



## RESEARCH SUMMARY: WHAT GIRLS SAY

While the topic of gender and leadership has been widely explored by social scientists and management practitioners, little or no specific in-depth research has been done on how youth, especially girls, view leadership itself. In particular, little is known about how they understand their leadership experiences, their motivations for pursuing these opportunities, or the implications of their current behaviors and attitudes on their future lives. What kind of leadership does this generation of girls aspire to and connect with? What do we need to know in order to support the next generation of girl and women leaders?

*Change It Up! What Girls Say About Redefining Leadership* presents findings from a national study of almost 4,000 girls and boys on a broad spectrum of issues related to leadership: how they define it; their experiences, failures, and successes with leadership experimentation; their aspirations, hopes, and fears; the effect of gender biases and stereotypes; and predictors of leadership aspiration. From the evidence of this report, girls are clearly saying we need to “change it up” in how we define and think about leadership.

### MAJOR FINDINGS

## INSIGHT #1

### GIRLS ARE REDEFINING LEADERSHIP IN MEANINGFUL TERMS

The conception of leadership in today’s culture is too limiting. Even at a young age, girls have well-formed ideas about what it means to be a leader. The top-of-mind definition of leadership is expressed in terms of authority exercised through command and control. However, both girls and boys find this definition of leadership the least appealing or aspirational. **Their preferred definitions of leadership imply personal principles, ethical behavior, and the ability to effect social change.**

The gap between the kind of leadership girls aspire to and the conventional command-and-control definition may help explain some of this ambivalence. Girls are also more likely to be driven toward leadership by altruistic motives, whereas boys are more likely to be motivated by power and money.

- Youth set the benchmark for leadership skills very high. Leadership is highly idealized and perceived to require a wide range of skills and qualities that do not seem attainable. **Only 21% of girls believe they currently have most of the key qualities required to be a good leader.**
- The desire to be a leader among Asian American (59%), African American (53%), and Hispanic girls (50%) is higher in comparison with Caucasian girls (34%).
- Over 90% of girls say they want to or would not mind being leaders.

## INSIGHT #2

### SELF-CONFIDENCE + SKILLS = NEW GIRL LEADERS

Self-confidence is the strongest driver of leadership aspirations. **Youth who report high self-regard on a number of leadership skills and qualities are more likely to aspire to leadership.**

- **Girls from higher income and diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds are more likely to desire leadership.** These girls rate themselves higher on leadership skills and dimensions, are more likely to report having had a leadership experience, and are more likely to think of themselves as leaders. It is these attitudes, self-perceptions, and experiences that drive leadership aspirations in youth, not their race/ethnicity or income.
- The greatest single barrier to leadership seems to be low self-regard about skills and qualities.
- Barriers to leadership are consistent among girls and boys, but **girls experience fears and inhibitions about social acceptance more acutely**, in the form of stress, fear of talking in front of others, aversion to seeming bossy, and peer pressure.
- **External barriers in the general environment still exist for girls and young women.** While most youth (82%) agree that girls and boys are equally good at being leaders, 52% also agree that “girls have to work harder than boys in order to gain positions of leadership.” Women are still judged to be better than men at stereotypically “female” things like “taking care of others” and “running a household,” while men are judged to be better at things such as “running a state or country” and “running a business.”

## INSIGHT #3

### OPPORTUNITIES + EXPERIENCES + SUPPORT = NEW GIRL LEADERS

Other factors influencing girls’ leadership aspirations include family, particularly mothers, and peers—who can play both a negative and a positive role. Participation in organized and informal activities and exposure to leadership opportunities are strongly correlated with leadership aspirations. Yet girls relate that environments in which they can develop leadership skills are scarce. **Notably, youth do not feel they have much power to change things or teach/help others in many environments, which is the kind of leadership they aspire to the most.**

- **Overall, four in six girls (67%) believe they have had some opportunity to be a leader.** The large majority (86%) say their most recent experience being a leader was a positive one. African American and Hispanic girls are more likely than Caucasian girls to report enjoying their experiences as leaders.
- Girls derive greater satisfaction from learning (31% vs. 22%) in leadership experiences; boys derive greater satisfaction from being in charge (26% vs. 16%). Girls and boys equally cite “being able to effect change” as a reason for their positive experiences.

- Girls say their mothers are the most likely to encourage them to be leaders, followed by teachers and fathers. However, 39% of girls report having been discouraged or put down, usually by peers and classmates, when they were trying to lead.
- Youth do not feel they have much power to change things or teach/help others in any environment. When asked to rate environments in which they felt they could effect change, “school” is the highest—at 23%—but “none” gets the same rating. After-school environments are rated significantly lower at 7%.

## INSIGHT #4

### GIRLS HAVE A RANGE OF LEADERSHIP IDENTITIES

Girls vary widely in terms of their leadership aspirations and self-perceptions and fall into five categories of leadership identity. The categories range from girls (and boys—both sexes fall into exactly the same categories in exactly the same proportions) who think of themselves as leaders and actually want to be leaders to those who do not think of themselves as leaders and do not want to be leaders. A comparison of these groups reveals substantial differences not only among their respective orientations to leadership, but also in relation to their general attitudes, goals, aspirations, and behaviors.

