

Dreaming Big: Examining the Career Aspirations of Girls of Color

The paucity of women in leadership positions in the U.S. is well established: only 4.6% of Fortune 500 CEOs, 16.9% of Fortune 500 Board members, and 19.4% of Congress are women. Even in industries heavily populated by women, leaders tend to be men. Nonprofits are no exception: 75% of the workers are women, but they head only 16.3% of the largest nonprofits. In education, where 75% of teachers are women, only 30% of the leadership are women.¹

While girls who are white have few role models as they look toward U.S. leaders, girls of color have even fewer. Women of color make up 18% of the entire U.S. population and 38.3% of all American women, but their representation at the top is even more disproportionate. Only one African American woman and one Asian American woman hold a Fortune 500 CEO role. Only 3.2% of board seats are filled by women of color, and two-thirds of Fortune 500 boards have no women of color at all. In the U.S. Congress, 31 (5.8%) out of 535 members are women of color.²

Why do so few women, and even fewer women of color, make it into leadership positions? Varied explanations for this “leaky pipeline to leadership” include deep socialized expectations about gender roles (e.g., men as leaders, women as caretakers), ubiquitous messaging that promulgates those expectations (through media and the lack of role models), and social structures that hold those gendered roles in place (such as employers requiring 24/7 availability and the lack of child care).³

Though the factors cited above no doubt have a major impact on women’s lives and their participation in leadership, this research team hypothesized that women may start “leaking out” of the leadership pipeline earlier than most theorists had proposed. Positioning middle school girls as the “headwaters” of the pipeline, in 2011 Simmons College and Girl Scouts of Eastern Massachusetts (GSEM) studied 414 boys, 475 Girl Scouts, and 299 non-Girl Scout girls. We found reasons to be hopeful: middle school girls are ambitious, holding more leadership positions than boys. In addition, girls expect that they will have to support themselves in the future, expect to have full-time jobs, and can articulate plans for managing children and work.

Other findings, however, were less hopeful. In the face of prevalent gendered social roles, middle school girls maintain gendered attitudes about their futures (e.g., feeling they have fewer options than boys) and gendered career aspirations (e.g., high interest in the arts, low interest in STEM fields). However, the study also determined the important role participation in Girl Serving Organizations (GSOs) plays for girls in reducing the negative impact of gendered messages, increasing girls’ confidence, and widening the career options girls would consider. It is important to note that 73% of the girls in that study were Caucasian. Thus, though this study (Phase 1) shed new light on when and how girls may start leaking out of the pipeline, and how girls differ from boys, Phase I only tells part of the story.⁴

Increasingly, scholars are looking to complicate gender by integrating race, ethnicity and other identity factors in their analysis in an effort to understand the context, the impact, and the choices that comprise the experiences of women of color. This concept of intersectionality scrutinizes the large identity category of women—often falsely regarded as homogenous—for differences, and acknowledges that every woman belongs to multiple identity groups, including race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, class, and many more. Unique experiences arise for each woman as, depending on the broader context, one dimension may become more salient and/or power relations, discrimination, and other factors based on an identity may create advantage or disadvantage.⁵

To address the nuances posed by intersectionality, we sought to expand our Phase 1 sample to include more girls of color.

Positioning middle school girls as the “headwaters” of the leadership pipeline, we expanded our 2011 study to address the nuances posed by intersectionality. This approach enabled us to examine whether girls of color “leak” out of the leadership pipeline at the same rate and for the same reasons as girls who are white.

To do so, six Massachusetts GSOs with similar missions relating to building leadership with girls gave access to their girl members to complete the same survey.⁶ This approach enabled us to examine whether girls of color “leak” out of the leadership pipeline at the same rate and for the same reasons as girls who are white.

