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'I don't want to be known for it': Girls, leadership role models and the problem of representation

Michele Paule and Hannah Yelin

Oxford Brookes University, UK

Abstract

An absence of role models in girlhood is a popularly cited cause of the shortage of women in decision-making positions in adulthood. The power of leadership exists in a close relationship with public visibility, and this relationship is regularly foregrounded in adult interventions that seek to stimulate girls' leadership aspirations through the public pedagogy of role models. We explore the problematic nature of such popular solutions through a framework suggested by feminist critique of the 'fetishisation' of representation, by their media effects foundations and by their alignment with neoliberal logics. Drawing on group interview workshops conducted in five English state schools, we find that role-model solutions offer an overly simplistic view of girls' engagements with public figures, and that they recognise neither the contemporary conditions of women's visibility nor how such conditions regulate girls' imaginings of power along axes of 'race' and class as well as gender.

Keywords

Feminist, girls, intersectionality, leadership, representation, role models

Introduction

As the gender imbalance in decision-making roles garners increasing attention in the public sphere, a lack of role models in girlhood is popularly identified as a key factor in the shortage of women leaders in adulthood (BBC News Online, 2016; Fraser, 2014; Warrell, 2018). The prevalence of this way of thinking can be understood within the wider discursive positioning of the 'agentic girl' as an emblem of social mobility

Corresponding author:
Michele Paule, Oxford Brookes University, Harcourt Hill Campus, Oxford OX2 9AT, UK.
Email: mpaule@brookes.ac.uk

and change (Biressi, 2018; McRobbie, 2009), and simultaneously, as vulnerable to the influence of mass media (Gill, 2007). Role-model solutions addressing girls are, we argue, attempts to shape a specific element of the 'public pedagogy' of media texts (Giroux, 2004). In their intervention into the relationship between girl audiences and representations of women, they seek to regulate the meaning-making and identity work that characterises girls' relationships with celebrity figures (Duits and van Romondt, 2009: 43).

A range of high-profile projects such as Sheryl Sandberg's (2014) 'Ban Bossy' (the girl-orientated spin off from her 2013 'Lean In' initiative[1]) in the United States and Edwina Dunn's (2017) 'The Female Lead' here in the United Kingdom mobilise role models – including celebrities and women from professional fields – in popular campaigns that aim to stimulate girls' leadership ambitions. The concept of leadership itself and its traditionally individualist, authoritarian and masculine connotations is not, in general, challenged within such campaigns. Rather, their tendency is to encourage girls to function more successfully within its terms. There is a vast array of similar initiatives and programmes (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Biressi, 2018) and it could be argued that they are needed, as national and international surveys find that girls struggle to name female leaders they admire (Estrada et al., 2015; Girl, 2018). However, popular role-model solutions are often based on simplistic ideas of gender-matching in which the complex relationships that young people have with media figures are reduced to the assumption that exposure will lead to imitation. While there has been ground-breaking work investigating the ways in which engagement with celebrities can school the formation of youth aspirations (Mendick et al., 2018) and some exploration of girls' discursive construction of leadership in educational contexts (Shinew and Jones, 2005), there remains a need to interrogate popular claims that 'inspirational' role models offered to girls have a transformative, enabling effect on leadership aspirations.

Our analysis here disrupts some assumptions inherent in claims about the impact of role models through exploring the complexity of girls' engagements with women in the public eye. We demonstrate ways in which role models may be both 'sites of struggle' (Mendick et al., 2018: 13) and the sites of 'visual media governmentality' that Angela McRobbie (2013) identifies as regulatory spaces where 'the benchmarks and boundaries of female success are established' (p. 122). We offer an analysis which attends to the meanings that girls attach to women leaders, and how these are shaped by wider gendered discourses and by the inequalities that girls experience along intersectional axes. We begin by arguing for the problematic nature of role-model solutions in terms of their reliance on representation, their conservative and simplistic assumptions of media effects, and their mobilisation of neoliberal tenets. We then turn to data from our 'Girls, Leadership, and Women in the Public Eye' project to show how girls themselves respond to role models.

The representation problem

The underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles is identified globally as an issue of pressing significance. There exists a range of high-profile initiatives and data-gathering organisations across political and corporate sectors with a focus on the

proportion of women leaders, for example 50:50 Parliament (n.d.) (https://5050parliament.co.uk/), and the Forbes 30% Club (https://30percentclub.org/). Internationally, bodies such as the World Economic Forum (2020) and United Nations Women (2020) collect data on women in roles of local and national decision-making, but do not cross reference this with other data such as demographics of class and 'race'.

