OVERVIEW

According to the article:

Girls, whose lives are locked in what is hoped to be temporary poverty, are showing their private pain through early motherhood, chronic truancy, drug and alcohol abuse and anti-social attitudes, experts say.

Adolescence, a time of determining one’s identity, is shaped by many external influences: families, communities, media, and peers are all important. It is during this time that adolescents look beyond the family to see where they fit in the world, if they fit at all. It is this issue that experts deem the main contributor to the African-American girl’s loss of dreams, self-esteem, and purpose.

The article proposes the plight of the young black female: "They are not sure the world likes them, unclear whether they like themselves...[and] searching for appreciation in the wrong places...Some girls are more than willing to be a boy’s possession." This, according to Brenda Wade, a San Francisco psychologist and author, may be a new scenario, but the need it expresses is not. " ‘Whatever is going on inside a young person is going on inside of the family system. The girls need a sense that they are valuable,’ " Wade says.

In 1991, a comprehensive survey of school-age girls and boys commissioned by the American Association of University Women (AAUW), "Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America," rocked conventional wisdom on the topic. It found that all girls felt good about themselves at age nine, but by the end of adolescence, external influences had torn away at their self-image.

To combat this startling finding, organizations such as the California Department of Education, Hyattesville Middle School Female Achievers in Maryland, Teen Lift, and black sororities have designed and developed programs to address girls’ needs. These programs are designed to equip
young people with the devises to reject others’ low expectations of them and to prepare them to face racism and stereotypes.

Other structural ways to combat this rising problem are rooted in education, teaching assertion and adopting a critical perspective. Experts say that only real-life examples can provide keys to self-realization and building self-esteem. They also maintain that success and positive images close up, boosts self-esteem.

Where should the love and encouragement begin? In the home, say the "heart-laden" voices of the parents. "I tried to give her a value system that is more than American—that is, you have to be CEO to be important—but what is important is the quality of your relationships, who you are and being in touch with God," says Enid Doggett of her daughter, Damalia Rhetta.

Enid Doggett is director of media relations at a Washington, D.C., public relations firm. Her perspective shows that at either end of the income spectrum, girls battle so many negative forces that, at times, whole communities seem to be adrift. "The real crisis is that so many of our children don’t have dreams," says June M. Perry, the executive director of New Concept Self-Development Center in Milwaukee.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- Have the issues facing African-American girls been ignored?
- How much do dreams contribute to the shaping of one’s self-image? Or self-esteem?
- If adolescence is one of the worst times for parent-child communication, how can communication be fostered?
- What is so unique about girls’ needs in general? Are the challenges of African-American girls unique from other adolescent girls? Explain.
- How do these issues affect the family system?
- How has the family contributed to these growing concerns among young women?

IMPLICATIONS

- Many programs for young girls focus on sexuality. But self-esteem issues extend beyond pregnancy and adolescent motherhood. If the
deeper issue is not addressed, then the "bedrock of the black family" will continue to scramble.

- Many agree that love and encouragement within the home is necessary for building one’s self-esteem. When the family does not provide these essentials, there are organizations, clubs, and programs that offer alternative support. However, these networks are not available to or used by all who need them.
- Youth workers see girls who define themselves by men and seek quick-fixes to their disappointments using drugs, alcohol, overeating, and criminal behavior. These girls need to be made aware that no person can define who they are and what they are capable of accomplishing.
- Common among young women are issues of beauty, family, value systems, the sense of being valued, relationships, and role models. Youth groups need to address the needs of these young women.

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