'There are so many things that you could change': The gendered politics of hope and aspiration in girls' mediated imaginings of leadership

Michele Paule & Hannah Yelin,
Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK

Abstract:
This paper examines data from our research into Girls, Leadership, and Women in the Public Eye within a framework suggested by Janet Newman's (2015) distinction between individual 'aspiration' and collective 'hope' in political contexts of austerity. The project responds to the contemporary turn to the agentic, aspiring girl as the solution to the gender leadership gap in the future. It explores ways in which girls are enjoined to imagine leadership via high-profile campaigns, and their own envisionings developed through their local experiences and their encounters with highly visible women across a range of media. Our data reveals differences between the aspirational, individualist leadership models promoted to girls and their own preferences for more collaborative leadership as a means of achieving wider social change. We suggest that the concept of 'leadership' presented to girls needs to be challenged in terms of its gendered individualism and its failure to capture ways in which they desire to participate in decision making.

Keywords: Girls, Leadership, Feminism, Hope, Aspiration

Introduction

The instrumentalization of feminist ideals in corporate and government agendas and the location of cultural optimism in the figure of the girl coalesce in popular campaigns that encourage girls to aspire to become the leaders of the future. The call to girls as future leaders is a call to imagine themselves assuming power not just over their own lives, but in terms of bringing about broader economic benefit and gender equality through their

personal advancement. This imaginative journey is to be accomplished by the individual girl, fuelled by the promises of popular feminism and navigated via the inspiration of high-profile role models. In this paper we use a framework suggested by Janet Newman's (2015) distinction between 'aspiration' and 'hope' within political contexts of austerity to examine discourses of feminism and leadership in campaigns addressing girls, and in girls' discussions of leadership. Newman's (2015) casting of 'aspiration' as individualised but 'hope' as collective provides a hermeneutic which not only resonates with some key patterns in our data, but one that allows for interrogation of the discursive premises of high-profile girl leadership initiatives in terms of their alignment with corporate and patriarchal modes of producing subjectivities.

Hope and aspiration

The terms 'hope' and 'aspiration' are often conflated (see for example Rose and Baird 2013; Feltchner 2014; Grant 2017; Libbery and Wydick 2019). There have, however, been attempts to define and theorise 'hope' in its various manifestations beyond the common imaginary. Notably, Darren Webb (2007) provides an historical overview of the concept as deployed in Western thought; what the kinds of hope populating his taxonomy have in common (with the exception of 'utopian hope', to which we return later) is their locus within the individual. Webb nonetheless recognises hope as essential to social cohesion and particularly to capitalism, which 'requires that individuals study, sell their labour power, consume, save and invest' and 'therefore requires that individuals possess both future-oriented significant desires and a perception that these can be attained' (76). This reliance is, under neoliberalism, manifested in the pervasive discourse of a particular form of hope: aspiration.

Aspiration is central to neoliberal capitalist regimes in their offer of 'a form of social hope' which, rather than seeking to improve the common good, is centred on improving the individual's economic status (Bishop and Willis 2013: 779). Webb (2007: 76) notes that fostering such hope in the face of contradictory evidence of attainability is a means by which capitalist society is stabilised. This stabilising form of hope is the 'cruel optimism' of Lauren Berlant (2008)—cruel because it sustains attachment to the unattainable even when such attachment threatens wellbeing. Berlant accounts for its pervasiveness and persistence because 'the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world' (32). Neoliberal aspiration thus works to stabilise both capitalism and the individual within it through a particular and cohesive form of subjectivity that is shaped around unmet desires. Capitalism is also intrinsic to the birth of feminism as a collective movement, as through the workings of industrialisation women were brought together in conditions that both enabled the exploitation of their labour and fostered organised activism against such exploitation (Faludi 2013 np). It is under specifically neoliberal forms of capitalism however, that we see feminism itself appropriated and redefined as an individualist project that ultimately works to sustain patriarchal relations of domination (Rottenberg 2018).

A key discursive strategy of neoliberal governance has been to set aspiration against collectivism (Littler 2017), with such success that Sarah Amsler (2008: 2) sees the latter, in the form of utopian hope, as in danger of extinction within public culture. Newman's (2015) 'hope' is both intrinsic to and a product of collectivism. It is associated with community and collaboration, and is 'central to narratives that inspire political action' such as the formation of political parties, of public institutions, and of movements that seek to improve life at wider social levels (n.p). Newman also identifies hope in newer forms of resistant activism and campaigns that may 'appear defensive' but nonetheless 'offer new social and political possibilities' (n.p.). Such a model of hope is suggested by contemporary youth activisms of which girls are at the forefront; recent examples include the growth of school feminist groups (see e.g. *Rookie,* 2015), and the international school climate strikes (see e.g. *The Guardian*, 2019). Set against the individualism of aspiration, Newman's model of hope bears some resemblance to Webb's (2007: 77) 'utopian hope' in its attachment to imagined, possibly unattainable futures; this does not, however, render it merely wishful. This is important when considering collective hope as it appears in youth activism, which is often dismissed as utopian and thus immature and fanciful by adults (Taft 2011:161). As Richard Rorty observes, the task of politics is 'replacing shared knowledge of what is already real with social hope for what might become real' (1998: 18–19).

Hope and aspiration then, cast respectively as collective and individualist modes of conjuring a better future, represent 'specific forms of existential politics' (Raco 2009: 436) that shape and are embedded in governance and in individual subjectivity. It is these 'specific forms' that we identify and explore in girl-focused leadership initiatives and in our participants' discussions. Our exploration reveals tensions between the dominant aspirational discourses propagated by popular initiatives and ways in which these are taken up, adapted, or rejected by girls as they form ideas about how they might wish to change the world.