Media and political attention to this issue has elevated the presence of women in leading roles to be the most prominent of concerns around gender inequalities. Lorna Finlayson (2018) argues that such a focus on representation is problematic in that it is often based on an assumption that having more women in high-profile roles is indicative of greater equality more generally; it can also assume that representation is productive of such equality, through what has been termed 'trickle-down' feminism (Jaffe, 2013), as women with the most powerful roles are assumed to create conditions in which more women will flourish. Such simple counting of women neglects other key relations of domination and exclusion. Furthermore, implicit in concerns regarding the persistent underrepresentation of women in top professions is an approval of the competition and individualism required to achieve such roles (Cawston, 2016). Catherine Rottenberg (2018) sees the corporate feminism of popular campaigns such as Sheryl Sandberg's (2013) *Lean In* as the birthplace of neoliberal feminist subjectivity, in which a woman recognises gendered inequality, but commits to her own individual economic advancement in response, rather than to collective action and social reform.

Inherent in the popular calls for more women leaders is an uncritical reproduction of leadership itself in its most androcentric political and corporate forms. As we argue elsewhere (Paule and Yelin, 2021), girls' leadership initiatives, while couched in terms of empowerment, work to stabilise the masculinist and corporate values and structures that subjugate and disempower women. Rather than focus on the existence and number of role models then, here we offer a consideration of the *conditions of visibility* for women in the public eye and of what their presence might mean for girls.

The role-model solution

The idea of the inspiring role model and the focus on women in leadership roles are closely entwined as both assume that increased visibility of women in top positions will encourage others to follow suit (Finlayson, 2018). This assumption is not without evidence; the function of role models in the formation of youth aspirations has been explored (Allen and Mendick, 2012; Jackson and Vares, 2016), while the idea of the importance of leadership role models for women has gained traction both in corporate arenas (see, for example, Frazer, 2014; Pereira, 2012) and in management studies (Adamson and Kelan, 2018; Simon and Hoyt, 2013). A range of corporate and academic texts thus contribute to the production of social knowledge about the value of leadership role models and the ways in which they may operate.

Given its popularity then, it is surprising that as a concept the role model remains somewhat ambiguous beyond being 'someone to look up to' (Gauntlett, 2002: 211). Its operations become yet more indistinct when role models are 'distant' media figures that may form part of a public pedagogy (Giroux, 2004; Stead and Elliott, 2018).

As well as concerns surrounding lack of definition, issues inherent in role-model assumptions mirror some key concerns identified in media effects claims. These include an agenda led by wider cultural anxieties, an assumption of fixed meanings in media texts or objects and a presumption of inadequacy in audiences or subjects (Gauntlett, 2002). In both, there is a tendency to assume a particular influence of media on children and youth. This is evident throughout a well-established history of anxieties over girls as especially vulnerable to media content (Blumer, 1933: 205; Jackson and Vares, 2016; Perloff, 2014). However, an important difference exists between role-model assumptions and media effects claims in one regard: in the latter, vulnerable groups are typically held to be vulnerable to negative media messages, but not to positive content (McLeod, Eveland and Nathanson, 1997) whereas, in girl-empowerment initiatives, role models are assumed to work in benign, socially desirable ways. This, we suggest, is because role-model solutions are a manifestation of the discourses of both optimism and anxiety that coalesce around girlhood (Gonick, 2006). In such, solutions girls are simultaneously at risk in terms of their vulnerability to undesirable media messages (Mendick et al., 2018) – here, in the form of non-endorsed role models – and the locus of hope as potential entrepreneurs of the self and of the future (Banet-Weiser, 2015).

Role models, neoliberalism and empowerment

In their attempts to shape individual subjectivities, popular role-model campaigns align with neoliberal thinking that ignores material inequalities beyond gender and promotes instead 'equality of opportunity' (Littler, 2018: 153). These campaigns belong to the genre of girl-empowerment initiatives that centre aspiration as the desirable, necessary force behind individuated social mobility, and in this case, potential leadership (Biressi, 2018; Harris, 2004). They characterise structural barriers as surmountable through the development of self-sufficiency and leadership skills and self-promotion (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Wilson, 2017). Role-model campaigns model the internalisation of responsibility for the surmounting of adverse contexts that is fundamental to the neoliberal subjectivity (Foucault, 2008: 226) and to the myth of meritocracy (Littler, 2018).[2]

