

# Jewish Girls and Gender Norms

## A Thriving but Vulnerable Population



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## This Paper's Focus and Data

This report is grounded in extensive experience working on gender norms in various communities, interviews with upper-and middle-class non-Orthodox Jewish girls and their mothers in New York and Chicago, research from surveys conducted by the Research Training Intensive, and a review of relevant literature.

Because it is based so much on interviews, quotes, and surveys, some readers may find sections uncomfortably personal or close to home. This is a reflection of the paucity of hard data on Jewish girls, rather than any problems particular to this community.

In fact, as this report hopefully makes clear (and its *raison d'être*), Jewish girls and gender norms are dramatically understudied, and we would also welcome a deeper, more qualitative understanding and documentation. That will have to wait until there is more academic focus on Jewish girls—an outcome that this paper would welcome.

In addition, this is intended as an introductory report. It doesn't claim to cover the diversity of experience of Jewish girls in the US. For instance, the different experiences of Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, and Sephardic girls of color weren't more researched, and would be very welcome in future reports.

Thus, although this paper uses the term "Jewish girls," it's important to note that the category encompasses a diversity of demographics, identity, cultural norms, and religious practices that this paper does not, and does not claim to, exhaust or encompass.

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*"We're starting to relate things that were not related before. Eating disorders in girls, obsession with boys—which often leads to deferential behavior—the very few women who are running Jewish communities, and very few Jewish female role models for girls. All of these things were separated in the past. Now it's all becoming part of one big story that's actually undermining our girls and our dreams for our girls."*

~ Parent

*"I grew up in a very gendered atmosphere where there were two different sets of expectations: for my brothers and then for me. I was definitely hyper-gendered and hyper-sexualized by my parents and my brothers. I was told I needed to be a certain weight in order for boys to find me attractive ... I was told that I should wear certain kinds of clothes, do certain kinds of activities. My father made a joke that I would go to college to get my 'MRS degree.'"*

~Young Queer-Identified Woman

*(Additional comments from parents and girls that appear in the sidebars of the following pages were drawn from interviews conducted for this project or Ma'yan's Research Training Intensive.)*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A DEEPER CONVERSATION

Learning to negotiate gender norms and expectations is a central developmental task for nearly every adolescent girl. This task is made all the more challenging because the girls—including Jewish girls—get very mixed messages about feminine expectations and how to meet them.

For instance, popular Western notions of tall, willowy, athletic bodies with small features and straight, blond hair may be challenging for any young woman whose features diverge from that ideal. And, of course, the vast majority of women, including many Jewish girls, can't possibly measure up.

Jewish girls also get mixed messages about food, cooking, and weight ("Eat! Eat! ... But don't get too fat!"). This can be especially important because cooking, serving, and food-centered rituals involving women are woven throughout many communities' Jewish practice.

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### **Learning traditional gender ideals is a central developmental task for every adolescent.**

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Girls may learn that they are expected to excel academically and achieve professionally while simultaneously getting the message that they need to attract and marry high-status, high-achieving males who can support them financially and psychologically for the rest of their lives.

While many communities go out of their way to encourage girls to become leaders, there are also long-standing patriarchal traditions in many homes, schools, and synagogues that reflect and reinforce the cultural and religious primacy and centrality of males.

Despite such known impacts and the vulnerabilities they create, Jewish women and girls are almost totally absent from the academic literature in this area, and more studies and data are greatly needed.

## ABOUT GENDER NORMS

Decades of research have found that when young women (and men) internalize rigid gender norms for masculinity and femininity, they have markedly lower life outcomes in areas such as education, economic security, or basic health.

As a result, some researchers have begun referring to gender norms as a “gateway belief system.” Their purpose is to underscore how once a young person internalizes rigid gender ideals, it can impact them across a range of related areas.

In this context, “gender” does not mean the biological fact of being male or female, or specific traits usually associated with one sex or the other. Rather, “gender” refers to the social rules, customs, and scripts for being a woman or man—what are commonly known as “gender norms.”

It is these cultural scripts and expectations for manhood and womanhood that are often major underlying causes for gender inequities that can disempower women and girls.

Studies suggest that there is a surge—a “gender intensification” period—from ages 9 through 14, when interest in traditional gender norms accelerates and belief in them solidifies.