Aspiration, leadership, and feminism

The deployment of discourses of aspiration as part of a broader educational and cultural address to youth, and their shaping of youth subjectivities, has been extensively investigated (Francis and Skelton 2005; Allen and Hollingsworth 2013; Berrington et.al. 2016; Spohrer et.al 2017; Mendick at al. 2018). The pervasiveness and intensification of such discourses is especially concerning in contexts of austerity that increasingly limit the opportunities and support available to young people (Bradford and Cullen 2014; Mendick et al. 2018). While it is girls who bear the brunt of austerity policies (Harris 2004; Allen 2016), girl empowerment initiatives nonetheless address girls as self-responsible subjects capable of transforming their lives and prospects through a confident mindset (Banet-Weiser 2015).

The model of leadership proffered to girls in popular campaigns in centred on individual aspiration rather than collective hope; there is a well-established relationship between leadership and individualism via the lone, heroic, androcentric authority figure (Muir 2000: Ford 2016; Adamson 2017). This mythological figure is perpetuated, and indeed

revivified, in contemporary organisational and populist contexts (Eksi & Wood, 2019; Knowles and Little, 2019) as well as in regimes of neoliberal austerity (Sinclair 2014; Sawyer and Andrew 2014) and in postfeminist assumptions of meritocracy (Nash and Moore 2019). At the same time, women's leadership is popularly gendered as ethical, collaborative and connected, leading to calls for more women's involvement in powerful corporations to curb the potentially damaging excesses of unbridled capitalism (Prügl 2012; van Staveren 2014). Here, essentialist ideas of 'women's qualities' combine with a mandate to work outside of these in masculinised leadership modes to create an 'impossible space' (Tseëlon 1995) of conflicting gendered demands which simultaneously require and rule out women's suitability for leadership.

It is possible to trace these diverse strands of leadership discourse in the campaigns that address girls, as popular and corporate attention turns to them as the potential leaders who can deliver equality in the service of a more secure future for capitalism. This is at odds with the aims of specifically *feminist* leadership in which inclusivity is fostered as an ethical rather than an economic imperative (Chin 2004: 2). Feminist leadership emphasises collaboration—but such collaboration is foregrounded in the interests of ensuring equal voice, not because it is an innate property of women (Hoyt and Kennedy 2008: 204). Indeed, Becky Francis and Valerie Hey point out that it is a duty of feminists to 'challenge the discursive premise' of individualist aspiration and redirect focus to structural causes of inequality (2009:225). We align our analysis here with that feminist duty, and call for a recalibration of popular understanding of leadership that might enable girls to recognise and realise their collective power.

Girl empowerment and popular leadership campaigns

Popular girls' leadership campaigns are a part of the wider 'market of empowerment' described by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2015) which gains its purchase via a perceived crisis in girls' confidence and self-esteem, at the same time as positioning girls as privileged consumers and potential entrepreneurs. In this market it is empowerment itself that is the commodity, as the imagined girl is in need of intervention to realise her potential as a future economic contributor, and increasingly, saviour (Masciandaro et al. 2016; van Staveren 2014; Prügl 2012). Like Banet-Weiser (2015: 185), we do not dispute the necessity for the empowerment of girls; nor are we denying their subordinate position within wider patriarchal cultures that socialise them as submissive and insecure. Rather, we argue that popular girl-focused leadership initiatives, while appearing to promote change in terms of equality, work to sustain the very structures and masculinist models of governance that limit girls' opportunities and produce them as inadequate. The strategies of such campaigns focus girls' energies inward and elevate individual aspiration, but are silent on both the need for and potential of collective activism to challenge inequalities for the wider social good.

Girls' leadership campaigns proliferate across the internet and in non-virtual realms, offering everything from inspirational quotes (such as girls-build.org [n.d], a Los Angeles

organisation that runs the #girlsbuild hashtag campaign on Instagram), downloadable training materials (such as the National Literacy Trust/Lancôme partnership's 'Words for Work: Women in Leadership' initiative [2019]), to national and international events. Some offer all of the above: for example, 'Girl Up' (www.girlup.org 2019) located in Washington DC, runs social media campaigns such #GirlHero, supplies free resources, provides virtual guidance for organizers, and offers the opportunity for girls to take part in international summits. The examples we focus on in this article are two of the most high-profile initiatives: Sheryl Sandberg's *Ban Bossy* (2014a) and Edwina Dunn's *The Female Lead* (2017)*.* These campaigns are the brainchildren of women who are themselves successful corporate leaders—Sandberg is the chief operating officer (COO) of the global behemoth Facebook and founder of Leanin.org, while Dunn is CEO of a high profile global data and consumer insights company, and has received an OBE for data services. Both these campaigns have achieved global penetration, as indicated by geographical analysis of the location of responses to their twitter feeds (@BanBossy and @the_female_lead), recognition at government levels, and endorsement from established girls' organisations—both are affiliated with national girl scouting movements.

    Ban Bossy (2014a) is the girl-orientated spin-off campaign of Sandberg's internationally successful *Lean In* (2013)*,* which itself is seen by feminists as symptomatic of a wider neoliberal phenomenon in which a reinvigorated discussion of gendered inequalities is couched in terms of the advancement of individual women, while social and collective justice are off the agenda (Rottenberg 2018: 57). If *Lean In* (Sandberg 2013) is*,* as Catherine Rottenberg argues, 'a site in which the neoliberal feminist is born' as she learns to internalise responsibility for her success rather than locating impediments in structures of male dominance, then *Ban Bossy* (2014a) can be seen as an attempt to induce an earlier birth. As does *Lean In* (2103)*, Ban Bossy* (2014a) proclaims itself feminist while shifting focus from external oppression to internal deficit (Rottenberg 2018: 61). 'Hope' as the collective endeavour defined by Newman (2015) is reduced to a vague anticipation of 'trickle-down' feminism from which other women will benefit, as Sandberg (2015:7) claims that 'conditions for all women will improve when there are more women in leadership roles'.

