Toronto programs, to inform them about subsidies".

Girls-only counsellors, kitchen staff, maintenance and administration of the camp visually demonstrates to girls that they are in a safe space.



It was also noted that girls-only camp is a “unique opportunity” for girls as they may not have access to such an environment in their everyday lives, such as at school. Camp is a space that allows girls to trust their leaders and connect to other girls on a personal level.

When asked “In what ways would you like to see the camp program grow/improves in the next few years,” the Manager responded that there is a need for more mental health support of campers and staff, as mental health challenges are widely seen across camp. The Manager expressed that the program must continue to adapt and rise to these challenges, by providing support for girls’ mental health.



# SECTION 7

LIMITATIONS



## LIMITATIONS

This program evaluation has several limitations. Data needs were based on depth, rather than breadth, due to the limitation of collecting data from only one Girls' Centre. The small sample sizes reflect the limited number of staff, and availability and willingness of program participants and parents/guardians at the Girls' Centre to participate in focus groups, surveys and interviews. The participants of focus groups were not randomly selected, but rather presented with the opportunity to participate, and then had the opportunity to either opt-in or opt-out of the evaluation. As the sample sizes of this study were relatively small, they may not represent the views of all girls who attend the Girls' Centre. Randomization of the selection of participants may help to remove potential biases in the study. The findings of this report only serve as a confirmation of existing evidence regarding the benefits of girls-only programming, rather than conclusive determinations of outcomes.

There is a convenience bias selection in the sampling of the program participants and parents, as participation in the evaluation was solely on a voluntary basis. While criteria for focus groups were set by the policy consultant team, staff members also assisted in suggesting and organizing the program participants in the focus groups. Criteria included the number of girls in each focus group, and the roles of the participants in the programs (focus groups were restricted to mentees, mentors, and Girls' Council members). The scope of the program evaluation could not avoid this bias.

The selection of girls and parents/guardians are therefore indicative of the benefit of girls' programs, but not totally representative. A larger sample size, evaluated over a longer period of time, would improve the validity of the outcomes of the program. As the program evaluation was limited to the YWCA Toronto Girls' Centre located in Scarborough, Ontario, it is not representative of the experiences of all girls across Ontario/Canada. A possible improvement to this evaluation would be to expand the sample size to cover a broader geographical area, to include a more diverse range of ethnicities, race, sexual and gender identities, backgrounds, and experiences.

This study is also subject to the "Hawthorne effect," in which participants of the study alter their behaviour due to their awareness that they are being