During this period, learning and navigating the “rules” of masculinity for boys and femininity for girls—and the costs and benefits associated with them—is a central developmental task for nearly every adolescent.

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### **Girls who internalize the “three Ds” of being Deferential, Desirable, and Dependent often have lower life outcomes.**

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For example, young women who internalize narrow codes of femininity that prioritize what TrueChild has called the “three Ds” of being Deferential, Desirable, and Dependent are more likely to defer to male sexual prerogatives, to have unplanned pregnancies, to develop disordered eating, and to become financially dependent.

Gender norms can also impact young men and boys. Young men who internalize narrow codes of manhood as defined by strength, aggression, sexual prowess, and emotional toughness are more likely to have disciplinary problems at school or engage in sexual risk-taking, LGBTQ harassment, or partner abuse.

Gender binaries can be especially challenging for Jewish youth who identify as LGBTQ and/or are gender nonconforming.

## REVOLUTION OF THE OBVIOUS

In many ways, this is not surprising information. Nearly anyone who has ever had an adolescent at home or in the classroom is already familiar with the power of group norms to influence everything from dress and hairstyle to school course selection and romantic relationships.

Gender norms are something that nearly everyone has experienced, and they are well-documented in thousands of studies as a major issue. Yet they remain something that almost no one really discusses.



**“The powerful influence of gender norms on an individual’s actions is one of the foundations of gender inequality.”**

### **LGBTQ Girls**

Jewish girls come from a range of racial, ethnic, class, geographic, and even religious backgrounds. They also come from families with two moms or two dads; some identify themselves as gay, trans, queer, or within non-binary genders. But one thing they have in common is being held to narrow gender expectations. These take the form of tacit assumptions about girls’ sexuality (straight) and gender identity (cisgender, i.e., being not transgender). These subtle expectations about “normal” gender and sexuality—pressure to date the “right boy,” be slender and wear the “right clothes” to attract (and be attracted to) a male and eventually become his wife—are what academics call “heteronormativity.” And while heteronormativity shapes the experiences of all Jewish girls, for those who identify as (or come to realize they are) gay, trans, or queer, contending with those rules can be particularly difficult, frustrating, and painful.



## A Gender Dictionary

“Gender” is used in multiple contexts. Here’s a quick guide.

### Gender Equality/Equity

Ensuring equal access to resources, power, and opportunity for women, men, children and families, LGBTQ, etc.

### Gender Expression

How we express feeling feminine and masculine through dress, hair style, adornment, posture, etc.

### Gender Identity

An inner sense of being male, female, or neither; useful when discussing transgender individuals who feel a conflict between their sex and gender identification.

### Gender Lens or Gender Analysis

Being aware of the impact of gender equity and/or gender norms on a problem or issue.

### Gender Norms

Socially constructed ideals, scripts, and expectations for how to be a woman or a man.

### Gender Roles

Social and behavioral norms for how men and women are expected to act: being a doctor or nurse, being martial or maternal.

### Sexual Orientation

Romantic attraction to members of one or more sexes.

### Transgender

Umbrella term for those whose self-identity does not conform to conventional binary woman/man, including those whose gender identity varies from their birth-assigned sex (e.g., transsexual).

Yet when we are creating policies, programs, or funding priorities for young people, it can seem like everything we know as parents, siblings, or educators about children and norms gets left behind.

It’s as if we work from what might be called an “empowerment model,” which assumes that every young person is empowered and autonomous, reaching logical decisions by weighing the facts and able to take individual action.

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### Attitudes about womanhood can act like “guard rails,” restricting girls’ choices and pushing them toward a narrower set of roles.

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Such a model describes the reality of very few adolescents. The result is that programs, policies, and funding priorities designed to help young women usually ignore gender norms.

Even those who say they use a “strong gender lens” usually prioritize effects (such as gender inequalities between women and men) while overlooking underlying causes (such as gender norms).

Part of the challenge is that it’s relatively difficult to think in terms of attitudes, beliefs, and practices. Yet when it comes to womanhood, they can act like invisible “guard rails”: locking inequalities into place, pushing young women toward traditional caretaking roles and a smaller range of options that restrict their choices when it comes to family, career, and community engagement.

This is not just the power of concrete, visible discrimination, which many of us have learned to recognize and challenge. The effects of feminine ideals often show up as a subtle kind of “negative power” or absence: needed reinforcement that never came, doors that just didn’t open, or nontraditional choices that somehow seemed out of reach.

## GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES

This is why major international institutions such as CARE, CRW, UNAIDS, UNFPA, and WHO\*\* have all launched gender transformative initiatives and found them effective.

“Gender transformative” (a term coined by Geeta Rao Gupta, an authority on at-risk youth and gender) refers to programs, policies, and funding priorities that highlight, challenge, and ultimately try to change rigid gender norms and the inequities that result.

USAID no longer funds new programs that lack a strong gender analysis, and PEPFAR has made changing masculinity norms one of their top three priorities in dozens of countries.

The World Bank—which has invested hundreds of millions of dollars to improve gender equity for women and girls around the globe—has initiated an extensive and highly public effort to move gender norms to the center of its work.

The Bank found that there was an invisible ceiling preventing further improvement for women and girls, regardless of how much money and programs were made available.

After interviewing thousands of people in dozens of countries, the Bank determined that the common factor was cultural gender norms. If community attitudes dictated that “*Women and girls don’t do X,*” no amount of funding, programs, and opportunity was going to move substantial numbers of girls into *doing X* over time.

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**If community attitudes are that “Girls don’t do X,” no amount of funding and programs will move substantial numbers of girls into X.**

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As one Swedish senior manager at the Bank observed, “We’re not doing this because it’s trendy or politically correct—we’re data-driven economists after all—we’re doing it because the numbers show it works better.”

The implication is clear: young women and men have better life outcomes when we teach them to think critically about rigid gender norms, than if we ignore them.

“The good news,” declares World Bank President Dr. Jim Yong Kim, “is that social norms can and do change.”

On that positive note, the rest of this paper will focus on specific challenges faced by young Jewish women and girls, and close by offering some suggested concrete action steps.

By looking not just at women per se, but also at their age, religion, and culture, we’re doing what theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw calls an “intersectional” analysis, and trying to understand different and overlapping aspects of their experience that can undermine their ability to reach their full potential and result in lower outcomes.

## IMPACTS FOR JEWISH GIRLS

### Body Image

Beauty is a defining aspect of ideal femininity. In fact, by some estimates up to 80% of all compliments a girl hears growing up will be about her appearance and looks. “You’re such a beautiful little princess!” is something nearly every parent hears about their daughter, sometimes even from strangers.

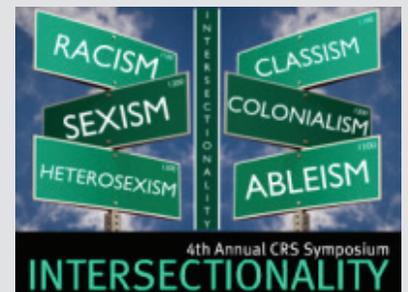
The fact that feminine norms stress appearance over substance—that girls’ looks are much more important socially and culturally than their courage, strength, and intelligence—is deeply problematic.

It is a sign of how strongly feminine norms are grounded in a presumptive heterosexuality and the expectation that one must appear physically attractive to males.



Dr. Jim Yong Kim,  
President, World Bank Group

**“The good news is that social norms can and do change.”**



### Intersectional Approach

Addressing different facets of oppression—race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, etc.—as interacting in people’s lives rather than compartmentalizing them and treating each as independent of the others.



“My friends are interested in social justice and read about sexism in the media and know it’s a problem—then in the same breath, they talk about how they’re too fat or their thighs are too big.”

“There are days when I will feel so ugly that I don’t even want to leave my house.”

“Those [North Shore] women just keep getting thinner and thinner, and they run around all day in tracksuits. Those exercise suits cannot be comfortable. They’re making some kind of statement that ‘I am a greyhound, and I am constantly exercising.’ It’s become this status thing that you run around in exercise wear at all hours of the day.”

“In the Jewish community, we have to eat, but don’t be above a size zero. Keep eating, but don’t exceed size zero. Because that may impact your marriageability.”

“I see girls wearing these really short, tight dresses, really high heels, uber feminine, uber sexualized, and they’re 13 at their bat mitzvah. And it is startling and horrifying, to see it. It’s girls trying to look like their moms, and the moms trying to look like the daughters.”

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## Girls’ appearance and beauty are given much more social attention than their courage, strength, and intelligence.