    Both *Ban Bossy* (2014a) and *The Female Lead* (2017a) cast the individual girl as the agent of change, and operate at the level of shaping girls' subjectivities. While they both draw girls' attention to a range of manifestations of inequality such as boys getting called on more often in class (*Ban Bossy* 2014c), and the gender pay gap in the wider world (*The Female Lead* 2019a), the solutions they offer are nonetheless to be found within the girl. *Ban Bossy*'s 'Leadership Tips for Girls' (2014b) offers ten behavioural and attitudinal adjustments that focus on overcoming a confidence deficit, and *The Female Lead*'s '5 key messages' (2019b) have a similar focus. As such both campaigns can be seen as a part of a wider gendered discourse in which confidence emerges as 'a technology within and through which women and girls across age, race, sexuality and class' are exhorted to examine, judge, and improve themselves (Gill and Orgad 2017:21). The development of such confidence

becomes the key focus and strategy of a form of feminism that is individualised and corporate rather than collective and social.

Self-improvement and imaginative labour: reading the resources

Ban Bossy (2014a), in common with many girl empowerment organisations, offers a range of free, downloadable support materials. Its 'Leadership Tips for Girls' (2019a) is characterized by individual aspiration and self-responsibility, with overtones of the 'heroic' leadership model described above as girls are exhorted to be courageous in the face of risk. The idea of 'risk' appears repeatedly in this short document as girls are encouraged to develop the courage necessary to adopt behaviours not typically endorsed as feminine. This will, it alleges, give girls 'the exhilaration of overcoming an obstacle' (5) while risk avoidance, they are warned, may result in them 'paying the price later' (7). The exhortation to girls to disregard risk in contexts where women in the public eye are subjected to unprecedented hostility fails to recognise the real concerns and threats that shape the contexts in which girls might envision or exercise power, as we discussed below.

Although the aim of the campaign is to empower girls 'with life skills to change their world' (3), neither the nature of such change nor the necessity for it are elaborated. Tip number eight, 'Change the World' (8) at first appears it might develop this idea, but the discourse is pulled firmly into line with corporate feminism as the girl reader is told she should attempt to make change because, 'Running a campaign gives you amazing practice for speaking and marketing yourself as a leader' (8); activism is only advocated in pursuit of self-promotion. The girl leader is thus cast as a self-improvement project in the making as she is told, 'The time to start building female leaders is now' (2). Her effort is described as a form of capital investment that will 'pay off for years to come' (3) in terms of skills that, she is promised, 'you'll use throughout your life (2)'. Individualism is stressed throughout; girls are addressed as unique holders of potential that can be realised through attention to and monitoring of their 'inner voice' (7). 'Hope' in Newman's (2015) sense of collective endeavour is absent: while girls are advised to ask for help when necessary from an adult, collaboration only appears where girls are cautioned against doing more than their fair share in group projects, or instructed to join with friends in monitoring one another's self-effacing behaviours.

Like *Ban Bossy* (2014a), *The Female Lead* (2017a) offers free resources for teachers and for girls. While *Ban Bossy* sets self and peer-monitoring tasks, *The Female Lead* mobilises aspiration as an imaginative exercise, suggesting obstacles to equality and advancement can be overcome though fostering feats of individual envisioning. *The Female Lead*'s (2019a) 'Classroom Resources' document starts by encouraging girls to recognise gender inequalities in range of adult contexts such as pay, occupational exclusion and media objectification. However, no structural explanations are offered. While girls are invited to consider the prevalence of limiting stereotypes in a range of different contexts such as toy advertising and STEM fields, stereotyping itself is treated as a cause rather than a symptom of inequality. The possibility of a collective feminist response to the inequalities it

encourages girls to identify, is sidestepped in the next section: here girls are invited to choose for reflection an individual woman's path to 'her own unique kind of success', drawing on examples from *The Female Lead*'s book (2017b) of 'sixty inspirational women'. The strategy offered for tackling inequality then is that of reflection on an endorsed role model[1], followed by five tasks that we describe as 'imaginative labour'. These tasks constitute a set of instructions for the formation of individualised aspiration: Girls are instructed to note down their 'biggest goal for the future' but this goal must be 'something you really want for yourself' rather than a social good. The individualised goal identified, the next stage involves the development of attachment to that goal as girls are invited to conjure the feelings associated with achieving it. Task 3 enjoins girls to:

> Think really hard: do you feel confident about your ability to achieve this goal? Can you see any obstacles in your path that worry you? If you do, write them down. Giving voice to your worries can make them less scary!

Thus, the proper response of the girl when she recognises evidence of oppression is to note and alter her attitude towards it, as though the very recognition is sufficient to overcome entrenched forms of oppression. A defining characteristic of *The Female Lead* is its encouragement of girls to recognise various manifestations of gendered oppression *without*, while at the same time locating the fix *within* the girl. Its particular strategy is to foster the girl's capacity to develop individualised, future-oriented desires (Webb 2007; Berlant 2008) that are central to the maintenance and stability of the neoliberal status quo.

