



Taking the Lead:

Girls' Rights in the 21st Century

**girls
inc.**[®]

A Nationwide Survey
of School-Age Children
Conducted for
Girls Incorporated[®] by
Harris Interactive, Inc.

Girls Incorporated is a national nonprofit organization that inspires all girls to be strong, smart, and boldSM. Since 1945, Girls Inc. has responded to the changing needs of girls and their communities through programs, research, and advocacy designed to build girls' skills and self-confidence.

Programs focus on sports, science, math, leadership, self-defense, technology, media literacy, money management, sexuality and health education for girls ages 6 to 18 in all parts of the country. Most of the girls who participate in Girls Inc. come from families headed by single parents or with incomes under \$25,000.

Girls Inc. currently reaches 350,000 young people through Girls Inc. affiliates, neighborhood centers, schools, and partner organizations. Thousands more access Girls Inc. through the Internet and through a variety of publications. Now, by our vision of empowered girls and an equitable society, Girls Inc. has pledged to affect positively the lives of at least one million girls each year by the year 2002.

©Girls Incorporated 2000.

All rights reserved. All reproduction of this work is forbidden without express written permission of Girls Incorporated. Please address all inquiries to:

Girls Incorporated
120 Wall Street • 3rd Floor
New York, NY 10005-3902
Tel: (212) 509-2000
Fax: (212) 509-8708
E-Mail: www.girlsinc.org

Photography: Joan Beard Design: Shawn Newton Design

Taking the Lead: *Girls' Rights in the 21st Century*

Introduction

Girls have the right:

- to be themselves and to resist gender stereotypes
- to express themselves with originality and enthusiasm
- to take risks, to strive freely, and to take pride in success
- to accept and appreciate their bodies
- to have confidence in themselves and to be safe in the world
- to prepare for interesting work and economic independence

Imagine a world where girls have complete access to their rights. They are empowered, not limited, by the fact that they were born female.

A girl will go to school confident that her clothes, haircut, or weight will not be discussed in the hallways. In class, she will raise her hand high, not intimidated to voice a unique opinion. After school, when she goes to basketball practice at the local recreation center, the girls' team will be as valued as the boys' team. Although it is dusk, she will walk home from practice confidently, without risk of physical harm along the way. At night, when she



does her homework, she will be able to dream of career options that women in earlier generations never had.

In *Taking the Lead: Girls' Rights in the 21st Century*, a nationally representative survey about girls' rights, girls have told us that they want this world for themselves. We asked two thousand girls and boys in grades 3 through 12 to tell us what rights girls have and don't have and how those rights shape girls' lives today and their hopes for the future.

While today's girls are confident in their abilities and ambitious in their goals, they are frustrated by outmoded stereotypes that place roadblocks in their paths. They feel pressured to conform to narrow and often conflicting expectations in all aspects of their lives.

Importantly, girls experiencing these gender barriers have a lower quality of life and less confidence in their futures. For these girls, exercising their rights is not a philosophical issue



but rather an opportunity to make concrete improvements in their lives at school, at home, and in their communities.

Girls have told us that they are ready to seize this opportunity. Through the data in this report and in their own words, they have said that they recognize and resist the stereotypes. In fact, as girls grow older, they see the limitations imposed on them more clearly and object more strenuously. One twelfth-grader spoke for many when she said, "Girls have never been less than boys. It would be nice if people could just understand that girls can do the same things boys can."

Other girls acknowledged the barriers but didn't object to them. Their views underscore the invasive power of gender stereotyping to limit girls' sense of their own opportunities.

Boys also told us that they recognize the stereotypes that constrain girls, but twice as many boys as girls endorsed the status quo. Clearly, the

value of gender equity is not communicated effectively across our society.

By supporting girls, adults can help them face these challenges. Girls who are resilient, and able to overcome the effects of gender stereotypes, are likely to say that they have adults in their lives whom they trust. And adults seem ready to play that role; large numbers of women and men told us that they recognize how much more difficult it is to grow up female today than when they were young.

