



WHY GIRLS?

By Catherine Henderson

Introduction

GALS Inc.'s answer to the question "Why girls?" extends past the school setting, describing a world fraught with gender inequities. We believe that in order to serve the young women in our schools, we must give them space to grow, issues to be passionate about, and an unflinching look at the way gender shapes the world today.

The first pillar of the GALS worldview is that we are feminists, advocating for basic security, financial independence, and political representation for all. Feminism is a nongendered term that applies to everyone.

The second pillar of our worldview is that single-gender education is not about the separation of genders; it is about creating space to navigate a world still defined by gender stereotypes. In the discussion about gender identity, GALS Inc. embraces the challenge to live up to our core values of inclusion. All students, irrespective of gender identity, are welcome and safe at our schools while they too find their place in a deeply gendered world.

The third pillar of GALS Inc. is that girls need female role models of all shapes, sizes, colors, and backgrounds who are often absent from the media. At GALS Inc., we provide mentors and "sheroes" at school to create a more engaging community where gender does not define choice, self-image, and passions. Our students learn to own the life they live and accept nothing less than what they know in their hearts to be a world of access, opportunity, and love.

When members of the GALS Inc. community answer the question "Why girls?" they recognize the research acknowledging the impact of low self-esteem on women in the workplace and in a coed environment.¹ At GALS Inc., an educational model with a positive gender focus allows girls the freedom to make choices and take actions aligned with their values and aspirations. Our students learn assertiveness, goal-setting, and social-emotional well-being. By educating girls in a gender-based environment, we prepare them for the challenges of sexism in the outside world.

Women in the world

Gender inequity continues to affect American women across industries. Women earn 79 cents for every dollar a man makes, and the pay gap remains even after factoring in occupation, hours, and age.² Race exacerbates the pay gap with African-American women earning 65 cents for every dollar and Hispanic women earning 58 cents.³ Though

¹ Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, "The Confidence Gap," *The Atlantic*, (May 2014.)

² Joanne Lipman, "Let's Expose the Gender Pay Gap," *The New York Times*, (13 August 2015.)

³ Ibid

women make up more than half of the population, they only account for 19.6% of the U.S. House of Representatives.⁴ In the media, women directed only 4% of the top 100 grossing films of 2016.⁵ Given that girls today will most likely face sexism in their future careers, what can we do to prepare them for a world of gender inequity? In particular, how can we serve young women of color who are disproportionately affected by disparities in professional settings?

The Confidence Gap

In the discussion about gender inequity, GALS Inc. believes there are skills we can teach our students to help them navigate sexism in the future. Exercise, social-emotional learning, and strong teacher-student relationships help improve the major X-factor associated with the gender gap: confidence.

Why do girls struggle with confidence? Some researchers seek to explain timidity based on physiological factors. On average, men have 10 times as much testosterone as women, making them more likely to take risks.⁶ Women also have larger amygdalae in the brain, the center in charge of fear.⁷ On a basic level, perhaps men are hardwired to be sure of themselves and women to question themselves. However, nature does not fully account for the confidence gap.

Social norms influence girls from a young age and play a significant role in lowering self-esteem. According to bestselling author Rachel Simmons, we teach girls to prioritize relationships above all, leading them to play it safe and avoid conflict in their friendships.⁸ Girls are taught that coming on too strong or appearing conceited lead to inevitable social consequences. As a result, they adopt self-defeating postures, phrases, and intonations when they express ideas and displace conflict into hidden aggressions.⁹ Confidence is a key factor in receiving professional positions and promotions later in life,

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leaving women at a disadvantage. In terms of intelligence, one study found that by the age of 6, girls are less likely to view their own gender as brilliant, and they begin to think that certain activities such as sports are “not for them.”¹⁰ At a young age, girls internalize the perception that genius is a masculine trait, a thought they may have gleaned from the adults in their lives. In 2014, American parents

⁴ “Women in Elective Office 2017,” *Rutgers University: Center for American Women and Politics* (2017.)

⁵ “Facts to know about women in Hollywood.” *Women in Hollywood*, (2017.)

⁶ Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, “The Confidence Gap,” *The Atlantic*, (May 2014.)

⁷ Louann Brizendine, *The Female Brain*. (New York: Broadway Books, 2007.)

⁸ Rachel Simmons, *The Curse of the Good Girl*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2009.)

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Andrei Cimpian and Sarah-Jane Leslie, “Why young girls don’t think they are smart enough.” *The New York Times*, (26 January 2017.)