The Female Lead's (2017a) offer to girls differs from *Ban Bossy*'s (2014a) in its greater emphasis on the existence of gendered discrimination in the adult world but not in its offer of individualized aspiration as the solution. Neither campaign addresses intersectional disadvantage and privilege. Both programmes recommend external resources, but the differing capacity of individual girls to access such resources is elided. For example, *Ban Bossy* (2014b) encourages girls to engage in extra-curricular activities in order to develop leadership skills. Such activities have been identified as important in reproducing the values and networks of privilege (Gonick 2003; Scardigno 2009; Covey and Carbonar 2010), while activities available to less advantaged girls have been significantly reduced under neoliberal and austerity regimes (Harris, 2004: 151; Finlayson 2018: 781). *The Female Lead* (2019b) has 'Asking For Help' as one of its five pillars; this 'help', it transpires, is traditional networking - one of the key skills by which the 'future girl' is to be empowered (Harris 2004). Networking appears here as a capacity that can be developed by an individual rather than as a form of cultural capital that relies on familiarity with social genres (Lee and Chen 2017:7). *The Female Lead* (2019a) elides the role of privilege in networking, suggesting that

> Even if you feel like you don't have a network, we can guarantee that there is at least one person out there rooting for you, or willing to root

for you: your network can include friends, family, teachers, your Head Teacher, careers advisers, business mentors, youth leaders, religious leaders – or anybody else who helps and supports you, or may be able to do so in the future.

While we do not mean to understate the role that key cultural workers can play in supporting the progress of individuals, the advantage enjoyed by those with adult connections to help access the fields they wish to enter cannot be overlooked; nor can the implications of cuts to the public services that should help reduce this deficit for the less advantaged.

The discourses of both *Ban Bossy* (2014a) and *The Female Lead* (2017a) can thus be characterised, in Newnan's (2015) terms, as aspirational rather than hopeful; like many aspirational discourses aimed at young women (Allen 2014) the kind of agency these initiatives promise is not equally available to all. Nor do the strategies they offer, in turning the focus of activity inward, offer a future in which such inequalities may be addressed as a core aim of feminist endeavour. Rather, they foster the creation of the aspiration described by Berlant (2011:1) as 'cruel' in invoking desires that may be an obstacle to flourishing; they cast the failure to aspire properly - Sandberg's (2013) 'ambition gap' - as the cause of failure to attain the aspirational status. The ideal girl subject they evoke recognises gender inequalities, but has developed confidence and self-belief in her ability to overcome them. Her goals are individualised and her notion of feminism is fulfilled through their attainment. The data we explore suggests ways in which girls' own visions of leadership reproduce or conflict with the popular discourses represented in these girl-orientated campaigns.

Method

We collected data for our 'Girls, Leadership, and Women in The Public Eye' project via semi-structured group interview workshops conducted with fifty participants aged 13-15 in five state schools in diverse geographical and socio-economic settings in England. Participants were broadly representative of each school's intake in terms of class, ethnicity and 'ability'. The workshops entailed both prompt questions and free discussion of issues and images associated with women and leadership. We also set up a dedicated, closed social media group for each school where girls could contribute and discuss images and memes in their own time without the presence of the researcher. This helped to some extent counter the power effect of researching in school contexts, in which producing the 'right' kinds of answers to questions posed by adults is the prevailing culture; it also helped align the method with the project's feminist aims (Hesse-Biber 2007; Phillips et al. 2013; Caretta and Vacchelli 2015) as well as offering the potential for unanticipated insights (Gaiser 2008: 297). Both the workshop and online groups encouraged participant-led discussion, and were designed with the aim of reproducing ways that girls, in their social and social media interactions, produce and negotiate meanings as interpretive communities (Fish 1980; Barbour, 2007; Allington, 2007). We also aimed to offer spaces in which they might discuss

ideas relating to gender and girlhood, to power and inequality, and to their own imagined futures (Gonick 2003: 15). Girls were enabled to access their preferred social media during the workshops so they could identify and discuss popular figures via images and memes. The workshops were audio and video recorded and the data transcribed; the images, comments and memes for the social media groups were downloaded; all data were then thematically coded using NViVO.

Findings

Individualism and collaboration

Our data suggest that for girls, 'leadership' is a complex configuration of individual aspiration and social hope. A key finding was that girls saw working collaboratively as offering them more possibility for effecting change than would developing influence as individuals. This preference for collective action was tied to social hope rather than to personal ambition; for example, Isabel felt that by working together, 'There are so many things that you could change...people could say like stop poverty, stop stuff like that'; Daisy identified collective action as the best way to achieve key global goals like peace, whereas Amina, in common with other participants, saw climate change as an issue that could be tackled by both local groups and international movements.[2] Bea saw collective action as the key to improving conditions for women, and cited its historical importance: 'No but not just a single person, but groups like the Suffragettes who fought for things for women'. Chloe explained why she thought collective action might be more effective in achieving goals: 'Because if you have a group of people combined that are believing in the same thing and working well together, you're going to get more things done and you'll all help each other to make the best possible outcome'. Girls' preference for collective action was not only because they saw it as effective; it was, for them, an ethical issue - a way of ensuring inclusion and representativeness. Chloe explained that 'you could make people more comfortable sharing their ideas...You can help other people and direct them in sharing their ideas', while Eva and Chloe thought listening and making 'people feel accepted' was crucial in achieving consensus to bring about change. While in play here we can see wider gendered tropes of femininity, and specifically women's leadership as more caring and connected (Prügl 2012; van Staveren 2014), the girls politicise these qualities in terms of thinking about how they might bring about change more effectively as well as more ethically.

Although participants acknowledged that a good leader could achieve a great deal in providing direction and cohesion, the potential for too much power resting in one person troubled them. They were concerned about how power might affect a person's ability to make good decisions, and the potential for an individual to serve only a small group of interests. Donald Trump was frequently described as an example of the individual having too much power; Rachel described him as 'more thinking about changes for himself and his

type of people...he's only representing the interests of a particular group, not of everybody'. As Daisy summed up: 'There might be a problem trying to get one person to try and bring about world peace because they'd be in control of the world'. Some girls thought about how they themselves might be pressured into cronyism if placed in a position of individual power: Toya felt that if she were prime minister, 'my friends will try and take advantage of it... you're my friend and you say let's do this, I'd be like let's do this!' Finally—and importantly—girls saw collective leadership as providing a buffer against the pressure and exposure faced by individual women leaders, a theme on which we expand below.

