Leaning Out

Teen Girls and Leadership Biases

RICHARD WEISSBOURD AND THE MAKING CARING COMMON TEAM

MAKING CARING COMMON PROJECT

HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Executive Summary

Are teen girls and young women poised to become our nation's leaders? The pathways to leadership for girls have never been clearer or brighter. Girls have made astounding progress in school and work over the last decade and women now occupy more leadership positions in key private and public institutions—including Congress—than at any point in our nation's history.

Yet the gender gap persists: male leaders still far outnumber women leaders in many fields, including business and politics—only 2 of the top 20 presidential candidates in 2016, for example, are women.

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Our research suggests that the teen girls who are key to closing the gender gap appear to face an age-old and powerful barrier: gender bias, and specifically biases about their leadership. According to our findings, many teen boys and teen girls appear to have biases against girls and many women leaders and teens perceive their peers as biased against female leaders. Further, our research suggests that some mothers prefer teen boys over teen girls as leaders.

Our mission at Making Caring Common is to help parents, educators, and communities raise children who are concerned about others and the common good, and who work to create a more just world. Perhaps nothing more commonly erodes children's capacity to care and to lead efforts to promote equality and justice than the biases they hold and confront in others.

We conducted several surveys, focus groups, and informal interviews over the last year to better understand students' and adults' biases related to gender and leadership. We asked students, for example, whether they viewed males or females as better leaders in specific professions including health care, business, politics, and child-care. Our largest survey—19,816 students from a diverse range of 59 middle and high schools[1]—included an implicit bias scenario designed to detect unconscious biases.[2] This scenario assessed whether students would be more or less in favor of giving more power to their student council depending on the gender, race and ethnicity of its leaders. Students were randomly presented with student councils headed by leaders with names commonly recognized as Black males, Black females, white males, white females, Latino males and Latina females.

1. See methodology section in full report for more information about our student sample. Our largest survey was taken by over 17,000 students from the USA and approximately 2,800 international students.

2. Throughout this report we refer to "implicit" and "explicit" biases. For the purposes of this work, we define explicit biases as those biases people are consciously aware of, which are often rooted in their basic beliefs. We define implicit biases as unconscious beliefs or attitudes that also affect our actions and understandings. Our implicit bias scenario seeks to elicit biases that respondents may be unaware of—biases that are unconscious.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Many Boys and Girls Expressed Bias Against Girls as Leaders in Powerful Professions:

- When asked who is more effective in specific professions, **almost a quarter of teen girls—23%—preferred male over female political leaders** while only 8% of girls preferred female political leaders, with 69% reporting no difference in preference.
- **Forty-percent of teen boys preferred male over female political leaders** while only 4% preferred female political leaders with 56% expressing no preference. A higher percentage of **boys preferred male business leaders (36%) to female leaders (6%)**. There was no significant difference between girls' preference for male versus female business leaders.
- Both boys and girls preferred females by large margins in traditionally female professions, e.g., as child care directors and arts program directors.

2. Students Were Least Likely to Support Granting More Power to White Girls as Council Leaders:

- In response to the scenario intended to detect implicit biases[3], **students were least likely to support giving more power to the student council when it was led by white girls and most likely to support giving more power when it was led by white boys.**[4]

  Black and Latino boys and girls appear to face leadership biases as well based on our scenario. See footnote and finding #6 below for more information on racial biases.[5]

- We also looked at whether students in **each school** preferred giving more power to one type of council over another. In 59% of the schools we surveyed, students on average expressed more support for a council headed by white boys than for one headed by white girls.

3. White Girls Appear to be Biased Against Other White Girls as Leaders:

The gap between white boys and white girls appears to be largely explained by the fact that **white girls tended not to support giving power to white girls.** White girls presented with boy-led councils expressed higher average support for the council than white girls presented with girl-led councils. Further, when we looked at what types of councils students tended to support in each school, we found that in 61% of our schools, white girls' average level of support was higher for councils led by white males than those led by white females. These findings mirror studies of women in the workplace. A 2013 Gallup poll found, for example, that 35% of all respondents would prefer to have a male boss while only 23% of respondents would prefer to have a female boss, with 41% reporting no preference. The preference for male bosses was even stronger among female respondents (Newport & Wilke, 2013).

3. Students and parents who responded to the implicit bias scenario did not choose between different councils. Instead, they were presented with one scenario/council type and asked to indicate how likely they were to support the principal giving power to that council. About one-sixth of respondents were presented with each council type (i.e.: 1/6 were asked whether they wanted to give more power to a council led by white boys, 1/6 were asked if they wanted to give more power to a council led by white girls, etc.). We then compared the average level of support for each type of council.

4. The overall difference in the entire sample in the percent of students who showed support for white boys versus white girls was small but statistically significant.

5. Some of our reported findings are specific to white girls and boys, because that is where we saw the most statistically significant findings. However, responses to our implicit bias scenario suggest that students and parents do not view students' capacity for leadership through one simple gender or race lens. It was hard for us to clearly assess students' views about race because most differences in students' responses to student council leaders on the implicit bias scenario were not statistically significant. Yet it does appear from our data that students have complex views about how race and gender mix. For example, students expressed roughly the same amount of support for Latina councils as for white male councils. These findings—and how students generally view different race/gender combinations—merit further investigation. See full report for more information on our racial bias findings.

