

YOUNG LEADERS



YOUNG WOMEN

Challenge to address adolescence changes

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BACKGROUND

Adolescence is one of the most rapid changes that happen across the human life span, where physical, psychological, emotional, and personality changes happen. It's a critical time for teenage girls to describe themselves, take decisions, and be confident around their peers. The time when girls transition from childhood to adulthood defines their characteristics and development. During the adolescent years, important changes take place in regions of the brain that are responsible for pleasure-seeking and reward processing, emotional responses and sleep regulation. Besides the changes in the brain limbic system, the pre-frontal cortex is also changed, that is the executive function area that is responsible for making decisions, organization, impulse control, and future planning (WHO, 2019).

Despite the huge brain development, the transition is an overwhelming experience that comes to the forefront of the adolescent life. Girls navigate puberty differently than boys do, not due to biological or psychological changes, but to the gendered cultural meanings they absorb and learn from their world (Martin, 2018). It's found that girls at adolescence have their self-esteem drop significantly more than boys. In another study, adolescents who are screen addicted are found to be unhappy with themselves, and become less interested in school, math and science (Twenge, Martin, & Campbell, 2018).

The sudden change in girls' confidence is explained to be related to what girls are taught by their mentors, to be nice and kind, and to silent what they feel. Others say that puberty happens very quickly, and young girls struggle to integrate these new changes and bodies into their selves. Psychopathology is considered to be more produced during adolescence in girls, while boys produce it more during early childhood (Marshall, 2016). It's also important to consider that media exposure is suggested to influence self-concept among girls.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

SOCIAL MEDIA EFFECTS AND INFLUENCE

In today's digital world, we are witnessing the explosive growth of the new idols who owe their fame to social media. The concept of a role model has begun to be different and created new forms of fame. Children are growing up as digital natives, turning to Google for answers or social media celebrities for advice. They are naturally curious and eager to use technology, as it seems to make more sense of the world around them, and they relate to what they navigate. Nowadays, TikTok is the most popular social media platform among teens (Bellan, 2020), thus, it's no surprise that the content and the characters can substantially affect the young health and wellbeing, and even change their lives. Evidence is mounting that there is a link between social media and depression. According to a survey in 2017 by The Guardian, one in three young women feels under pressure to present themselves as having a "perfect" life on social media (Marsh, 2017). Young girls feel more pressure to compare themselves to others because everyone is their best on social media even if it's not accurate. With all the changes happening while growing, young girls might face issues like eating disorders or anxiety to look like someone they follow. Without relating to biological or psychological aspects that might happen to them going through adolescence, girls might feel challenged to live up to a standard that is hard to achieve.

In the past, media has largely controlled what roles and images to present to the public. Today anyone, in theory, can upload content on the internet and social media for public consumption. While this led to shaping politics, business, world culture, education, innovation and more, experts say that kids nowadays are growing up with more anxiety and less self-esteem than ever (Twenge, 2017). Adolescence is an important and vulnerable period of rapid development. Research tends to blame social media for a long list of mental health issues that have been rising among youth. A study has found that social media has a large negative impact on teenagers' life. A study published in The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health says that frequent social media exposure seemed to harm a girl's health (The Lancet, 2019). This has led to either cyberbullying and/or inadequate sleep and exercise. It seems like social media has a strong impact on girls more than it shows on boys. Girls tend to be more susceptible than boys to mental health and how they are affected by certain aspects of it. Adolescence can be a difficult time for the parent and the child. Learning how to make friends is a major part of growing up, and it requires an adequate amount of skills to be socially accepted.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

While girls are developing physically, they are also experiencing rapid growth of psychological maturity. During this change, children begin to naturally pull away from their families and connect with their friends or social platforms to establish individuality and independence. A role model is a person who serves as an example by influencing others (Brown, Bakken, Ameringer, & Mahon, 2008). Children look up to parents or caregivers to help shape how they behave. They may try to copy teachers, coaches, and peers. Other role models, however, may also influence children. Widely admired media public figures also influence children, especially when embracing behavior that makes them feel different, and as a result, gain more attention. Children are usually inspired by a character that provides a significant change; however, nowadays it might be the person with the highest number of followers and likes.

