

## **Engaging Girls in Civic Life: Challenges and Opportunities<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*This article highlights findings from the first stage of a three-year project that explores how young women and girls engage in leadership and civic activities in the new urban environment. This study utilizes a qualitative action research method that includes youth interviews, forums, and an intervention action component. The findings reported in this paper are drawn from interviews conducted by specially trained participants who led conversations with their adolescent female peers about their conceptualization of leadership and civic activities. Our analysis of the peer interviews found that girls' conceptualizations and experience with leadership and civic engagement was linked to existing gender, cultural, and ethnic stereotypes.*

**Keywords:** female youth, civic engagement, leadership, challenges

### **1. Introduction and Background**

The new urban environments in which adolescent females reside shape their civic participation and leadership abilities. These new environments created through, among other factors, processes of globalization, migration and post-industrial developments, and facilitated by innovative global communication systems, have led to major shifts in family structure and other social aspects. These shifts have complicated our understanding of community life, or of what a community entails, to begin with. Further, these shifts in urbanity have magnified the need to look at the uneven and gendered engagement of youth in leadership and civic life. This paper reports results<sup>2</sup> from a broader study Engaging Girls, Changing Communities (EGCC)<sup>3</sup>, designed to examine girls' leadership and civic engagement experiences in new urban environments, identify elements of the new urban environments that limit and/or enhance possibilities for girls' leadership and civic performances, and develop and pilot an intervention that considers new and innovative ways to engage girls in leadership and community life.

In EGCC, civic life is defined as those activities that encompass civic engagement, civic identity, civic learning, and volunteerism; terms that are used interchangeably and embrace Rogers, Mediratta, & Shah's (2012) definition of civic development to mean, "a process through which young people acquire the knowledge, skills, and identities to interact effectively with their fellow community members and participate in political institutions" (p. 44). Our research is guided by the following questions: How do adolescent girls understand and identify leadership? In their definitions of leadership, do girls conflate leadership with popularity and charisma? What community experiences shape these leadership perspectives? What role do civic engagement and active citizenship play in their lives?

EGCC is conducted in two locales, Toronto and Windsor, Ontario, which are cities that encompass elements of new urbanism. Both are considered to be among Canada's most culturally and linguistically diverse cities. As such, these cities epitomize the ever changing nature of urban environments, which are marked by opportunity, prosperity and well-being on the one hand, and by marginality, impoverishment and ill-health on the other. The innate diversity within these cities further results in altered family structures and also presents challenges in fostering positive youth leadership and engagement strategies.

How city dwellers, especially young women and girls, produce and simultaneously consume changes in their environments is part of what EGCC aims to unveil. As such, EGCC investigates whether or not the city is a space providing opportunities for girls to prosper as engaged leaders and active community residents. Put differently, within the project, there is a focus on illuminating how the conglomeration of symbolic resources such as cultures and languages as well as material resources, including jobs, enhance or limit girls' community life and leadership possibilities.

Now in its third year, EGCC has organized female youth for action providing resources (mentors, workshops, and funds) for girls to use in designing mini-projects that facilitate active community and civic life. Further, these resources may assist participants in understanding what constitutes the public good – "understandings that are grounded in historical analyses of power and social relationships and focused explicitly on expanding opportunities for disadvantaged groups" (Rogers et al., 2012, p. 44) within the context of new urban environments.

## **2. Literature Review**

EGCC builds on the extant literature on youth leadership and civic engagement (e.g. Gervais, 2011; MacNeil & McClean, 2006; and McNae, 2010), which focuses on developing and/or identifying the difference in leadership and civic engagement by gender. Literature on youth leadership and civic engagement reveal four categorical questions: (1) Are youth active, civically motivated, and politically engaged agents? (2) How are civic and leadership skills best developed? (3) What are the processes of youth leadership and civic engagement? (4) Are leadership and civic engagement gender specific?