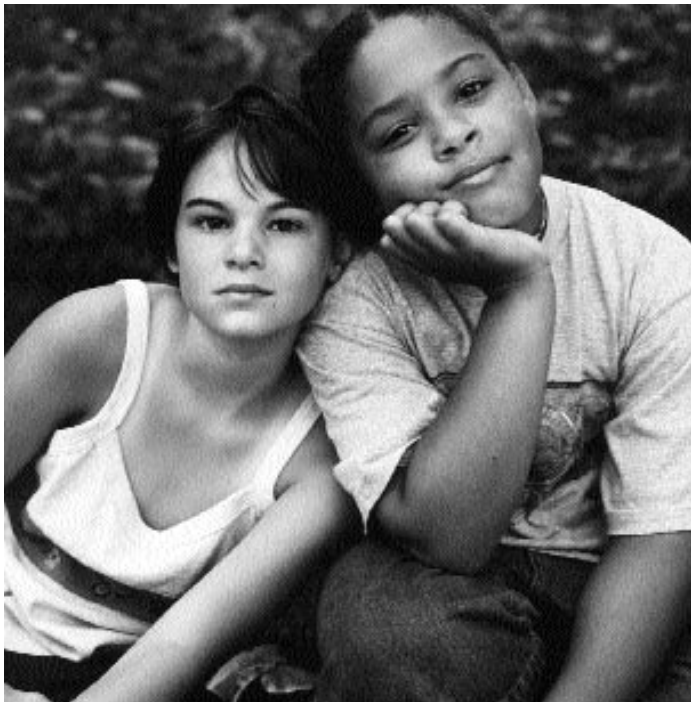
At Girls Inc., we are helping girls learn their rights and open doors to a more equitable society. It is a cause we have championed for over fifty years. Through the Girls Inc. Girls' Rights Campaign, we are reaching out to millions of girls across America, and to the millions of adults who care about them. Our goal is to help every girl understand, value, and gain access to her rights. A national advertising campaign will dramatize the importance of girls' rights. An action kit for girls will educate and inspire them to assert their rights. Through the vast reach of the Internet, we will ask girls across the country what kinds of support they need to achieve their rights. And we will use their answers to inform the parents, teachers, family members, and friends who want to help girls achieve their fullest potential.

Please join us in the Girls' Rights Campaign. America's 36 million girls are ready for change, and they are asking for your support.

Girls take their rights seriously.

When asked how important each right is to them, majorities of girls rated each right as “very important.”

Girls' Rights*	% Saying “very important”
The right to be themselves and to resist gender stereotypes	86%
The right to express themselves with originality and enthusiasm	71%
The right to take risks, to strive freely, and to take pride in success	59%
The right to accept and appreciate their bodies	72%
The right to have confidence in themselves and to be safe in the world	80%
The right to prepare for interesting work and economic independence	75%

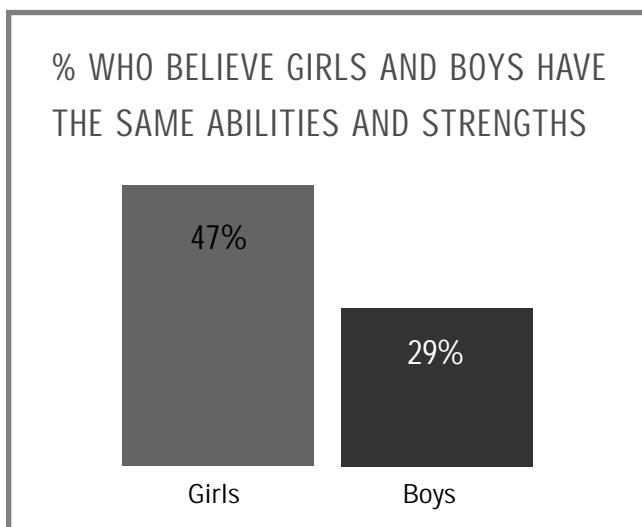


** In order to use language accessible to students in grades 3 through 12, the rights were rephrased as follows:*

- The right to be themselves and to resist gender stereotypes (To be comfortable being myself)
- The right to express themselves with originality and enthusiasm (To say what I think and feel)
- The right to take risks, to strive freely, and to take pride in success (To try new things)
- The right to accept and appreciate their bodies (To like my body the way it is)
- The right to have confidence in themselves and to be safe in the world (To know how to be safe in the world)
- The right to prepare for interesting work and economic independence (To have an interesting job when I grow up)

Girls believe they can do whatever boys can do.

Girls are more likely than boys to believe that girls and boys have the same strengths and abilities. This difference may be due to the fact that girls—but not boys—are getting the message that they can do whatever boys can.



Boys acknowledge the stereotypes about girls but don't object to them.