Individual aspiration was nonetheless expressed by many participants—they wished to become lawyers, doctors, sporting champions, to head up charities, lead schools, and run businesses. For some girls the idea of occupying a leadership role was attractive in itself: For example, Molly said, 'I'd like to think I'd be like a leader of a company or of a business or something'. She saw this as 'something everyone aims for... they want to climb high up the ladder, to earn more respect and stuff like that, while Isabel thought that 'the higher up you are, the more respect you have and having respect is, it's not empowering, it just makes you feel like people respect you, you have some sort of say in what happens'. While this exchange initially appeared to reproduce aspirational tropes of individualised, neoliberal self-advancement, Becky moved the discussion of desire for power into a consideration of social good, saying:

> If you're higher up, people are more likely to listen to you. So like Michelle Obama she can speak her word and something will happen about it, but if one of us was to be like, we want this to happen, I don't, kind of how society works, you wouldn't really get like much recognition for it.

Individual and community benefits

The motive here—the seeking of power to advance community benefit— was one that characterised discussion of favourite leaders/celebrities in every group and in the online forums: the women most admired were consistently those that were seen to advance equalities and social justice. The top five across the board were (1) Michele Obama and (2) Beyoncé (advocacy for girls and for Black women); (3) Ellen DeGeneres (LGBTQ+ advocacy and generosity to emerging artistes); (4) Malala Yusafzai (advocacy for girls and education) and (5) Emma Watson (advocacy for feminism). Tani summed up the motives of such leaders as 'they actually want to do something good and actually once they are in power, they can actually put their point across and actually make everyone listen to them'.

It is important to note that girls and women are socialised to be selfless, that wanting to do good is a sanctioned reason to want power as a woman, while wanting power for its own sake is not. However, among our participants these socially sanctioned forms of desire were undergirded and energised by their consciousness of social inequalities and forms of oppression. In describing their own aspirations, Tani, Kelly, Judith and Isabel

expressed a similar mix of personal ambition and desire to implement wider good. Tani said 'I want to be a lawyer because the system is unfair', and while Isabel thought that becoming any kind of a leader would bring personal satisfaction, it was as Minister for Education she felt she could address social inequalities to 'give every kid the same opportunity to get the job they want'. Judith saw herself as 'not exactly a leader' but 'something important in like the music industry...using music to inspire other people and just help them and then from that just do sort of like charity stuff'. She wanted to 'make people's voices be heard, because nowadays there's a lot of people that don't speak up'. Kelly agreed that this was 'the whole point of speaking up'. She elaborated this in terms that link gender to powerlessness, and recognise patriarchal oppression, stating that, 'Men believe we don't have a voice at all, men believe that we are just quiet and that we don't have no power to take over the country'.

These exchanges offer an interesting perspective on popular discourses of leadership and empowerment: while individual aspiration is present, for the girls in this group, a social justice agenda was seen as distinct from 'leadership', and 'empowerment'. They have picked up and reproduced popular terminology in their discussion, but its individualism renders it inadequate to convey their motives for aspiring to exert influence. What is interesting in Becky's statement above is her own recognition of her lack of understanding of how to effect change, and thus of her powerlessness to do so.

Cruel attachments and inadequate imaginings

Berlant (2008, 32) suggests that neoliberal aspiration is a process of sustaining attachment to an imagined future status. We discuss above how leadership initiatives such as *The Female Lead* work to school this process of attachment as a form of imaginative labour necessary to overcome identified gender barriers, implying that affective commitment is necessary to women's success. Our participants offered perspectives that suggest that the foregrounding of emotional investment through discourses of imagination and passion - rather than for example, fairness or ethics - in a leadership role means that a lack of such affective attachment itself can become a deterrent. Participating girls saw the experience of sufficient 'passion' as a key (dis)qualifier: For example, Laura said:

> I don't know, it seems like I wouldn't be passionate enough about, well I would be passionate, but I don't think I would be able to put the ideas across as well as some people who would really want to be there.

Samantha had similar misgivings with regard to political leadership: 'It just doesn't really (work) if you're not really passionate about being in the Government'. Despite the perceived necessity of 'passion' however, there was suspicion of strong desire for leadership for its own sake, with Bella feeling that 'if you really want to be in charge then you'll just be too confident and you'll end up losing people'. While these suspicions align with cultural suspicion and negative media coverage of women who are seen to seek power in traditional

male preserves (Rhee and Sigler 2015; Manne 2018)[3], they also reveal the affective politics of aspiration as inadequate for the articulation of motive beyond individual fulfilment.

Further, where girls do envision themselves holding roles of influence, their imaginings may act as a deterrent rather than a spur as they reflect on the conditions in which women experience leadership. For our participants, this entailed a vivid conjuring of the risk that leadership may entail—the very kinds of 'risk' that *Ban Bossy* enjoins them to take. Amina, Maya and Leah feared the isolation and exposure that leadership may entail, with Amina saying 'but a leader... you get a lot of attention don't you', and Maya that 'you'd always have to constantly be up to everybody's standards and you won't be able to ever do anything wrong'; Isabel associated negative exposure explicitly with risk-taking: 'You don't want to be associated with a huge disaster because you took a risk'. Also prominent in girls' envisionings were the media conditions of women leaders' visibility. Isabel described such leadership as represented in the news as 'a thankless task', with Becky describing how,

> it's all in the eye of the media and you're seen by the whole of the country if you're at Government level... you could make a change, but you're not acknowledged for what you do right, you're acknowledged for what you do wrong.

