



# Girls Empowering Girls

A girl-driven approach to gender equity



**Girl  
Guides**

# Girls Empowering Girls

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## Preface on language use

### “Gender equality” versus “gender equity”

This paper intentionally uses the terms “gender equity” and “gender equality” in different places for specific reasons. Generally speaking, “equality” refers to giving different groups of people access to the same opportunities in equal proportions. Efforts to realize gender equality usually involve ensuring women and girls have the same opportunities and representation as men and boys. For example, achieving equal representation for women and men among elected officials or on corporate boards is an excellent step toward advancing women’s empowerment in Canadian society. However, striving solely for equality may not reflect the fact that individuals or groups of people may face systemic barriers, meaning that even with access to the same opportunities, their experiences and outcomes may differ.

On the other hand, equity is about removing the systemic barriers that marginalized groups face, so that everyone can achieve equitable outcomes. Rather than simply providing equality in access to opportunities, an equity-focused approach starts by acknowledging that different groups of people have different experiences and therefore different starting points in society, and as a result must be treated differently in order to achieve true, substantive equality – equality in substance, not just in name. When we talk about gender equity, we talk about a society in which girls and women not only occupy an equal number of seats at the table, but one where they may access these seats without facing harmful stereotypes about their abilities as women and girls; where they may participate without being subjected to gender-based harassment and violence; and where the intersectionality of their experiences – based on race, class, ability, sexual orientation and more – is accounted for, likely through gender-based supports that address the specific barriers facing girls and women.

In many ways, the Girl Guide movement’s own story is one that started with a demand for gender equality: in 1909, girls in England demanded to take part in a Boy Scouts rally organized by Lord Baden-Powell at the Crystal Palace in London. Baden-Powell was impressed and asked his sister, Agnes, to create a program just for girls. This was the beginning of the Guiding movement, with its early days being

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characterized by girls advocating for access to the same opportunities afforded to boys – in essence, gender equality.

However, as described in this report, despite efforts and progress towards achieving gender equality, gendered inequalities and gendered inequities persist through the prevalence of harmful gendered norms and stereotypes. As such, today, Girl Guides of Canada’s approach is one that strives for gender equity – ultimately a more ambitious goal, in which systemic changes empower every girl to truly be everything she wants to be.

### “Girls and women”

Girl Guides of Canada (GGC) is a membership organization for girls and women to meet in a safe, inclusive space to explore what matters to them. GGC recognizes and values the richness of human diversity in its many forms, and therefore strives to ensure environments where girls and women from all walks of life, identities, and lived experiences feel a sense of belonging and can participate fully. As such, persons who identify as girls and women are welcome to join GGC, including transgender girls and women. Throughout this report, all references to “girls and women” refer to individuals who identify as girls and women, regardless of the sex they were assigned at birth.

For this reason, the term female has intentionally not been used in this paper, unless used in a direct quote or statistic. Female is commonly used as a biological term referring to an individual’s sex, and can be considered exclusionary to transgender girls and women.



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## Introduction

*“Even though education and career opportunities have improved enormously over the past decades, gender stereotypes still persist and young people in Canada continue to face considerable pressure to conform to traditional male and female roles. Although some girls are starting to take on more masculine jobs, it is still a very small amount. Girls today also feel increasing pressure to do everything and please everyone.” – Girl Guides of Canada Conference Participant<sup>1,2</sup>*

Despite efforts and progress towards achieving gender equality, girls and women in Canada continue to experience unequal access to resources and power. Women still earn less than men – a gender wage gap that is even wider for women of colour, women with disabilities and trans women. Women are underrepresented in certain fields including science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), politics and academia. And violence against girls and women is still prevalent. Through the process of actively listening to girls, GGC has identified key challenges girls in Canada face today. Based on feedback from teenage girls aged 15 to 17, poignant themes that have emerged include the existence of inequity, persistence of harmful stereotypes and gender-based social norms which affect feelings of self-worth and mental health, as well as experiences with various forms of violence and discrimination. This is supported by research that suggests that around the onset of adolescence, girls’ self-esteem decreases dramatically due to what researchers call a triple whammy of sexual assault, mental health issues, and toxic, hypersexualized culture.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, sexual objectification and body image has profound implications on self-esteem and mental health, with girls reporting higher rates of stress,

*Based on feedback from teenage girls aged 15 to 17, poignant themes that have emerged include the existence of inequity, persistence of harmful stereotypes and gender-based social norms which affect feelings of self-worth and mental health, as well as experiences with various forms of violence and discrimination.*

<sup>1</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *I3 Conference Insights: Girls Voice Their Opinions About Important Issues, and How GGC Can Lead* (2018).

<sup>2</sup> Note: All direct quotations from conference participants are from Girl Guides of Canada’s internal report on the *Ignite. Inspire. Innovate.* girls’ conference, held in April 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *Cognitive, Physical, Emotional, and Social Development of Girls in Canada: A Girl Guides of Canada–Guides du Canada perspective* (2015).



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depression and anxiety.<sup>4</sup> In this complex web of issues impacting girls in Canada, one of the central culprits is the persistence and prevalence of harmful gendered social norms and stereotypes.

GGC has developed this report because the issues facing girls are integral to who we are as a girl-driven organization. GGC facilitates a girl-driven approach to increasing gender equity by providing gender-specific programming that addresses girls' needs, facilitated by women mentors in an all-girls and -women environment. The GGC approach focuses on girls and their unique needs and social barriers, enabling girls to witness women in positions of leadership and to build confidence and skills in a safe space. Given how quickly the world is changing for girls today, it is more important than ever for society to actively listen to girls' voices and use the information we hear to be responsive and develop relevant programs and services. We need to understand what girls in Canada are facing so we can be the support and advocate a girl needs to be everything she wants to be.



## Complex state of girls' lives

### Harmful gendered social norms and stereotypes

Social norms are rules and expectations of behaviour that are culturally constructed and accepted as the norm, and may vary depending on the cultural context. A stereotype is a form of representation that generalizes an entire group of people based on a few, often negative, traits and/or behaviours widely thought to be characteristic of that group. In Canadian society, some examples of gendered social norms and stereotypes include harmful expectations about girls' and women's physical appearance and sexuality, as well as attitudes about what constitutes an appropriately feminine occupation or activity – all of which can be multi-layered and mutually reinforcing. When looked at systemically, these norms and stereotypes can limit opportunities for girls and women, as well as present barriers to accessing financial resources and positions of power.

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<sup>4</sup> Girls Action Foundation, *The need for a gender-sensitive approach to the mental health of young Canadians*, (2008), [http://girlsactionfoundation.ca/files/Mental%20Health%20Paper%20Final\\_0.pdf](http://girlsactionfoundation.ca/files/Mental%20Health%20Paper%20Final_0.pdf).