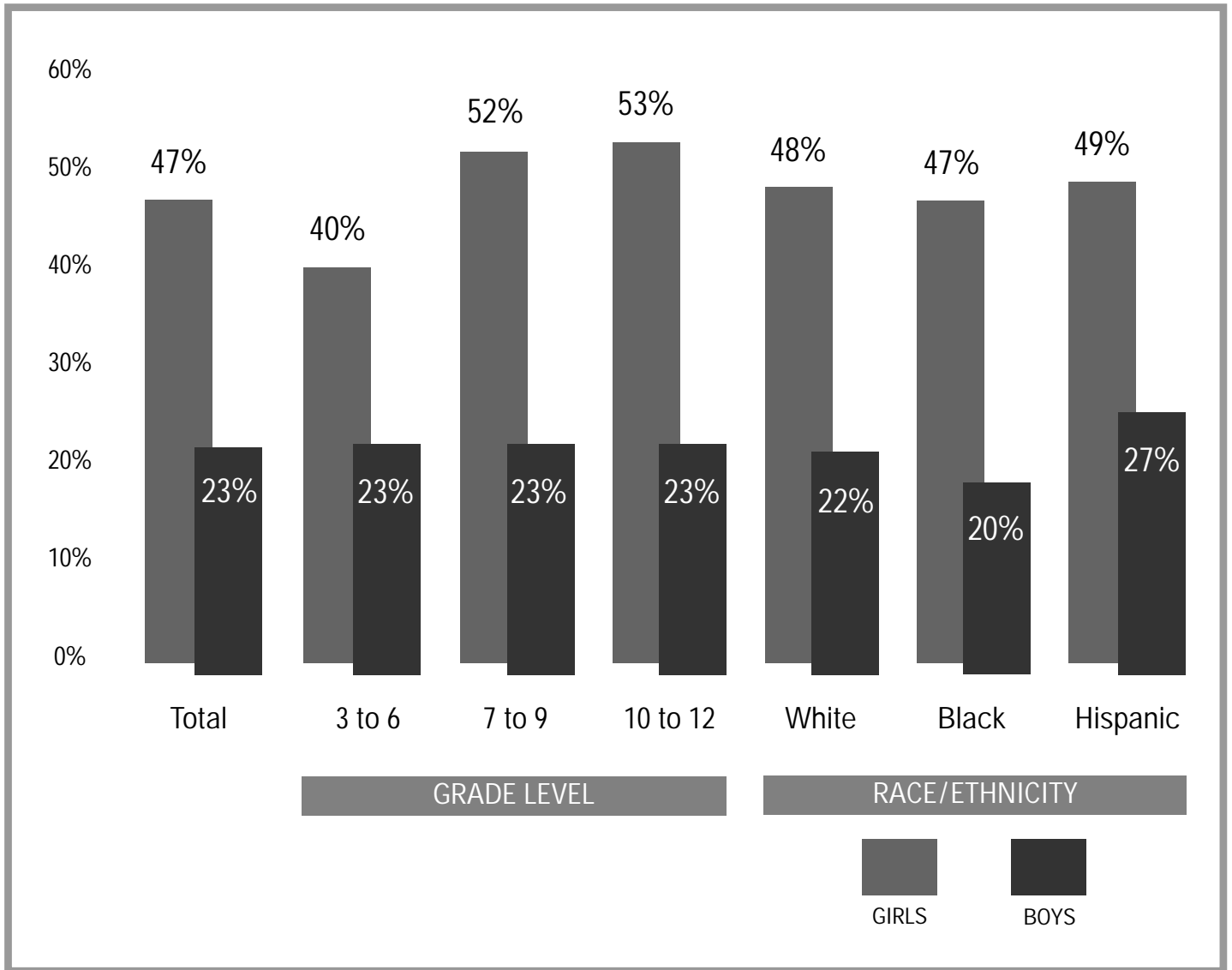
Boys are not oblivious to the stereotypes that constrain girls. A large percentage of boys agreed that the stereotypes exist. However, boys were much more likely to think that the stereotypes are acceptable. We used students' responses to questions about stereotypes to calculate a dissatisfaction score for each student. Girls were twice as likely as boys to be highly dissatisfied with gender stereotypes about girls (47% vs. 23%). While girls are more likely to be dissatisfied as they grow older, boys' views do not change with age.