She concludes, 'So all of these things would make you think, I wouldn't want to be in charge' Toya summed up her imagining of the individual leadership experience as 'Pressure. Peer pressure, judgement pressure, people pressure. Stress'. The mitigating comforts of collective responsibility and solidarity do not appear within the affective toolkit of popular girls' leadership campaigns.

The leadership campaigns we examine offer little in the way of risk amelioration, nor of addressing the reasons why such risk exists; rather, they encourage girls to embrace risk as of value in itself. Indeed research conducted for *The Female Lead* (2018) identifies hostile social media climates for women as a deterrent to leadership, but places responsibility for resolving this onto individual girls to manage their social media feeds rather than suggest ways in which they might access and contribute to collective campaigns to address online misogyny.

Missing strategies and unequal resources

In reflecting on leadership, as well as expressing a consistent preference for collaborative models, girls expressed a desire for strategies beyond those of guided aspirational imagining and exercises in risk tolerance offered in the popular campaigns we discuss above. Cadence observed that if you want to 'have like a large impact on like the world or something...you have to feel it's something you're competent to do.' Amina agreed, asking, 'Yeah, how *do* you get competent at stuff?' and Maya responded, 'Experience'. That they identify the need for experience to build competence-based confidence, rather than the imaginative labour required to create subjective self-esteem—a core element of the 'girls and women

empowerment market described by Banet-Weiser (2018:94)—is a further indicator of the problematic nature of such campaigns in terms of addressing the needs and priorities of the girls they purport to support. When questioned about their experience, most girls reported none. It was only in domestic contexts that they had any responsibility at all, and this was chiefly for household tasks and care of younger siblings. The exceptions were those girls who were involved in extracurricular activities, especially sports and music; these were the participants to report experiences they identified as leadership. As noted above, the opportunity to access such activities was unevenly distributed across the social groups represented among participants; opportunities were restricted as austerity measures have closed down youth provision with the assumption that the voluntary sector will step in to fill the gap—this has hit some areas, and girls within them, especially hard. For example, Jill complained that the domination of some unruly boys combined with a lack of suitable volunteers to help run the local youth club meant its closure.

Girls who had access to adults in particular leadership roles in their everyday lives were both able to identify the nature of the work in fields to which they aspired, and to understand the means of achieving it. For example, participants whose families ran businesses expressed the desire to do so themselves. However, most girls expressing a specific ambition had no connection with that field, and were unsure of how they might enter it and of what the actual work might entail. Molly said, 'It's just really I don't know just what happens in most environments, workplaces and education too', while Isabel summarised the problem as 'I feel that people don't know the way, it's the path you take to get there that people don't understand.' Isabel also saw that certain kinds of leadership as only possible if 'you know people that are relatives or friends of people that have already done it or you know they're already up high status' while Maya thought that 'their support network', including 'a good family that supports them', were central to the fostering of leadership in girls. This indicates girls' own perceptions of the ways in which privilege is reproduced, and of the inadequacies of development initiatives that rely on working on the individual girl's subjectivity while eliding the role of advantage.

Conclusions

Our findings indicate that popular initiatives, in their focus on individual aspiration, fail to recognize the concerns and priorities in girls' ideas of leadership. First, in assuming girls will aspire to leadership solely for personal status, they ignore the social justice agenda that may motivate them. Second, in their focus on 'fixing' the girl instead of addressing the causes of inequality—indeed the girl *becomes* the problem through failure to address her own lack of confidence and ambition—they neglect the complex and various forms of subordination that shape girls' lives outside of gender. Finally, in their focus on individual affective and imaginative labour as their key tactics, they fail to offer meaningful strategies that could enable girls to improve their own conditions and those of others, and thus work to sustain the inequalities that they purport to address. Girl leadership initiatives work on encouraging girls to *feel* like leaders, while girls themselves focus on what they would like to *do* as

leaders. This distinction is central to the ideology of popular campaigns. In working on altering subjectivities they pose no real threat to existing structures; the wider representational politics they embrace allows for the assumption of trickle-down feminism as the key to broader cultural change, while offering no challenge to organisations nor commitment to funding for programmes and activities that might equip girls to bring about the kinds of change they wish to see.

Our deployment of Newnan's (2015) distinction has allowed us to demonstrate how popular empowerment initiatives fail to understand the form and focus of girls' hope as collectively orientated. This collective hope is easy for the adult world to dismiss as utopian, but for young people as well as adults its political formation emerges and is shaped by real concerns and objectives (Graeber 2011). Imagination among our participants is, as Kyriakides (2014) describes, 'related to desire for change, is the result of socio-material arrangements, and also carries potency of acting on and changing such arrangements'. That potency can only be realised if girls are provided with the tools to address those socio-material arrangements—the structures and conditions—that they intuit as damaging at community level, and not just in terms of the hurdles they may present to individual women. Girls' imaginings of 'leadership' then, are characterised by hope but must be sustained through practical strategy. We are not alone in calling for a better way of working with girls than is offered by popular campaigns: Jessica Taft (2011) identifies the need to support such activism through collaboration with us as adults as well as through encouraging girls' solidarity with one other, while Batsleer and McMahon (2017) urge those working with girls to be alert to the potential for intergenerational alliances. This we see as central to the project of challenging neoliberalisation's appropriation and remaking of feminism as a self-help guide rather than a collectivist project with social justice at its heart. Further, it is crucial in enabling girls to begin to recognise and understand how they might begin to dismantle patriarchal conditions that, while encouraging them to 'lean In' and purportedly realise their individual power, work to silence collective voices and to sustain oppression.