The final sample (including girls from Phase 1 and Phase 2) consists of 632 (60.6%) girls who are white and 281 (39.4%) girls of color (see Table 2 in Endnotes).⁷ Because other variables—e.g., school grade level, age, socio-economic status, urban/suburban, education levels of parents, and presence of parent/guardian in the home—were consistent across the groups, we were able to examine and attribute differences in responses to race/ethnicity. However, it is important to acknowledge two limitations, both related to sample size. First, the experiences and cultural norms of girls can vary widely across ethnic groups, yet each individual ethnic cell (e.g., Spanish/Hispanic, African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, and biracial/multiracial) is too small to allow cross-group analyses. Second, there is diversity within each ethnic group. Despite these limitations, however, the data leads to four key findings.

Findings

Finding #1: More girls of color say that their future work won't be interrupted by having children.

In looking at girls' future goals, they expect to have to support themselves and their families; this expectation is consistent with current reality, where 40% of women are the primary breadwinners for their families, whether in single or two-parent families.⁸ Additionally, most girls expect to have a full-time job. However, more girls of color (65%) expect to have children and continue to work right away after giving birth than girls who are white (51%). Only 23% of girls of color say they will stop work until their children reach school age and then return, compared with 35% of girls who are white. Taken together with the strong financial career goals of girls of color (see Finding #2), these girls may be anticipating a future informed by the reality of financial obligations, lack of affordable child care in the U.S., and

cultural dynamics where multiple generations share child-care. Unlike many white women, African American women tend not to create a dichotomous choice between good mothering and providing financial support. Instead, they see good mothering as providing at least in part the financial resources necessary to sustain families.⁹ The girls of color in this survey may have already adopted this perspective.

Finding #2: Girls of color share some of the same career goals as girls who are white, but “being respected” and financial goals are comparatively more important.

Girls were asked to rank how important 19 potential job attributes are to their future careers. Factor analysis divided up those 19 attributes into three categories, each of which explains a distinct “mega” goal. We named those mega-goals: “**Helping Others**” (which includes job attributes such as “making the world a better place” and “being respected”), “**Be Your Own Boss**” (including attributes such as “being in charge” and “working from home”); and “**Rewarding Job**” (including attributes such as “enough money to enjoy my life” and “time to spend with family and friends”). For all girls, “**Helping Others**” was the strongest mega-goal category. For all girls, inside that mega-goal, “making the world a better place” and “helping other people” were the top two most sought-after job attributes.

When examining the responses of girls of color, however, several differences become evident. First, the attribute of “being respected” (embedded in the strongest “**Helping Others**” category) became much more powerful as a sought-

after job attribute for girls of color than for girls who are white. Second, the next strongest mega-goal for girls of color is “**Rewarding Job,**” compared with girls who are white, for whom it is “**Being Your Own Boss.**” Taken together, this means that, for girls of color, having a rewarding job is more important than being one's own boss. This also signals that the attributes of “making enough money to enjoy my life” and “making lots of money” are much stronger for girls of color than for their white counterparts. For girls who are white and who share other identity dimensions as the girls of color including socio-economic status, having control over their time (as

Table 1: Middle School Girl Career Choices

Girls, White	Their Parents	Girls of Color	Their Parents
	43.4 I don't know		40.3 I don't know
18.1 Teach/Coach	22.2 Do whatever makes me happy	13.3 Doctor/Surgeon	17.4 Do whatever makes me happy
12.7 Work with animals	7.1 Doctor/Surgeon	12.5 Want to be famous	13.3 Doctor/Surgeon
9.4 STEM	5.7 Teach/Coach	10.0 STEM	4.8 STEM
9.1 Want to be famous	4.2 STEM	8.8 Teach/Coach	4.0 Teach/Coach
6.4 Health care	3.9 Make lots of money	8.8 Work with animals	4.0 Make lots of money

Note: Numbers in the “Girls” columns represent the percent of the sample selecting that career category. Numbers in “Their Parents” column represent what girls believe their parents want their daughter to do.

captured in the goal attributes of working from home, or working for myself, or being one's own boss) is more important than financial goals, which fall into their weakest mega-goal.

Finding #3: All middle school girls need guidance relating to career choices.