Role models and the blurred categories of leader and celebrity

Even if one were to accept the premise that exposure to an increased number of female role models will fuel girls' leadership aspirations, the nature of the role models themselves as sites of contestation raises further issues in terms of sanctioned forms of visibility. 'The Female Lead' (2019), for example, aims to provide 'alternative role models to those ever-present in popular culture' and warns against 'celebrities and actresses' as role models. 'Ban Bossy', however, features a range of celebrities in its materials. As Mary Beard (2017a: 13) observes, power has always been coupled to public prestige and a kind of celebrity. The blurring of celebrity and leadership is also reflective of a wider cultural shift which sees the increasing involvement of celebrities in political movements and processes, and politicians constructing celebrity identities (Adamson and Kelan, 2018; Marshall, 2014). Anxieties over both the celebritisation of leadership and 'improper'

forms of celebrity (Allen and Mendick, 2012) inform the restrictive ways in which girls are expected to admire role models, both in terms of the kinds of role model sanctioned for admiration, and within the discursive formations of leadership and celebrity themselves (Kokoli and Winter, 2015). Concerns reproducing conservative models of the public sphere and of what constitutes appropriate representation indicate how role-model solutions rely on the adoption of endorsed figures for admiration but, as an inevitable adjunct, are accompanied by 'media effects' fears of unwholesome influence.

Method

This article draws on data from our research project, 'Girls, Leadership, and Women in The Public Eye', which investigates the relationship between girls' experiences and imaginings of leadership and their engagements with influential women in various media. Data were gathered through semi-structured focus group workshops and throughout dedicated social media groups in 2017–2018. In total, 50 girls aged 13–15 from five state-maintained schools across England in diverse geographical and socio-economic contexts took part. Participants were broadly representative of each school's intake in terms of class, 'race' and 'ability'. A secure, undiscoverable social media group was set up for participants in each school, in which girls could post images, memes and comments relating to their discussion.

Our prompt questions began by asking girls to describe the qualities of a good leader, and to nominate or describe any women whom they saw as possessing these qualities. Following questions focused on their perceptions of the representation and experiences of women leaders, on factors that enable women to occupy such roles, and on their experiences of leadership roles themselves.

We deliberately refrained from asking participants specifically who their 'role models' were, and avoided the term unless participants used it themselves. The nomination of a role model implies that such a figure influences their aspirations and possibly their life outcomes (Jung, 1986). This fails to acknowledge that aspirations can be 'cruel' in their fostering of attachments to unachievable futures (Berlant, 2011). Asking girls to describe leadership qualities they admire or the women whom they feel possess such qualities, therefore, is not the same as asking them who their role models are.

The focus group workshops were designed to encourage the kind of dynamic and interrelational knowledge production that characterises ways in which meanings of media texts are negotiated among audiences as interpretive communities (Barbour, 2007; Fish, 1980) and among girls in peer group discussions (Mikel-Brown, 1998; Taft, 2011). Girls were encouraged to lead elements of discussion themselves. The social media groups enabled girls to continue to share ideas after the initial focus groups had ended, generating the kinds of 'bonus insights' that flexible online spaces for data generation can foster (Gaiser, 2008: 297).

Findings

Blurring the celebrity or leader divide

The first common assumption around role models that collapsed in discussions with girls was the categorisation of public figures as a 'good' or 'bad' influence along a fault line

of celebrity or leader. Girls' responses erased distinctions between these two categories. Two strong patterns that emerged early in the data analysis were admiration concentrated on a few global figures, and within this, a blurring of the celebrity or leadership divide. The most sustained discussion focused on Michelle Obama and Beyoncé in all five participant groups, with Michelle Obama emerging as the figure of greatest interest or admiration. In this article, we focus, therefore, particularly on these two women. It is not solely in their prominence and popularity that they are of interest, but because discussions of them coalesced around neoliberal myths of self-improvement, the policing of women's domains and the risks of visibility.