Biographical notes:

Dr Michele Paule is a Senior Lecturer in Culture, Media and Education at Oxford Brookes University. She researches gender and youth in media, institutional, and wider discursive settings, focusing particularly on issues relating to girlhood. She is Principal Investigator for the 'Girls, Leadership, and Women in the Public Eye' project. Her monograph *Girlhood, Schools, and Media: Popular Discourses of the Achieving Girl* was published by Routledge (2017) and her co-edited collection *Interrogating the Neoliberal Lifecycle: The Limits of Success* by Palgrave Macmillan (2019). She undertakes consultancy work with NGOs and governments and has twice been elected a (Labour) city councillor for Oxford. She is active in the promotion of women's involvement in local and national politics. Contact: mpaule@brookes.ac.uk.

Dr Hannah Yelin is a Senior Lecturer in Media and Culture at Oxford Brookes University. Her research interests centre around women in the public eye, the curtailments upon them and their resistant strategies for countering these. She is Co-investigator for the 'Girls, Leadership, and Women in the Public Eye' project. Her first monograph, *Celebrity Memoir: From Ghostwriting to Gender Politics*, is out in 2020 with Palgrave MacMillan. She runs the Celebrity Culture Club bringing together academics, those working in the media, and interested members of the public to discuss issues of the day relating to celebrity culture. Before returning to academia she had a 12-year career in the media, producing award winning work for organisations such as the BBC and UKTV. Contact: hyelin@brookes.ac.uk.

References:

Adamson, M. (2017) Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and A 'Successfully' Balanced Femininity in Celebrity CEO Autobiographies. *Gender, Work & Organization, 24*: 314– 327.

Allen, K. (2014), 'Blair's children'. *The Sociological Review, 62:* 760-779.

Allen, K. (2016) Top girls navigating austere times: interrogating youth transitions since the 'crisis', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 19(6): 805-820.

Allen, K., & Hollingworth, S. (2013). 'Sticky Subjects' or 'Cosmopolitan Creatives'? Social Class, Place and Urban Young People's Aspirations for Work in the Knowledge Economy. *Urban Studies*, *50*(3), 499–517.

Amsler, S. (2008), Pedagogy against "dis-utopia": from conscientization to the education of desire, In (ed) H. Dahms. *No Social Science without Critical Theory (Current Perspectives in Social Theory, Vol. 25)*, Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp. 291-325.

Ban Bossy (2014a) http://banbossy.com/.

Ban Bossy (2014b) Leadership Tips for Girls http://banbossy.com/girls-tips/.

Ban Bossy (2014c) Leadership Tips for Teachers http://banbossy.com/teacher-tips/.

Banet-Weiser, Sarah. (2015). 'Confidence you can carry!': Girls in crisis and the market for girls' empowerment organizations. *Continuum 29*(2): 182-193

Banet-Weiser, Sarah. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Batsleer, Janet and McMahon, Gráinne (2017) *Girls, 'leaning in' and faux-empowerment.* Presented at: Who Runs the World? Girls, Leadership and Celebrity, 16th June 2017, Senate House, London. Available at: http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/32273/.

Berlant, L. (2007). Cruel Optimism: On Marx, Loss and the Senses. *New Formations,* (63), 33–51.

Berrington, A., Roberts, S. and Tammes, P. (2016), Educational aspirations among UK Young Teenagers: Exploring the role of gender, class and ethnicity. *British Educational Research Journal 42:* 729-755.

Bradford, Simon & Cullen, Fin (2014) Youth policy in austerity Europe, *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth 19*(sup1): 1-4.

Bright, N.G. (2011). 'Off The Model': Resistant spaces, school disaffection and 'aspiration' in a former coal-mining community. *Children's Geographies* 9(1): 63-78.

Caretta, M.A. and Vacchelli, E. (2015) Re-thinking the boundaries of the focus group: a reflexive analysis on the use and legitimacy of group methodologies in qualitative research. *Sociological Research Online.*

Carling, Jørgen and Collins, Francis (2018) Aspiration, desire and drivers of migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 44*(6): 909-926.

Chin, J. L. (2004) Division 35 Presidential Address: Feminist Leadership: Feminist Visions and Diverse Voices. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 28*(1): 1–8.

Covay, E., & Carbonaro, W. (2010). After the Bell: Participation in Extracurricular Activities, Classroom Behavior, and Academic Achievement. *Sociology of Education*, *83*(1): 20–45.

Eksi, B. and Wood, E.A. (2019) Right-wing populism as gendered performance: Janus-faced masculinity in the leadership of Vladimir Putin and Recep T. Erdogan *Theory and Society 48(5)*: 733.

The Female Lead (2017a)*.* https://www.thefemalelead.com/.

The Female Lead (2017b) https://www.thefemalelead.com/get-involved)

The Female Lead (2019a) *Classroom Resources.* Available at: https://www.thefemalelead.com/new-female-lead-society-launches-in-schools-today.

The Female Lead: About Us (2019b). https://www.thefemalelead.com/the-campaign

Faludi, Susan (2013) Facebook Feminism, Like It or Not. *The Baffler 23.* August. Available at: https://thebaffler.com/salvos/facebook-feminism-like-it-or-not.

Ford, J. (2016). *Gendered relationships and the problem of diversity in leadership-as-practice*. London, UK: Routledge.

Francis, B. and Hey, V. (2009) Talking back to power: snowballs in hell and the imperative of insisting on structural explanations, *Gender and Education*, 21(2): 225-232.

Francis, B. & Skelton, C. (2005) *Reassessing gender and achievement: Questioning contemporary key debates.* London, Routledge.

Gill, Rosalind and Orgad, Shani (2017) Confidence culture and the remaking of feminism. *New Formations*, 91: 16-34.

Gonick, M. (2003) B*etween Femininities: Ambivalence, Identity, and the Education of Girls*. New York: SUNY.

Graeber, David. (2011) *Revolutions in Reverse: Essays on Politics, Violence, Art and Imagination.* London: Minor Compositions.

