

VIEWPOINT

Teen-age prostitution on the rise but welfare services lag behind

By Dr. Eliezer D. Jaffe

The subject of teen-age prostitutes, or "girls in trouble" as they are called by social workers, has always troubled the conscience of the Israeli public. But little is done about it. Some welfare workers even have the uneasy feeling that there is an unhealthy element of voyeurism, and that both press and reading public rather enjoy the juicy case histories reported.

It is, however, a fact that teen-age prostitution is reaching an all-time high in Israel while the system of social services available to deal with the problem lags far behind.

Jerusalem presents the most glaring example of how token services are given maximum publicity.

The number of teenage prostitutes known to the Welfare Department in Jerusalem prior to the Six Day War was approximately 70. Today, with a much larger population, over 300 girls are known to the department. However, as of June 1974 only 154 girls were in the care of the Municipal Unit for Girls in Trouble.

The unit was created by Gad Harari, a young graduate of the Hebrew University School of Social Work who had previously worked at National Police Headquarters. Gad was drawn by the challenge of the task and by the decision of the director of the Welfare Department in 1971 to take on a male social worker to head the new unit. It was felt a male could deal better with pimps and drug pushers.

Harari succeeded in creating a well-knit, devoted young staff, and in a coalition with District Court Judge Felix Landa lobbying as chairman of the Public Committee for Jerusalem Youth, succeeded in 1972 in obtaining nine social work positions including six field work staff, an intake worker, a supervisor, and the unit director. His staff are on call at all hours of the day and night, work in the hasnish cellars of East Jerusalem as well as in the city centre and low income areas of West Jerusalem, and are respected by other welfare workers and the police force. Above all, they have become the only useful address for teenage prostitutes after everything and everyone has failed them.

Harari's workers are always around, never judging or pushing but available at the really crucial,

dead-end turns in the girls' life, and always willing to try to help. They have fought steadily to establish work norms and procedures that enable them to do truly professional work and have resisted bureaucratic procedures that strangle initiative and creativity and turn social workers into bitter, inefficient clerks.

The problem is, however, that four years after launching, the unit is still without the most elementary tools for the job. There is only one temporary and inadequate shelter in town where a girl off the streets can take refuge for a week or so; there is no hostel where girls who want to quit prostitution can live at minimal board rates; there are no group homes for those in need of substitute family-type living, there are no "free homes" which can provide a clean bed and quiet place to sleep for a few nights, there is no counterpart employment counsellor in the Youth Labour Exchange, and no systematic professional consultation to the workers in Harari's Unit.

The Jerusalem Municipality has consistently avoided ownership of social work enterprises. Thus it avoids the ongoing expenditures involved in staff positions, and upkeep. The Municipality expects the Ministry of Welfare or the voluntary women's organizations to operate local welfare services. But in this way it denies its own responsibilities for building a local welfare network. This position is hardly tenable now that the Government contributes 75 per cent of

the city's welfare budget.

Unfortunately, this policy of minimal municipal involvement has a price tag, namely, neglect of social services to Jerusalem residents. A case in point is the unique special school that the WIZO Organization was prepared to build in Jerusalem to provide disadvantaged girls with a trade and personal counselling. Wizo leader Raya Jaglom succeeded, together with her co-workers, in raising nearly IL5m. in 1972 for the vocational school. She worked with her own staff and municipal Education and Welfare Department specialists in Jerusalem, only to have the project collapse because the Municipality failed to find a suitable plot of land for over a year.

Several weeks ago the Ministry of Welfare converted part of the Meşilla institution for juvenile delinquents near Jerusalem into an "institute" for 48 wayward teenage girls, with one open and one closed dormitory for stays of up to two weeks, supervised by a Hebrew University psychiatrist and psychologist. Ironically, according to the Welfare Ministry spokesman, the new home will not be for girls from Jerusalem, but will be a national facility.

Ultimately what the Mayor and his colleagues will have to decide is just where they stand on Jerusalem welfare services and whether they really believe the city's workers can function without municipal facilities in tune with the practices of modern social work.

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