### **2.1 Are Youth Active, Civically Motivated, and Politically Engaged Agents?**

The literature addressing whether or not youth are motivated, engaged, and active citizens is contentious. The first camp constitutes studies that show disengagement and decline in civic engagement as demonstrated through low youth voter turnout (Carpini, 2000; Flanagan, 2004; Menard, 2010). In contrast is the camp indicating that, "young people can be valuable participants in building a democratic future, [as such] many adults are now turning their attention to the best ways to 'train,' 'engage,' and 'socialize' youth to become active citizens" (Gordon & Taft 2011 p. 1500; see also, Banaji, 2008; Checkoway, 2011; Kirshner, 2007; Llewellyn, Cook, & Molina, 2010; Nicholson, Collins, & Holmer, 2004; Rogers et al., 2012). This camp claims that as part of activist groups, youth have the potential to influence political change when encouraged to "question the status quo and envision better alternatives for themselves and their peers" (Kirshner, 2007, p. 368). This camp also argues that youth engagement and participation varies from that of the adult population (Checkoway, 2011). Further, this camp is critical of the way that youth are presented in civic life arguing that the dominant negative representations fail to capture youth voices and participation in political campaigns (Banaji, 2008; Saito, 2006), and fail to show the spaces where youth often play important roles as advisors, organizers, and leaders (Kirshner, 2007; Rogers et al., 2012).

## 2.2 How are Civic and Leadership Skills Developed?

Research on leadership and civic engagement suggests that the best way to develop leadership skills is in collaborative learning environments. These are spaces that incorporate the unique experiences of the individual, provide the opportunity for voice, influence, and decision-making processes, and take into account the context/community in which the learning is happening (McNae, 2010). The collaborative nature of working with small groups in leadership development enables participants to accomplish goals that would otherwise be difficult to accomplish on their own. Also, group members learn how to effectively work together to ensure the success of their projects (Kirshner, 2007).

MacNeill and McClean (2006) note that there is a distinction between learning *about* leadership – studying theories and hearing stories about great leaders- and *learning leadership* - a process of providing opportunities for students to create and discover skills and knowledge in collaboration with their teachers and to try-on the roles of leadership in a “real-world” context. As these authors note: “Learning leadership happens experientially, through involvement in opportunities to practice the skills, experiment with approaches and try on the roles” (p. 99). The development of leadership skills and the facilitation of civic engagement include creating contexts and relationships where young people can engage in the action of leadership (MacNeill & McClean, 2006) and it requires that adults learn how to learn from, and with, young people (Saito, 2006).

To best foster the development of civic engagement and leadership skills, young people must be provided an environment where they feel part of the group and where there are opportunities for active participation (McNae, 2010). The ideal environment for this to take place according to Libby, Sedonaen, & Bliss, (2006) is a place where “young people and adults come together to plan, problem solve, learn, and strengthen their relationships with each other and in the community” (p. 22). Students working in partnership arrangements with other adults found the process enjoyable as these created an increased sense of ownership (McNae, 2010). Furthermore, successful youth organizing involves intergenerational cooperation and youth-adult partnerships (Christens & Dolan, 2011). Although adults help to foster this skill development in youths, peers and older youths act as mentors and teachers in mutually beneficial relationships. Experienced youth leaders gain a sense of pride and confidence from fostering leadership development in their peers as they help them to develop a critical perspective on the systems that affect their lives (Christens & Dolan, 2011). Similarly, Martineka, Schillinga, & Hellison (2006) argue that today’s youth continue to have the potential to be great leaders and to help their peers transform themselves from followers to leaders.

## 2.3 What are the Processes of Youth Leadership and Civic Engagement?

Literature is uniform in presenting the complexity of the development of youth civic engagement and leadership as well as how these experiences are enacted (Gordon & Taft, 2011; MacNeil & McClean, 2006; McNae, 2010; Nicholson et al., 2004). This complexity results first, from a definition murkiness; that is, researchers have difficulty agreeing on how to even define youth leadership since it can be recognized or categorized under many names such as youth civic engagement, youth empowerment, and youth participation (O’Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2006). Added to this definition dilemma is the lack of recognizable skills that can be used to identify leaders and/or engaged citizens.

Moreover, studies also indicate the importance of collaborative learning and teaching amongst youth and adults in the process of fostering leadership development and civic engagement. Most youth leadership researchers indicate that youth development approaches have been based on adult leadership constructs, which do not fit well with what works for youth leadership education (McNae, 2010). Although research in the area of youth leadership development has increased recently, the majority of the research has excluded youth leadership in the high school context (McNae, 2010). Additionally, according to McNae (2010), there is a “difference between adult and youth leadership development” and “current researchers in the field of youth leadership even admit to creating youth leadership development approaches based upon adult learning constructs, due to the lack of youth research” (p. 678). What makes the process complex, however, is the ambiguity in defining where and when adult roles end and when youth roles begin in this development process.