Grant, Thomas (2017). The complexity of aspiration: the role of hope and habitus in shaping working-class young people's aspirations to higher education, *Children's Geographies*, 15(3): 289-303.

Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2007). The Practice of Feminist In-Depth Interviewing. In *Feminist research practice: a primer* (ed. S.N. Hesse-Biber)*.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 111-148.

Kleist, N. 2016. "Introduction: Studying Hope and Uncertainty in African Migration." In *Hope and Uncertainty in Contemporary African Migration*, edited by N. Kleist and D. Thorsen, 1–20. New York: Routledge.

Knowles, K.K. and Little, A.C. (2019) Leadership perception in candidate faces: Scotland's unionists prefer dominant leaders, and so do nationalists – but only if they are economic pessimists. *Scottish Affairs 28*(4): 434-458.

Kyriakides, Theodoros (2014) Stillness as a Form of Imaginative Labour. *The Unfamiliar 4*:1: 47-55

Lee, K. and Chen, W. (2017) A long shadow: Cultural capital, techno-capital and networking skills of college students. *Computers in Human Behavior 70:* 67-73.

Lybbert, T.J and Wydick, B (2019) Hope as Aspirations, Agency, and Pathways: Poverty Dynamics and Microfinance in Oaxaca, Mexico. In eds. Christopher B. Barrett, Michael R. Carter, and Jean-Paul Chavas, *The Economics of Poverty Traps.* National Bureau of Economic Research. https://www.nber.org/books/barr-3.

McRobbie, Angela. (2009). *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. London: Sage

Manne, Kate (2019) *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny.* Oxford: OUP

Masciandaro, Donato; Profeta, Paola and Romelli, Davide (2016) Gender and Monetary Policymaking: Trends and Drivers. BAFFI CAREFIN Centre Research Paper No. 2015-12. Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=2683917.

Mendick, H., Allen, K., Harvey, L. and Ahmad, A. (2018). *Celebrity, aspiration and contemporary youth: Education and inequality in an era of austerity*. London: Bloomsbury

Muir, Kathie (2000). Tough choices: news media accounts of women union leaders [online]. *Hecate, 26*(2) 10-30. Available at:
https://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=200106042;res=IELAPA

Nash, Meredith and Moore, Robyn (2019) 'I was completely oblivious to gender': An exploration of how women in STEMM navigate leadership in a neoliberal, post-feminist context, J*ournal of Gender Studies, 28*(4): 449-461.

National Literacy Trust (No date) *Words for Work.* Available at
(https://literacytrust.org.uk/programmes/words-for-work/words-work-women-leadership/ N.D.)

Newman, Janet (2015) Austerity, aspiration and the politics of hope. *Compass* 3 June. Available at:
http://www.compassonline.org.uk/austerity-aspiration-and-the-politics-of-hope/

Phillips, L., Kristiansen, M., Vehviläinen, M. and Gunnarson, E. (2013) Tackling the tensions of dialogue and participation. In: L. Phillips, M. Kristianse, M. Vehviläinen and E. Gunnarsson (eds) *Knowledge and Power in Collaborative Research: A Reflexive Approach*, 1–18.

Prügl, Elisabeth (2012) "If Lehman Brothers Had Been Lehman Sisters…": Gender and Myth in the Aftermath of the Financial Crisis, *International Political Sociology 6*(1): 21–35,

Raco, M. (2009). "From Expectations to Aspirations: State Modernisation, Urban Policy, and the Existential Politics of Welfare in the UK." *Political Geography* 28 (7): 436–444.

Rhee, Kenneth S. and Sigler, Tracey H. (2015). Untangling the relationship between gender and leadership. *Gender in Management: An International Journal 30*(2): 109-134,

Ruiz, Siena, and Cami (2013) How to Run an Intersectional Feminism Club. *Rookie.* 18th November. Available at: https://www.rookiemag.com/2015/11/start-an-intersectional-club/

Rottenberg, Catherine (2018) *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*. Oxford: OUP

Sandberg, Sheryl (2013) *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* New York: Knopf

Scardigno, F. (2009) The Informal Choices of Italian Young People: between increase and erosion of family cultural capital. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education 2*:230-252

Shain, F. (2013). 'The Girl Effect': Exploring Narratives of Gendered Impacts and Opportunities in Neoliberal Development. S*ociological Research Online,* 18(2), 1–11.

Sinclair A. (2014) A feminist case for leadership. In Damousi J, Rubenstein K and Tomsic M (eds.) D*iversity in Leadership: Australian women, past and present.* Australian National University epress: 1–35. Available at: http://press.anu.edu.au/titles/diversity-in-leadership/

Sparkmovement (no date) http://www.sparkmovement.org/agenda/feminist-clubs/

van Staveren, Irene (2014) The Lehman Sisters hypothesis, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Volume 38, Issue 5, Pages 995–1014.

Taft, Jessica (2011) *Rebel Girls: Youth Activism and Social Change Across the Americas.* New York: NYUP

Tseëlon, E. (1995) *The masque of femininity: The presentation of woman in everyday life.* London: Sage

Watts, Jonathan (2019) Greta Thunberg, schoolgirl climate change warrior: 'Some people can let things go. I can't' *The Guardian.* 11 March. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/11/greta-thunberg-schoolgirl-climate-change-warrior-some-people-can-let-things-go-i-cant

Notes:

[1] For critique of role model solutions aimed at girls, see our paper '"I don't want to be known for it": Girls, leadership role models, and the problem of representation' (Paule and Yelin, Forthcoming)

[2] These workshops took place a few months before Greta Thunberg and the student climate strikes received global media attention

[3] Media and participant attitudes to women identified as seeking power is a theme we explore in our paper '"I don't want to be known for it": Girls, leadership role models, and the problem of representation' (Paule and Yelin, Forthcoming)