



## Too many girls, young women keep an awful secret

By Guest Columnist

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Jeannette Pai-Espinosa

By **JEANNETTE PAI-ESPINOSA**

What do Mackenzie Phillips and Claireece "Precious" Jones have in common? At first glance, you might think that other than being female, they share absolutely nothing. Phillips comes from rock 'n' roll royalty and has lived her life in the celebrity limelight, while Precious is a fictional character in the new film of the same name.

Precious represents thousands of young women like her who are survivors of sexual, physical and emotional abuse, incest and neglect; who live in poverty; who are single young mothers; and for whom the mainstream education system hasn't worked. Like Precious, these young women struggle at the edge of the American dream -- invisible to those around them.

We call them young mothers@the margin.

No question, the differences between these two women are significant, but scratch below the surface and you'll see that they share a secret that far too many girls and young women silently endure.

In Mackenzie Phillips' book, "High on Arrival," what emerges is the story not covered by the media, of her early life with a middle-class single mother who struggled to provide structure, stability and values -- a life much different from that of her rock star father, John, a member of the Mamas and the Papas.

Then one day, Mom married a man who appeared to bring security to their family. Unfortunately, he also brought a violent temper and a propensity to break bones. Justifiably frightened, Mackenzie and her brother fled the violence and went to live with their father.

Everyone who has read the media reports knows about the drugs and incest that occurred there. But what is not often mentioned is the severe and persistent neglect Mackenzie experienced in her father's "care." Neglect that by any standard was serious enough to trigger a visit from Child Protective Services, if anyone had noticed. But no one did; the Phillipses were rich and famous.

Precious Jones, on the other hand, lives in poverty with her mother in Harlem during the 1980s. Her mother lives on welfare and expects Precious to do the same. Suffering in a life of horrifying abuse at the hands of both of her parents, by 16 she is the mother of two children -- both the result of her father's incestuous abuse. She is neglected and expected to meet her mother's every demand, or risk being hit by a cast-iron frying pan. Precious is illiterate, alone and invisible. By the end of the movie, Precious gets a fighting chance when she connects with people who care and gets services that meet her needs.

Precious may be a fictional character, but her story is very real. There are thousands of young women just like her in the United States. Yes, she is African American, but young women with similar stories come from all races and they live in all communities -- even yours. Chances are you walk by them every day without seeing them.

The secret Mackenzie and Precious share is one of powerlessness and alienation. They are both destined to live lives marked by the trauma caused by betrayal and violence, and at the same time are unable to speak out,

silenced by a society that jumps too fast to blame female victims. Yes, both of these cases are extreme, but the bottom line is this: In America, female victims of violence (particularly when the perpetrators are male friends, relatives and co-workers) are all too often judged, ignored and silenced.

Violence against girls and women is an epidemic in this country, and while we often demonstrate concern for the way women are treated in Third World countries, somehow the majority of Americans just don't want to contemplate the same issue within our borders.

And yet one in three girls in the United States is sexually abused and one in three adult women report having been sexually abused as children -- and these are only the reported cases. Given our society's unspoken gag rule, how can we be sure the real numbers aren't even more staggering?

Where is our national outrage?

Get involved: Speak out. Be a mentor. Contribute money, time, clothing, etc. and let Congress and the White House know you care about this issue and support young mothers@the margin like Precious.

Jeannette Pai-Espinosa is president of The National Crittenton Foundation, which supports the empowerment of vulnerable girls, young women and their families. More information: **AtTheMargin.org**

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