// We can accomplish anything we want to—this is not a man's world. //

—11th-grade girl

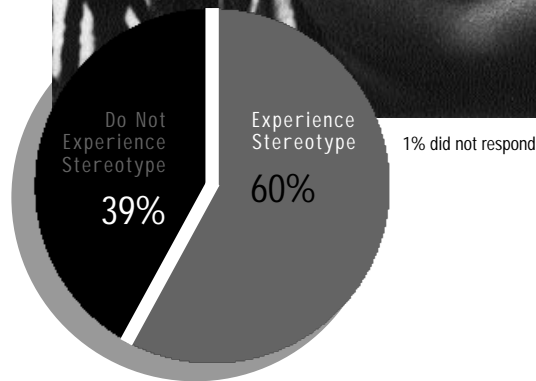


DISSATISFACTION WITH STEREOTYPES THAT LIMIT GIRLS



Girls have the right to be themselves and to resist gender stereotypes.

Girls recognize that gender stereotypes hold them back from their rights. In order to explore girls' perspectives on the Girls' Bill of Rights, Harris Interactive created a "Rights Index." This index consists of eighteen statements—three statements for each right—describing the gender stereotypes associated with that right. Students were asked to evaluate each statement according to whether or not girls experience the stereotype and their own feelings about the stereotype.



Sixty percent of girls said that they experience stereotypes that limit their right to be themselves and to resist gender stereotypes.

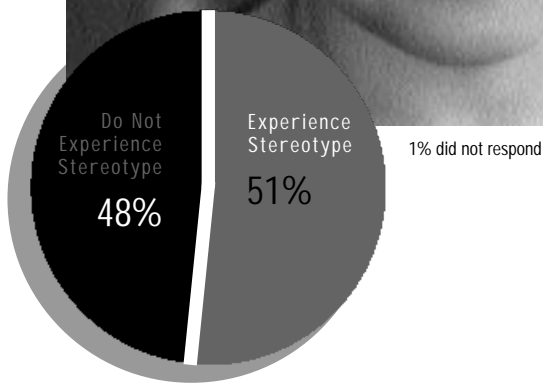
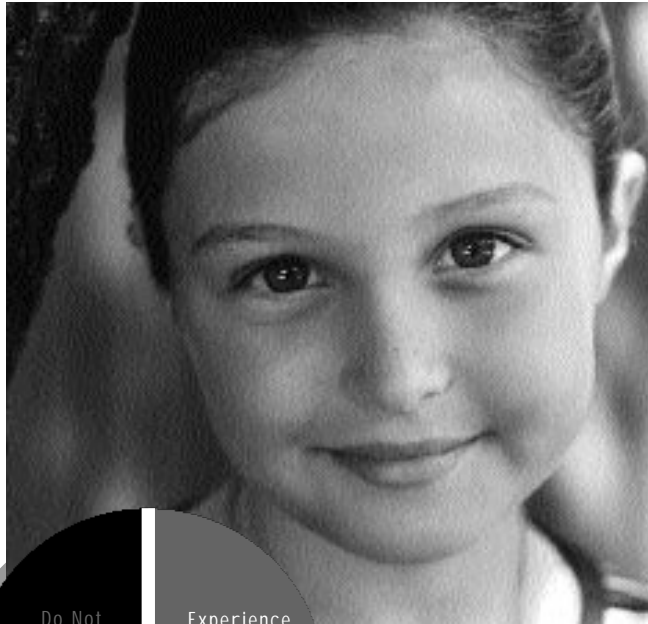
Thirty-eight percent of girls said it is true that "girls are not supposed to be strong and tough." Twenty-eight percent of girls said they don't like it.

Sixty-two percent of girls said it is true that "parents want girls to play with dolls not trucks and action figures." Thirty-seven percent of girls said they don't like it.

Eighty-one percent of girls said it is true that "girls are supposed to be kind and caring." Fourteen percent of girls said they don't like it.

"We're expected to be beautiful, thin, intelligent, perfect women and manage everything else in our lives. I work 30 hours a week, keep up my grades, clean the house, do college work, pay the bills and try to find time for sleep, maybe 4-5 hours a night."
—12th-grade girl

Girls have the right to express themselves with originality and enthusiasm.



“School is difficult for girls. If you try to be a leader, the males will call you a bitch. We can’t be who we want to be.”
—11th-grade girl

Fifty-two percent of girls surveyed said that they experience stereotypes that limit their right to express themselves with originality and enthusiasm.

Fifty-six percent of girls said it is true that “girls are expected to speak softly and not cause trouble.”
Thirty-five percent of girls said they don’t like it.

Fifty-one percent of girls said it is true that “people think girls are only interested in love and romance.”
Thirty-seven percent of girls said they don’t like it.

Forty-seven percent of girls said it is true that “people don’t think girls are good leaders.”
Forty percent of girls said they don’t like it.