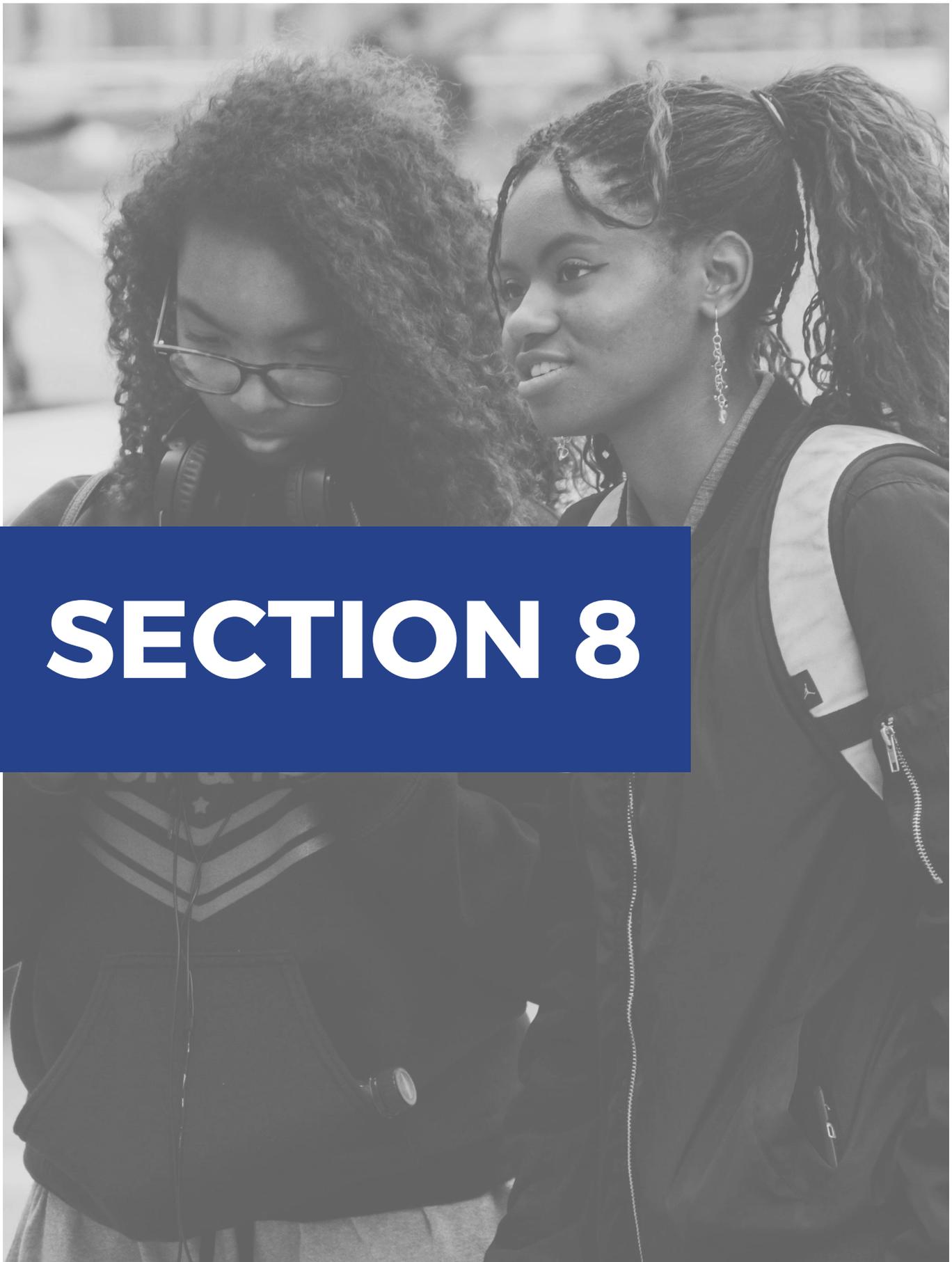


observed. In a focus group setting, individuals may feel as though they are obligated to say certain things due to the group dynamic, or in order to impress those facilitating the focus group. One staff member was present in the room at all times during each the focus groups, which serves as a possible limitation to the accuracy of the responses from the girls. Questions posed to focus groups were kept open-ended to encourage full and varied responses.

Furthermore, this study did not measure the confidence, social skills, leadership skills, or social/health outcomes of girls after their participation in girls-only programming. It evaluates the ways in which girls-only programming has benefitted girls currently and in most recent years, according to participants themselves, parents/guardians, and staff members. This study did not utilize panel or longitudinal data, in which a small sample is observed over a long period of time. This would demonstrate how girls benefitted in the long-term from girls-only programs, as they move into adulthood. This study predicts the long-term benefit of girls-only programs, but cannot confirm them.

Additionally, this research is not quantitative, and does not quantify the impacts of girls-only programming. It did not utilize quantitative research methods nor engage with statistical analysis at any point in the evaluation.

Lastly, YWCA Toronto Girls' Centre staff interviews are an essential element of this study, and staff did have a vested interest in placing the program in a positive light. However, Girls' Centre staff have less of an interest in this study than the YWCA Toronto administrators who ordered the program evaluation, who will use this report and corresponding literature review for both internal and external administrative purposes.



# SECTION 8

CONCLUSION



# CONCLUSION

The findings from this evaluation corroborate the conclusions from existing reports and studies, which argue in favour of girls-only spaces. This evaluation confirms that girls-only spaces have a net positive effect on girls' overall development. In discussions of leadership, girls, parents/guardians and staff all responded that the girls only programming had a positive effect on the girls' overall leadership skills. In discussions of confidence, girls, parents/guardians and staff all responded that the girls only programming had a positive effect on the girls overall confidence development. In discussions of social skills, girls, parents/guardians and staff all responded that the girls' only programming had a positive effect on girls' ability to socialize, and their social skills in general. Additional program impacts include improvements to mental health and safe practices in daily life. Staff in particular noted the benefits to mental health that Girls' Centre programming offers, however also mentioned that the program did not have the capacity to support girls with significant mental health challenges.

Our findings have demonstrated that there is a strong need for the expansion of girls-only programs in general, and the Girls' Centre itself. Overwhelmingly, girls, parents/guardians and staff wanted the programming at the Girls' Centre to expand its capacity. The girls referred to the program as "a great program every girl should be a part of" and that more exposure of the program and more availability of it in different communities "can help so many girls." Parents and guardians expressed a desire for the Girls' Centre to increase its capacity to provide more programming throughout the week - specifically the addition of more drop-in programs. The majority of staff feedback on the programs demonstrated the need and desire to expand the Girls' Centre programs to new locations, to reach and serve more girls in the Greater Toronto Area.