## 2.4 Are Leadership and Civic Engagement Gender Specific?

Studies that have focused on how gender structures social movements have been limited to adult women rather than girls.

However, the experiences of girls are much different than their adult counterparts; this is especially true in matters of leadership and civic engagement (McNae, 2010). Further, Kezar and Moriarty (2000) indicate that there are significant differences in leadership models between males and females. Accordingly, male leadership models tend to be based on an autocratic approach as opposed to female leadership models, which often use a compassionate and democratic approach (Douglas, 2012). Male models of leadership tend to emphasize hierarchy, directive power, and competition for rewards (Kezar & Moriarty, 2000), while female models of leadership emphasize the importance of relationship building, empathy, and empowerment (Douglas, 2012). Kezar and Moriarty (2000), also stress the importance of acknowledging that leadership development processes and perceptions of leadership differ between genders. Teachers and facilitators should consider this when introducing and developing learning opportunities.

In a national survey on gender differences in political and civic engagement among youth ages 18-24 conducted by Portney, Eichenberg, and Neimi (2009) over a period of two years, the researchers concluded that males tend to be better informed than females by a wide margin even when accounting for differences of resources based on socio-economic factors. The researchers identify a “gap in knowledge” between the genders and further bring evidence to show that once females acquire knowledge about civic engagement and participation, the gap can be bridged. One of the interesting findings from the survey is that “in terms of the electoral activities, young men outpace young women” (p. 27) and that young women have a tendency to be more engaged in community service than men. Parental/familial influences are other factors that were considered in this survey in which they found that female parents exerted a greater influence over female youth in the family. Although genders differences are notable in relation to civic engagement, Westheimer and Kahne (2004), note that active youth civic engagement for both genders is manifested at different levels: the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the social justice-oriented active citizen.

McGregor and Clover (2011) point to Sylvia Bashevkin’s “discomfort equation” when it comes to female engagement and leadership development. This discomfort equation entails a double bind in which females are influenced by the gendered discourse that focuses on male dominance and the discourse of devaluation that denigrates civic participation. Both these discourses operate to limit active female participation. The EGCC project aims to break this double bind by encouraging young females to become civically engaged and to nurture their leadership abilities so they feel more effective in creating change within their communities.

### **3. EGCC Methodology**

A community-based research strategy, the *Community Dialogue Approach* (Anucha & Mitchell, 2007) is the research methodology utilized within the EGCC project. This methodology was also used in other projects that served as the foundation for this study (Dlamini & Anucha, 2005). With elements of traditional action research, the *Community Dialogue Approach* conceptualizes *community engagement* as a methodological practice and research as a *community dialogue* that must fully engage community stakeholders. The participatory nature of this research involves alternating cycles of research, translation and transfer of research findings to government, NGOs, and civil society (e.g. parents/caregivers, parent-teacher associations, faith-based and traditional leaders), and action (e.g. the delivery of school and/or community-based interventions) (Natasi, Varjas, Bernstein, & Jayasena, 2000; Nelson, Poland, Murray, & Maticka-Tyndale, 2004; Smith, Willms, & Johnson, 1997). As such, the *Community Dialogue Approach* ensures that knowledge translation and collaborative partnerships are an integral part of the research process.

We began the project by holding a forum, which included community organizations, researchers, academics, youths, and community leaders to discuss salient issues related to girls’ leadership and civic engagement in new urban environments. At this forum, we (the researchers) presented the main components of the EGCC project. The feedback and suggestions we received were positive and indicated that forum attendees were interested in the project and wanted knowledge on ways to participate (for details, see EGCC, 2012). Out of this process, we created a research schedule of activities, fine-tuned key research activities, and established a community based project advisory group that worked with the research team. The data findings reported in this paper derive from the first schedule of research activities, which was interviewing girls about their conceptualization of leadership and civic activities. To conduct the interviews, EGCC began by engaging in capacity building, whereby female youths were trained to interview other female youths in their communities in ways that encouraged interviewees to be subjects, rather than just objects of study (Fallis & Opatow, 2003).