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While research suggests that pre-adolescent girls tend to be optimistic and driven,<sup>5</sup> sexual objectification and negative body image is internalized by girls as young as age 3 who already associate “fat” with “stupid, ugly, sloppy, loud, and friendless”, and 80% of whom have tried dieting by age 10.<sup>6</sup> This worsens during adolescence, when the existence of harmful gender disparities in both expectations and opportunities for girls becomes particularly pronounced.<sup>7</sup>

For teenage girls, unrealistic beauty ideals, stereotypes, and gendered social norms are deeply embedded within Canadian society. Girls themselves have identified how these social norms are gendered, stereotypical, unrealistic, and often ambiguous, and therefore restrictive and harmful. For example, girls have repeatedly said that they feel pressure from society to act and look a certain way, and meet certain expectations of what it means to be a girl. According to a nationwide Ipsos survey of girls aged 15 to 17 in September 2017, 59% of teenage girls in Canada feel pressure from society to conform to unrealistic expectations of what it means to be a girl, not only in terms of how they should look and dress, but also in terms of how they should act or which interests they should pursue.<sup>8</sup> This is not surprising, considering that some girls reported being treated differently because of their gender; this includes experiences such as being treated differently by teachers in class (19%, rising to 33% for girls who identified as Asian), or being excluded from joining a club or team (12%, rising to 22% among girls who identified as Asian).<sup>9</sup>

**59%**

of teenage girls in Canada feel pressure from society to conform to unrealistic expectations of what it means to be a girl, not only in terms of how they should look and dress, but also in terms of how they should act or which interests they should pursue.



<sup>5</sup> Girls Action Foundation, *Girls Action Research Review: A compilation of research on girls and young women's issues* (2009), [http://girlsactionfoundation.ca/files/Girls\\_Action\\_Research\\_Review\\_2009\\_LR.pdf](http://girlsactionfoundation.ca/files/Girls_Action_Research_Review_2009_LR.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *Development of Girls in Canada*.

<sup>7</sup> Girls Action Foundation, *Girls Action Research Review*.

<sup>8</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *International Day of the Girl 2017: Nationwide Survey of Teenage Girls in Canada* (2017), [https://girlguides.ca/WEB/GGC/Media/Thought\\_Leadership/Day\\_of\\_the\\_Girl\\_Survey/GGC/Media/Thought\\_Leadership/IDG\\_Nationwide\\_Survey.aspx](https://girlguides.ca/WEB/GGC/Media/Thought_Leadership/Day_of_the_Girl_Survey/GGC/Media/Thought_Leadership/IDG_Nationwide_Survey.aspx).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.





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These experiences may be negatively influencing how girls view their potential and participate in society. For example, 30% of girls have avoided or considered stopping an activity or sport they like because not many other girls participate. Some girls also said they feel unmotivated to pursue their dream career because they are worried they will be paid less than male counterparts (24%), or be treated worse than men because of their gender (19%).<sup>10</sup> This data provides a glimpse into how intersectionality – the idea that one’s varying identities, including gender, race, class, ability, etc. overlay and interact with each other – manifests itself in girls’ lives today. Girls who self-identify as a visible minority were more likely to avoid an activity or sport because not many other girls participate (average 40%, highest among girls who identify as Indigenous at 45%), or feel unmotivated to pursue their dream career because of the gender pay gap (average 33%, rising to 36% among girls who identify as Asian and Indigenous). The realities of girls’ intersectional lives mean we cannot consider their gendered experiences in a vacuum, without considering their other identities and positions in society.

These harmful social rules and expectations of behaviour in Canadian society perpetuate a reality in which girls and women have less access to resources and power, and in which girls specifically may not have access to supports to assist them in these situations. As a result, girls have noted how these norms and stereotypes contribute to the persistence of inequalities today: for example, they are aware of how gender inequality is a human rights and global issue, and how gendered violence is a consequence of inequality. Needless to say, girls face numerous gendered norms and stereotypes which impact their lives in four key ways:

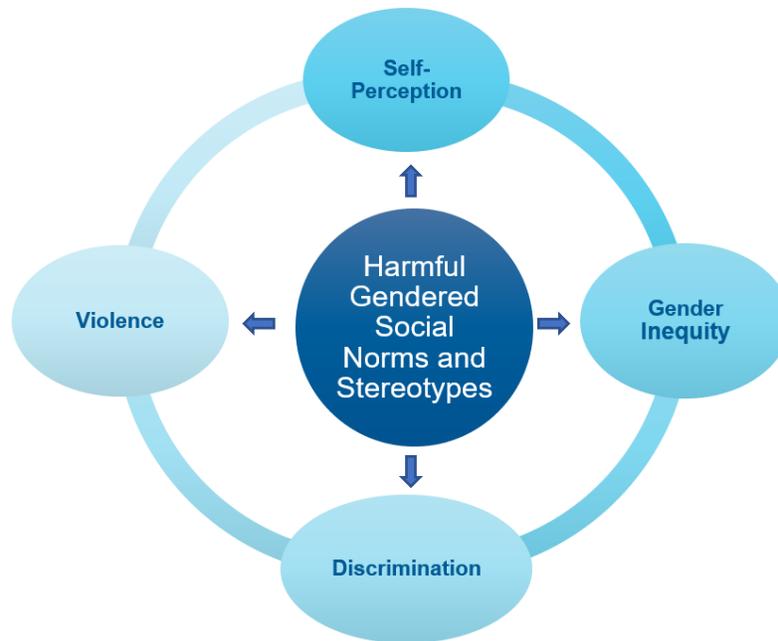
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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



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## Self-perception

Girls recognize how harmful gendered norms and stereotypes are significantly impacting how they perceive and value themselves. The notion of self-worth refers to how girls see and value themselves, and more importantly how society imposes standards on girls, which affects their perceptions of themselves. Girls have expressed the idea of self-worth in multiple ways: low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, poor body image, and never feeling good enough.<sup>11</sup>

***“I think one of the biggest issues impacting girls is self-image, and confidence in themselves, and their abilities. There are too many girls with low self-esteem. I always hear girls saying things they don’t like about themselves, and sadly I am guilty of this as well.” – Girl Guides of Canada Conference Participant<sup>12</sup>***

<sup>11</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *13 Conference Insights*.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



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The overwhelming majority of teenage girls (80%) think that the beauty standards for girls they see on social media are unrealistic, yet 60% say they feel pressure from social media to conform to these unrealistic standards.<sup>13</sup> In fact, one in four girls say they feel pressure to post sexy or provocative things about themselves on social media, and this number doubles among prolific social media users who regularly use six or more platforms (rising from 25% to 53%).<sup>14</sup> Without a doubt, social media plays a role in perpetuating harmful gendered norms and stereotypes, given that 93% of teenage girls are using more than one social media platform on a regular basis.<sup>15</sup> The constant flow of images of how girls and women should look, act, and behave sets a standard for girls to live up to. In other words, the messages girls receive become normalized as the expectation. The pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards has real consequences. More than half of girls (55%) report that trying to meet social expectations on how they should look or act has negatively impacted their self-esteem. Significantly, the connection between meeting social expectations and lowered self-esteem was felt more strongly among girls who self-identify as belonging to a visible minority group (Asian, Indigenous or Black, combined average of 64%).<sup>16</sup> Again, this data showcases how intersectionality affects girls today: those whose experiences cross over multiple disadvantaged or minority identities are impacted more notably.

***The overwhelming majority of teenage girls (80%) think that the beauty standards for girls they see on social media are unrealistic.***

Girls have frequently noted the influence of social media on their notion of self, especially when it comes to



body image and girl-appropriate behaviour. Girls who are heavy users of social media are most likely to say that trying to meet unrealistic expectations diminishes their self-esteem (71%). To further complicate matters, more than half of girls (56%) said they receive mixed messages about how they should look and dress, as well as how they should act and behave. For example, they feel pressure to dress more feminine (36%) or

<sup>13</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *International Day of the Girl*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



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provocatively (26%) on the one hand, but to dress more modestly so as not to tempt boys on the other hand (36%).<sup>17</sup>

### Gender inequity

Girls are also aware of how inequity – in access to power and resources, in the workplace, and in leadership roles – continues to be an issue for women. They are most concerned with lack of opportunities for women and lack of women role models, and are discouraged by the fact that men are paid more than women for the same work – evidenced in the persistence of a gender wage gap.