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Even more problematic is that pop culture femininity often promotes ideals of tall, lean, athletic white bodies with small features, blue eyes, and long, straight blond hair. Such ideals are unrealistic and unachievable for many if not most girls.

They can be especially challenging for the many Jewish girls whose body types and features don’t conform to these ideals. This includes those with shorter, full figures, larger and more expressive features, dark eyes, and dark wavy hair, as well as others whose ethnic or genetic heritage may predispose them to diverge from media ideals.

As author Leslie Goldman once wryly noted, “Try Googling ‘Famous Jewish models,’ and you practically hear e-crickets chirping.” Except for a handful of prominent exceptions (Natalie Portman, Gal Gidot, etc.), her observation is still often true.

While a minority of Jewish girls are tall and lithe with blond hair (“*Funny, you don’t look Jewish ...*”), many others may end up “preoccupied with how ‘wrong’ their bodies are,” becoming anxious, depressed, and self-rejecting.

Such feelings may also be implicated in the desire for hair straightening, cosmetic surgery, and extreme diets—all to fit bodies to standards that are simply unrealistic.

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## Some researchers are now calling eating disorders the “addiction of choice” among Jewish girls.

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### Food, Eating, and Weight

Complicating matters, Jewish girls also tend to get mixed messages about bodies when it comes to weight, food, and eating.

This is not, of course, at all unique to Jews. Thinness is integral to Eurocentric standards of feminine beauty.

Yet with matzo ball soup, potato *latkes*, bagels and lox, kreplach, kosher dills, and knishes (staples of Ashkenazi-American cuisine), Jewish culture places food lovingly at the center of faith and cultural traditions while also placing such a premium on female thinness.

In many Jewish homes, the rhythms of the week (e.g., Shabbat), holiday observances, and major life events are grounded in the preparation and serving of food, much of which is traditionally the responsibility of women and girls. For Jews in many homes, therefore, successful womanhood can be intricately bound up with being successful with food. As with thinness, this is also not at all unique to Jews—food and food rituals are at the center of many cultures.

At the same time, some Jewish girls may hear incantations, “Eat, eat! ... But don’t get fat;” “Look at you: you eat like a bird. You’re only skin and bones!” and “Enough already with the desserts!” from family members, not to mention strangers. The end result is that a young woman’s weight is treated as familial (or even communal) property.

While it’s true that in American culture girls’ bodies are often objectified and subject to public comment, such behaviors can have increased impact when they come from one’s own family.

Studies show Jewish women have a higher incidence of disordered eating than almost any other ethnicity. Some researchers are now calling it the “addiction of choice” among Jewish girls.

With 39 percent of 14-year-old girls reporting being or having been on a diet, the troubling trio of body-weight dissatisfaction, dieting, and disordered eating may no longer be aberrations but on their way to becoming a normative experience for adolescent girls.

If so, the Jewish girls among them may be uniquely vulnerable not only because of the challenges of body image noted above, but also because eating disorders like bulimia and anorexia are closely linked to pressures to control, achieve, and perfect—pressures not unique to Jewish adolescence, but certainly prominent features of many Jewish girls’ experience.

## Achievement

Young Jewish women learn early that they should aspire to be intelligent, accomplished, and well-educated. In practice, this translates into bringing home A’s, having extensive (and sometimes over-scheduled) extracurricular activities, and laying the groundwork for matriculating to an Ivy League or similar elite college.

In addition, they should have a high-status boyfriend while remaining thin, cool, and chic—and appear to accomplish all this effortlessly.

We want our young women to be happy, to be themselves, and to enjoy their lives—but they’d better also excel academically, be leaders, and achieve at the same time. As the *New York Times* puts it, girls today are expected to “be yourself ... but be perfect too.”

This is an extraordinarily tall order for any adolescent. If that wasn’t enough, communal standards of achievement ensure that practically every other girl is trying to do the same things.

While discussing the *Race to Nowhere*, documentary filmmaker Vicki Abeles (herself a Jewish mother of three) noted that the constant pressure to achieve from an early age can end up stressing out Jewish girls.

As one New Jersey mother observed, “We’ve always emphasized education as a means of survival and thriving in the world. Jewish parents get caught up in this illusion that if we do A-B-C-D, all will be well.”

