

## **Girls will be SHINY and boys will be STRONG... Praise God!**

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### **Abstract**

The Christian evangelist organisation, Hillsong, has developed programs for boys and girls which are being delivered in schools nationwide. The *SHINE* program statement released on 26<sup>th</sup> July 2008 claims that it is non-religious; delivered by qualified staff from the areas of youth work, community work and welfare; does not reinforce gender stereotypes; and uses "personal care" topics merely to break down barriers for the discussion of issues such as peer pressure, self-esteem, bullying and other challenges of adolescence. This paper provides a critique of these claims and a caution about the program content and its implicit endorsement (despite claims to the contrary) of narrow and potentially debilitating feminine and masculine stereotypes, and the potential for facilitators to influence students towards their religious beliefs and recruit them to their organisations.

### **SHINE program content**

Hillsong claims that the program does not reinforce gender stereotypes. The following section is a summary and comment on the program content as read from the facilitator's manual. At first glance the goals may seem to be worthy notions and the language is warm, positive and inviting. The objectives however are of a vague, highly subjective quality and open to a range of interpretations.

The 9 week program objectives are to equip high school girls to "discover themselves as valuable, precious and beautiful, make good decisions, change and impact any situation by investing into it, dare to dream, see a preferable future, and move confidently towards it". The program is divided into sections reflecting 3 values: "I Have Worth: Body and soul I am marvellously made", "I Have Strength: Choose life", and "I Have Purpose: You have a future and a hope". The first 4 sessions (out of nine) are dedicated to skincare, make-up, hair-care and nail-care. Two more sessions incorporate lessons in good posture, "sitting pretty" and diet. The next 2 sessions are dedicated to feelings and willpower, respect and etiquette.

#### Worth - "I Have Worth: Body and soul I am marvellously made"

These first 4 sessions (out of nine) are dedicated to skincare, make-up, hair care and nail care - ostensibly to impact "the world's view of beauty by reinforcing that true beauty is letting the REAL you shine through!" "Beautiful hands are for doing beautiful things for people - helping and giving". It is suggested that a professional beauty therapist, nail

therapist and hairdressing students facilitate or participate in these sessions. A “Power Focus” includes viewing a range of pre-recorded cosmetic commercials such as L’Oreal, “Because I’m worth it”. Discussion is around make-up and beautiful hair as a tool to build confidence, a sense of self and celebrate the uniqueness of a girls’ individuality. Are there not contradictions here?

#### Strength - “I Have Strength: Choose life”

These next 2 sessions are dedicated to feelings and willpower and respect and etiquette. These sessions encourage discussion about different feelings, problem solving, choice and good decisions, respect in relationships, good manners, table place settings and social etiquette. The definition of respect includes “ladies before gentlemen” and we are told that “The girls at school who get kissed the most aren’t necessarily happier in life”, “Q. What is the best way to handle people who are rude and unpleasant to me? A. Ignore their behaviour, Be pleasant in return, or Smile and walk away”.

Clearly respect and etiquette and emphasis on good manners is laudable, however being positioned as the passive object of male affection and focusing on being a charming hostess may not support girls to be assertive and challenge disrespectful attitudes and abusive behaviour, or to imagine powerful and independent futures in work and other arenas.

#### Purpose - “I Have Purpose: You have a future and a hope”

Two more sessions incorporate lessons in good posture, “sitting pretty” and diet – with the suggestion that models or actresses may visit to give an example. The reinforcement of thinness as attractive is problematic where eating disorders and negative body image is such a cause for concern for women and girls in our society. Experts in this area operate from a feminist perspective which equips young women to challenge these values.

#### Gifts

A suggested gift to the girls at the end of course celebrations is a pink handbag with ‘seeds of greatness’. It may be argued that this is a telling metaphor for the reproductive imperative and the successful female defined as body rather than mind and as the conforming, feminine, accessorised stereotype.

#### Supplementary materials

The recommended readings include *Worth the Wait* - about saving sex for marriage, Cindy Crawford’s *Basic Face* and *The Penguin Book of Etiquette*. DVDs are also recommended, such *Miss Congeniality* and *Pretty Woman*, *Princess Diaries*, *Legally Blonde*, *Erin Brockovich*, *Good Will Hunting*, *Mean Girls*, *Baraka*, *Bugs Life* and *Thirteen*. These resources emphasise the importance of appearance and virtuous restraint and chastity. They provide questionable models of femininity and power and one might wonder how these texts are read and what kind of critique, if any, is facilitated.

