

**Written evidence submitted by Dr Michele Paule (Reader at Oxford Brookes University) and Dr Hannah Yelin (Reader at Oxford Brookes University)
[FEN0044]**

The evidence submitted here draws on research interviews conducted with teenaged girls (aged 13-16; n = 100) in a variety of settings across England, Scotland and Wales. The research focus was girls' perceptions of/aspirations towards leadership roles, and the risks and barriers they face. Findings were relevant to entrepreneurship especially in the areas of countering stereotypes, potential risk, and lack of opportunities for girls to develop relevant skills/knowledge to become the entrepreneurs of the future. Our evidence addresses the following question from the Terms of Reference: *What are the barriers facing women, including specific groups of women such as those from an ethnic minority background, seeking to start and grow successful businesses in the UK?*

Stereotyping and social risk

Girls in our study perceived leadership, including entrepreneurial leadership, as isolating and risk-laden. While starting their own business was appealing in terms of the creative opportunities and independence it could offer, the idea of being a boss carried many negative social stereotypes that conflicted with socialised gender roles. While recognising the pressure to be 'confident' and 'speak up', girls described how behaviours traditionally coded as masculine can draw negative attention to girls in school and to women in the workplace. These behaviours included:

- Assertiveness
- Giving opinions
- Trying to influence the opinions of others
- Appearing 'too confident' and 'coming across a bit big'
- Attempting to centre attention on oneself
- Taking charge

Key aspects of such gendered socialisation were reinforced in classrooms, where girls reported being less likely to be called on, being more likely to be interrupted, and facing social derision for speaking out. While girls and boys were nominally offered the same learning opportunities, the kinds of gendered behaviours fostered meant that boys were rewarded for occupying the limelight while girls were not. For working class and Black girls, speaking out carried the additional risk of being perceived as pushy and aggressive. Muslim girls reported stereotyping which painted them as overly passive and oppressed by their religion, while they themselves saw their faith and their faith communities as a source of support and resource.

Girls saw women leaders as disliked, as having to work harder to prove themselves, and as carrying more criticism for their actions. Girls from some minority groups were especially aware of the increased hostility faced by women leaders of colour.

Education, entrepreneurialism and leadership:

Girls also reported a lack of understanding and opportunity around entrepreneurship and leadership. Only girls who already had a close family member running an independent business expressed the intention or the confidence to run such a business themselves. The model of entrepreneurship available to most girls was that of the reality TV shows such as *The Apprentice*, where individualist 'hustle' and self-promotion were seen as the keys to success. Collaborative and community enterprises were unfamiliar to most participants (even those taking Business Studies GCSE) and do not form a part of the citizenship curriculum, yet such models might do much to counter the perceived risks and isolation of entrepreneurship. Such models would also reflect girls' own concerns that entrepreneurs' focus should be directed to the benefit of society, not just the individual, for example in the field of tackling climate crisis or social inequalities. While it is easy to dismiss such concerns as youthful utopianism, they were more commonly and more strongly expressed than was the desire for personal success.

When specifically asked about leadership experience, most girls claimed to have none. However, when we changed the question to ask about their experiences of being responsible for something or of taking charge, we got different answers. Most girls described having domestic responsibility – eg. household chores, care of younger siblings, supervising homework of siblings, planning, shopping and budgeting. Their perceptions of such responsibility and what it entails reflect a wider cultural failure to recognise the value of domestic experience, and translates into vocabularies that do not enable girls to see their experiences as relevant to entrepreneurship or leadership. This offers evidence that girls experience additional and significant barriers to developing as entrepreneurs.

Conclusion

Key elements of social learning form a kind of a 'shadow curriculum' by which girls do not associate their school and extracurricular experiences with entrepreneurship, but learn that putting themselves forward and taking charge carry penalty and risk. Steps the government could take include reviewing how opportunities for girls to develop skills and knowledge for entrepreneurship might be developed within school curricula, as a part of the review of the national curriculum.

March 2025