As girls get older, they are more likely to say that these statements are true but they don’t like them. While 33% of 3rd- to 6th-grade girls said they don’t like it, 43% of 10th- to 12th-grade girls said they don’t like it. Almost half (46%) of 10th- to 12th-grade girls said that it is true and they don’t like it that “people think that girls are only interested in love and romance.”

Black girls are more likely than white girls to report that in their experience “girls are expected to speak softly and not cause trouble” (69% vs. 54%) and “people think girls are only interested in love and romance” (63% vs. 48%).

Girls have the right to take risks, to strive freely, and to take pride in success.

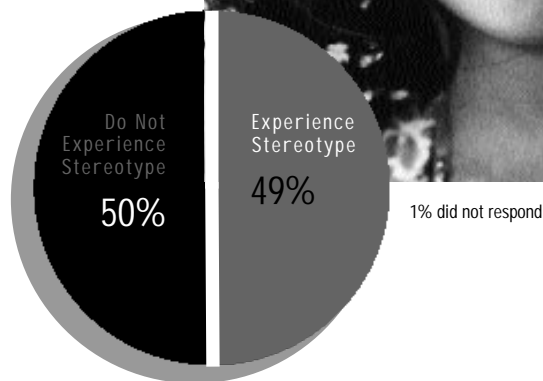
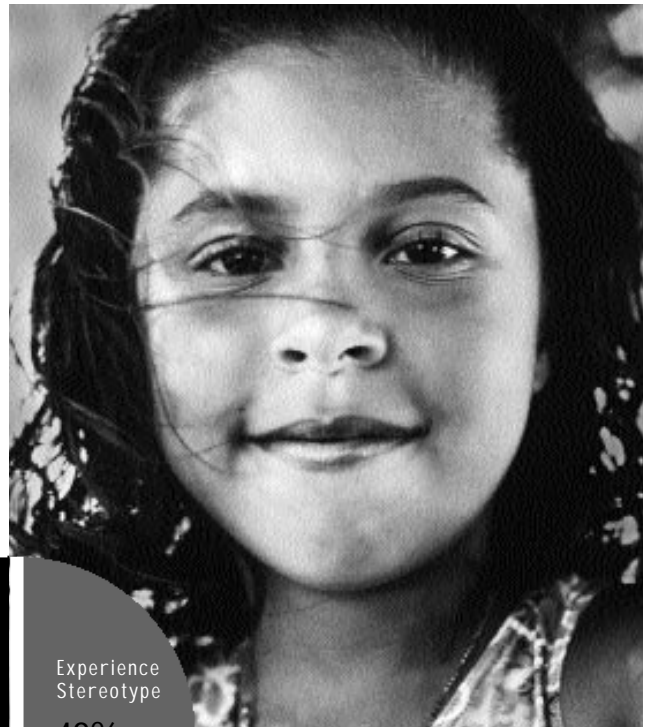
Nearly half of girls (49%) said that they experience stereotypes that limit their right to take risks, to strive freely, and to take pride in success. Younger girls are more likely than older girls to say they experience stereotypes related to this right (54% vs. 44%).

Forty-seven percent of girls said it is true that “people think girls are weird if they plan to be firefighters or police officers.” Forty-one percent of girls said they don’t like it.

Forty-four percent of girls said that it is true that “the smartest girls in school are not popular.” Thirty-one percent of girls said they don’t like it.

Fifty-nine percent of girls said that it is true that “girls are told not to brag about things they do well.” Twenty-eight percent of girls said they don’t like it.

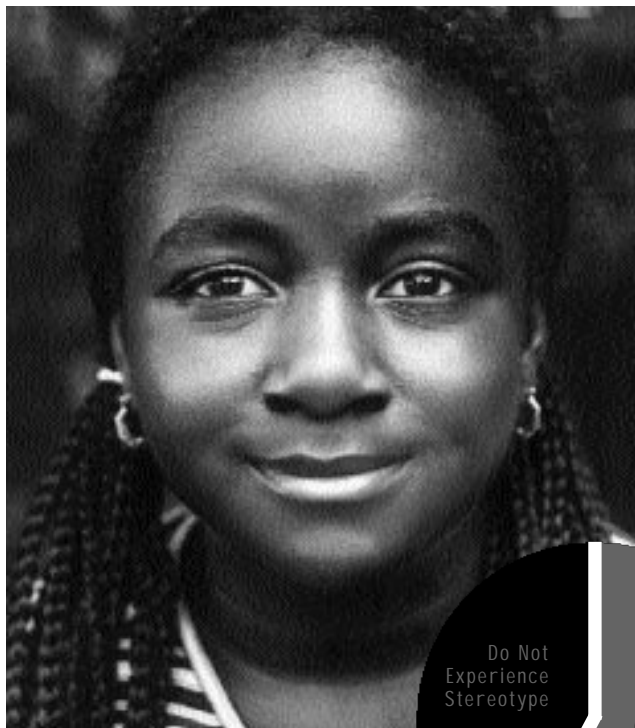
Over half (52%) of Hispanic girls said that it is true that the smartest girls in school are not popular.