When middle school girls are asked what job they *think* their parents would want for them, the most frequent responses are: "I don't know" and "whatever makes me happy" (see Table 1). Additionally, only 4% or less of middle school girls say their parents want them to get a job that "makes money," and only around 4% believe their parents support their interests in STEM careers. Unfortunately, girls, regardless of race or ethnicity differences, share this lack of actionable career guidance and financial advice from parents. The two groups also share the same top career preferences, although in somewhat different order. Both want to be "famous," to be teachers or coaches, to work with animals, to have a STEM career, or work in the medical field. But while girls of color want to be doctors or surgeons, girls who are white want to be nurses or physical therapists. Perhaps girls of color see being a doctor as a better vehicle to achieving their stronger career goals of "being respected" and "making lots of money."

Finding #4: Girls of color have higher confidence than boys, and girls who participate in multiple Girl Serving Organizations, whether over time or at the same time, have the highest confidence.

To identify "confidence" or "self-efficacy" of middle schoolers, we asked them to compare their abilities to perform 20

different activities with those of their peers. Factor analysis divided their responses into three confidence categories which we named: Confidence as a **Leader in Charge** (including abilities to "speak in front of others" and "being in charge of projects"); Confidence in Being a **Responsible Leader** (including "organizing and finishing projects" and "solving problems"); and Confidence as a **Team-building Leader** (including "resolving

conflicts" and "being a good listener"). In all three categories, both girls of color and girls who are white are more

confident than boys at a statistically significant level. In Confidence as a Teambuilding Leader, girls of color are slightly more confident than girls who are white, also at a statistically significant level.

Among girls who have been members in multiple Girl Serving Organizations, whether over time (one year at one organization, and the next year at another) or concurrently (participation in two or more GSOs during the same year), girls with multiple GSO experiences have the highest confidence overall.

Discussion and Implications

The girls of color in our study are ambitious, pragmatic about their future need to work, committed to working in a "rewarding job," and still "in the pipeline" towards leadership. Indeed, a 2008 study found that 53% of African American girls and 50% of Latina girls said, "I want to be a leader!," compared to 34% of girls who are white.¹⁰ But we know that girls of color disproportionately face additional challenges that may narrow that pipeline: they are at greater risk for inequitable discipline in K-12, by 8th grade they are more likely to score "below basic" in mathematics and reading, and they have fewer opportunities for AP and honors classes.¹¹

Yet we have cause for optimism: research, including ours, consistently shows the positive impact extra-curricular activities can have on girls, particularly during the middle school years. It is at this time that cognitive development enables adolescents to reflect on their behaviors, and extracurricular activities may enable them to express their individuality, master new skills, and engage in activities that allow them to experiment with increasing leadership opportunities, away from the competition of the classroom and peer groups.¹²

Educators, girl serving organizations, and the funders that sustain them all play a crucial role in keeping middle school girls in the pipeline to leadership, equipping girls to navigate the gender and racial/ethnic challenges they will face, and guiding them in choices they make today, orienting them towards their career and life aspirations. Beyond the support that their families provide, we offer these recommendations to the other adults in their lives:

- Challenge your organization to view its work in the larger context of cultural change. As you work with girls, whether building their self-esteem and confidence or reframing their body image, recognize the social messages and cultural norms you are contesting. This enables your organization to reorient its paradigm from doing charity (girls as victims) to social justice (girls as worthy of investment) and moving donors from being check-writers to activists for social change.
- Do not apologize for focusing your efforts on girls. Doing so does not ignore the fact that boys, particularly

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boys of color, have desperate needs. Indeed, in our own Phase 1 research, boys reveal significantly lower confidence than girls, yet have a disconnected (and gendered) view that they have more career options. Choosing to focus on girls or boys is a false dichotomy: what is good for girls will be good for boys as well. Even more specifically, the best practices developed in the service of girls of color serve all children.

- While we've examined differences of girls across ethnic/racial identities, we must resist the urge to view all girls through a heteronormative lens. Another dimension of intersectionality is gender identity and sexual diversity. While our Phase 1 research demonstrates the positive impact that "girl only" environments have, we know that pressuring youth into heteronormativity as well as normative gender identity and gender expression at a young age can have a detrimental effect.¹³ We speculate that this may lead to lower confidence levels in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth, which could impact their place in the pipeline.