The process of training and preparing adolescent females to engage in the research process was challenging, yet enlightening and engaging. Some of the challenges included explaining the participatory aspect of this research partnership as most community participants held preconceived notions of university researchers. We used social media to reach adolescent females, and we also recruited our local community organizers and leaders to conduct outreach and to spread the message about this EGCC project. The focus on conducting outreach was also enlightening and engaging as it gave us opportunities to truly understand some of the local social and political issues and gave us insights into the programs and practices currently in place at the local level. Windsor, a blue-collar, border city with chronic rates of high unemployment had several innovative programs and agencies to welcome a diverse group of new immigrants

Training at the Windsor site occurred over two sessions. At these sessions we provided an overview of the purpose and processes of research and the importance of conducting research in an ethical manner. Furthermore, we provided an in-depth understanding of the nature of the interview process, the different kinds of interview formats, and the characteristics of interview questions (probing, leading, follow-up, direct, indirect, clarifying, and paraphrasing). Since our research protocol was based on semi-structured interviews, we conducted a demonstration and then allowed participants to engage in mock interviews where the questions and the follow-up questions had to be adjusted. The process of carrying on a guided conversation as part of the interview process was an issue we particularly had to emphasize not only during the training process, but also in our post-interview feedback sessions with each participant.

Following the training, youth interviewers used the interview protocol that was derived from an analysis of the literature described in the above sections. They were also required to complete an interview reflection sheet immediately following each interview. In this exercise they had to reflect upon, as well as analyse, the success and the shortcomings of each interview. They were also required to list interview strategies that worked and those that did not. Furthermore, they had to outline the steps they would employ to improve their strategies going forward into the next interview. Through their/our reflections as well as our ongoing conversations, we found that their first interviews were rather stilted, as they were new to the process. We listened to their interviews, read their transcripts, and then engaged them in conversations that provided feedback about the interview and transcription process before they conducted the next interview. At first, they found the transcription process rather cumbersome, and they would have rather moved on to conducting the next interview. However, they discovered that the transcription process itself afforded them insights into the data they collected and gave them opportunities to assess their skills and abilities and to decide on their next steps; it became a reflective and iterative process.

Each interviewer conducted five interviews; however, the first interview was not used as data since it was conducted for practicing interview skills. Therefore, our sample consisted of 20 female participants at the Windsor locale whose ages ranged from 16-23 years. The participants' ethnic identities varied; of the 20 participants, eight identified as South Asian, seven as Caucasian, two as African-Canadian and one as a Pacific Islander. Nine females were enrolled in undergraduate programs at the local university, one at an American university, two were enrolled in a community college, and eight girls were high school students. All participants had some degree of experience volunteering in the community and, at the time of the interviews, were involved in at least three different volunteer activities. The nature of their volunteerism and community engagement varied greatly. Some participants had served on the local multicultural council; while others had circulated petitions about topics such as animal testing, tar sands, gay marriage, and other social/environmental justice related issues.

Each interviewer transcribed her own interviews, which was then followed by a general reading of the transcripts to search for emerging themes. The transcribed data was then coded using NVivo software, which further helped with a re-reading of the data and to unpack informing linguistic terms and phrases that participants used to talk about their experiences of leadership and community life. The data analysis revealed the following themes: (1) gender and culture in leadership and civic engagement; (2) issues of self-identification as leaders; (3) motivation for civic engagement and quality of opportunities; (4) barriers and enhancers to female adolescents' civic engagement.

#### ***4. Findings and Discussion***

##### **4.1 Gender and Culture in Leadership and Civic Engagement**

In order to understand youths' conceptualization of leadership, participants were asked the following questions: *How do you define leadership? What characteristics should a good leader have?*

*Who do you consider a leader in your community? Who are women that you see as leaders?* Data reveal that participants consider a leader as someone who should exhibit characteristics that others admire and would want to follow. Ann's •response encapsulated a lot of the ideas that the girls put forward when she said:

Leadership would have to be the ability to direct, ... pursue, or move an audience or crowd of people, so [it's] the person that stands up and takes charge and guides everyone else around them. I think having those qualities, but you are not bossy and you are not full of yourself because you have to always have your own way, but [that you have] the qualities that you kind of push people along the right direction and guide them to the right path.