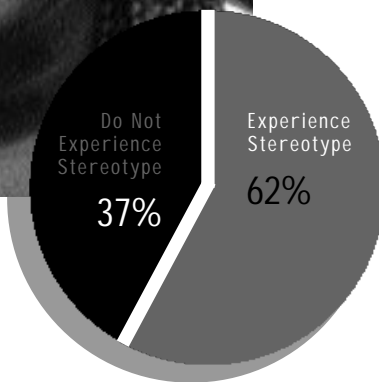
“Girls are under constant pressure. We are supposed to get good grades, stay thin, be happy and cheerful at all times. Society is putting too much pressure on girls these days.”

—12th-grade girl

Girls have the right to accept and appreciate their bodies.



1% did not respond



Sixty-two percent of girls said they experience stereotypes that limit their right to accept and appreciate their bodies.

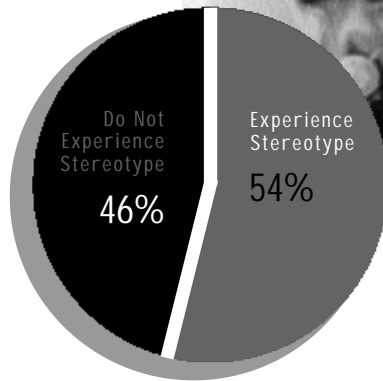
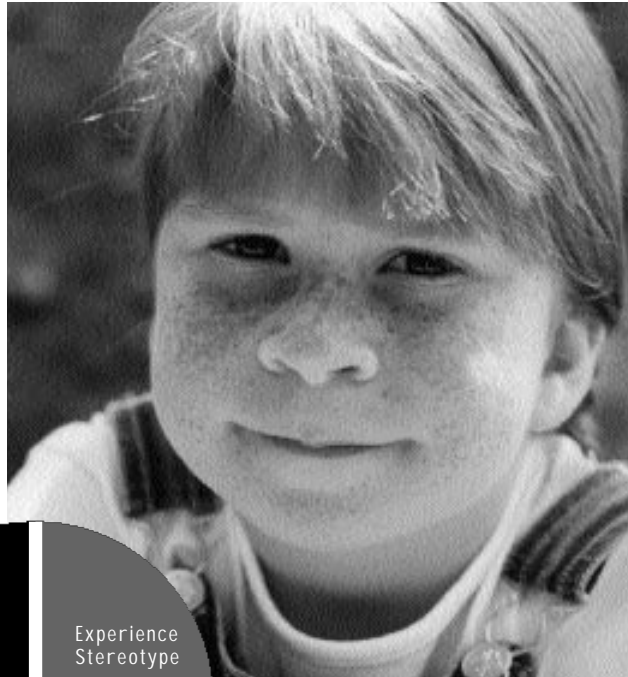
Sixty-two percent of girls said it is true that “in school boys think they have a right to discuss girls’ bodies in public.” Fifty-seven percent of girls said they don’t like it. Older girls were twice as likely as younger girls to say this (78% vs. 37%).

Seventy-five percent of girls said it is true that “girls are under a lot of pressure to dress the right way.” Fifty-five percent of girls said they don’t like it. Older girls were more likely than younger girls to say this (61% vs. 43%).

Forty-eight percent of girls said it is true that “the most popular girls in school are very thin.” Thirty-five percent of girls said they don’t like it. Only 22% of Black girls said they don’t like it, compared to 38% of white girls and 33% of Hispanic girls.

“I want adults to know that it is not easy growing up as a girl. Boys are making fun of your body as if it is a picture—I HATE THAT.”
—7th-grade girl

Girls have the right to have confidence in themselves and to be safe in the world.