- **(36%) LEADERSHIP VANGUARD:** Youth already think of themselves as leaders and actively desire to be leaders. They have the highest self-confidence, higher focus on academic, personal, and career success, and high social change values.
- **(25%) AMBIVALENT LEADERS:** Youth think of themselves as leaders and would not mind being leaders, although leadership is not expressly a goal for them. They share most of the attributes and behaviors of Vanguard leaders, only to a lesser degree.
- **(4%) HOPEFULS:** Youth want to be leaders but do not think of themselves as leaders. They are not as confident as the Vanguard leaders, or even the Ambivalent leaders.
- **(26%) UNMOTIVATED:** Youth would not mind being leaders but do not think of themselves as leaders. They have relatively low self-confidence and are unmotivated in pursuing leadership opportunities.
- **(8%) REJECTERS:** Youth do not want to be leaders and do not think of themselves as leaders. This group of girls and boys has the lowest self-confidence, feels powerless to change the world, and is more likely to believe that leadership cannot be learned.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Girls today aspire to leadership not in the form in which it most commonly appears in the culture—command and control—but to a model that is purpose-driven and oriented toward social change. As well, the leadership aspirations and experiences of youth are greatly dependent on their perceptions of their own abilities and their opportunities and experiences to exercise leadership.

Opportunities to develop leadership skills are scarce, and youth-developing organizations such as the Girl Scouts need to give youth the opportunity to effect change, which is what they are passionate about. The impact of positive adult role models, especially mothers, and supportive environments cannot be underestimated.

**Overall, to be relevant to and successful with girls, a leadership program must address their aspirational or preferred definition of leadership, their need for emotional safety, and their desire for social and personal development.** To encourage future girl leaders and support those already interested in leadership:

- **Frame communications about leadership in ways that are appealing to girls.** Understand the types of leaders girls want to become and help them realize that vision. Emphasize the skills and activities associated with the program, not just the end result.
- **Help girls see leadership as attainable.** Girls do not need to have all the skills and qualities they associate with being a leader to actually be one.
- **Work on enhancing girls' self-confidence in their skills and abilities.** Leadership can become a natural by-product of this skill and confidence development.
- **Create opportunities for girls to experience a broad range of leadership activities in a supportive environment.** Make clear that leadership is multi-dimensional and encourage girls to experiment with different roles and types, from social change and political activism to the more traditional, in a supportive environment that allows them to attempt new things and "try leadership on."
- **Understand the barriers to leadership for girls, including the fear of peer ridicule and persistent stereotypes about what it means to be "feminine."** Things like speaking in front of others and not wanting to upset anyone can be prohibitive.
- **Do not treat girls as one homogenous group.** Understand where girls already are in terms of leadership and help guide them forward in the most appropriate way for them.
- **Identify and create opportunities to engender positive leadership aspirations, behaviors, goals, and self-perceptions across environments.** This includes school, home, house of worship, peer group, community organizations, and the Internet, among others.

## METHODOLOGY

The study combined qualitative and quantitative research from the Girl Scout Research Institute and Fluent, a New York based research firm. In January of 2007, researchers conducted focus groups and ethnographies with 165 girls, boys, and mothers in four regions across the country. Upon completion of the qualitative research, a nationwide online survey was administered to a national stratified sample of 2,475 girls and 1,514 boys between the ages of 8 and 17 years. The online survey was fielded from June 22, 2007, to June 29, 2007. The margin of error did not exceed 1.5%. The sample was weighted to reflect the U.S. Census representation of racial/ethnic groups among the target-age population.

**GIRL SCOUTS OF THE USA (GSUSA)** is the preeminent organization for and leading authority on girls, with 3.6 million girl and adult members. Now in its 96th year, Girl Scouting builds girls of courage, confidence, and character, who make the world a better place.

**THE GIRL SCOUT RESEARCH INSTITUTE (GSRI)**, formed in 2000, is a center for research and public policy information on the healthy development of girls. Its main goal is to elevate the voices of girls on key issues that affect their lives, such as their emotional and physical health and safety. The GSRI originates national projects and initiatives, synthesizes existing research, and conducts outcomes evaluation to support the development of Girl Scout programs and to provide information to educational institutions, not-for-profits, government agencies, public policy organizations, parents seeking ways to support their daughters, and girls themselves. The GSRI includes staff and advisers who have expertise in child development and advisers from academia, industry, government, and not-for-profit organizations.

**GSUSA'S PUBLIC POLICY AND ADVOCACY OFFICE**, located in Washington, D.C., educates representatives of the legislative and executive branches of federal, state, and local government and advocates for public policy issues important to girls and Girl Scouting.

Source: *Change It Up! What Girls Say About Redefining Leadership* (2008)