***“It’s hard to strive for excellence if you know that no matter how much work and effort you put in and how great you are, a man will always be paid more.” – Girl Guides of Canada Conference Participant<sup>18</sup>***



Women still earn less than men for the same work: in 2014, women working fulltime earned 74.2 cents for every dollar that full-time male workers made<sup>19</sup> – and the gap is even wider for women of colour, women with disabilities and trans women. For example, in 2005, racialized women in Canada earned 55.6 cents for every dollar white men earned and 88.2 cents for every dollar that white women earned.<sup>20</sup> University-educated women make 80 cents on the dollar, whereas low-income women (who make up 60% of minimum wage workers in Canada) make as little as 72

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Girl Guides of Canada. *13 Conference Insights*.

<sup>19</sup> Tavia Grant, “Who is minding the gap?” *The Globe and Mail*, November 12, 2017, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/gender-pay-gap-a-persistent-issue-in-canada/article34210790/>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



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cents on the dollar.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Canada ranks 15<sup>th</sup> out of 29 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries based on the hourly wage gap.<sup>22</sup>

While it's clear how this issue impacts women in the workforce, GGC has found that the realities of unequal pay and messages about women's economic worth in the professional world impact teenage girls before they even enter the workforce. Our Ipsos survey revealed that one in four (24%) girls aged 15-17 do not feel motivated to pursue their dream career because they are concerned they will be compensated less than their male counterparts.<sup>23</sup>

**One in four (24%) girls aged 15-17 do not feel motivated to pursue their dream career because they are concerned they will be compensated less than their male counterparts.**

***“As a student in the throws [sic] of university and program selection it is very important to me to ensure that my career choices remain open and fair and that compensation upon graduation is reasonable and fair.” – Girl Guides of Canada Conference Participant<sup>24</sup>***

Interestingly, girls as young as 15 years old are already making less than boys across most industries and jobs, in some cases as much as \$3.00/hour less.<sup>25</sup> While there is little research on the gender wage gap

<sup>21</sup> Statistics Canada, *Women in Canada: A gender-based statistical report* (2016), <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/89-503-x2015001-eng.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Department of Finance Canada, *Background: Pay Equity: Empowering Women for a Strong Middle Class* (2018), [https://www.fin.gc.ca/n18/data/18-008\\_7-eng.asp](https://www.fin.gc.ca/n18/data/18-008_7-eng.asp).

<sup>23</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *Women in the Workforce: Impact on Girls* (2018), [https://girlguides.ca/WEB/GGC/Media/Thought\\_Leadership/Women\\_in\\_the\\_Workforce/GGC/Media/Thought\\_Leadership/Women\\_in\\_the\\_Workforce\\_Impact\\_on\\_Girls.aspx](https://girlguides.ca/WEB/GGC/Media/Thought_Leadership/Women_in_the_Workforce/GGC/Media/Thought_Leadership/Women_in_the_Workforce_Impact_on_Girls.aspx).

<sup>24</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *13 Conference Insights*.

<sup>25</sup> Statistics Canada, *Table 282-0072 - Labour Force Survey estimates (LFS), wages of employees by type of work, North American Industry Classification System (NAICS), sex and age group, annual (current dollars unless otherwise noted)* (CANSIM database, 2018), <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/a26?lang=eng&retrLang=eng&id=2820072&pattern=&csid=>. See also: Statistics Canada, *Table 282-0152 - Labour Force Survey estimates (LFS), wages of employees by type of work, National Occupational Classification (NOC), sex, and age group, annual (current dollars unless otherwise noted)* (CANSIM database, 2018), <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/a26?lang=eng&retrLang=eng&id=2820152&pattern=&csid=>.



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among working teens in Canada, a recent study in the United States indicates that the gender earnings gap starts by age 14 or 15.<sup>26</sup> While more women are graduating from university than men,<sup>27</sup> and although 82% of women aged 25 to 54 participate in Canada's workforce, they are still underrepresented in certain industries including politics, STEM and academic faculty.

Women remain outnumbered in STEM fields: in 2015 only 24% of those employed in professional scientific occupations were women.<sup>28</sup> The limited representation of women in fields such as STEM impacts the motivation and behaviour of girls to pursue such career paths. One conference participant expressed: "As a confident girl who is very interested in all aspects of STEM, I still walk into coding events and science and math events and find myself intimidated by the lack of people like me in a room."<sup>29</sup>

As well, women are still underrepresented in leadership roles: women hold only 25% of vice-president positions, 15% of CEO positions, and 27% of the seats in the House of Commons.<sup>30</sup> These numbers are even lower among women of colour: 4% of MPs are women who belong to visible minority groups and less than 1% are Indigenous women,<sup>31</sup> and studies have found visible minority women to be significantly less represented among corporate leadership than white women.<sup>32</sup> The fact that 50% of the population is

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<sup>26</sup> Yasemin Besen-Cassino, *The Cost of Being a Girl: Working Teens and the Origins of the Gender Wage Gap* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2018).

<sup>27</sup> Canadian Women's Foundation, *Girls in Canada 2005* (Calhoun Research & C.Lang Consulting: 2005), <http://www.canadianwomen.org/sites/canadianwomen.org/files/PDF%20-%20Girls%20in%20Canada%20Report%202005.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Statistics Canada, *Women and Paid Work* (2017), <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/2015001/article/14694-eng.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *I3 Conference Insights*.

<sup>30</sup> Canadian Women's Foundation, *Fact Sheet: Moving Women into Leadership* (2017), <https://www.canadianwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Facts-About-Women-and-Leadership.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> Erin Tolley, "Visible Minority and Indigenous Members of Parliament," *Samara Canada* (blog), November 26, 2015, <http://www.samaracanada.com/samarablog/blog-post/samara-main-blog/2015/11/26/visible-minority-and-indigenous-members-of-parliament>.

<sup>32</sup> Diversity Institute, *DiversityLeads: Women and Visible Minorities in Senior Leadership Positions: A Profile of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA)* (Toronto, ON: Ryerson University, 2014), [https://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/diversity/reports/DiversityLeads2014\\_KeyPreliminaryFindings.pdf](https://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/diversity/reports/DiversityLeads2014_KeyPreliminaryFindings.pdf). See also:



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underrepresented in leadership positions in Canadian society is not something that has gone unnoticed by teenage girls. As one GGC conference participant astutely noted: *“Without female leaders in our government, girls do not have a role model to look up to, which leads to fewer girls attempting to gain a position within our government.”*<sup>33</sup> More broadly, one in four (25%) girls aged 15 to 17 in Canada report that they do not know any female role models who have their dream job.<sup>34</sup> This leadership gap can have serious ramifications, as decision-makers and those in positions of power may not reflect the interests and experiences of girls and women.

**One in four (25%) girls aged 15 to 17 in Canada report that they do not know any female role models who have their dream job.**

## Discrimination

Discrimination is an ongoing concern. According to *A Portrait of Canadian Youth* published in 2018 by Statistics Canada, 20% of female youth aged 15 to 24 reported experiencing discrimination in the past five years.<sup>35</sup> Girls have also called out sexism more generally, and recognize the power imbalances that exist beyond the workplace. This is consistent with the opinion of the general public. According to a nationwide public opinion poll conducted by Abacus Data in February 2018, almost all Canadians believe girls experience sexism at least occasionally (92%), with 52% believing they experience sexism regularly or all the time.<sup>36</sup>

**Almost all Canadians believe girls experience sexism at least occasionally (92%), with 52% believing they experience sexism regularly or all the time.**

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Canadian Board Diversity Council, *2015 Annual Report Card* (2015),

<https://www.boarddiversity.ca/sites/default/files/2015-Annual-Report-Card.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *13 Conference Insights*.

