

It's Time for Young Women to Rise

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It is a promising time for women and girls, with the election of the first woman and woman of color, Vice President **Kamala Harris**, and the formation of the **White House Gender Policy Council**. Hopefully, the time has come to restore America as a champion for women and girls. At the same time, women and girls (especially women and girls of color) have been disproportionately impacted during the COVID-19 crisis. Their unique needs are growing more urgent by the day. As state and local leaders work to help communities endure the pandemic, it is critical to pay attention to the needs of our most vulnerable youth.

In 2014, with a passion for girls' leadership and over 25 years of corporate and leadership development experience, I founded **LiveGirl**, a Connecticut-based nonprofit girls' leadership organization. LiveGirl's mission is to build confident, inclusive leaders. We serve thousands of girls annually (grade 5 through college, 65% girls of color) in our innovative, evidence-based leadership development and mentoring programs. Our free-of-charge after-school programs range from our middle school Confidence Clubs, creating a safe space for girls at a crucial developmental stage in their lives, to **She Works**, our career-readiness and internship program for college-aged women. From pre-teen to young adult, we equip young women with the skills, mentors, role models, and experiences necessary to thrive and gain social mobility.

Why is this work so important? What holds girls and young women back?

1. {Internal Barriers} **Confidence:** We know that confidence drops almost 30% in girls between 5th and 9th grade and never recovers, and that 7 out of 10 girls don't feel they are enough or measure up in some way. Why? The adolescent years can be especially difficult for girls. Girls who were once confident and outgoing may turn inward and become timid and insecure. Girls who robustly shared their opinions, raised their hands in class, and took healthy risks, suddenly stopped engaging with the same veracity. These digital natives are chasing perfection in an all-about-the-likes toxic social



media culture. No wonder 30 percent of girls with a perfect 4.0 GPA do not think they are smart enough for their dream job.

2. {External Barriers} **Gender Norms/Systemic Barriers:** By age six, when girls tend to outperform boys at school, they become less likely than boys to attribute brilliance to their own gender (*University of Illinois, Lian Bian 2017*). According to *Ruling Our Experiences*, one in three girls stay away from leadership opportunities because they are afraid that others will think they are bossy. Girls of color face additional systemic barriers. According to a Girls Leadership report, Black and Latinx girls internally have significantly higher levels of confidence and leadership skills, but externally they face bias, discrimination, and, in the school environment, punishment and pushout.

3. {Invisible Barriers} **Visibility of Role Models and Representation:** "You can't be what you don't see."

While progress has been made, there are more men named John in American leadership roles than women. Women account for only 26.5 percent of the U.S. Congress and 7.4 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs. **Roz Brewer**, recently tapped to become **Walgreen's** next CEO, is the **ONLY** Fortune 500 Black female CEO. Representation matters. We must work to provide our girls visibility and access to fierce female role models and mentors.

So, how does LiveGirl build confidence? We provide girls with a safe space to try new skills and experiences themselves. {self-esteem} We give

girls the tools to be self and socially aware and to discover the power of her voice. {social emotional intelligence} We provide opportunities for young women to build authentic bridges to other people whose lives are different from their own. {empathy}. Yes, the pandemic presents a challenge, but we have risen to meet the challenge. We moved all of our regular offerings online and added community programming to help families cope with COVID-19 stress, anxiety and uncertainty. Programs like **She Cares**, which provide free 1:1 mental health mentoring, are helping our girls continue to forge ahead as confident, inclusive leaders.

Post-program, 96 percent of our girls agree "I feel ready to lead" (up 35 percent). Equally as important, I SEE the positive impact that our LiveGirls are having on their local communities. Our leadership development is defined by middle schoolers learning how to lead themselves; high schoolers, like **Olivia Cognetti** (**Stamford PS '23**) leading others by launching a "Hats for the Homeless" community project; and college students, like **Kellie Taylor** (**Bridgeport PS '19**) interning and networking through **She Works**, so she is ready to lead in the workforce.

We have partnered with districts including **Bridgeport, New Britain, New Canaan, Norwalk, and Stamford** to build girls confidence. Counselors like **Sarah Beltran** from **Saxe Middle School** see the impact. "Through LiveGirl, girls build self and social awareness and develop their ability to communicate, make sound decisions,

and nurture positive relationships," Beltran said. "LiveGirl complements our school-wide Social Emotional Learning initiatives beautifully."

Neya Krishnan, a **New Canaan High School** senior, is a shining example of what young women can gain through LiveGirl. "LiveGirl taught me that anything and everything is possible," Krishnan said. "The specific leadership skills I learned - resilience, public speaking, advocacy, and networking - are the superpowers I need to rise."

So, yes, it is time for young women to rise, and we need to make sure that they have the skills, support, and mentors they need to do so. At LiveGirl, we stand ready to welcome your girls and help prepare the next generation of fierce, diverse female leaders who will undoubtedly make the world a better place.

About LiveGirl: Founded in 2014, LiveGirl, Inc. is a Connecticut-based nonprofit organization that builds confident, inclusive leaders. Our mission is to prepare the next generation of diverse, brave female leaders with the skills, community, and connections so that ALL girls may thrive and make a positive impact on the world. Learn more www.goLiveGirl.org or email info@goLiveGirl.org.

*Sheri West has a passion for girls leadership and more than 25 years of corporate and leadership development experience. She is the Founder, CEO & Chairperson of LiveGirl, a non-profit organization that builds confident, inclusive leaders. Prior to LiveGirl, Ms. West spent 17 years as a finance executive at General Electric Co. and PepsiCo. Sheri regularly speaks on the importance of building confidence and resilience and co-hosts the *Confident Podcast* with her 17-year-old daughter. Her honors include being named "Best Friend to Girls" by Mofly Media. She is married with three children (ages 20, 17, and 13) and lives in New Canaan, CT, where she is actively involved in the community and serves on the New Canaan Public Schools Board of Education. Email Sheri@goLiveGirl.org.*

Please email info@goLiveGirl.org if you are interested in bringing LiveGirl to your district free-of-charge.

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