Many identified their leadership role models as their mothers, women who held important positions within the community (i.e. religious leaders, non-profit organizers, local politicians), as well as teachers and professors. However, when asked to name women leaders in politics, most had trouble naming female leaders at all. Several participants eventually named Michele Obama, Hilary Clinton, Angela Merkel, and Sandra Pupatello. Several celebrities, like Oprah Winfrey, Taylor Swift, and Kim Kardashian were also identified as role models. When encouraged to reflect on why they had difficulty naming women leaders, girls felt that there was not enough media exposure focused on women as positive role models. The girls suggested that women who take leadership roles in civic issues suffer from a significant lack of media exposure as compared to men in similar roles.

To determine the ways in which gender influences conceptualizations of leadership, participants were asked: *Do you think that leadership is different for girls and boys? If so, in what way(s)? In the business world [and other fields], leadership roles continue to be controlled by men. How do you think we can change this situation?* Two participants made comments that suggested that they have internalized various stereotypes such as “men take charge and focus on results, and women are more emotional and relational.” However, most were of the opinion that gender differences were due to immaturity, suggesting, “boys are more immature and ‘wild’ in adolescence but things even out between boys and girls as they reach adulthood.” Data show a consensus among the participants that they felt that the playing field gets even in adulthood, where men and women share the same leadership capabilities and traits. Many participants perceived the gender gap as narrowing, “times were changing,” and that there were more opportunities for girls than ever before. For example, Margaret, who is studying engineering, is ready to stand out in her field:

I definitely think [that] ... throughout the years, it has been completely male dominated...Now women are slowly getting involved. [There are] women in engineering, women in science, women in technology. [They] are being encouraged all the time and I find that the ratio of man to woman [*sic*] now is getting even.... Women are getting out of the mentality that they are not able to do it, and men are starting to expect the fact that women can ... do their job, better even. So I find that it doesn't discourage me that there are a lot of men in my domain, but it actually serves as an encouragement to stand out and be that girl [who]went that far.

Furthermore, we found that gender stereotypes about leadership and civic engagement co-existed within frames of culture, race, and ethnicity. These issues are intertwined and complex, such that it is imperative to account for contextual, familial, cultural, racial, class, ethnic, and media influenced frames of reference in working with our youth collaborators and participants in demystifying these constructs during our intervention stage of the research. These findings parallel those of Kezar and Moriarty (2000), who postulate that issues related to leadership styles and the needs of minorities, in particular African Americans, might differ from traditional leadership styles and patterns. Additionally, Stepick and Stepick (2002) suggest that first and second generation immigrant youth who face discrimination and potentially feel alienated in their new communities, have even more barriers to civic engagement as their responses to discrimination play a critical role in developing their complex identities that will promote multiple forms of engagement.

In highlighting gender differences in leadership, several participants raised the matter of “false humility” that is expected from females in public life. Participants explained false humanity to mean that there are unwritten cultural mores, which dictate that females should not “brag” about their accomplishments, while it was quite acceptable for males to do so.

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•All names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect participants' identities

This finding supports research by Kezar & Moriarty (2000) on leadership ability, which found that “men rated themselves 14% higher than women on leadership ability, and almost 13% higher on public speaking ability” (p. 59).

#### 4.2 Issues of Self-Identification as Leaders

In order to explore whether participants considered themselves to be leaders, the following questions were asked: *Do you think that you are a leader? What activities have you been involved in where you took a leadership role?* Fifty percent of participants did identify themselves as leaders (though half of them did so hesitantly), 30% said it depended on the situation, and 20% did not identify themselves as leaders. Further analysis of the data revealed that the failure to identify themselves as leaders may have been partly because of the way participants defined a leader. They seemed to conceptualize leadership as a trait that is present throughout all situations. Because they have only had discrete leadership learning experiences, they did not consider themselves “leaders.” However, when the question was rephrased to ask whether they have had experiences in which they took leadership roles, 69% said “yes,” while only 23% said “no.” It is possible that this discrepancy is a manifestation of girls who are taught it is socially inappropriate to brag as noted in the previous section.