<sup>34</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *Women in the Workforce*.

<sup>35</sup> Statistics Canada, *A Portrait of Canadian Youth* (2018), <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-631-x/11-631-x2018001-eng.htm>.

<sup>36</sup> Abacus Data, *Public Opinion Research: Girl Guides of Canada – A National Survey of 2,000 Canadian Adults* (2018).



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Girls are acutely aware that the harmful gendered norms and stereotypes that society creates and perpetuates are the underlying causes of sexism, and in turn inequity, particularly at school – the key arena in which their social lives and relationships take shape.<sup>37</sup> The Ipsos survey revealed that two in ten girls (19%) agree that their teachers treat them differently in class because they're a girl. Girls who identify as Asian are significantly more likely to say this has happened to them (33%).<sup>38</sup> This is especially

poignant in subject areas that are traditionally more male, such as STEM. One GGC conference participant explained: “[In my coding class where I was the only girl], over and over again they were suggesting, and my teacher was agreeing with them, that the only reason I was able to be successful was because of the guys I was sitting next to, and every time I asked a question they assumed that meant I didn't know what I was doing and not that I was inherently curious.”<sup>39</sup>

Gender-based discrimination extends beyond the classroom. One in ten girls (12%) surveyed agree that an adult – whether it's a coach, teacher or parent – has excluded or prevented them from joining a club or team specifically because they're a girl.<sup>40</sup> A conference participant shared this experience of trying to organize a girls' basketball team at her school: “I went to the coach and I said ‘we have nine girls, that's good’ and he said ‘well I don't know how committed you are,’ and I said ‘well the boys have six guys, why can they have a team and we can't?’ and he said ‘well the boys, they can commit. Girls – you have other stuff, you like to do other stuff.’ And so we didn't end up having a basketball team.”<sup>41</sup>

These experiences may be negatively influencing how girls view their potential and how they participate in society. As described above, many girls have avoided or considered stopping an activity or sport they like

<sup>37</sup> Margriet van Hek, Gerbert Kraaykamp, and Ben Pelzer, “Do schools affect girls' and boys' reading performance differently? A multi-level study on the gendered effects of school resources and school practices,” *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 29, no. 1 (2017): 1-21, doi: 10.1080/09243453.2017.1382540.

<sup>38</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *Women in the Workforce*.

<sup>39</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *I3 Conference Insights*.

<sup>40</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *Women in the Workforce*.

<sup>41</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *I3 Conference Insights*.



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because not many girls participate, and this is especially the case for girls who identify as Asian, Indigenous, or Black. Regarding their professional pursuits, two in ten (19%) teenage girls report that they are not motivated to pursue their dream career over concerns they will be treated worse, simply because of their gender.<sup>42</sup>

Even more daunting are the statistics about incidences of harassment and racism among girls in Canada. Four in ten girls (40%) who self-identify as a visible minority say they have experienced acts of racism. While not as prevalent, it is important to note that girls also report experiencing acts of homophobia (7%), transphobia (4%) and ableism (4%).<sup>43</sup> For racialized girls, LGBTQ+ youth, and girls with disabilities, the differing forms of discrimination they experience overlay and intersect with, and cannot be separated from, the sexism they also experience.

**Four in ten girls (40%) who self-identify as a visible minority say they have experienced acts of racism.**

## Violence against girls and women

***“My friends would report a serious crime that happened to them or a sexual assault and people would say, ‘Oh, you’re just making that up for attention.’” – Girl Guide of Canada Conference Participant<sup>44</sup>***

As the #MeToo movement has revealed, sexual harassment and violence are critical issues facing women, and it is worth noting that this continues to be an issue among teenage girls with 41% saying that they know a girl who reported being touched or harassed in an unwanted way and was not believed.<sup>45</sup> This number rises to 53% among Indigenous girls,<sup>46</sup> which is consistent with Statistics Canada’s overview of *First Nations, Métis and Inuit Women* which indicates that Aboriginal women in Canada are at a higher risk of

<sup>42</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *Women in the Workforce*.

<sup>43</sup> Statistics Canada, *A Portrait of Canadian Youth*.

<sup>44</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *I3 Conference Insights*.

<sup>45</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *International Day of the Girl*.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.



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experiencing violence than non-Aboriginal women, and that a disproportionately high number of Aboriginal women have also been murdered or have gone missing.<sup>47</sup> Forty-six percent of high school girls have been sexually harassed, with sexual assault being eight times higher for girls than for boys,<sup>48</sup> and in 2012, 81% of sexual offences against children and youth were directed at girls, especially those between 12 and 17.<sup>49</sup>

**41% of teenage girls say that they know a girl who reported being touched or harassed in an unwanted way and was not believed.**

Beyond and alongside sexual violence, girls also experience other intersecting forms of gender-based violence, such as intimate partner violence, family violence, and criminal harassment. Because of the lesser power and resources available to girls and women, their vulnerability to violence is increased.<sup>50</sup> Every six days a woman in Canada dies after facing violence by an intimate partner,<sup>51</sup> an issue that affects girls as well: prevalence of dating violence for teens ranges from 9% to 45%, and girls' vulnerability to abuse in relationships can be attributed to gender socialization.<sup>52</sup> Girls are also more vulnerable to online forms of gender-based violence; for instance, 14% of girls and young women age 15 to 24 report being cyberstalked in the previous five years.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Paula Arriagada, "First Nations, Métis and Inuit Women," *Statistics Canada* (2016), <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/2015001/article/14313-eng.htm>.

<sup>48</sup> Status of Women Canada, "Violence against girls" last modified August 5, 2016, <http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/violence/resources-ressources/violence-girl-fille-en.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Adam Cotter and Pascale Beaupre, "Police-reported sexual offences against children and youth in Canada, 2012," *Statistics Canada* (2014), <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2014001/article/14008-eng.htm>.

<sup>50</sup> Lori Michau, et al., "Prevention of violence against women and girls: lessons from practice," *The Lancet* (2014): <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/e698/f92d09f2922785882712d6487e6f07edde7d.pdf>.

<sup>51</sup> Canadian Women's Foundation, *Fact Sheet: Moving Women Out of Violence* (2016), <https://www.canadianwomen.org/the-facts/gender-based-violence/>.

<sup>52</sup> Deborah L. Begoray and Elizabeth M. Banister, "Reaching teenagers where they are: Best practices for girls' sexual health education," *Women's Health and Urban Life* 6, no. 1 (2007): 24-40, [https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/9747/1/Begoray\\_Banister.pdf](https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/9747/1/Begoray_Banister.pdf).

<sup>53</sup> Statistics Canada, *Cyberstalking in Canada* (2017), <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2017039-eng.htm>.





