

# Report on findings for ‘Girls, Leadership, and Women in the Public Eye’ research project

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Will the girls of today grow up to close the gender leadership gap? Not unless conditions for women leaders change.

Girls are doing very well in schools, and are attending university in record numbers. Many fields traditionally closed to women are making active efforts to recruit them. At the same time, the lack of women in decision-making and leadership roles is a matter of both national and global concern, and addressing this is an ongoing priority. Public interest in gendered barriers to leadership is growing, as shown for example in popular guides for women on achieving success in corporate cultures such as Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In*, and demands for legislation to halt the vilification of women leaders online.

Attention is now turning to girls as the solution to overcoming the shortage of women leaders. There is a proliferation of programmes and materials aimed at fostering girls’ leadership skills and ambitions – Sandberg has extended ‘leaning in’ to girls via her *Ban Bossy* initiative, while here in the UK Edwina Dunn’s *The Female Lead* project produces images of ‘amazing women’ pitched at girls. The provision of more role models is often seen as the key to igniting girls’ aspirations. However, the increased presence of women in public roles is unlikely to be effective if they are represented in discouraging ways.

*Our research suggests that, far from desiring power and celebrity, girls are deterred from public life and from decision-making roles by the scrutiny, the hostility, and the risks that they see women leaders endure.*

The distinction between celebrities and leaders is becoming increasingly blurred, as politicians seek to engage us via popular media and appeals to emotion, and celebrities embrace political causes. The causes that a public figure embraces, their perceived authenticity, and the medium in which young people encounter them are as, if not more, important as formal roles in defining who is seen as a leader.

Our aim in this project is to understand how girls conceive of leadership – a role and concept traditionally associated with men – in relation to prominent women and to their own lives and futures. We are particularly interested in the ways in which girls engage with media representations of women in the public eye, and their ideas about what makes effective role models.

Using surveys, focus group interviews, and social media groups we discussed issues of gender, leadership, and celebrity with 50 girls aged 13-15 in a range of English schools. We asked the girls which leaders they admired, what they thought made an effective leader, and about their own experiences and ambitions. In the social media groups girls could post pictures, memes (see below) and comments about women leaders. In this way we were able to collect some snapshot data, to explore ideas face-to-face, and also to tap into some of the ways in which girls share ideas about celebrities among themselves.



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Research conducted by

**Dr Michele Paule** ✉ [mpaule@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:mpaule@brookes.ac.uk) and **Dr Hannah Yelin** ✉ [hyelin@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:hyelin@brookes.ac.uk)  
Oxford Brookes University

## KEY FINDINGS:

### 1. Girls see leadership as a double-edged sword

- Girls expressed strong desires to improve their communities and wider society, especially regarding issues of equalities and the environment.
- They see leadership as offering the potential to bring about such change.
- Leadership was, they felt, more difficult for women because they have less authority, and face constant sexism.

### 2. Girls think women in the public eye are under constant and hostile scrutiny, and are at risk of psychological and physical harm

- They recognise that this scrutiny often focuses on looks, but they also believe that women's opinions are judged more harshly than are men's.
- For many of those interviewed, this scrutiny deters them from aspiring to public and decision-making roles.
- Visibility was seen as carrying particular risks for girls and women. These risks increased with other forms of inequality – while girls in an affluent area feared being teased for putting themselves forward, those from deprived communities feared assault.

### 3. Girls draw on global media and on their local communities for role models – but aren't impressed by our national leaders

- American politicians and leaders were more frequently recognised and admired than were their UK equivalents. Michelle Obama was by far the most popular and frequently named leader (29 nominations as favourite). The next four were Beyoncé (19), Ellen DeGeneres (17), Malala Yousafzai (15), and Emma Watson (12). Participants discussed the US presidential debates, Hillary Clinton's emails and Donald Trump's leadership style with familiarity, but not British political affairs.
- The only female British politician mentioned was Theresa May, and this only once. No British politicians were named as favourites. Aside from Emma Watson, Princess Diana was the only other British woman in the top ten.
- After these global figures, girls were most likely to nominate women they know, especially mothers and teachers.

### 4. BAME women were the most popular role models among all girls, but BAME girls recognise the most significant barriers

- BAME girls were especially aware of hostility, as both gendered and racialised. They saw Black women leaders as unfairly treated in sexist and in racist ways.
- BAME girls felt they were themselves subject to more scrutiny, and more risk. They felt that to raise the issue of risk itself was risky in some contexts.

### 5. Relatability and authenticity are the most important qualities in role models

- Distinctions between celebrities and leaders are less important than perceived aims and motives. The desire to make some kind of improvement in the world is seen as more important than a woman's primary role as e.g. politician, singer, or actor.
- Girls disliked leaders whom they saw as wanting power for its own sake, or as desiring attention.
- Women leaders coming from less advantaged backgrounds, and those who overcame obstacles were the most admired. However, more privileged women whom girls saw as making an effort to understand and address inequalities were also admired.

### 6. Girls think experience is as important as role models, but have limited opportunities for decision-making

- Girls reported that they rarely got the chance to participate in meaningful decision making, or to take leading roles. However, they reported that some lessons in school, especially RE, gave them practice in developing views and shaping them in debate.
- If they engage in formal extra-curricular activities, including sports, music and dance, and especially Guiding, girls are far more likely to get a taste of leadership. This was also true of youth clubs, although some girls reported difficulties in getting volunteers to supervise their clubs.
- The most common form of responsibility experienced by the girls in the study was domestic – for younger siblings, for household chores, and for pets.

### 7. Leadership is seen as the preserve of the privileged

- The circumstances into which someone is born were seen to play the biggest role in leadership prospects, irrespective of gender.
- Most leaders were seen as rich people living enjoyable lives 'in a bubble' and unaware of how the majority lived.
- Less affluent girls from outside the capital thought it highly unlikely that a person from their region would become a leader; Oxford was seen as the most likely place to produce leaders.
- Girls felt it was possible to overcome adversity to become a woman of influence, but highly unlikely without specific encouragement and opportunities.