**“And this little girl said, ‘My mom hasn’t eaten dinner at the table with the family for years. She makes stuff for us, but she doesn’t eat.’”**



**“In Jewish families, around Jewish holidays, so much of it is being together with your family, and just eating and consuming huge amounts of food during times of celebration. And during times of sorrow—when people are sitting shiva—it’s not just about people coming to visit but, literally, people bringing trays and trays of food to help comfort.”**

**“Women and girls are still expected to be everything—the intelligence, to achieve in their professional life and their education, and also to be great wives, great moms, leaders in the Jewish community, and to juggle all of those things very successfully.”**

**“My parents want me to go to an Ivy League college while saving the world all summer.”**

"I went to Jewish summer camp for years, and we competed at tennis, swimming—every activity. I was, at best, mid-level. Then one summer I went to a nondenominational camp. The kids were just focused on having fun. Suddenly I was number one at everything. That was the first time it struck me how competitive we all were."

**"The Jewish community puts such value on wealth and success and a good marriage. The end goal is the income and the status. The marriage is just a conduit to it. The dangerous norm here is this fixation on wealth and success."**

"The mother flies all over the world doing computer kinds of leadership things, and probably makes three times what he does. He was proud to be a stay-at-home dad for their daughter—he loved it. But people looked at him funny—there was a stigma around it. He pushed against it, and still does, but there was a stigma. She was the breadwinner in a Jewish family, a highly involved Jewish family. There's such a bigger stigma in the Jewish community if you're not the breadwinner, if you're not the guy taking care of your family. There were snide remarks to him all the time."

**"They want a divorce lawyer with a neurologist for a husband, with kids and a nice house in Sands Point."**

The need to always be perfect, to always succeed, can make Jewish girls feel like they always need to be "on." Being perfect can also be a means of people-pleasing and submitting to others' expectations—another version of the demand that girls should always be "nice."

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### **For girls, excelling can be a way of people pleasing and submitting to expectation—another version of the demand to always be "nice."**

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It's no surprise that communal pressures on Jewish girls to achieve from an early age have been tied to eating disorders, drug use (to stay up nights and get more done), anxiety, or even depression or self-harm.

Pressures around social and romantic competition can also encourage bullying among girls. Studies have repeatedly found that girls who strongly internalize rigid ideals of femininity are more likely to engage in social aggression to achieve or maintain status among peers.

### **Marriage, Leadership, and Economic Security**

As a society, we remain ambivalent about encouraging girls to become physically strong, emotionally tough, and socially aggressive—all traditionally masculine virtues.

We hesitate to encourage them to become really strong and powerful. Femininity has always had a complicated relationship with power.

In fact, studies consistently show women wielding real authority are perceived as cold, harsh, and unfeminine, and penalized accordingly (as Sheryl Sandberg brilliantly highlighted in her book *Lean In*.)

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### **Be a leader with an advanced degree and strong career, but marry a high-status male who supports you financially and psychologically.**

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Unfortunately, some girl-serving programs omit addressing the underlying norms that push girls away from being leaders and feeling strong or powerful, and toward communal action, conflict avoidance, and traditionally feminine virtues, thus necessitating such programs in the first place.

Many Jewish girls receive contradictory messages on this front. On one hand, they're expected to become high-achieving leaders who earn advanced degrees with strong career prospects.

On the other hand, they are also expected to attract and marry an older high-status Jewish male who can (and actually may) support them financially and psychologically for the rest of their lives.

Girls who are fortunate enough to come from high-wealth, high-achieving families can face enormous pressure to maintain family advantages and privileges by being a top student and a top earner.

As one mother put it succinctly, “Then the Jewish stuff on top of that says: be attractive, be deferential, get a really high-wealth Jewish guy.

“So the girls have to put together and synchronize these two things that are often at odds with each other ... How can a girl be as brilliant as she needs to be to get into Harvard but wear four-inch stilettos and a very short skirt, have the most expensive bat mitzvah, and date the richest boy in the congregation?”

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### **Some Jewish patriarchal traditions appear to endorse an ideal of observant womanhood that places men and boys first.**

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Complicating this, some Jewish patriarchal traditions appear to endorse an ideal of observant womanhood that valorizes men and boys as head of the family and places women second.

Successful womanhood emphasizes matrimony and family above all else—not professional excellence and a lifetime of career dedication.

Thus, in many American families, men manage businesses; women manage homes and raise children and, if they have time, also have careers.