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Moreover, age is a significant risk factor for experiencing violence. Girls and young women between 15 and 24 experience the highest rates of police-reported violent crime with rates for women declining as age increases,<sup>54</sup> and young women age 15 to 24 have the highest rate of spousal homicide.<sup>55</sup> As Lori Michau et al. write, “to be born a girl in a patriarchal society is a fundamental risk factor for various types of gender-based violence.”<sup>56</sup>

## Driving gender equity: for girls and by girls

While girls feel pressure from society to conform to stereotypical gender norms and have experienced various forms of discrimination in one form or another, there is resistance and resilience among girls today. The good news is that girls are pursuing their interests and dreaming about their future. According to the Ipsos survey, most adolescent girls do participate in sports (70%) and are motivated to pursue their career aspirations (75 to 80%), even if there is a lack of female participation and they are traditionally considered male realms.<sup>57</sup>

*There is resistance and resilience among girls today... girls are pursuing their interests and dreaming about their future.*

At a time when girls are constantly inundated with negative messages and pressures to conform to gendered stereotypes and norms, girls need safe spaces and supports in society to build their confidence and overcome these challenges.

GGC believes that girls benefit tremendously when they have access to:

- Programs and services that address girls’ gender-specific needs.
- Women mentors and role models.
- Environments dedicated to girls and women.
- Being valued and listened to as the experts on their own needs and lived experiences.

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<sup>54</sup> Hope Hutchins, “Measuring Violence Against Women: Statistical Trends, 2013,” *Statistics Canada* (2013), <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2013001/article/11766-eng.htm>.

<sup>55</sup> Maire Sinha. “Family violence in Canada: A statistical profile, 2011,” *Statistics Canada* (2013), <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2013001/article/11805-eng.htm>.

<sup>56</sup> Michau, et al.

<sup>57</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *Women in the Workforce*.



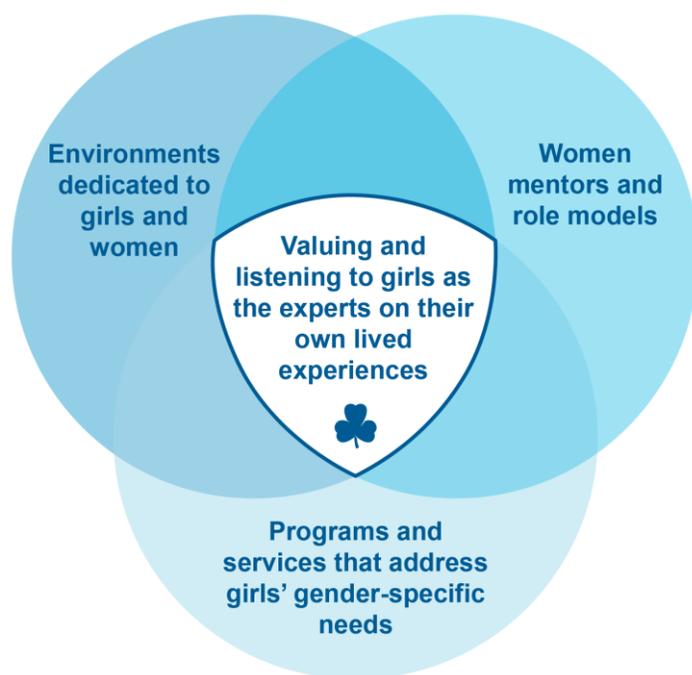
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## Girls need programs and services that address their unique needs and experiences

The ongoing inequity girls and women face in Canada is at the root of the need for girls' programming.<sup>58</sup> As stated above, when girls are younger they tend to be optimistic and driven, however during adolescence the harmful gender disparities in expectations and opportunities for girls become particularly pronounced.<sup>59</sup> These overall differences in lived experiences and realities between girls and boys is something that is broadly acknowledged: according to the nationwide Abacus Data poll in February 2018, most Canadians (81%) believe girls have different social experiences from boys (79% of men and 84% of women).<sup>60</sup> Canadians under 30 are especially more likely to acknowledge this reality. In this context, social experiences include the societal realities affecting a child's development, and their expression and management of emotions and ability to establish positive and rewarding relationships with others. For example, girls may learn from others to be reserved, passive, and giving in their interactions, while boys may learn to be confident, active, and aggressive.

Issues related to teenage girls' self-perception and unique social experiences all have gender-specific barriers, and as a result having programs and services that directly respond to those barriers can help girls overcome them. Specifically, the consensus among providers of services and programs for girls is that any issues related to emotional and mental health, social development, violence and bullying and leadership need to be addressed and require a different approach for girls.<sup>61</sup>



<sup>58</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *Gap Analysis & Program Model Development* (Alpha Projects & C.Lang Consulting, 2011).

<sup>59</sup> Girls Action Foundation, *Girls Action Research Review*.

<sup>60</sup> Abacus Data.

<sup>61</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *All-Female Structure: Research on benefits of gender-specific programming*, 2016.





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Violence is inflicted on girls because harmful gendered norms and stereotypes are prevalent. As noted, girls and women experience disproportionate rates of gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence, stalking and harassment, and sexual violence. In 2011, women and girls were 5 times more likely to be killed by a former or current spouse or intimate partner than boys and men. As mentioned, girls and young women are at a higher risk than older women for most forms of gender-based violence.<sup>62</sup> Because vulnerability to violence is gendered, prevention approaches also should be gendered to create emotional safety and address specific needs.<sup>63</sup> “Gender-transformative” violence prevention programs work with girls and women to deconstruct the unequal distribution of power that perpetuates the inequity for women.<sup>64</sup> For example, if a teenage girl is experiencing violence in her first dating relationship, she may internalize the experience and blame herself for the violence – because of what she has learned about being a girl. However, if girls have access to programs that address their specific gendered needs, they can gain the skills to deconstruct the harmful gendered stereotypes and norms they face, and in turn identify potentially unhealthy relationships, as well as reject blame for violence they may be experiencing.

***The consensus among providers of services and programs for girls is that any issues related to emotional and mental health, social development, violence and bullying and leadership need to be addressed and require a different approach for girls.***

Girls benefit tremendously from programs and services that focus on them and their needs, needs that exist because of their unique social experiences in a world where girls and women, and boys and men, are still treated differently and unequally.<sup>65</sup> Programs and services that account for the specific needs and interests

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<sup>62</sup> Sinha.

<sup>63</sup> Centre of Excellence for Women’s Health, *A study of Girls’ Perspectives on Girls’ Groups and Healthy Living* (2012), [http://bcccewh.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/BCCEWH\\_girls\\_perspectives\\_final\\_report.pdf](http://bcccewh.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/BCCEWH_girls_perspectives_final_report.pdf).

<sup>64</sup> Margaret E. Greene and Andrew Levack, *Synchronizing Gender Strategies: A Cooperative Model for Improving Reproductive Health and Transforming Gender Relations* (Population Reference Bureau, 2010), [https://assets.prb.org/igwg\\_media/synchronizing-gender-strategies.pdf](https://assets.prb.org/igwg_media/synchronizing-gender-strategies.pdf).

<sup>65</sup> Canadian Women’s Foundation, *Building Strong Girls: Girls’ Fund 2009-2012 Evaluation Highlights* (2012), <http://canadianwomen.org/sites/canadianwomen.org/files/CWF-GirlsFundReport-Highlights-EN-web-single%20page.pdf>.