At the operational level:

Girl Serving Organizations:

- Create or define space in your program delivery to have conversations with middle school girls about what they see as their futures. What stands in their way, and how can your organization give girls the skills to stay on course to their future dreams?
- The cumulative effect of girls participating in more than one GSO experience is evident in the research. Find ways to keep girls active in multiple GSO experiences. By looking for opportunities to collaborate or scaffold experiences across GSOs, you can focus on keeping girls in the pipeline of career-broadening experiences. This collaboration also involves recognizing the collective impact GSOs are trying to make, with complementary agendas.
- Appreciate that for girls involved in GSOs, the GSO mentor or adult staff is the second most common source from which middle school girls seek career advice. Given the less pragmatic advice that girls hear from their parents ("be happy"), be prepared to work with those girls who are forming ideas about their futures and to encourage the broadest possible spectrum with concrete examples and appropriate role models.
- As you attempt to reach out to girls whose racial or ethnic identities are new to your GSO, consider using a "middle man" (or woman!). Partner with a cultural, community, or religious group who can introduce you to people who work with those girls, while observing expected cultural protocols and language.

- When seeking funding, donors want to be confident that you understand the specific population you are serving. Demonstrate that you have recognized the critical dimensions of intersectionality, such as race, ethnicity, and class, and have aligned your "product" to meet their specific needs.

Middle School Level Educators and Counselors:

- Middle school girls and boys most frequently seek career advice and information from their schools. This great responsibility also represents an opportunity for educators. Given that our research identifies that girls of color and girls who are white assign different levels of salience to the 19 job attributes, consider customizing conversations with students based on their individual backgrounds, interests and aspirations.
- Educators and counselors must work to reverse the message that girls—especially girls of color—should not pursue particular careers. Beware of unconscious biases that those giving advice may be projecting unintentionally onto girls of color. Encourage girls to think that any career is possible.

- Our research shows that middle school girls lack a clear understanding of the concrete steps necessary to get to the careers of their choice, or how their current school activities relate to future careers. Connecting girls to career choices that both "help make the world a better place" and are well paying can help them make the connection between their current practice and their futures; making clear how varied careers *can* make the world a better place can also open up possibilities for girls. Counselors and educators can also explicitly position the classes girls are taking as building blocks to their future careers.

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- Because educators and girl-serving organizations are at the forefront of cultural change, expand your focus from just educating girls to educating their families. Consider

how to bring parents/guardians along, not just in building their math skills so they can assist with homework, but also in aligning families' thinking about career possibilities and preparation so they can support their daughters' ambitions.

- Given the benefits that result from girls' participation in GSOs, consider ways your school could partner with those organizations. Carve out curricular space to bring in GSOs to deliver content in areas like leadership, body image, career preparation and mentorship, and empowerment.
- Finally, given the gap between the ambition and confidence middle school girls of color espouse and the scarcity of women of color in leadership positions, help girls prepare to deal with the additional challenges of discrimination, both unconscious and conscious, and other social systemic barriers they will face along their path to leadership. Provide them with opportunities to build strategies and skills to navigate the barriers of sexism, racism, and other forces they may encounter.

Funders:

We know that participation in GSOs increases the confidence of middle school girls, provides a support system for career advice, and broadens the scope of careers—especially non-traditional careers—that girls will consider. Funders armed with this knowledge can use this research to convince their boards, their organizations, and their constituencies to continue to fund GSOs. Additional action steps include:

- Given that this research has established the positive impact on girls by participating in multiple GSOs, resist the urge to make “either/or” funding decisions. Rather than funding just one GSO, consider a portfolio of GSOs. A broader approach supports the multiplier effect and encourages collaborative projects between and among GSOs.
- Solicit input from organizations that serve girls of color to identify the unique challenges intersectionality presents. Strategies could include board members visiting GSO sites, revealing a more complete story about who they serve and what they uniquely are trying to achieve.
- Consider funding research to identify the needs of communities of color and community organizations that seek to address needs.