Googled “is my son a genius” twice as often as “is my daughter a genius.”¹¹ It is clear girls are influenced by the perception that they are less worthy and less smart. Low self-esteem early in life can have detrimental influences later, leading to more serious issues such as mental illness. For minority students, a lack of nurture and protection intensifies low self-esteem. According to the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, African-American girls are viewed as less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers.¹² These findings relate to fewer leadership opportunities for black girls and disproportionate punishments in the education and justice system. The biases against black girls set them at a disadvantage and further damage self-image.

At GALS Inc., we believe we can and must teach girls confidence to reverse the internalized perception that women are inferior to men. We devote an entire class to a social-emotional wellness class called “GALS Series.” We emphasize leadership skills: power, flexibility, focus, and balance. We encourage risk and failure in a healthy, competitive environment. We teach Carol Dweck’s growth mindset in schools, emphasizing learning and effort rather than innate ability.¹³ We serve students in our schools no less than seven hours a day, five days a week, and approximately 35 weeks a year. This equals, on average, 1,100 hours. We believe it will take that much investment in our young women to push the work of gender equality forward. In effect, girls work harder, lead confidently, and reap the rewards. In the words of GALS Denver teacher Sara Shapiro, “GALS students learn to match their values with their actions in order to be their true authentic selves and take up their deserved space in order to positively impact the world.”

At GALS, teachers and administrators are expected to know students personally and serve as role models. We know girls who are exposed to women in positions of power are more likely to pursue professional paths.¹⁴ Every room is dedicated to a “Shero,” a woman from anywhere in the world who demonstrates power, flexibility, balance, and focus. In the words of a seventh grader at GALS L.A., “The GALS Staff helped me by teaching me to be myself. They helped me understand that I have a voice.” We steep students in empowerment, from the women represented on the walls to the teachers in the front of the classroom because girls are smart, kind, powerful, and deserve every opportunity.

Single-Gender Education

The case for single-gender education is often based on personal anecdotes about finding confidence, self-sufficiency, and freedom in all-girls environments. Surveys provide the most research about the impact of single-sex schooling. According to the

¹¹ Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, “Google, Tell Me. Is My Son a Genius?” *The New York Times*, (18 January 2014.)

¹² Jamila Blake, Rebecca Epstein and Thalia Gonzales, “Girlhood Interrupted: the Erasure of Black Girls’ Childhood,” *Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality*, (June 2017.)

¹³ Carol Dweck., *Mindset* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006.)

¹⁴ Nilanjana Dasgupta, “Ingroup Experts and Peers as Social Vaccines Who Inoculate the Self-Concept: The Stereotype Inoculation Model,” *Psychological Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (December 2011.)

High School Survey of Student Engagement, 95% of students at all-girls schools agree or strongly agree that they are motivated by the desire to succeed outside of school, compared to 86.7% at coed, public schools.¹⁵ Eighty-seven percent feel their opinion is respected, compared to 58% at coed schools.¹⁶ It is important to note that some of these results may be attributed to the fact that all-girls schools are often private and draw from higher socioeconomic classes. Nonetheless, GALS is ahead of the curve with schools like the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy, providing single-gender education for students of all backgrounds.

The logic behind the strengths of single-gender education lies in the basic academic behaviors. According to a University of Chicago report, one of the central indicators of academic performance is a strong academic mindset, defined by statements like “I belong in this academic community” and “My ability and competence grow with my effort.”¹⁷ In an all-girls environment, young women are given their own space to feel at home in an academic setting, fostering their mindsets. Single-gender education is not about confining students; it is about giving them the freedom to develop without societal pressure to perform for the opposite sex. At GALS, we embrace this fundamental benefit of an all-girls education, integrating students into a sisterhood. In the words of Shayla Bezjak, the GALS editor of the class of 2012 and current student at Smith College, “GALS allowed me to become more aware of where I stood in the world and exposed the potential I had as a teenage girl. With advisement from my favorite GALS teacher, turned mentor, I eventually found my way back to a traditionally single-gender education at Smith College, where I continue to thrive as a first generation college student and a member of GALS' first continuation class.”

¹⁵ “Steeped in Learning: the Student Experience at All-Girls Schools.” National Coalition of Girls’ Schools, (2013.)

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Elaine Allensworth, Nicole Beechum, Camille Farrington, David Johnson, Tasha Keyes, Jenny Nagaoka, and Melissa Roderick, “Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance,” *University of Chicago Consortium of School Research*, (June 2012.)