As reported by girls, parents/guardians and staff members, girls-only programming presents a unique opportunity for girls to develop these skills in a space separate from the mixed-gender public environments, such as the public school system. Girls-only spaces and specific programming provides girls with the opportunity to connect and support each other in a safe and secure environment, that is separate from boys, and to develop critical thinking skills that will lay the foundation for their future success.



## 8.1 AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There are many opportunities to further research the impacts of girls-only programming. As this program evaluation was limited in scope, further research that extends across programs, geography and includes larger sample sizes is recommended by the policy consultant team. There is a gap in research for randomized controlled trials in Canada for girls-only programming that could potentially provide more conclusive evidence to the full short-term and long-term impacts of the programming.\*\*\*\*\*

Additionally, as this program evaluation was limited to the experiences of the Girls' Centre, there is an opportunity for further research into the camp experience at Camp Tapawingo.

## 8.2 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors of this report would like to thank YWCA Toronto for their continued support and cooperation.

Specifically, they would like to thank Colette Prevost, Jasmine Ramze Rezaee, and Etana Cain for their ongoing guidance in the development of this report.

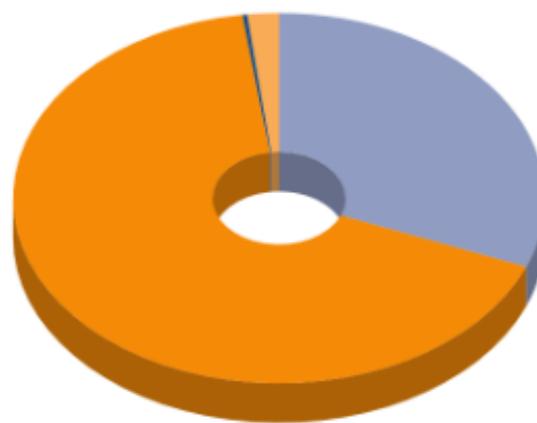
They would also like to deeply thank the many program participants, parents and staff at the Girls' Centre who made the completion of this report possible.

\*\*\*\*\*Refer to section 1 of the Literature Review in the appendix of this report for more information on girls-only programming in Canada, outside of YWCA Toronto.



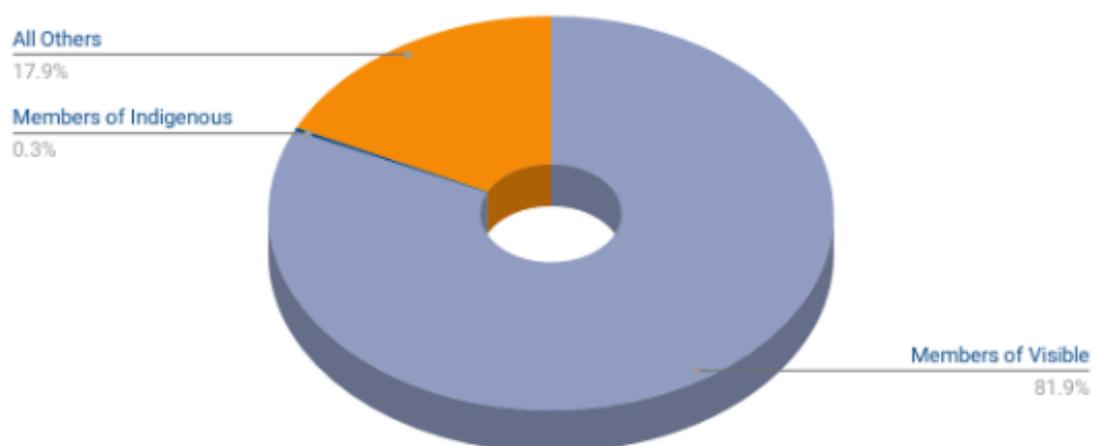
# APPENDIX 1

## Girls Centre Stats - 2017



● Girls (5-11) ● Youth Female (12-24) ● Gender Diverse (12-24) ● Adults Female (25-64)

## Diversity at the Girls' Centre - 2017





# APPENDIX 2

## Focus Group Questions (Mentees)

Verbally asked by policy consultant team in February 2019.

1. Icebreaker: Can you share your name and your favourite TV show?
2. What do you like most about the Girls' Centre?
3. What do you like most about being in the mentorship program?
4. What do you like to do with mentor?
5. How would you feel if there were boys here? How would it be different if boys were here?
6. What have you learned here about being a friend?
7. What have you learned here about being a leader?
8. Is there anything you would like to change about the program?
9. How is this [Girls' Centre programs] different from school?
10. How do you think this program will help your future?
11. What do you want to be in the future?