While indicating the pervasiveness of celebrity politics in the public sphere, our participants' perceptions of women as leaders at first appear to evade adult categorisations of 'celebrity' and 'leader' (Marsh et al., 2010). While the celebrity aspects of leadership were recognised – for example, Molly remarked that '[b]asically leaders are celebrities because everybody knows them . . . as soon as they step into that power, they are automatically a celebrity because they're in the public eye', while Amina observed that as 'a leader you get a lot of attention don't you. Kind of celebrity and things like that'. Girls were invariably less concerned with the public role a woman occupied, and more with how far her concerns represented issues of importance to themselves. Their choices are also illustrative of ways in which girls' explorations of such ideas are shaped by the wider discursive context in which they take place; their favourite women leaders were among those identified by Anita Biressi (2018) as exemplifying mainstream politics' attempts to revivify itself through mobilising girls to promote conservative political discourse, a discourse in which both representations of and exhortations to female success are taken as signs that equality has been achieved.

Intersectionality, privilege and the idea of overcoming

A second way that the girls' ideas about leadership pose problems for common assumptions about role-model solutions is the fact that, by focusing on the existence of a female role model as de facto evidence that gender barriers are surmountable, role-model discourse inadequately accounts for the way that girls experience the (in)accessibility of positions of leadership through intersecting axes of race, class and regionality with gender.

Participants' discussions suggested that they did see women's presence in high-profile roles as a sign of wider equality. They saw women overcoming difficult conditions, including gendered restrictions, to achieve status and power as demonstrating that society is working as it should be in terms of providing opportunity and rewarding merit. This was tempered, however, with the ideas of 'austere meritocracy' (Mendick et al., 2018: 9), of entrenched forms of classed and masculinised power, and of the 'implied whiteness' of ideal forms of femininity, including those implicit in ideals of female leadership (Biressi, 2018). Just as celebrity culture is classed, raced and geographically contingent, and hierarchies of oppression operate along these axes (Christiansen and Richey, 2015; Currid-Halkett, 2013; Skeggs and Wood, 2008; Tyler and Bennett, 2010), class, race and gender were pronounced in the framing both of girls' admiration of prominent women and of their awareness of their own opportunities. Both Michelle Obama and Beyoncé promote a form of girl empowerment that is centred on personal confidence, self-determination and individualism (Mirza and Meetoo, 2018); these

qualities were exemplified in popular memes shared by the girls. One variant shows Michelle Obama with an extract from a speech given at a London girls' school (2009): 'Whether you come from a council estate or a country estate, your success will be determined by your own confidence and fortitude'. This illustrates the kind of 'popular parable' described by Littler (2018) as encapsulating the Western narrative of social mobility, a narrative that both obscures social division and promotes an image of the elite as ordinary individuals, 'just like us' (p. 116), who are living a life attainable by us. Shameem felt that 'it just shows that someone who came from a background or was born as a minority, can have that opportunity to be in the spotlight'. For Shameem, Obama's Black identity served as a marker of disadvantage – for all her global visibility, participants knew little of her socio-economic background. Similar discussion took place around Beyoncé, who was described by Chloe as having 'had so many, like, difficult situations in her life'. Michelle Obama and Beyoncé were both felt to have earned their influence through a combination of hard work and the 'right' kind of motivation.[3] Their success and prominence were, however, understood as taking place in contexts of wider inequality that particularly disadvantage women. Apprehension of these contexts was shaped by participants' own experiences of inequality along intersectional axes. For Black participants, Michelle Obama was read first and foremost through her identity as a Black woman. For these girls, Obama was a figure of pride and possibility in terms of representation, as is shown in this exchange:

> Toya: Because I watch her and she's like, I'm a black woman, I'm here talking to you here, you can make a change. That was quality.
>
> Tani: She's proud to be black. Not a lot of women now are like proud to be black.

The participants in the same group praised Beyoncé for celebrating Black culture and women in the face of public hostility:

> Toya: You know that Superbowl performance? She did the arrow thing, she did a wonderful formation, she got a lot of like hit backs for it.
>
> Ayana: She got a lot of remarks for it because she did women things in her performance.

That neither Michelle Obama nor Beyoncé's racialised identity was mentioned by White participants is suggestive of the wider erasure of racial specificity inherent in popular White feminisms (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Staycer, 2017). In media coverage of both women, a foregrounding of universalising, feminised factors such as relationships, fashion and family have been identified (Short, 2015; Utley, 2017; White, 2011), and indeed these factors figured in participants' discussions. Such foregrounding locates both women within traditional patriarchal structures and renders them intelligible in ways that are consistent with Eurocentric ideals of femininity (Block, 2017: 163).