Interestingly, we noted that our youth interviewers would often give the interviewee a sort of “pep-talk” to build confidence. We illustrate this with one example: “See... you are doing all this stuff in the community that you don’t really have to... so that makes you a leader, don’t you think?” One participant, in response to this “pep-talk” commented, “No, I don’t believe I am a leader, but I know that I can make a change by volunteering.”

#### 4.3 Motivation for Civic Engagement and Quality of Opportunities

To determine what motivated participants’ involvement in civic opportunities, the following question was asked: *What activities have you been involved in where you took a leadership role?* Data reveal that many female adolescents lacked the motivation to become active citizens in their community. Many did volunteer work as they were required to have a certain number of hours to graduate from high school and also because, as many pointed out, it “looks good on your resume.” However, some participants did not find these activities to be meaningful and worth their time. A consistent comment was that they would be motivated if they truly believed in what they were doing and found the volunteer work meaningful.

Our respondents mentioned that their volunteer work was mostly mundane. Judy, age 19, said, “I am not doing anything drastic,” and when asked to elaborate, she commented that the work she did was not about change or transformation. Such comments demonstrate that these girls would like to have opportunities that allow them to attain an advanced level of civic engagement although they might not be able to articulate the three levels of civic engagement identified by Westheimer and Kahne (2004). It appeared that girls would be more inclined to volunteer if they found the opportunity to be meaningful. There is a lot of untapped potential that could be harnessed by improving access, publicizing available opportunities, making youth feel welcomed, and improving the quality of formal and informal programming (Saito, 2006) for youth in general and for females in particular.

There was also a distinct qualitative difference in the experiences of those who were veteran volunteers, as compared to those who had fewer engagement experiences. Those who volunteered more frequently stressed that it takes a while to find what you want to do, but the rewards are worthwhile. Some of these oft-cited reasons for volunteering were: the good feeling they got when they helped others, the opportunity to work with friends and meet new ones, to gain new skills, and to create connections within their community. One comment in particular is worth noting in its entirety here:

You learn a lot of good things, you learn more about the community, and where you’re residing...because you don’t [usually] notice that stuff. You are always at school, you go home, and you go hang out with friends, but you don’t [know] what is going on in your community.

Furthermore, they were aware of the opportunities and benefits of civic involvement, and they realized the potential for networking and for future professional connections as ways to assist them in their career goals.

#### 4.4 Facilitators and Barriers to Female Adolescents’ Civic Engagement

To determine ways to facilitate girls’ involvement in their communities two of the questions were designed to garner what participants found to be facilitators or barriers to their own community involvement.

We asked: *What are some things that encourage you to be involved in your community activities? What are some things that discourage you from being involved in your community activities?* Participants identified two main factors, other than role models, as a facilitator to their community activities. These were: a good cause to work for and peer participation. Fifty-five percent of our respondents said they would become engaged in civic life if they found their “passion” – if they found a cause they believed in and that would be worthwhile. Judy said “[participating in the community] is kind of like a once in a lifetime opportunity, you get to experience something that you might have not [*sic*] experienced throughout your life if you didn’t try it out.” In other words, they are seeking a transformative experience, so they would be encouraged by a promise of such an experience. Victoria explains what would motivate her to become involved in her community:

A cause that I believe in ... the Brain Tumor Foundation, that's a personal family issue, so that interests me. And really anything that gives you a lot of options of what you can do and lets you explore a little bit and doesn't ... confine [you] to only one opportunity at first and then you are stuck with that for a year. Like the [foundations that] let you ... understand all the different opportunities and then you can choose what is best for you.

In order to have a powerful learning experience, participants showed a yearning for a sense of responsibility to make a contribution to an actual cause. This notion was best explained by Margaret, who at age 17, is an exceptional young woman who applied her experience and passion by founding the Canadian Cancer Society’s youth troop:

What is really important, especially with the *Canadian Cancer Society*, is that we discovered [that it] was essential [to] engage the youth..., to have them decide what they wanted to do. We didn’t want them to have to fit into a mold. We wanted them [to be] innovative. We wanted them to create their own activities. To create their own events, to really use their talents to get involved and make an impact. We didn’t want [to] just assign them a task...we wanted to give them that power, that responsibility, and really, that sense of the importance and the initiative. And at the same time you’re building their confidence in themselves and their decisions, all while having them get involved and encouraging their friends. [Then] it becomes fun; it becomes like an activity for everybody to share and the reward of doing something, [such as] getting involved with a non-profit organization, is just as encouraging too. So it really has to be something that the person -the girl, the student, anyone- is really excited to do; something they enjoy.