**Focus Group Questions (Mentors and Girls' Council)**  
**Verbally asked by policy consultant team in February 2019.**

1. Icebreaker: Can you share your name and your favourite TV show?
2. Why did you want to join the Girls' Council/Mentorship program?
3. How long have you been involved in these programs?
4. How many times a week/per month do you come to the Girls' Centre?
5. How would you have felt differently about the program if it was mixed with boys AND girls? Would this have changed your decision to join? Would this change your general experience of the program?
6. What do you like most about the program?
7. Is there anything that you would like to change about the program?
8. What have you learned about being a leader?
9. What does a safe space look like to you?
10. What have you learned about yourself here/what you learned about being a friend?
11. What would your friends say they have learned about you?



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8. What have you learned about being a leader?
9. What does a safe space look like to you?
10. What have you learned about yourself here/what you learned about being a friend?
11. What would your friends say they have learned about you?



## Parent/Guardian Survey

Printed and completed separately by willing parents/guardians in February and March 2019.

1. Why did you sign your daughter up for the programs at the Girls' Centre?
2. What do you like the most about the programming at the Girls' Centre?
3. What do you like the least about the programming at the Girls' Centre?
4. How often does your daughter attend the programs at the Girls' Centre? (once a week, twice a week, once a month, etc.)
5. If your daughter is finding the programs at the Girls' Centre challenging, what aspect is challenging for her? (Friends, physical activities, public speaking, other etc.)
6. Please circle the option below depending on how much you agree with this statement: "My daughter's leadership skills have improved from participating in the programs at the Girls' Centre."

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

Comment why you chose the option above.

7. Please circle the option below depending on how much you agree with this statement: "My daughter's social skills have improved from participating in the programs at the Girls' Centre."

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

Comment why you chose the option above.

In what ways (if any) do you think your daughter's social skills have improved from participating in the program?

8. Please circle the option below depending on how much you agree with this statement: "My daughter's confidence has improved from participating in the programs at the Girls' Centre."

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

Comment why you chose the option above.

In what ways (if any) do you think your daughter's confidence has improved from participating in the program?



## Staff Interview Questions

Verbally asked by policy consultant team in February 2019.

1. Could you tell me about your role at the Girls' Centre and a brief overview of the programs you are responsible for?
2. What are the age groups and proportions of ages that you work with in your specific programs?
3. How are different demographics (age, ethnicity, race, culture, gender, socio-economic status) represented in this program?
4. What do you consider to be different challenges the girls in your programs face?
5. From what you have seen from the YWCA Toronto programs, what do you believe to be the biggest strength(s) of the programming at the Girls' Centre? Weakness(es)?
6. To what extent are there improvements in girls' independence after participating in any Girls' Centre activities? Rate and Comment  
A. No Improvement   B. Slight Improvement   C. Average Improvement   D. Intermediate Improvement   E. Excellent Improvement
7. To what extent are there improvements in girls' confidence after participating in any Girls' Centre activities? Rate and Comment  
A. No Improvement   B. Slight Improvement   C. Average Improvement   D. Intermediate Improvement   E. Excellent Improvement
8. To what extent are there improvements in girls' leadership skills after participating in any Girls' Centre activities? Rate and Comment  
A. No Improvement   B. Slight Improvement   C. Average Improvement   D. Intermediate Improvement   E. Excellent Improvement



### Staff Interview Questions (continued)

9. To what extent are there improvements in girls' physical activity after participating in any Girls' Centre activities? Rate and Comment

A. No Improvement   B. Slight Improvement   C. Average Improvement   D. Intermediate Improvement   E. Excellent Improvement

10. What other specific skills are the most important for the girls in your program? Which of these skill sets does the Girls' Centre prioritize?

11. In what way does girls only programming support the development of these skills?

12. What do you believe are the benefits of creating girls-only spaces (vs mixed gender spaces)? AKA What do girls get out of girls-only spaces (vs mixed gender spaces)?

13. Are there any programs which aim to be particularly accessible to girls with marginalized identities, different socioeconomic backgrounds?

14. How do you work to promote equity, inclusivity and different needs in your programs?

15. How do you handle interpersonal conflict between the girls? Are conflict resolution skills in approaching adults taught in the programming?

16. How do you and your team ensure the safety of the girls in your program?

17. What do you feel is your biggest challenge when facilitating the programs in the Girls' Centre?

18. What is your opinion on the future of Girls' Centre programming (objectives, expansion, etc)?



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