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of girls, or address significant disparities that women face in accessing resources and opportunities, are critical to supporting girls to build their confidence and overcome these challenges.<sup>66</sup>

### Girls benefit from having women mentors and role models in their lives and seeing more women in positions of leadership in society

***“Another issue that I believe affects girls on a daily basis is that they don’t have positive female role models in their life.” – Girl Guides of Canada Conference Participant<sup>67</sup>***

Because girls have specific needs as a result of the harmful gendered norms and stereotypes they experience, they require different types of mentorship and have different types of relationships with their mentors.<sup>68</sup> In addition to the fact that programs and services for girls must value them and their lived experiences, it is also beneficial that they are delivered in a way that moves away from the idea of ‘male as norm’.<sup>69</sup>

Role models are needed to inspire success in any realm, as modelling ourselves on others is part of human nature. Women role models and mentors can be catalysts in girls’ lives by helping them take the lead themselves as they find their place in the wider world; helping them develop useful skills – from knowing how to have their voices heard to leading a team to ensuring healthy relationships. For example, when girls go camping for the first time and are taught by women who pitch the tent and light the fire, girls are more likely to visualize themselves doing the same thing.

***Women role models can show girls that new roles and accomplishments can be attained, and that there are living examples of high-achieving women who are like them in some way.***

<sup>66</sup> Canadian Women’s Foundation, *Girls in Canada*.

<sup>67</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *13 Conference Insights*.

<sup>68</sup> Belle Liang, Anne Bogat, and Nicole Duffy, “Gender in Mentoring Relationships,” in *Handbook of Youth Mentoring*, eds. David L. Dubois and Michael J. Karcher (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc., 2005): 205-217.

<sup>69</sup> Canadian Women’s Foundation, *Girls in Canada*.



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Women role models can show girls that new roles and accomplishments can be attained, and that there are living examples of high-achieving women who are like them in some way.<sup>70</sup> Importantly, there is evidence suggesting that girls who belong to visible minority groups may receive the most benefit from mentoring relationships when they are mentored by women of the same race, or who they perceive to be similar to them – which underscores that having a diverse and inclusive mentoring program should be prioritized.<sup>71</sup>

It is worth noting that women who serve as mentors and role models have their own personal experiences of being a girl and woman in the world, which may lead them to inadvertently reinforce gendered stereotypes. In order to ensure that they do not unintentionally perpetuate harmful stereotypes as a result of their own experiences, research suggests that it is important to ensure that women working with girls receive comprehensive ongoing gender-equity training.<sup>72</sup> After all, it isn't just boys and men who uphold harmful gendered norms and stereotypes – there is a broader, systemic issue where all members of society might reinforce these learned attitudes and behaviours, including other women.<sup>73</sup>

**Leadership development for girls requires them to observe women in positions of leadership as they promote different perspectives on leadership and challenge the traditional notion of leadership and who leaders are.**

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<sup>70</sup> Lori Beaman, et al., “Female Leadership Raises Aspirations and Educational Attainment for Girls: A Policy Experiment in India,” *Science* (2012), doi: 10.1126/science.1212382. See also: Penelope Lockwood, “‘Someone like me can be successful’: Do college students need same-gender role models?” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2006), doi: 10.1111/j.1471-6402.2006.00260.x; and Lucia A. Nixon and Michael D. Robinson, “The Educational Attainment of Young Women: Role Model Effects of Female High School Faculty,” *Demography* 36, no. 2 (1999): 185-94, <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/~mirobins/edattain.pdf>.

<sup>71</sup> Ellen A. Ensher and Susan E. Murphy, “Effects of Race, Gender, Perceived Similarity, and Contact on Mentor Relationships,” *Journal of Vocational Behaviour* 50, no. 3 (1997):460-81, doi: 10.1006/jvbe.1996.1547. See also: Stacy Blake-Beard, et al., “Matching by Race and Gender in Mentoring Relationships: Keeping our Eyes on the Prize,” *Journal of Social Issues* 67, no. 3 (2011), doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4560.2011.01717.x.

<sup>72</sup> David L. DuBois, et al., “Effectiveness of mentoring programs for youth: A meta-analytic review,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 30, no. 2 (2002): 157-197, <https://www.wmich.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/u58/2015/Effectiveness-of-Mentoring-Programs-for-Youth.pdf>.

<sup>73</sup> Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).





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Barriers to leadership are also gender-specific. Girls have a different concept of leadership than boys and do not necessarily identify with the traditional definition – that is, the dominant form of leadership within white, male, upper-middle class culture, in which a leader should be “confident, brave, able to express

themselves, and able to influence and motivate others.”<sup>74</sup> Instead, girls might focus on leadership as meaning being cooperative and collaborative, listening to the opinions of other people, and being respectful and persuasive. That said, leadership development for girls requires them to observe women in positions of leadership as they promote different perspectives on leadership and challenge the traditional notion of leadership and who leaders are.<sup>75</sup> Programs and services that focus on exposing girls to women leaders and broadening their definition of leadership show positive outcomes.<sup>76</sup> Women leaders can inform and inspire girls by sharing their expertise, interests and life experiences – and being someone in whom girls can see themselves and with whom girls can immediately identify.

For example, in smaller communities, girls may not be exposed to women in a wide range of leadership positions. Quite often, positions of authority such as local politicians, religious leaders, prominent business owners, and even those in educational administration (such as principals and superintendents) may be held by men, with few opportunities for girls to see women taking the lead beyond traditionally-described caring positions, such as teachers. When girls have the opportunity to see women taking on the leadership of a group, including leading outdoor, STEM, and advocacy activities, they are exposed to a different kind of role model – one they can relate to.

Enabling girls to witness more women in positions of leadership in society, and presenting role models with whom diverse girls can readily identify, is integral to instilling confidence in girls and empowering them to see themselves as leaders. Providing girls with as many women role models as possible, in as many fields as possible, opens their minds to a wide range of opportunities that are available to them, and can inspire them to think broadly about their future paths. As GGC’s CEO and long-time mentor of girls said, “For girls,

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<sup>74</sup> Michael A. Hoyt and Cara L. Kennedy, “Leadership and Adolescent Girls: A Qualitative Study of Leadership Development,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 42, no. 3-4 (2008): 203-219, doi: 10.1007/s10464-008-9206-8.

<sup>75</sup> Liang, Bogat, and Duffy.

<sup>76</sup> Hoyt and Kennedy.





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being mentored by women who've travelled diverse paths inspires them to broaden their own expectations of what's possible."<sup>77</sup>

### Girls benefit from environments dedicated to girls and women

In addition to benefiting from programs and services that are directly responsive to their needs and experiences, girls also benefit from receiving those programs and services in all-girls and -women environments where they are free from the harmful gendered norms and stereotypes that otherwise pervade their lives.

While co-educational environments certainly lead to beneficial outcomes, programs and services that are responsive to girls' gender-specific needs provide a unique developmental benefit for girls. Because gender is relational, meaning that boys and girls relate in specific ways because of their gender roles which in turn creates power dynamics, service providers find that boys tend to dominate in co-ed programs, as well as interrupt, derogate or even harass girls.<sup>78</sup> Because of this, the content and structure of programs and services tend to cater to the needs of boys over those of girls, and girls may automatically feel secondary if there are boys in the room.<sup>79</sup> As a result, in co-ed environments girls may be more susceptible to, or unconsciously conform to, the same gendered stereotypes they face elsewhere in society.

***In co-ed environments girls may be more susceptible to, or unconsciously conform to, the same gendered stereotypes they face elsewhere in society.***

In all-girls environments "the issue of being 'the other' recedes into the background."<sup>80</sup> As well, given the complex reality of girls' lives, girls can be reluctant to discuss certain topics in front of boys. When provided with an all-girls space, girls can relate to each other and express what they really think and feel, especially

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<sup>77</sup> Jill Zelmanovits, "How volunteering is everything you never knew it could be," *LinkedIn* (blog), April 17, 2018, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-volunteering-everything-you-never-knew-could-jill-zelmanovits/>.