Role models and classed geographies

Classed geographies came into play for girls from disadvantaged regions outside the capital. While admiring the same women, they were less likely to see their presence in the public eye as indicative of wider equalities. They did not see successful women as overcoming similar hurdles as themselves, and recognised that many who

occupy positions of influence are drawn from already privileged groups. In a school in the post-industrial north-west of England, there was consensus among participants that the apparent opportunity modelled by women leaders was not easily realisable for themselves. Leaders were discussed in ways that reproduced wider framings of the operations of privilege through institutional and geographical signifiers (Currid-Halkett, 2013; Savage et al., 2001), as indicated by the following exchange:

Callie: If you take people from like posh areas, they'd have all this (opportunity) . . . because Bradford is not like a very posh place.
Cadence: Oxford, they're posh people, right?
Amina: We're not one of the best areas.
Geri: If someone came here, like from somewhere where it don't look like this, they'd be shocked. But like, I don't think people know that there are places like this in England.
Maya: Yeah, like all the posh country, they'd run a country on their beliefs and how they've been brought up, so with money and everything they've ever needed. Whereas, if you've got people that have nothing, they could possibly be better leaders because they've had to try harder to get why they are. So if you had to, if you took people from places like Bradford, they may be in better control than people from posh places because they can, they've actually had a chance, an opportunity, like an opportunity to see the rest of the world for what it really was, instead of being in their own little bubble of richness and happiness.

Here, representation of the disadvantaged by the elite was as a matter of concern; rather than generating the 'intrigue of difference' (Littler, 2018: 135). Leaders from privileged backgrounds emphasised the girls' sense of their own disadvantage and disempowerment:

Becky: If you're higher up, people are more likely to listen to you . . . but if one of us was to be like, we want this to happen, I don't, kind of how society works, you wouldn't really get like much recognition for it.
Serena: That is it, the higher up you are, the more respect you have and having respect is . . . you have some sort of say in what happens.

While participants reproduced some of the meritocratic narrative of 'earned success' attaching to Michelle Obama and Beyoncé, in terms of their own lives, they saw ideas around equality of possibility and self-made success as myths. They struggled to name other leaders as emerging from disadvantage, or to whom they felt could relate. A sole focus on gender as the indicator of equality means that for these girls, proffered female role models may serve to further normalise structures of power and inequality because those endorsed for their admiration are too often drawn from a privileged pool.

Role models, motives and the gendering of leadership: making a difference versus seeking power

The third way in which role-model discourse falters at the point of its encounter with girls is the failure to take into account the proliferation and strength of cultural narratives

that penalise women for seeking power, and restrict its exercise to more traditionally feminised domains. Here, we bring into our analysis girls' discussion of Hillary Clinton; because she was frequently evoked as a kind of foil to Obama's virtues in ways that illuminated girls' sense of the ways in which women can and should achieve and perform leadership.

The curtailment of women's participation in structures of power is not a contemporary problem; Rebecca S. Richards (2015) makes a compelling case for gendered difference as both inherent in the creation of, and appropriated by, the policing of the patriarchal 'nation state' in ways that render women's seeking of power as a destabilising challenge, while Mary Beard (2017b) demonstrates that mechanisms that silence women and sever them 'from the centres of power' have been practised for thousands of years in Western cultures. Although the space allowed to women leaders – be they celebrities, corporate stars or politicians – in contemporary culture has expanded over the last century in Western democracies, it is still constrained by gender in ways that resonate with the essentialised feminised leadership traits described earlier. Furthermore, contemporary conditions of visibility for women add new pressures which compete with older but nonetheless potent gendered mores, adding new tensions and complexities to navigate, and these increase exponentially along intersectional axes. For the girls in our study, these coalesced around issues of authenticity and motive.

That women leaders should be seen to work towards creating greater equality was an important criterion for most participants, and both Michelle Obama and Beyoncé were lauded for promoting the interests of girls, in particular. Judgement of both women, however, depended largely on perceived authenticity, and this authenticity was linked to perceptions of motive and to claims to struggle. Beyoncé's celebrity status was seen as driven by a kind of ministry to girls, as exemplified in this exchange:

Ayana: I don't even think Beyoncé does it for the money. She just wants to be heard and wants to make a difference.

Tani: It's just like that thing that girls can run the world if you want to, don't give up.

Michelle Obama's desire to promote girls' interests was also seen as a key motivation in seeking power.