“I’m always scared I’m going to get shot, raped, pregnant, or called something I’m not.”
—12th-grade girl

Over half (54%) of girls said they experience stereotypes that limit their right to have confidence in themselves and be safe in

Sixty-three percent of girls said it is true that “girls are under a lot of pressure to please everyone.” Fifty-three percent of girls said they don’t like it. Older girls were more likely than younger girls to say this (62% vs. 43%).

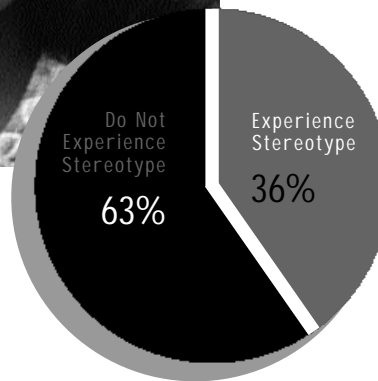
Sixty-five percent of girls said it is true that “girls are expected to spend a lot of their time on housework and taking care of younger brothers and sisters.” Forty-nine percent of girls said they don’t like it. Older girls were more likely than younger girls to say this (56% vs. 42%).

Thirty-three percent of girls said it is true that “people think it is not important to teach girls how to protect themselves.” Twenty-four percent of girls said they don’t like it.



Girls have the right to prepare for interesting work and economic independence.

1% did not respond



Girls are least likely to believe that they experience stereotypes that limit their right to prepare for interesting work and economic independence. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of girls believe that girls do not experience stereotypes in this area.

Thirty-nine percent of girls said it is true that “people think girls don’t know how to take care of their own money.” Thirty-four percent of girls said they don’t like it.

Fifty-three percent of girls said it is true that “people think the most important thing for girls is to get married and have children.” Thirty-seven percent said they don’t like it.

Seventeen percent of girls said it is true that “teachers think it is not important for girls to be good at math.” Nine percent said they don’t like it.

“Sometimes I don’t feel free because boys have better jobs and more things to do. They think girls should be teachers and watching children.”
—5th-grade girl

Gender stereotyping lessens girls' quality of life.

// It's difficult especially living in a double-standard society. People expect us to be fashion experts, clueless and sweet to boys, rude to other girls. When one of us does not fit this stereotype, she's automatically an outcast. //

—12th-grade girl

Several factors contribute to a girl's quality of life. These include having a lot of friends, getting along with parents, getting good grades, feeling safe, being happy at school, feeling sad, unhappy or bored, and getting into trouble frequently. We asked girls about each of these areas to calculate a quality of life score.

Girls are more likely than boys to report a high quality of life (35% vs. 28%) and less likely than boys to report a low quality of life (26% vs. 34%). High school girls are less likely to have a high quality of life than elementary or middle school girls (elementary school, 38%; middle school, 39%; high school, 27%). Minority girls are less likely to have a high quality of life than non-minority girls (Black, 23%; Hispanic, 24%; white, 41%).

Stereotyping fundamentally changes girls' quality of life. Girls with a low quality of life are more likely to believe that girls and boys are very different in all areas of their lives and less likely to agree that girls and boys have the same strengths and abilities. When girls feel that their skills are not equal to boys' skills, their quality of life is lower.

GENDER VIEWS AFFECT QUALITY OF LIFE

<i>Girls' Gender Views</i>	<i>Quality of Life</i>	
	High	Low
Girls and boys are very different in all areas of their lives	59	71
Girls and boys have the same abilities and strengths	50	42

// If you don't wear,
do, or say what
people expect
you to, they think
you're weird.
If you want a
supposed 'man
job' people think
you're weird. //

—7th-grade girl



Overall girls are more likely than boys to believe that girls and boys have the same abilities and strengths (47% vs. 29%).

A support system in the form of adults girls trust, after-school sports and activities is also linked to a higher quality of life. While nine out of ten (89%) girls said they know three adults they could go to if they had a problem, girls with a low quality of life are ten times more likely to say they do not have an adult support system as girls with a high quality of life (20% vs. 2%).

Girls with a high quality of life were more likely to say they play on a sports team (61% vs. 40%) and more likely to say they belong to clubs and organizations (67% vs. 49%).

Gender stereotyping limits everyone's views of a girl's potential.

Almost a third of all students believe that it is not at all easy for a girl to become the kind of person she wants to be when she grows up. Boys are slightly more likely than girls to hold this belief (32% vs. 29%). Girls with a low quality of life are more likely than girls with a high quality of life to hold this belief (39% vs. 24%).