Even in families where women have their own incomes, men are often expected to be primary breadwinners, manage the finances, do the investing, etc. These are very traditional gender role expectations for manhood and womanhood.

Certainly those expectations will complicate the task of any parent who wants to make sure his or her daughter grows up financially literate and economically self-reliant. Girls learn from an early age that womanhood need not include financial acumen, earning lots of money, or mastering investing. Those are *guy things*.

Following a presentation on the proposal for this project, the lead author of this paper was handed a small piece of paper by an accomplished community leader.

On it was scrawled, “Older Taller Stronger Smarter.” When asked what this meant, she replied, “That’s what I was told to find in a husband.”

Informed of this, another community leader asked, “So what does that mean many of our husbands were told to look for in a wife: Younger Shorter Weaker Dumber?”

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### **Are rigid feminine norms and male centeredness a factor in some girls’ drift from a religious toward a more cultural affiliation?**

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#### **Religious Affiliation**

A small number of those interviewed saw rigid feminine norms and male-centeredness as a toxic combination within their Jewish communities, and speculated that it could be one factor driving some girls away from a religious—and toward a more cultural—affiliation.

**“When it comes to financial literacy, women and girls—girls, in particular—aren’t sat down at a young age and really given the tools and the knowledge they need about how to make healthy, smart financial decisions for themselves and the need to maintain control over their finances once they’re married and have a family.”**

**“These women realize they have backed themselves into a corner. They’re utterly, financially dependent upon men, their husbands, despite the fact that they, too, may have a Harvard MBA. It’s probably worthless now since they’re 10 years out of the workforce. So they’ve put themselves into such a corner, and they don’t want their daughters to end up in the same situation.”**

**“I don’t like the separation of sexes that some Orthodox follow. Women are seen as a ‘distraction,’ and that’s unfair. There is no reason why men should be able to do things in Judaism women can’t.”**

**“I work with a modern Orthodox rabbi, and he still says, ‘The most important thing you should be doing is having kids, and raising a family, and your career should come second.’ But he’s also asking me to attend all these meetings out of town. The messages are still out there, and they’re just so inconsistent. ”**



On this point, the analysis of one mother perhaps bears repeating in full:

“Within the Jewish community, I’ve seen more of girls holding themselves back. Whether it’s in bat mitzvah class, in Shul, in community activities, these are really super bright girls who basically say nothing, and the boys just dominate all of the public forums. They start progressively withdrawing from religious environments as they become aware of how gendered they are.

“So when everyone takes a bar and bat mitzvah class, the rabbis teaching them are all men. In one class they handed out photographs of what Jews wear in different parts of the world, ranging from the extreme ultra-Orthodox to a hippie in California. Their point was that Jews can look any which way. Except there wasn’t one picture of a Jewish woman.”

Simultaneously—although it’s beyond the scope of this paper—there are important conversations within North American Jewish communities about the “feminization” of Jewish religious/ritual life that are also linked to gender norms.

While nominally focused on growth and visibility of women in rabbinic posts, concerns about “feminization” also point to deeper issues of gender norms and discomfort over traditional roles within the Jewish religious leadership that cross denominational boundaries.

## **IN CLOSING: A SILENT CONVERSATION**

In many ways, the issues raised by traditional gender norms within Judaism go deeper than specific program areas such as eating disorders, body image, or youth leadership.

Within modern Judaism lies an enormous contradiction. In many ways instinctively broad-minded politically, many congregations have worked hard to integrate a feminist (and sometimes even queer) sensibility into their religious and cultural practices.

At the same time, a substantial minority of women and girls interviewed for this report still say that they are often encouraged or even pressured to conform to very traditional and sometimes even rigid gender expectations.

Moreover (despite progress by Advancing Women Professionals and others), males overwhelmingly hold the top leadership positions in synagogues, federations, and other community and national organizations.

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**Some tell stories of being stuck in gender roles that would fit comfortably in the 1950s, of feeling like second-class citizens in their own culture.**

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So even as we encourage girls to excel, to be the best they can be, to grow to be our next generation of leaders, many are also learning in very subtle and not so subtle ways that they are still expected to play secondary and supportive roles to the men and boys in their lives. Some even wonder if this is implicated in the drift of some young women away from a religious and toward a more cultural affiliation.