<sup>78</sup> Girls Action Foundation, *Girls Action Research Review*.

<sup>79</sup> Canadian Women's Foundation, *Girls in Canada*.

<sup>80</sup> Girls Action Foundation, *Girls Action Research Review*.





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when they are not ready to express the same thoughts and feelings to others in their lives.<sup>81</sup> Creating a safe space – where all girls feel welcome, listened to and respected – and encouraging a healthy community where girls can form real friendships allows them to experience environments where they are not held to standards designed for boys and men.<sup>82</sup>

Providing these safe spaces for girls to interact and build healthy relationships with other girls and women is an important avenue for addressing many of the gender-specific issues facing girls including sexism and self-esteem.<sup>83</sup> Gendered spaces support girls as they empower them to come together to discuss their unique experiences and develop personal strategies to improve their circumstances.<sup>84</sup> For instance, if teenage girls are feeling pressured by their peers at school to attend parties, they may not feel comfortable talking about their concerns in a co-ed environment. They may be worried about safety, or about pressures to dress a certain way, engage in sexual activity, or consume alcohol or drugs. In an environment dedicated to girls and women, girls are more likely to come forward with these pressing concerns, share with each other, and strategize.

***In an all-girls environment, girls are more likely to be themselves and feel more comfortable sharing, worry less about appearance and teasing, feel strong and special, and find it a positive and fun experience.***

As a case study, the Expect Respect program (run by SafePlace, a national US-based charity) is a dating violence prevention program for at-risk youth, in which separate gender groups are facilitated by same-gender group leaders. Expect Respect has found that same-gender groups allow a sense of comfort and safety for teens, allow them to bond more quickly, and to more readily explore their relationships and expectations. As a result of participation in the all-girls groups, girl participants recognized warning signs of abusive relationships, which helped them protect themselves, get help, or leave abusive or harmful

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<sup>81</sup> Hoyt and Kennedy.

<sup>82</sup> Canadian Women's Foundation, *Girls in Canada*.

<sup>83</sup> Girls Action Foundation, *Girls Action Research Review*.

<sup>84</sup> Girls Action Foundation, *Amplify/Resonance: Designing Spaces & Programs for Girls: A Toolkit* (2010), [http://girlsactionfoundation.ca/files/Amplify\\_2010\\_LR\\_0.pdf](http://girlsactionfoundation.ca/files/Amplify_2010_LR_0.pdf).



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relationships – much different outcomes than those of the boys in the program, who learned to communicate better in their relationships and find alternatives to violence.<sup>85</sup>

In all-girls and -women spaces, girlhood is celebrated; girls have the opportunity to build confidence and skills, gain attention from women mentors and role models, and have the chance to safely explore their identity in a supportive environment free from harmful gendered norms and stereotypes.<sup>86</sup> In an all-girls environment, girls are more likely to be themselves and feel more comfortable sharing, worry less about appearance and teasing, feel strong and special, and find it a positive and fun experience.<sup>87</sup>

Overall, all-girls and women environments lead to positive outcomes for girls. They nurture and reinforce girlhood as a positive identity with inherent strengths to support healthy self-expression and help transition girls into womanhood.



***“Teach [girls] to surround themselves with a network of amazing women so together they can help each other. Nobody can know more about how you feel than another woman.”***

**– Girl Guides of Canada Conference Participant<sup>88</sup>**

<sup>85</sup> Barbara Ball, Patricia K, Kerig, and Barri Rosenbluth, “‘Like a family but better because you can actually trust each other’: The Expect Respect Dating Violence Prevention Program for At-Risk Youth,” *Health Promotion Practice* 10, no. 1 (2010): 45-58, [http://www.expectrespectaustin.org/uploads/general/Like\\_a\\_Family\\_-\\_final\\_published\\_article.pdf](http://www.expectrespectaustin.org/uploads/general/Like_a_Family_-_final_published_article.pdf).

<sup>86</sup> Centre of Excellence for Women’s Health.

<sup>87</sup> Canadian Women’s Foundation, *Building Strong Girls*.

<sup>88</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *13 Conference Insights*.





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## Girls need to be valued and heard as the experts on their own needs and lived experiences

*“I think adults should do more to listen...Adults should not dismiss youth voices on the false basis that we are inexperienced and do not understand what we are talking about.”*

– Girl Guides of Canada National Youth Council Member<sup>89</sup>

Girls’ voices matter and girls are the experts on their own needs and lived experiences. Girls live their realities every day, and as a result they are best placed to talk about what they experience, how they feel about their environment, and their ideas for how to improve their circumstances. It is girls who are impacted by decisions that adults in society make every day, such as school dress codes, provincial education policies, and the media’s portrayal of girls like them – things that have the potential to be empowering, but are oftentimes harmful.

Girls need to be seen as full human beings who are active participants in society. Too often, adults make the assumption that girls – because of their age and gender – cannot contribute meaningfully to conversations and decision-making processes. For example, if a town election is happening, it may be assumed that girls do not know or care about local issues such as community safety, land zoning, or the town budget. However, given the chance to voice their thoughts, girls may have important insights – based on their own lived experiences – on which areas of town are unsafe for pedestrians, or which recreation programs should be funded. Adults need to see and believe that girls can help shape the very decisions and conversations that affect their lives, because girls know best how decisions that are made about their lives play out for them in reality.

*Girls need to be seen as full human beings who are active participants in society. Too often, adults make the assumption that girls – because of their age and gender – cannot contribute meaningfully to conversations and decision-making processes.*

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<sup>89</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, “Why we should all be willing, ready and able to let youth lead,” *GirlGuidesCANBlog* (blog), April 27, 2018, <https://girlguidescanblog.ca/2018/04/27/why-we-should-all-be-ready-willing-and-able-to-let-youth-lead/>.





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Girls have important insights on issues; they offer unique gender- and generational-based insights that only they can provide. As such, the opinions of society and institutions on girls' lives should not be prioritized over girls' own opinions. Girls are well-served when they are valued and listened to as the experts on their own needs and lived experiences.

Girls need to be given voice, choice and the scope to take action. It is important for adults in society to:

- Make all girls feel welcome, listened to and respected, and to enable them to support each other.
- Ensure that girls can explore their interests in non-judgmental ways, and that they are supported to challenge stereotypes about what they can and cannot do.
- Support girls in overcoming barriers and enable them to meet inspiring women from all walks of life.
- Provide opportunities for girls to explore and voice their thoughts on issues that are relevant to them, and to build relationships and connections between and among generations of girls and women.

Society – and anyone in a position of power – needs to make meaningful space for girls and actively listen to girls' voices. This insight will enable decision-makers, service-providers and institutions to be responsive to girls' needs and develop relevant programs and services.

## **GGC: A girl-driven approach to gender equity**

As described, providing gender-specific programs in an all-girls environment that also exposes girls to women leaders, where girls are valued and heard shows positive outcomes. At GGC, our mission is to be a catalyst for girls empowering girls. We facilitate a girl-driven approach to increasing gender equity in three key ways:

### **Girl-driven programming**

Girls benefit tremendously from a program that focuses on them and their needs. As a result of the harmful gendered norms and stereotypes that girls experience in their day-to-day lives, they need programs that address their specific gendered needs as girls.