There *are* activities in the program which consider identity and purpose, hopes and dreams for the future, goals, action plans and dreams, and this seems laudable, however the intent, balance and intellectual depth of these are clearly questionable. Out of a program of 9 sessions, there is only this one session which provides direct opportunity for challenging cultural stereotypes and limiting beliefs and aspirations. Session 4:2 on Purpose is called History Maker. This could be a great opportunity to examine social constraints for women and girls and to give examples of powerful, effective women and

the overcoming of adversity (Without makeup, hair and nails done, “sitting pretty”, choosing the correct fork and skill at folding serviettes).

Reports are that the program has been well received in disadvantaged communities. Fashion and make-up advice has great appeal, however it needs to be asked – just because the sleep-over and pyjama party fun of make-overs and dress-ups might indeed appeal to many young women, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, is this justification for such a limited range of topics for engagement of interest? The program claims that “personal care” topics are used merely to break down barriers for the discussion of issues such as peer pressure, self-esteem, bullying and other challenges of adolescence. It is claimed that the focus on appearance and behaviour is not problematic as there is some critique of the exploitation of women within the beauty industry, however the balance of the program activities (6 out of 9 sessions) are more likely to reinforce the dominant feminine stereotype of decorative, unobtrusive, supportive, subservient, restrained and submissive.

What wider futures are considered in this program? What possibilities are offered? Where are the examples of diverse achievements by women in non-traditional spheres? Do any of the activities truly attempt to widen expectations and increase ambitions beyond the limited stereotypes promoted by the Hillsong organisation? Could not other interest areas be offered which do not risk the reinforcement of traditional, conservative and sexist social imperatives? Where is the community of inquiry with challenging questions, and conversations about philosophy, history, politics and power which incorporate an analysis of gender and sexuality, a challenge to essentialism, and a consideration of other intersecting areas of prejudice and disadvantage such as race, culture and religion?

### ***It's SHINE for girls and STRENGTH for boys***

Narrow, oppositional gender dichotomies are further evidenced by the differences between the *SHINE* program and the boys' equivalent *STRENGTH*. This program hasn't been so publicly challenged and the writer of this critique has not been able to acquire the program materials for a closer look however the *STRENGTH Promotional Portfolio* reveals the same kind of limiting framework.

Compare the following example quotes from the *STRENGTH* promotional materials with the elements of the *SHINE* program which have been described. These clearly illustrate the presumed differences in interests, values and futures for the two groups.

The goal of *STRENGTH* is to change mindsets and empower young men with the 'right' tools to succeed in life... *STRENGTH* is a programme for adolescent males. It is a fun, life-equipping values-forming course. It is based on life principles including the belief that each young man was created with purpose, being strong, significant and full of potential..." (The seven sessions are about) Teamwork and friendship, Resilience, Work! What do you want to do? What makes you a man? Boy meets girl, Respect and Party safe!

Learn the power of motivation and endurance.  
Never give up... Never say die!  
Confidence, Know who you are...  
Learn practical ways to deal with anger...  
Learn the differences between males and females.

Remember, this is compared to the *SHINE* program with 4 sessions (out of nine) dedicated to skincare, make-up, hair-care and nail-care. Two more sessions incorporating lessons in good posture, “sitting pretty” and diet, and 2 sessions are dedicated to feelings and willpower and respect and etiquette.

In contrast to *SHINE*, *STRENGTH* positions boys in terms of power, success, work, tending to anger and needing to exercise restraint (implying that a tendency to aggression is a biological fact rather than an aspect of socially constructed hegemonic masculinity), and has a paternalistic and indulgent / patronising tone towards women – including a whole lesson on “What do women want?”! Narrow constructions of gender, oppositional frameworks and power imbalances are clear.

Focusing on differences between boys and girls denies a wealth of shared human attributes, and ignores diversity among boys (and among girls). If masculinity and femininity were truly biologically determined, behaviour could never change. But it can and does - across cultures, over time, within groups and for individuals. As educators it's our job to help students expand their understandings of gender issues, related behaviours and their consequences. Gender equity exists when both females and males have equitable opportunities and outcomes. In effect, this means that everyone, male or female, can pursue a broad range of interests, subjects, careers and lifestyles. (National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993-1997, p.7)

Claims that the Hillsong programs “tackle” social issues are highly questionable if not ludicrous. The literature on gender, culture, equity and change clearly refutes the direction of this program. Australian government education systems have provided clear statements and policy directives which are clearly being flouted, for example the *Inclusive Education Statement* from the Queensland Department of Education and Training (1995) states that schools should foster a “learning community that questions disadvantage and challenges social injustice”. Any dedicated programs for girls, or boys, need to help young people challenge disadvantage and social injustice in the areas of work and futures, relationships and family responsibilities, body image and health issues, and particularly around masculinity, sexual harassment and violence.

