Engaging Girls, Changing Communities:
How Parents Can Change the Future for Girls

What is Engaging Girls, Changing Communities?

Engaging Girls, Changing Communities is a participatory action research project. Its' goal is to explore how young women and girls engage in leadership and civic activities in new urban environments.

Additional goals of the project are to identify what assists and blocks girls' involvement in leadership and civic engagement and to provide opportunity for girls to become involved in projects that they have designed.

The research was influenced by concerns that involvement in civic life and leadership are shaped by culture, gender, language and power relations. Yet there is a limited body of qualitative research that examines girls' experiences through these lenses. Research is also limited on the barriers and facilitators of girls' involvement in civic and leadership roles.

The Participatory-Action Research model is ideal for this project because it engages girls in the implementation of the research. A total of ten (10) girls were trained as peer interviewers. They conducted 40 interviews in Toronto and 20 interviews in Windsor. They have participated in discussions to analyze the results and have presented their results to each other and the research team.

Based on the results the girls have designed projects in Toronto and Windsor that demonstrate how youth want to be able to give back to their community and take on leadership roles

Important Facts

Only 4% of Chief Executive Officers in Canada's Top 500 companies are women.

$30,100 is the average total income for women compared to $47,000 for men.

1 women to every 4 men are elected representatives in Canada.

Resource: Girls Action Foundation

How Girls View their Relationships with their Parents

Participants indicated that both parents have played a role in how they think about themselves and in how they view leadership.

Participants in the study stated they have positive strong relationships with their parents. Girls felt that if they can speak openly with their parents then the relationship is positive.

However, the girls also recognize their relationships with their mothers are different than the one they have with their fathers.

The differences relate to the roles in the family. For example girls identified they will talk to mom about personal issues. They identify their fathers as being stricter. They also appreciated their fathers encouraging them to get an education and to have a good job.

Some participants said their relationship with their mothers changed over time and they have gotten closer as they have matured.

As a result some of the girls identified their parents have helped them to see themselves as leaders.

"…Also having a younger brother though, him being the first boy on top of it, it was interesting to see all the responsibility that was given to him or the privileges that were given to him. I should not say responsibility but the privileges he seems to earn without question – and I always find that difficult to deal with…"
Participant

Different Expectations for Girls

While many of the participants noted that girls are able to take on any career they choose and have the opportunity to be leaders, gender roles were also voiced.

Some participants identified they were not able to do as much as their male siblings. Some girls also said their parents did not expect as much from them as they did from their brothers.

Some participants said that in their homes males and females have certain roles. For example it is still considered common that the woman does the cooking, and the man makes the decisions.

These types of roles that are played out in the home also influence how girls think about the differences in leadership between men and women.

Stereotypes about male and female leaders are voiced. Men are strong leaders because they are focused and rational. Women are described as more emotional and relationship-oriented.

In the end girls admire women leaders and their mothers especially, because they are strong and balance work and family.

More Facts

Did you know that Oct 11 has been declared International Day of the Girl by the United Nations.

More girls enroll in college and university programs after completing high school. More young women graduate from

What Makes It Hard for Girls to Engage in the Community

Many of the girls said they want to be more involved in the community but at times there are obstacles in the way.

The response that was stated the most by the girls was their low confidence which can make them nervous to try new things.

Some obstacles are also created by parents who may want to protect their daughters from harm. Some girls said parents can also place pressure on them to always study.

Other girls said their friends can stop them from getting involved in community activities. Peer pressure can also force girls into negative activities.

Lack of female role models and people who believe in them also makes it difficult for girls to take on leadership roles.

There are also obstacles in the community such as when a neighbourhood is not safe and when there is a lack of opportunities within specific neighbourhoods.

Some girls have also experienced stereotyping and discrimination which has prevented them from being engaged in the community.
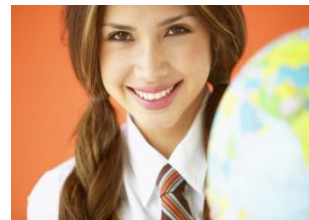
What Makes It Easier for Girls to Get Involved

When girls have friends who want to join them in making a difference then it is the one thing that makes it easier.

A positive relationship with parents also makes it easier to volunteer.

It is also easier to be involved when there are lots of opportunities to connect in the community. For example for schools have lots of different clubs and sports teams it is a positive experience. Schools are also important links to volunteering. The mandatory community service hours required to graduate high school forces some girls to get connected to an opportunity. Some girls identified their teachers can make a difference and encourage them to believe in themselves and to get involved in activities. Another idea was for schools to create mentoring programs that match girls to role models.

It is also better when the neighbourhood has community centers where girls can go and feel safe. Girls also identified the availability of leadership programs that are designed for girls encourages them to participate.

Top Ten Ways Parents Can Change the Future for Girls

One of the benefits of this study is to hear the excellent ideas from the girls on how parents can support their daughters to be leaders and to get involved in the community.

1. Believe in your daughter's abilities and support their dreams
2. Have open and honest discussions with your daughters.
3. Encourage daughters to go to University/College. Let them choose the field they want to study and the career they want to pursue.
4. Encourage your daughter to volunteer – help her get connected in the community.

"My parents we are really close; we are really close because I can tell them anything and they will not get mad at me, they will just talk to me about it…."

Participant

"In my culture girls are taught to be a good housewife, be pretty, be submissive and not really sporty, not really crazy, like funny or anything like that. These are all qualities that are not desirable in a girl. And I find that it is very perpetuated quite strong even in my generation."

Participant

Top Ten Ways cont'd……..

5. Encourage your daughter to take on leadership roles at school and/or in the community.
6. Encourage your daughter to pursue a hobby.
7. Encourage your daughter to become involved at school.
8. Let her know she can pursue a career in a male-dominated field.
9. Have the same expectations for your daughter as your son.
10. Avoid stereotypes of female and male leaders.

The Research Team

Principal Investigators

Dr. Nombuso Dlamini: Inaugural Jean Augustine Chair in Education in the New Urban Environment, Professor, Faculty of Education, York University

Dr. Yvette Daniel: Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Windsor

Co-Investigators

Dr. Joy Mannette, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, York University

Dr. Njoki Wane, Director of Office of Teacher Support at OISE, Associate Professor of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education, University of Toronto

Cathy Dandy, Director, Parent and Youth Engagement at Kinark Child and Family Services and Trustee for the Toronto-Danforth area, Toronto District School Board

Alison Gaymes San Vicente, Vice-Principal, Toronto District School Board

Community Partners

Multicultural Council of Windsor-Essex County

Skills for Change, Toronto

Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office, Toronto

Working Women Community Centre, Toronto