Shameem: I think she wants to be a leader because she'll be good for young girls like us and she has an impact on us . . . people would know that she's actually in it for that, not just because she's famous

Helen: I think because . . . whilst she was First Lady she didn't take advantage of the fact that she had tons of money now and she . . . she did a lot of stuff to help the environment in the community, not just like herself. She donated to a lot of charities and she's kind of like, I think she was a role model for most girls, I think.

Tani: A person who works in the White House shouldn't be like focused on fame and all of that . . . But like for Michelle Obama she's different because she's trying to help people and the only way she can help people is by getting known.

Here, Beyoncé's celebrity and wealth, and Michelle Obama's political celebrity status are seen as inevitable adjuncts of power, as means of doing good rather than as sought for their own sake – fame becomes 'the only way' a woman can help people. This 'doing good' discourse aligns with essentialised models of the caring, ethical woman leader (Enderstein, 2018; Lewis, 2014; Prugl, 2012) and becomes a way of reconciling the individualism of popular leadership models and neoliberal self-advancement with acceptable modes of femininity.

Although both women claimed to want to empower girls, there were notable differences in participants' reception of Michelle Obama and Hillary Clinton in terms of perceived motivation, for example,

Maya: She (Hillary) was in it for power as well. Her husband had done it and she was already in politics and she just . . . for her it was probably just being sick of being the one in the background, not making the proper decisions

Rachel: I think the difference between Hillary and Michelle, is that I feel like Hillary was a lot more, well she still is a lot more, power hungry than Michelle

Hillary Clinton's professed desire to inspire girls was called into question, with Helen expressing scepticism over Clinton's (2016) election night tweet that told 'every little girl who dreams big' that 'tonight is for you', thus,

> I don't think that she was 100% all for girls, I think she might have just tweeted that because, you know, oh hey this could win me the election I guess

Significant in the way Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama were discussed was the fact that Clinton had put herself forward for a powerful public role. The girls' judgements reflect a wider cultural disparagement of women who are perceived as staking a claim to patriarchal territory (Beard, 2017b; Manne, 2018), and the hostile arena created for women by the confluence of celebrity and politics (Zoonen, 2006: 299). Studies of press coverage of both women reveal that Michelle Obama's not seeking presidential office for herself, while Hillary Clinton had done so, shaped the different media treatment of the two women (Rhee and Sigler, 2015; Utley, 2017); in aiming for the presidential role Clinton was denigrated for poaching on male preserves (Manne, 2018).

While participants' preferences may also be symptomatic of the generational divide between the two women's appeal (Dolan and Hansen, 2018), admiration of Michelle Obama over Hillary Clinton indicates how girls' engagements with women in the public eye are shaped by and normalise wider discourses of gender and power and the perceived limits to a woman's domain. Some participants recognised that public opinion of Hillary Clinton, including their own, was shaped by the media treatment she received as a result of seeking election – for example, Rachel observed, 'Hillary obviously, was going for president, so she was more in the spotlight than Michelle, so people were going to look for her insecurities and look for bad things about her'.

This sense of appropriate domains for women in the public eye was also an area where girls made some distinction between different kinds of celebrity and leadership. This is

demonstrated in the following exchange, showing awareness that public approval for a woman is contingent on perceptions that she is staying in her lane:

Laura: So if it was Beyoncé, no one really has an opinion unless they don't like her music. But no one really hates her with that passion that they might hate someone in politics.

Toya: The people that don't like Beyoncé, the only reason why they all say they don't love her is because people were branding, you know how people were calling her the queen. That's the only reason why they get, why is she being called the queen, why are you putting tags on her.

Such responses indicate the critical and nuanced readings that girls as experienced consumers bring to media texts and figures, and also ways in which their views are inevitably shaped by the wider discursive regime in which their meaning-making takes place. This has implications for the aims and the claims of role-model solutions; while girls are clearly not the passive dupes of media messages, the gendered values and ideologies that participants reproduced in their discussions carry the hegemonic weight of wider culture, and are unlikely to be shifted far by individual examples.