### **Last, but not least - a hidden agenda?**

Many parents and educators are very concerned about the potential for religious organisations to access and influence their students. It needs to be remembered that we are a diverse community which includes members of many faiths and value systems, including those who have a strong agnostic or atheist perspective. Schools are secular institutions and parents should be able to expect that their children will be protected from the influence of religious organisations.

The *shineGIRL Program Facilitator Information* is a document which accompanies the facilitators' kit. At the end, the letter advises the facilitator to continue the program outside of the school after completion of the original 9 sessions. It clearly suggests that the intent is to no longer be restrained by the official injunctions against advocating or teaching about religious beliefs. This, and sections of the program instructions to facilitators arguably have a subversive tone, as evidenced in the following quotations:

When you go into a high school as a Shine facilitator you are strategically positioned to place value on each girl and her LIFE.

It may take a few months from the first meeting until you get a green light to take the program into the school. Be encouraged to develop a good relationship with the school through being patient, gracious and committed...

Maintain a servant heart and a desire to be a blessing, remembering that you are in their school environment! If the school is not open to the full course, offer to do a single unit as a sample. We have found consistently that this opens the door for the full program. You will need to contact us if you are in this situation....

If a question arises about the 'faith-based nature of the program advise the school that the program is based on fundamental life principles. It is not a religious program in any way, shape or form. The values and principles are solely to do with the truth that girls have worth, can develop strength and have purpose. Stay with the basics.

*Pathways* is simply about the next step after the *shineGIRL* program. Your pathway approach will be unique to your organisation... This gives you the opportunity to facilitate initiatives within your organisation relevant to the girls that you have connected to in the program. During the program we establish connection and relationship with the girls. Where possible, we are committed to offering options for a next step. A starting point can be a weekly after school Shine Girls group. This is not a follow up within the school curriculum but an opportunity to connect girls outside the school system. Be conscious not to merely be an activities-based group. Continue to build on the values established from the Shine program.

Clearly the agenda is for facilitators to develop influence through their relationships with the girls so as to involve them in activities "outside the system" where agendas will no longer be restrained.

Excerpt from a parents letter of objection

My daughter talked all about "Shine" after the first session. Each one of us is unique, special and here for a reason, she was told. An assortment of other special things were also discussed, amongst which were time and mobile phones (because they keep us in touch with friends. But my children do not have phones, so this upset my daughter) and wedding rings. Several married women present elaborated in turn on just how special the latter item was. "Time" was special because no one knew how much they had; "only God knows that", the girls were told. The girls were also entertained with the song, and lyrics, of "Mirror", my daughter told me. My wife and I eyed each other knowingly across the table; the song is a Christian fundamentalist dirge available via various impassioned performances on the Internet.

After this, each Monday "Shine" became the topic of discussion as we were forced, according to our lights, to help our children deconstruct, understand and then question the messages received at school. There is not room here for a verbatim account, of course, suffice it to say that over the next few weeks it became clear that the girls were being urged to adopt the kind of passive/conservative Christian stereotypes that we are all long

familiar with: they were being groomed for domestic and spiritual bliss as demure brides of Man and Christ.

This went against the spirit of self-reliance, curiosity, empowerment and equality that we encourage in our house for girls as well as boys (we have three of each). On Monday evenings, now, we regularly find ourselves openly contradicting what was being taught at school.

To my great relief, my daughter opted not to go to the "Fleuro" night recently, where the little princesses get to really shine, but the next day her gobsmacked best friend exclaimed to my daughter that she was right and that "they're all Christians". It seems the entertainment there included spirited accounts of how various attendees had found God and been saved. And all this in a State School in the modern West, where centuries ago leading lights, in much more Christian cultures than our own, wisely decided on strict separation of church and state, and on secular education.

It is patently obvious, to me, that the "Shine" programme is an insidious and concerted, but thinly veiled, attempt by evangelical fundamentalists to 'get at' our children. Indeed, since my interest was fired, I have found various damning evidence that makes this an incontestable and indefensible conclusion. Via the ostensibly disinterested NSCP Chaplaincy and "Shine" programmes, and who knows what else, Australia's state schools are prey to the covert proselytising and machination's of zealots.