The power of peer influence to motivate girls to get involved and take leadership roles was another important finding. In 65% of the interviews there were statements suggesting the importance of peers as facilitators to civic engagement for two reasons: (a) when young women see others and what they accomplish, they realize that they are equally capable, and (b) they are weary and shy of doing activities by themselves or those activities which would not gain approval by their peers. If their friends are also engaged, that makes the activity both more acceptable and fun. Helen explains the motivating factor of peers:

You need to surround yourself with people who are getting involved in the community, and if my friends were all doing something, I would want to do it too! So that’s when you start wanting to get involved, and that’s also when you start to realize what it’s actually for. People always say, you should get involved with such-and-such, but it’s when you hear your friends or your role models talk about it, because you look up to them, [that] it makes it that much better.

Therefore, we argue that youth are the best people to lead other youth, and females as role models and mentors would be very successful in drawing out their peers. It would also be less intimidating for them to relate to their peers. For example, one interviewee was very successful in encouraging “shy girls” by approaching them in a non-threatening manner, establishing rapport with them over time, and only after a comfort and trust level was established would she invite them to join various groups and clubs in formal and informal settings.

Several barriers to participation that have been noted include: lack of initiative, lack of time, pressures of too much schoolwork, and the need to work to earn money to support themselves and sometimes their families as well. They felt they needed to focus on their schoolwork and future careers, and then volunteer/engage in civic life when they would have “more time,” thus indicating that it did not appear to be high on their list of priorities. An additional barrier to civic engagement was that it was not perceived as a “cool” thing to do.

It appeared that there was a generally held belief that those who volunteer do so because they are “nerds”; consequently have no friends and are lonely, so therefore volunteering is the only way for them to become socially active. Girls, in particular, “travel in packs” (quote from one participant); therefore, there is a stigma attached to participating in civic life if a girl went on her own initiative. Her peers could brand her as a “loner” who sought these opportunities to feel good and to be occupied with something.

### 5. Conclusion and Next Steps

In the first phase of this study we conducted an investigation using the *Community Dialogue Approach* to gain insights into adolescent girls’ understandings of civic engagement and leadership issues. We wanted to understand the perspectives that shaped their understanding of these issues and about the importance they attributed to civic engagement. We found that many of our findings concurred with the themes that emerged from an analysis of the literature. The literature is strong in suggesting that there are significant differences in leadership development between gender and cultural backgrounds (Douglas, 2012; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000; Stepick & Stepick, 2002), and our findings agree. Although the participants felt that there were more leadership opportunities for both women and girls now than in the past, many girls still felt their own gender was a barrier to successful leadership and had difficulty self-identifying as leaders. Even when they were actively engaged in their communities, the lack of confidence in their abilities skewed their perceptions of their own leadership skills.

Lack of motivation to become more civically involved is an issue not only gender specific to female adolescents, but for many youths as well. The literature reviewed supports this finding (Carpini, 2000). Although many girls had experience volunteering, many did not consider it a top priority, nor very meaningful in their lives. We speculate that if the civic opportunities were more welcoming and shown to be beneficial, more girls would be motivated to get civically involved.

Through the reflexive nature of the peer interviews and on our own reflection on the process and our analysis of the interview data, we understand that girls have unique experiences which shape how they conceptualize and learn about leadership. We also discovered that girls are engaged, at varying levels, within their communities, outside of the mandatory high school requirements. However, they still view traditional gender stereotypes as barriers to civic participation. The next stage of the project is underway following a symposium in which participants from all sites met to share experiences and findings. Following implementation of these interventions at the various research sites, the final activities will entail reflexive post-intervention peer interviews to explore the girls’ re-conceptualization of leadership and civic engagement and will finally focus on a collaborative model of program evaluation and design.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for providing the funds for this study.

<sup>2</sup> Although the study is conducted in two locales, the findings reported in this paper are from the Windsor site.

<sup>3</sup> The broader study is on-going (2011-2014); therefore, what is reported here are findings from the first stage of the project as outlined in the methodology section of the paper.