Participants' perceptions of motivation were also complicated by those of authenticity, and these align with narratives of self-improvement and overcoming. As Littler (2018) observes, media framings of powerful elites often present them in terms of the meritocratic myth that 'no matter where you start off in life, you can, with passion and effort, compete and rise up' (p. 121). The idea of authenticity as a media construction around such narratives of struggle and just deserts is inherently self-contradictory and ambivalent (Banet-Weiser, 2013; Holmes, 2005; Yelin, 2020), but such 'authenticity' is not only a feature of popular representations; it is central to what Allen and Mendick (2012) describe as 'the moral economies of personhood and processes of class-making' (p. 2). While such processes might render the too-authentically working class less valued in the eyes of audiences, when combined with aspiration and upwards mobility in narratives surrounding both Michelle Obama and Beyoncé, disadvantage conveys authenticity. Michelle Obama's perceived political outsider status also made her more relatable and accessible; Carly observed that 'she's not like all politicians who just walk around and tell you what to do and try being above everybody else. She can be like a normal person, but then she can also have the politics side as well'. The evocation of 'normal' here is significant in the light of Littler's (2018: 120) identification of 'normcore' as representational strategies through which the elite perform 'ordinariness' rather than difference, drawing on meritocratic discourse that frames them as hard-working, deserving and every-day.

Giving voice and the risks of visibility

Finally and most significantly, fundamental to our issue with role-model solutions is that they assume that increased exposure to women in the public eye will show girls what they can achieve, and inspire them to want to achieve similar status. This does not take into account the hostile conditions of representation faced by women in the public eye. Our data reveal that witnessing women in the public eye often operates as a cautionary tale against seeking positions of power which entail visibility, actively discouraging girls from such roles.

While the girls in our study reproduced some of the restrictive discourse surrounding women who explicitly seek power, they did express a desire to see more women in powerful roles. However, they saw the experiences of women in the public eye as providing evidence of gendered discrimination rather than as evidence of equality achieved. They saw inequality constituted by the very conditions of visibility for women; across our participating schools, girls identified elements of discrimination, misogyny, and risk inherent in life in the public eye. They recognised the particular dilemma that the polarisation of feminist, visibility and politics creates for women (Zoonen, 2006: 299), with Ayana observing that 'if they're not famous, no one is going to listen to them'. Women were perceived as less permitted to make mistakes and less likely to be praised for their successes than were men. Becky felt that 'You're not acknowledged for what you do right, you're acknowledged for what you do wrong', while Molly observed that 'women get judged more'. Serena imagined how it would feel to be a woman leader in the public eye thus, 'Everything you do wrong is enlarged. So it's just like super pressure for being in charge. Because you're on the face of everything, so if you do one wrong then it could go worldwide'.

Participants' impressions of the risks of visibility are borne out: women leaders face more media abuse and more questioning of their capacity than do men, combined with a relentless focus on appearance (Gershon, 2012; Ross, 2002; Tischnet, Malson and Fey, 2019). In each group of participants there was a consensus that, far from encouraging aspiration, the experiences of women in the public eye operated as a deterrent. For example, Chloe felt 'that women can be less ambitious because of these limitations and how they see how other women leaders get scrutinised'.

The perception of the degree of risk was a key area in which girls' views on representation as constitutive of equality differed along intersectional lines. For Black participants in a London school in a disadvantaged borough, the need for representation was felt more acutely while the risks were seen as far more intense. For these participants, Michelle Obama and Beyoncé's status as women leaders was not seen as evidence of a more equal rebalancing of power; rather, the girls identified the intersecting pressures and disadvantages created by gender and 'race' and the negative attention that campaigning on equality issues draws down upon women. They viewed the exceptionality of influential Black women as highlighting the barriers to power and the risks faced by BAME women more widely:

Avril: Michelle Obama for example, all the people who don't like her are kind of like obvious about it and upsettingly, partially it's because of her race and because she's a woman I guess.

Kelly: I think that that's and every time she does her speeches I think she does try to make that point across, not by directly saying it, but by sort of saying that she just wants to help even if she either gets dissed, or not really recognised as much, she is at least making the change which is what's important to her.. . .

Ada: She (Beyoncé) is letting her voice be heard.

Judith: Beyoncé is a good leader because she's speaking up for other women that can't be heard.

The idea of representation as giving voice to the disenfranchised was a key theme with this group; some of the girls made a poster for the session with the logo 'Just because you don't know my story doesn't mean I have no voice'. Formal representation in politics was seen as ineffective in promoting their interests; for example, Toya maintained that 'in this world that we're in, Government is out of the door'.