INCREASE IN YOUNG GIRLS MENTAL HEALTH

Over the last decades, mental health has been a major concern among young females. Although the rates of suicide in Canada is higher between boys, but girls have high rates of self-harm (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019). To better understand the nature of mental health problems, there should be a focused effort to limit anxiety and depression associated with adolescence. There has been a change in the health risk behavior, adolescent females are engaged in more risky behaviors (Mahalik, Levine, McPherran, Doyle Lynch, Markowitz, & Jaffee, 2013). Deaths associated with factors that influence health and longevity would be preventable if serious changes are made to these behaviors. Substance use, violence, and sexual risk habits become commonly initiated during adolescence. Multiple factors determine mental health, for example, both mental health and positive wellbeing is being associated with academic and social achievement (Shim & Finch, 2014). Girls are more likely to suffer from internalizing problems in early adolescence, gender norms and media exposure can aggravate the disparity between their reality and their goals and aspirations. Internalizing includes depressive and anxious disorders which is concerned with somatic, worry and sadness symptoms (Black, Panayiotou & Humphrey, 2019, p. 3). Research shows that some adolescents are at a higher risk of developing mental health conditions due to their living conditions, and in return, they are particularly vulnerable to uncomfortable situations.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

LOW SELF-ESTEEM AND CONFIDENCE IN YOUNG GIRLS

Research shows that most women face challenges in leadership, and when starting and leading companies. There are reasons women haven't been in power structure in various industries, and one is the inherited and instilled thought that resists this emergence. In today's digital world, children are wide-eyed for fame. They have found huge audiences on social platforms and they spend hours scrolling through an infinite feed, hoping one day they get similar attention. How can we prepare young women to be conscientious consumers of technology? How can we inspire them to be less inferior to the people they follow on social media? Can we empower them to embrace their value and power beyond beauty, sexuality and instead in their capacity as a leader?

School education doesn't necessarily cover interpersonal skills that could guide girls in similar contexts. It's not always easy to raise girls during this very sensitive time with courage and confidence. Girls can go through different psychological and physical changes, mood swings and cravings are not explained during adulthood (McKinzie, Burgoon, Altamura & Bishop, 2006). Some emotional symptoms of premenstrual syndrome are sadness, anxiety, irritability, and anger. The young brain is confusing and complex, and for girls to understand their abilities to make decisions and problem-solve, they have to be taught how to think with clarity and impulsive behaviors. Providing role figures is a good method to lead them to more regulated thinking and learning by setting examples.

According to the UN Women, only 24.3 percent of all US national parliamentarians were women as of February 2019. Although the split between men and women is even in Canada, only 27% of the seats in the House of Commons belong to women, they make 19.5% of the board members for the top 500 companies, and hold only 8.5% of the highest-paid positions according to the Canadian Women's Foundation. More than 49% of the world's population is female; however, for so long women have determined leadership by their ability to adjust to the male-dominated success. A survey by a nonpartisan economic think tank included about 22,000 companies in 91 countries, has reported that half of the companies lacked senior women in key leadership positions, and that a 30% increase in representation could generate a 15% increase in profits (Nolan, Moran, & Kotschwar, 2016).

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

Young women might fear leadership, given that women are expected to be feminine, and women who display a confident behavior are not well received by their peers. But leadership isn't reserved for those who are informal roles or those who are brute-less. Women life is more exciting than growth frustrations, which may be full of vulnerability, and unbalanced hormones. However, those are real struggles that every woman goes through starting from puberty to menopause. Unfortunately, the media and the professional world doesn't talk or educate about it, and this topic is not very observed by many. The woman in media is always seen as a beautiful figure and a fashion icon, and sometimes it will only put real women under spot to behave and look a certain way. It's important to teach teenagers and young women who will go through real-life challenges - on how to be the next generation of female leaders while highlighting female role models and characteristics.

Girls and young women are affected deeply by the socialization of gender and a wide range of social concerns. There are many timeless questions on how young women should cope with the changes of puberty, and how social factors might affect it. For the past decade or more, social media has significantly changed youth culture and issues, being the major mean of communication in developing their knowledge. Different sexual attitudes and practices happen in adolescences, because of the diverse societal influence and nature of relationships experienced by adolescents (Moore & Rosenthal, 2007). Despite different changes, adolescents might encounter similar acquaintances; however, they are greatly affected by their family, community or personal characteristics and can't be universal. Hormone changes at adolescence are associated with different social behaviors, risk-taking, and cognitive functioning. A list of heritable factors, ethnic differences, weight, environmental pollutants, and stress are triggers or disruptors to the onset of puberty. For girls, weight is one of the strong predictors for adolescence and it can be different from one to another.

UNDERSTANDING EXISTING SOLUTION EFFORTS

LEADERSHIP TRAINING AND SKILLS TO YOUNG WOMEN

Although women make up almost half of the world population, yet continue to be underrepresented in leadership. When women are participating in political and professional leadership positions, they become role models to young girls and other women. Everyone can develop their capacity to practice leadership if they choose to, and to have women examples in leadership can help young girls explore opportunities to advance their learning (Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005). It can help them change their perspective to leadership by making it an accessible concept for people of all genders. Leadership should be inclusive beyond narrow and predominant masculine approaches (Tillapaugh, 2017, p.18). It is important to promote an inclusive approach and encourage students to share their challenges and identify their limitations. Young women will examine issues of power, privilege, and oppression to learn about social justice. Leadership educators believe that leadership identity is developed over one's lifespan; therefore, it is important to start it when young women are developing biologically, psychologically, and socially. Systemic genders and sexism play an important role in how we view leadership with our societies, it's the leadership program educator's responsibility to help students understand and unpack how this can be problematic and dangerous (Tillapaugh, & Haber-Curran, 2017).