4. Some Mothers Appear to be Biased Against Girls as Leaders:

On average, mothers presented with councils led by boys expressed stronger support for the council than mothers presented with councils led by girls. We were not able to determine whether fathers had biases against girls because our sample of fathers was too small.[6]

5. Biases Against Girls have Many Causes:

Our focus groups and interviews suggested a variety of reasons for students' biases against girls and for white girls' biases against each other, including highly competitive feelings among girls, girls lacking confidence and self-esteem and projecting that lack of confidence onto other girls, and girls being viewed as too emotionally "dramatic." These findings are consistent with other research on girls (Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999; Marwick & Boyd, 2014).

6. Awareness of Bias Appears to Matter:

Our data suggest that **awareness of gender discrimination may be related to less implicit, unconscious bias against girls as leaders.** Although white girls tended to support councils led by white boys over white girls, white girls who perceive high levels of gender discrimination at their school show greater preference for female-led student councils. While our study was mainly focused on gender bias, our data also suggests that students of color face racial biases and that awareness of racial discrimination may be related to less racial bias.[7]

While much of our data is encouraging (e.g. high percentages of both males and females express no preference between male and female political leaders), the percentage of teens who do express bias against female political leaders combined with our other data on implicit and explicit biases is cause for concern.

40%

of teen boys and 23% of teen girls preferred male over female political leaders.

4%

of boys and 8% of girls preferred female political leaders.

36%

of boys preferred male business leaders; 6% preferred female leaders.

6. See methodology section in report for more information on parent respondent population, which included approximately 1200 parents.

7. Finding is marginally statistically significant.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations for parents, educators, and other adults are based on the beliefs that good intentions are not enough to prevent leadership or other types of biases and that biases can't easily or simply be eliminated. Reducing and preventing biases is a practice that we as adults need to model as well as cultivate in children and teens.

1. Check your own Biases

Preventing gender biases in teens and children means first understanding and managing our own biases. Parents' and teachers' biases can deeply influence what they model for children and how they facilitate children's daily lives. Do we inadvertently reinforce traditional gender roles, assigning girls caretaking tasks more than boys, for instance, or criticizing girls more than boys if they are arrogant or "bossy?" Are we as active in promoting and recognizing assertiveness in girls as we are in boys? Are we modeling nontraditional gender roles? At times it's also important for us to seek feedback from those we trust and respect about whether we are expressing biases.

2. Cultivate Family Practices that Prevent and Reduce Bias

Biases often take root early in childhood. Parents and other adults can help prevent leadership and other biases from forming in children by developing reflexes and practices in both ourselves and our children that stem gender biases. We can, for example, provide children with gender-neutral toys, games, and clothes and orchestrate tasks and activities in ways that don't reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. A chore wheel, for example, which boys and girls spin to see who does which family chores, can prevent boys and girls from falling into familiar gender-based family roles. We can ask girls to imagine themselves as senators, sports team managers, and business leaders, and we can ask boys to imagine themselves as child care directors or school arts program directors. We can work to expose girls and boys to culturally diverse women who model constructive leadership. As parents, we can periodically ask teens whether they think their school—or our family—is modeling gender equality and brainstorm with them what they or others might do about perceived inequities and biases.

3. Teach Teens to Spot and Effectively Confront Stereotypes and Discrimination

Girls are bombarded with constricting, demeaning images and stereotypes of females both in their daily interactions and in the media and culture that can erode their confidence in their leadership and negatively affect every corner of their lives (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008; Sax, 2010). These images also cultivate and reinforce boys' biases. Adults need to mobilize girls and boys to both identify and actively combat these biases. We can, for example, ask girls and boys to identify denigrating images and messages in television and games—we might ask teens to count the number of male versus female leaders they see on television. We can brainstorm with children strategies for dealing with their peers' gender biases, and recognize children who stand up to gender bias.

4. Don't Just Let "Boys be Boys"

Girls' confidence in their leadership and self-worth can be eroded by the degradations they experience in their daily interactions with boys, including sexual harassment and other forms of misogyny. Ironically, at the same time that more teen girls and young women outpace males in school and work, high percentages of young women face degradation in their romantic and sexual relationships (Khazan, 2015; Kimmel, 2009; Hill & Kearl, 2011). Yet too many adults are passive even when these denigrations are in their midst. Adults should be alert to and challenge these affronts by, for example, pointing out to boys the false bravado in degrading girls and the real strength and honor in defying one's peers when they devalue girls in general or divide girls into "good girls" and "bad girls."

5. Challenge Teens' Biased Assumptions and Beliefs

Teens' biases are often explicit and inherent in their basic beliefs. For example, many teens believe that males are better political leaders and females are better child care directors. It's imperative that adults constructively challenge these beliefs, but this is delicate work, because it's important not to shame teens who hold these beliefs. Instead, we can ask teens to consider on what basis these judgments are made and to question the "evidence" supporting these beliefs.

6. Use Programs and Strategies that Build Girls' Leadership Skills

While a wide variety of programs and interventions directly or indirectly foster leadership skills in young girls—and some programs seek to prepare girls specifically for political roles and civic leadership—high percentages of girls don't participate in these programs or don't have access to high quality programs. For a list of promising programs and resources, please see Appendix E. For a list of the key ingredients of effective programs and strategies, see Appendix A.

7. Use this Report to Spur Discussion

Ask teens how they understand the data reported here and facilitate discussions with teens about how to achieve greater gender equity at school and/or in the larger society. Have teens interview each other across gender and racial groups about their aspirations for leadership of various kinds: If you could be a leader, what would you want to be a leader of? Why? For a guide to discussing this report with teenagers, see Appendix B.

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HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

MAKING CARING COMMON PROJECT
HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
14 Appian Way
Cambridge, MA 02138

617.384.9544
mcc@gse.harvard.edu