One mother of four girls told how complete strangers would walk up after shul to ask if she was going to try one more time for a son. She wondered if things were reversed, and she had four sons, how many people would walk up after shul to ask if she was going to try one more time for a daughter?

In such small gestures are long-standing and deeply held attitudes made clear. These issues are not unique to Judaism. On the contrary, the larger culture is saturated with images and messages extolling the value and centrality of males, and the need for girls to find value in their attractiveness to and support for males.

What does set the women and girls interviewed for this study apart is how sophisticated, empowered, and accomplished many of them are. In ways large and small, they are the educated, capable women whom first- and second-wave feminism envisioned—and what we want girls today to become.

Yet some of them tell stories of being stuck in gender roles that would fit comfortably in the 1950s, of feeling like second-class citizens in their own communities, culture, and religion.

Many of the mothers interviewed very much want a world for their daughters that is more equitable and affirming than the one in which they grew up. Yet they fear that their daughters—and their dreams for their daughters—are quietly being undermined.

What this suggests is that while teaching girls to think critically about rigid feminine norms is a strong first step, real change may require deeper *structural challenges* to long-standing traditions and norms that tend to hold women and girls back.

It is important to note that such concerns by no means include all of the women and girls interviewed; quite the contrary. The majority told stories of highly egalitarian families in which girls really were encouraged to be their best, and fathers shared tasks like homemaking and child-rearing.

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### **They fear that their daughters—and their dreams for their daughters—are quietly being undermined.**

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Many reported attending temples with highly progressive values about women's participation and roles. Such stories showed the tremendous strides made in the last few generations.

At the same time, even for these, the issues raised in our interviews seemed to tap something larger, a "silent conversation," going on in many parts of the community.

For instance, following presentations about this project, after discussing the issues it raised, participants would often share very personal recollections and insights about their own upbringing, questions about whether their own daughters might be being unintentionally held back, and just how broad the horizons for girls really were.

Some worried that even today, traditional patriarchal norms and feminine ideals might still hamper even the most empowered, accomplished young women compared with their male peers who might still sometimes expect to enjoy superior access, privilege, and social capital.

**"There's still only one path to family formation that we offer our daughters—one single path that we try and force them all into—which is marriage to a man, under the chuppah by a rabbi (who is most likely male), and then live happily ever after. That is the path to family formation. I don't think things will change until girls consider they may have 5, 10, even 20 different paths to forming a family, and girls choose the path that works for them. Ultimately that is where we need to be, but it's going to be like moving Mount Sinai, right? We have to do it one rock at a time."**

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*ICRW is the International Center for Research on Women.*

*UNAIDS is the joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS.*

*UNFPA is the United Nations Population Fund.*

*USAID is the US Agency for International Development.*

*WHO is the World Health Organization.*

*PEPFAR is the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief.*

## SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

1. Fund more studies of gender norms and Jewish girls, with a focus on areas (like eating disorders or achievement pressures) where there are known vulnerabilities. These need not be large, expensive studies—other issues have been successfully studied by supporting dozens of smaller studies by dissertation candidates through small grants of \$1,000 or more.
2. Integrate a strong, specific focus on gender norms that teaches young Jewish women to think critically about feminine ideals (and male-centeredness) throughout girl-serving programs: classroom-based, summer schools, B'nei Mitzvah, etc.
3. Address attitudes of male entitlement. This project focuses on providing tools to girls and their parents, which is a good first step. But as many of the formative research interviews showed, much of the problem is still around attitudes of men and boys (and rabbis and other community leadership). We need to create more programs that will teach males to think critically about rigid and entitled masculine norms as well as their expectations of women and girls.
4. Such steps need to be combined with leading a wider, and explicit, public conversation around traditional gender norms in the Jewish community. Although this is already happening, much of it is still sub rosa. Organizations such as Moving Traditions, Ma'yan, and Jewish Women International are already leading efforts in this area. Community leaders at the state and national levels need to be engaged, educated, and recruited to help promote dialog and informed reflection.
5. Jewish religious, educational, and community organizations should consider setting a goal of 50 percent female leadership and regularly report their progress. More women with decision-making power would not only help challenge feminine norms, but they would be positioned to reshape the many community institutions that can undermine girls.
6. Women's foundations and other concerned organizations could initiate a coordinated, multi-year effort to promote concrete actions that challenge the structure of traditional gender norms, while identifying ways for male allies to also take part and publicly support them.

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