Society ideas can be critiqued to provide an equitable society, and to consider the ways where gender might affect leadership opportunities. Leadership educators have the potential to offer an engaging experience to students and learners and reinforce messages that analyze hidden messages in our society. This will engage students in self-work to challenge their assumptions, expectations, and limitations. Young women will better understand that leadership is not a labeled practice and is available for everyone. It will shift the mental models of what leadership looks like, students will find their voice and engagement as a meaningful change with their communities, regardless of their gender. Being part of a group in a similar context will help students to better understand the lived experiences of other individuals. Girls and young women will be prepared for their future careers and leadership aspirations. A significant challenge to this context is to remove the barriers between someone in a positional role and someone who is exercising leadership towards a change or an adaptive challenge.

UNDERSTANDING EXISTING SOLUTION EFFORTS

The learning experience will address young female-specific issues, teach them to speak with a strong voice, allow them to talk about their experience with biases, and practice body language, tone, volume, and word choice, to help them to confidently advocate their ideas. Young girls will feel engaged to talk to like-minded girls in a supportive, judgment-free zone, and it will help them develop positive self-esteem and build confidence.

HIGHER AWARENESS ON MENTAL HEALTH

There has been a change in how governments are responding to the health needs of adolescents. Mental health conditions are being defined and addressed. World Health Organization has provided a mental health program in lower resourced settings, to provide evidence-based guidelines for the non-specialist to enable them to better identify and support mental health conditions. The aim is to increase the awareness for early detection and treatment by avoiding institutionalization and over-medicalization, working with non-pharmacological approaches, and respecting the children's rights in line with the United Nations Convention.

The federal government in Canada has undertaken several initiatives to address mental health issues among young individuals. It had contributed to funding mental health service delivery through Canada Health Transfer. It also provides ongoing financial support to the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC). In 2010, the MHCC has developed a roadmap for governments and organizations to help them build mental health strategies targeted to children and youth. Early intervention can help to reduce mental health problems in adolescence, by offering help and building their confidence as an integral part of the society.

REFLECTION

Adolescence in the female is a vulnerable and unique time, where physical, social and emotional formation happens. The increased access to technology and exploration of sexual identity can contribute to stress during adolescence. Promoting mental health during this time is critical for their wellbeing being. There are many timeless questions on how young women should cope with the changes of puberty, and how social factors might affect it. For the past decade or more, social media has significantly changed youth culture and issues, being the major mean of communication in developing their knowledge. Having social platforms easier to access, makes it more challenging to control what adolescents get exposed to. With the COVID-19 pandemic, teens are left to fill their days virtually with an excessive use of technology.

Aside from biological changes being the central place of transition from child to adult, there are complex changes that happen during adolescence and include psychological and social developments which can be different from one culture to another. Developing leadership education that fits into biological, psychological, and social aspects of adolescence development, could successfully expand the knowledge and cognitive skills that allow young women to evaluate alternative points of view. This will allow them to feel inclusive beyond narrow and predominant masculine approaches. As the spread of COVID-10 continues, young people are becoming more immersed in social media, and parents might struggle to control them while sympathizing to keep them entertained when social distancing. It's important to keep adolescents engaged in the use of digital technology to gain skills and be more engaged in self-development. Parents should set an example of media use to their children, they should explain cyberbullying, behaviors toward technology, and be aware of what children are experiencing to maintain their development and mental health.

IMPACT GAPS & LEVERS FOR CHANGE

GAP	LEVER OF CHANGE	EXAMPLE
<p>Absence of leadership education for adolescents in schools.</p>	<p>Amending the school curriculum to include leadership training as part of the syllabus.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create an inclusive school leadership program within Ontario Ministry of Education, that works with young women to address their issues and challenges.• Create a dedicated women health department that specializes in women issues in World Health Organization.



IMPACT GAPS & LEVERS FOR CHANGE

GAP	LEVER OF CHANGE	EXAMPLE
<p>Lack of awareness of social media use among adolescents.</p>	<p>Raising awareness about ignorant misuse of technology.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ground Ontario school curriculum with the fundamentals of digital lives around young women.• Market weekly tips and tools designed specifically to help young women develop both their skills and habits through the digital world on common used applications.



IMPACT GAPS & LEVERS FOR CHANGE

GAP	LEVER OF CHANGE	EXAMPLE
<p>Female leadership is underrepresented to young women.</p>	<p>Setting higher goals for young girls by surrounding them with female leaders to narrow the gender gap, and increase their ambitions. Seeing women in charge will change expectations for young women and their families.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide female leaders workshops for young women to lead by example, supported by Ontario's Ministry of Education.