When considering leaders they admired, members of this group also listed Black leaders who had been arrested, assaulted, or assassinated, and Toya summed up starkly, 'Every black person that's done something good got shot in the head'. She described women, especially Black women, as living with a hyper-awareness of risk and of the surveillance that accompanies those in the public eye most intensely, observing that 'Black women are smart, they know how to get around, because they will know, they can sense when someone is looking at them. Not only black, women in general. Because we're more scared'. Toya's perception of scrutiny and hostility is borne out by analysis of media representations of BAME women politicians. They may receive more press attention than White female candidates due to exceptionality, but that press coverage is 'exceptionally negative and narrowly focused on their ethnicity and gender' (Ward, 2017: 43), and they receive by far the greatest amount of online abuse (Amnesty International, 2017; Demos, 2016). Rather than imagining themselves as future decision-makers, Black participants in this group saw the level of risk confronting Black women leaders in the public eye as too great to contemplate for themselves.

Conclusion

If the properly aspiring, empowered girl who will grow up to close the gender leadership gap is a new kind of subject necessitating a new regulatory mediascape (Kokoli and Winter, 2015), the campaigns promoting leadership role models for girls can be viewed as a part of that new mediascape in their attempts to tap into in celebrity youth cultures and to shape discourses surrounding women and power. Our findings indicate that popular role-model initiatives are, however, problematic in several ways. In their focus on representation alone and their single-issue axis of gender, role-model solutions are difficult to reconcile with intersectional feminisms and wider equalities agendas. Furthermore, their uncritical adoption of media effects assumptions means that they fail to take into account the situated realities of girls' engagement with public figures, nor the conditions of visibility for women in the public eye. In our study, rather than simply accepting and wishing to emulate women leaders, participants' views reflected feminist concerns that having more women represented in positions of power is not necessarily indicative of wider equalities nor likely to promote their own access to decision-making roles. The meanings the girls attached to the women leaders they discussed were shaped by their own contexts in terms of gender, class and 'race'. Within these contexts however, girls drew on and reproduced global media discourses surrounding women and the 'proper' pursuit of influence. Such discursive regulation further limits the possibilities of girls imagining future power for themselves.

In contrast with the claims of role-model solutions, our findings suggest that being exposed to more leading women in the public eye, however, popular such women may be, is not enough in itself for girls to view their own conditions as surmountable nor to

imagine themselves in decision-making roles in the future. Participants' engagements with figures that might be described as 'role models' were shaped not only by their own experiences, but by their awareness of the increasing hostility directed at women in the public eye, and of the particular targeting of BAME women within this (Demos, 2016). Conditions of public visibility are so hostile to women that exposure to coverage of influential women may deter girls from leadership rather than encouraging them. These findings illustrate the limits of contemporary exhortations to voice and to visibility for girls (Harris, 2004: 127); the incitement to discourse is outweighed by the risks of speaking up. This is not to say that the girls rejected the idea of assuming powerful roles and making change – indeed, as we argue elsewhere (Paule and Yelin, 2021), they offer original models for collective change-making towards progressive goals – but they were deterred by the inherent visibility. This was succinctly summarised by Serena, to whom we leave the final word: 'These things don't make me think I wouldn't want to be in charge, they make me think I don't want to be known for it'.

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ORCID iD

Michele Paule https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6944-9197

Notes

1. 'Lean In' is a globally successful campaign and book by Facebook's Chief Operating Executive Sheryl Sandberg. The strategies it recommends to women for achieving workplace success have been criticised as reactionary and individualist.
2. We offer a more detailed analysis of the neoliberal feminist address of both the 'Ban Bossy' and 'The Female Lead' campaign materials in our article: Paule and Yelin (2020)
3. This theme is explored further in our article, 'The best thing about having Meghan join the Royal Family is that she actually has black in her': Yelin and Paule (2021)

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Biographical notes

Michele Paule researches discourses of gender and youth in popular and institutional settings, focusing on issues relating to girlhood and equalities. Her edited collection (with Beverley Clack) *Interrogating the Neoliberal Lifecycle: The Limits of Success* was published by Palgrave Macmillan 2019 and her monograph based on her doctoral thesis: *Girlhood, Schools and Media: Popular Discourses of the Achieving Girl*, by Routledge in 2017. She is Principal Investigator for the 'Girls, Leadership and Women in the Public Eye' project. Before completing her doctorate, Michele worked in the Secondary education sector.

Hannah Yelin is a Senior Lecturer in Media and Culture at Oxford Brookes University. Her forthcoming book, *Celebrity Memoir: from Ghostwriting to Gender Politics* examines agency in celebrity self-representation. She is co-investigator on the project Girls, Leadership, and Women in the Public Eye. Before academia, Hannah had a 12-year career in the media. She now runs the Celebrity Culture Club, hosting discussions between academics and media industry figures.