Conclusion

Phase 1 and Phase 2 of this research project have begun to fill in a number of gaps in research on women, careers, and leadership. Most research on women and leadership has involved women of college age or older; the focus of this study on middle school girls makes clear that intervention to keep women on the path to leadership needs to occur far earlier

than most researchers have anticipated. Second, the research significantly adds to the importance of acknowledging the impact of intersectionality, in this case gender, age, and race/ethnicity. We've established that efforts to build confidence and support the career ambitions of girls need to recognize and then support the distinct issues that arise from each girl's multiple social identities. Echoing the platitude “It takes a village...,” adults engaged in serving girls also need to resist seeing themselves as competitors (for membership or funding) and instead look for ways to collaborate in helping girls explore who they are and understand the impact, challenges and opportunities of their multiple identities. Finally, this research supports concrete action steps that adults who seek to improve the lives of girls of color can take, making clear that the lack of women of color in leadership positions is neither inevitable nor fixed and that “dreaming big” now can become a future reality.

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Endnotes

¹For statistics on the participation of women in leadership positions, see Center for American Progress. 2014, March 7. The women's leadership gap. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/report/2014/03/07/85457/fact-sheet-the-womens-leadership-gap/>; Di Mento, M. 2014, April 28. Lack of women in top roles hinders nonprofits, female nonprofit workers say. *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. Retrieved from <http://philanthropy.com/article/Lack-of-Women-in-Top-Roles/146237/>; Lennon, T. 2013. Benchmarking women's leadership positions in the U.S. Denver, CO: Colorado Women's College, University of Denver. Retrieved from <http://www.womenscollege.edu/media/documents/BenchmarkingWomensLeadershipintheUS.pdf>

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⁶The GSOs participating in this research, and their missions, are *Big Sister Association of Greater Boston*: Big Sister Association of Greater Boston's mission is to help girls realize their full potential by providing them with positive mentoring relationships with women; *Girls' LEAP*: Girls' LEAP's mission is to empower girls and young women to value and champion their own safety and well-being; *Strong Women, Strong Girls*: The mission of Strong Women, Strong Girls is to utilize the lessons learned from strong women throughout history to encourage girls and young women to become strong women themselves. By building communities of women committed to supporting positive social change, Strong Women, Strong Girls works to create cycles of mutual empowerment for women and girls; *Investing in Girls Alliance*: Our mission is to improve services for middle-school girls in central Massachusetts through research, education, advocacy, and collaboration. Our vision is to improve the lives of girls in greater Worcester and ensure that local girls grow up to be happy, healthy, and productive; *Science Club for Girls*: SCFG fosters excitement, confidence and literacy in STEM for girls from underrepresented communities by providing free, experiential programs and by maximizing meaningful interactions with women mentors in science, technology, engineering & mathematics; *Girl Scouts of Eastern Massachusetts*: Girl Scouting builds girls of courage, confidence and character who make the world a better place.

⁷Table 2 showing ethnic breakdown in Phase 1 and Phase 2 samples:

Table 2	2014 Sample				
	Girls, All Phase I (775)	Girls, Phase II only (268)	Girls, Phases I & II (1043)	Girls of Color (281)	Girls, White (632)
Spanish/Hispanic	5.5%	21.6%	9.7%	26.0%	2.1%
White/Caucasian	73.3%	23.9%	60.6%	9.2%	100.0%
African American	2.7%	20.5%	7.3%	20.6%	0.3%
Asian/Pacific Islander	3.9%	14.2%	6.5%	20.6%	1.1%
Native American	0.5%	3.0%	1.2%	3.4%	0.8%
Biracial/Multiracial	2.6%	9.7%	4.4%	12.4%	1.4%
Other	2.3%	5.6%	3.2%	7.5%	0.8%

⁸Boushey, H., & O'Leary, A. 2009, Oct. 16. The Shriver report: A woman's nation changes everything. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress. Retrieved from www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/report/2009/10/16/6789/the-shriver-report (p. 19).

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