Lack of confidence in the future seems to be associated with an outlook that girls are limited in their abilities and opportunities in comparison to boys. Girls who believe that girls and boys are very different in all aspects of their lives are more likely to believe that girls face a challenge in becoming the kind of person they want to be than girls who believe that girls and boys have similar strengths and abilities (same, 26%; different, 35%).

Girls who see boys and girls as the same are also more likely than those who see boys and girls as different to want to go to college (79% vs. 70%) and to plan to go to college (82% vs. 68%).

Adults recognize the difficulties of growing up female today.

Nearly two-thirds of adults (63%) believe that it is more difficult now than when they were young. Women are more likely than men to believe that life today is more difficult for girls (70% vs. 56%).

Both older women and older men are more likely than their younger counterparts to hold this view. (women: 78% vs. 66%; men: 63% vs. 50%)

Women understand well the challenges that today's girls face. Women not only acknowledge the stereotypes, they recognize that these stereotypes are harmful to girls.

Women are more likely than girls to say that it is true and they don't like it that "parents want girls to play with dolls, not trucks and action figures" (46% vs. 37%); that "girls are under a lot of pressure to dress the right way" (71% vs. 55%); that "the most popular girls in school are very thin" (61% vs. 35%); and that "girls are under a lot of pressure to please everyone" (71% vs. 53%).

Girls are more likely than women to say that it is true and they don't like it that "girls are supposed to be kind and caring" (14% vs. 6%) and that "people think the most important thing for girls is to get married and have children" (37% vs. 31%).

// Guys think that girls belong in the kitchen and at home cleaning. We just need to be treated equally, that's all. //

—12th-grade girl



EXPERIENCING STEREOTYPES AGAINST GIRLS' RIGHTS

Girls' Rights	% saying "True"	
	Girls 1056 (Base)	Women 534 (Base)
<p>The right to be themselves and to resist gender stereotypes <i>Girls are not supposed to be strong and tough • Parents want girls to play with dolls, not trucks and action figures • Girls are supposed to be kind and caring</i></p>	60%	67%
<p>The right to express themselves with originality and enthusiasm <i>Girls are expected to speak softly and not cause trouble • People think girls are only interested in love and romance • People don't think girls are good leaders</i></p>	52%	46%
<p>The right to take risks, to strive freely, and to take pride in success <i>The smartest girls in school are not popular • Girls are told not to brag about things they do well • People think girls are weird if they plan to be firefighters or police officers</i></p>	50%	39%
<p>The right to accept and appreciate their bodies <i>In school, boys think they have a right to discuss girls' bodies in public • Girls are under a lot of pressure to dress the right way • The most popular girls in school are very thin</i></p>	62%	69%
<p>The right to have confidence in themselves and to be safe in the world <i>Girls are under a lot of pressure to please everyone • Girls are expected to spend a lot of their time on housework and taking care of younger brothers and sisters • People think it's not important to teach girls how to protect themselves</i></p>	54%	26%
<p>The right to prepare for interesting work and economic independence <i>People think girls don't know how to take care of their own money • People think that the most important thing for girls is to get married and have children • Teachers think it is not important for girls to be good at math</i></p>	36%	29%

Survey Methodology

Students

A nationally representative sample of 2,028 students in grades 3 through 12 was surveyed during an English class using a self-administered questionnaire. Interviews averaged 15 minutes in length and were conducted between October 4 and December 16, 1999.

Adults

The *Taking the Lead: Girls' Rights in the 21st Century* survey of adults consisted of 39 questions and was part of an omnibus study conducted with a representative national cross-section of 1,019 adults 18 years of age or older. Completion interviews were conducted between October 22 and October 25, 1999. The interviews averaged about seven minutes in length.

Project Responsibility

This study was designed by Harris Interactive, Inc. (formerly Louis Harris and Associates) and Girls Incorporated. Anne Axelrod directed the project for Harris Interactive, and Dana Markow conducted the research and analysis.

Alexander Kopelman, Director of Communications at Girls Incorporated, Heather Johnston Nicholson, Director of Research at Girls Incorporated, and Amy Sutnick Plotch of Amy Sutnick Plotch project and guided it to

Harris Interactive, Inc. was responsible for final determination of the topics, question wording, collection of data, analysis, and interpretation in the report.



Girls Incorporated®

For more information:

1-800-374-4475

www.girlsinc.org

National Headquarters

120 Wall Street

New York, NY 10005-3902

Tel: (212) 509-2000

Fax: (212) 502-8708

National Resource Center

441 West Michigan Street

Indianapolis, IN 46202-3287

Tel: (317) 634-7546

Fax: (317) 634-3024