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Today's reality is that girls face daunting and confusing challenges to thrive and be everything they want to be. Expectations about how to dress, pressure to keep up appearances online, barriers to pursuing their dream jobs, unequitable prospects for earning and leadership opportunities, as well vulnerability to gender-based violence are just some of complex issues girls are grappling with every day. GGC believes that girl-focused programs that are responsive to current issues help girls to develop the resiliency and skills that will enable them to be confident and tackle any challenge that comes their way.

At GGC, our approach to developing and delivering programming for girls is girl-driven. The girl-driven programming approach includes five key pillars:

1. **Safe space:** All girls feel welcome, listened to, and respected, can talk about life's challenges while supporting each other, and participate in ways they're comfortable with.
2. **Growth mindset:** Girls grow through exploring their interests and potential, while focusing on the process versus achievement. Through programs based on girls' developmental stages, girls challenge themselves, break out of their comfort zone, experiment, and have fun.
3. **Positive identity:** Girls are supported in overcoming barriers and exploring their interests in a non-judgmental way, regardless of ability. Girls challenge stereotypes of what someone can and cannot do, and meet inspiring women from all walks of life.
4. **Shared leadership:** Girls choose their own program and voice what is important to them. They build relationships and connection with other girls and their adult mentors, and as a team, share responsibilities and support each other. Girls are involved in program planning and decision-making.
5. **Engage community:** Girls are able to engage with community through service or action projects, and identify issues in the local community and issues relevant to themselves. Girls learn about their rights and responsibilities as a citizen, and have opportunities to participate meaningfully in the GGC organization.





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GGC's girl-driven programming is relevant to the lives of today's girls because it gives them the voice, choice, and scope to take action on the issues that matter to them. Through participating in programming of this nature, girls build their character and develop the attributes to thrive.

In recent years, GGC has employed this girl-driven approach in the development of new programming that tackles the issues most relevant to girls – programs such as: *DeCode*, where girls gain the tools to navigate the digital world and their own digital identities; *Mighty Minds*, where girls develop positive mental health skills to cope with everyday challenges; *Be You*, focused on body image and self-esteem through media awareness, self-acceptance, and balanced lifestyle; and *Say No to Violence*, where girls gain a better understanding of gender-based violence, as well as healthy and unhealthy relationships.

***GGC's girl-driven programming is relevant to the lives of today's girls because it gives them the voice, choice, and scope to take action on the issues that matter to them.***

## Catalysts: women mentors supporting girls

***“Another issue that I believe affects girls on a daily basis is that they don't have positive female role models in their life. GGC is one of the biggest role models I've had in my life when it comes to positive females...GGC [has] a huge impact on young females when there is a strong female leadership role in their life.” – Girl Guides of Canada Conference Participant<sup>90</sup>***

In GGC programs, girls take the lead, put their ideas into action, and jump into engaging activities – all with the support of engaged women who are committed to positively impacting their lives. Across Canada, nearly 15,000 women volunteer as Unit Guiders, supporting GGC's mission of being a catalyst for girls empowering girls. Unit Guiders serve as leaders and mentors for girls and facilitate girl-driven programming. They also create a welcoming and safe environment, and provide encouragement and support for girls to challenge themselves to take on decision-making and leadership roles.

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<sup>90</sup> Girl Guides of Canada, *13 Conference Insights*.





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Given that women are underrepresented in leadership roles in society, these women mentors act as important role models with whom GGC's girl members can readily identify. Women mentors come from a wide variety of educational, professional, and cultural backgrounds, serving as living examples of the breadth of what's possible for girls. Importantly, girl members see women taking on leadership roles that differ from the traditional model of leadership – the women mentors at GGC are committed to listening to girls, letting girls take the lead, and working collaboratively. This experience of women leaders allows girls to challenge the traditional concept of leadership, as well as overturn stereotypes about who can take on leadership roles.

***Girl members see women taking on leadership roles that differ from the traditional model of leadership – the women mentors at GGC are committed to listening to girls, letting girls take the lead, and working collaboratively.***

In order to ensure that women mentors are equipped to support girls to empower each other to be everything they want to be, Girl Guides of Canada provides training to volunteers on the girl-driven model, as well as diversity and inclusion.

## Girls empowering girls: all-girls and -women environment

***“Girl Guides is unique because it is an organization just for girls. It allows girls to develop and learn in an environment where they can focus on being who they are rather than trying to fit the mold that is so widely advertised.” – Girl Guides of Canada Conference Participant<sup>91</sup>***

Despite efforts toward achieving gender equality, girls and women still experience barriers and limited opportunities to their success. GGC strives to support girls in overcoming these barriers through providing gender-specific programming, in an all-girls and women environment, which focuses on girls and their unique needs and social barriers, and enables them to witness women in positions of leadership.

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.



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Importantly, in GGC programs, girls are surrounded by other girls and women mentors who support them. Whereas in co-educational environments, girls may feel pressured to replicate or conform to the same gendered stereotypes they face elsewhere in society, at GGC girls have access to a safe space where they can interact and build healthy relationships with girls and women. Girls feel more free to be themselves and build confidence and skills in environments without the harmful gendered norms and stereotypes they often encounter. As a result, girls feel more comfortable discussing their unique experiences and the gendered issues that affect their lives, as well as come together to take action.

Moreover, GGC's all-girls and -women environment is one in which diversity and inclusion are prioritized, and where girls feel a sense of belonging, acceptance and openness to others. The principles of diversity and inclusion build the foundation for a girl-driven environment that empowers every girl to become everything she wants to be. When girls have a space where they feel they belong and are accepted, they gain the confidence they need to make their own choices, take risks, and explore their identities. In addition, when girls are open to different ideas and perspectives, they can engage more meaningfully with their communities. A diverse and inclusive environment allows every girl to develop her sense of self, exercise her voice, and support her peers.



***GGC's all-girls and -women environment is one in which diversity and inclusion are prioritized, and where girls feel a sense of belonging, acceptance and openness to others.***

## Concluding thoughts

The current complex state of girls' lives in Canada may read as bleak. Harmful gendered social norms and stereotypes continue to impact girls' lives, distorting girls' self-perceptions, perpetuating gender inequity in girls' access to power and resources, creating environments in which girls are discriminated against, and sustaining violence against girls. However, GGC maintains that there is resistance and resilience among girls in Canada today and that Canadian society can provide important resources and supports that will help girls to overcome the gender-based barriers and challenges identified here.





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Namely, as detailed above, programs and services that address girls' specific needs, provided in an all-girls and -women environment, where girls have access to women mentors and role models, and where girls are valued and heard, have been demonstrated to provide remarkable benefits for girls. At GGC, we provide such girl-driven programs, delivered by women mentors who are catalysts for girls to empower each other in a safe space.

However, it is important that we acknowledge that our girl-driven programs that build girls' confidence, skills and resilience are only one part of the solution. The harmful gendered norms and stereotypes pervading girls' lives have widespread impacts on girls and women across Canada, which are being addressed from multiple angles, levels, and positions in society, by a host of organizations and institutions. Nonetheless, it is GGC's position that its programs are one of many important contributions to the movement for gender equity in Canada, by empowering today's girls to be equipped to meet today's – and tomorrow's – challenges.

Perhaps the most crucial learning is that adults, decision-makers, organizations, and institutions must take the time to listen to girls. When we hear directly from girls about their lived realities and the pressing issues they face, we will all be better informed and positioned to support girls in creating a better a future – designing programs and services that meet girls' needs, and providing the environments and role models that can help every girl thrive and be everything she wants to be.

***Perhaps the most crucial learning is that adults, decision-makers, organizations, and institutions must take the time to listen to girls.***



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