On my family's behalf, I demand that my children's education be secular. My wife and I should not have to monitor and contradict Christian ideology foisted on our children at school.

#### Hillsong claims that the program is non-religious

Even a cursory examination of the language and subtext of the facilitators manual and student workbook reveals biblical, religious, creationist and evangelistic language and references such as:

The introductory quote by Bruce Coleman, Executive Officer, NSW Right to Life, June 2004:

*Schools are the battleground for the minds of our children and youth. Confusing ideas and deceptive philosophies, reinforced by the media and their declining values in our society, can easily lead these formative minds onto the 'broad way that leads to destruction'. It is into this context that the message of life continues to be presented.*

which refers to Matthew 7:13-14

*Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.*

The Need (Introduction p. 5) is explained as:

*...instilling purpose and values... We need to see healthy values formed... mindsets changed, and create an environment where young people, especially girls, can discover truth.*

Why especially girls? Perhaps it's something to do with anxiety about pre-marital sex and terminations of pregnancies? The need is also described as a sense of purpose and regard for the future to counter an apparent *meaninglessness of life* as evidenced by high youth suicide and heroin addiction rates. This sense of meaninglessness is attributed to break-up of the family unit and young people's belief that "they are the result of an explosion or accident in the universe".

The Foundation (Introduction p. 5) talks more about value:

*Money is the currency of the world, and it has been said that heaven's currency is faith!" ... "When you go into a high school as a Shine facilitator you are strategically positioned to place value on each girl and her LIFE. We are not in the classroom to just present a good program, we are there to present and build LIFE – life in all it's abundance – and this is done significantly through value. Once the idea of LIFE is developed then a girl is open to hearing truth – and the impact on her life will begin to be felt. Remember to place value on each girl – be purposeful about that...and LIFE will come!*

Aim statement:

*It is based on life principles and on the belief that each girl is created with purpose being uniquely valuable, precious and beautiful.*

Facilitator Handbook:

*We are all unique...created one-of-a-kind! Custom-built and a masterpiece (p.11)  
We have a soul (p.23) What can you do about problems?... Pray (p.30)*

Affirmation:

*My life counts. I am unique! I have purpose. I was created to live a beautiful life, to make a difference. I am custom made, a masterpiece, one of a kind! I will be the best ME that I can be!*

Implications are that there is a special concern for the virtue and chastity of girls, that the need for meaning will be addressed by strengthening of the family unit and the adoption of a religious / creationist belief system as opposed to an apparently destructive scientific perspective. It begs the question as to how much critical discussion is offered about the meanings of LIFE, TRUTH and VALUE.

And who is facilitating these important discussions.....

It is claimed that the *SHINE* and *STRENGTH* programs are delivered by qualified staff from the areas of youth work, community work and welfare, or by facilitators trained by these staff. There are clear issues of accountability here. Would these claims hold up under scrutiny? Perhaps it is true that the majority of the people involved in developing and implementing these kinds of programs are motivated by goodness, kindness and generosity. However we need to appreciate how vulnerable young people are, and how much knowledge and skill is required to manage critical conversations and learning about personal identity and relationships and how much risk there is of the professional capacity and personal views and philosophy of the facilitator and their organisation influencing the program delivery and outcomes. For the many parents who do not follow this particular religious or values framework, the idea of their children being so influenced is highly objectionable. For the many others who just go along with what the school offers – either out of ignorance or lack of confidence to express objections, it is up to schools and systems to provide clear information and proactive protection.

## Conclusion

Have education departments and schools sought to apply any enlightened criteria related to their equity and inclusion policies and directives, to critique the programs' goals and materials? Has there been independent supervision of facilitators or an evaluation process for the program? None of the program materials give this information. It seems it would be up to parents and carers, school staff and administrators, and officers within the education system, to be alert to these issues and to take this critique and challenge seriously. In summary, as educators we must take a socially critical view and be alert to the way gender based programs have the potential to reinforce narrow stereotypes, prejudice and disadvantage. Schools and education systems need to develop and enforce relevant policies and guidelines in this area. The AWE website [www.awe.asn.au](http://www.awe.asn.au) forum is hosting information and discussion about the *SHINE* program and provides, in the *Gender and Education Guidelines* and the *LINKS* section, many of the excellent readings and guidelines which would assist any school or organisation to better understand and be proactive about these important issues. For advice, support and alternative programs and materials for addressing issues for boys and girls, contact the author Maria Delaney, at [delaneymt@gmail.com](mailto:delaneymt@gmail.com).

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