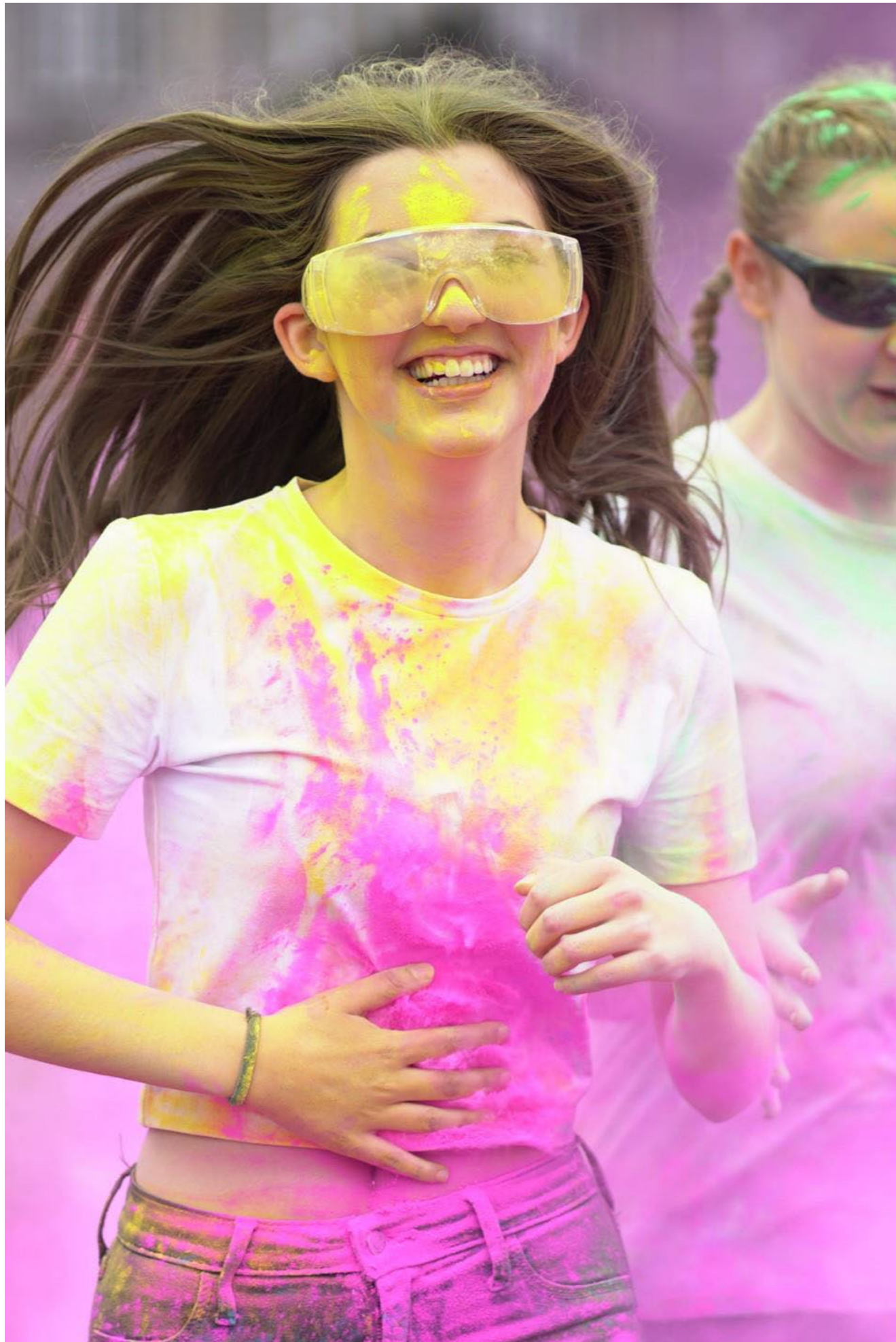


# The Girls' Futures Report

Shaping skills, driving confidence and creating leaders



**GDST**  
GIRLS' DAY SCHOOL TRUST



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# Introduction

## RESEARCH RATIONALE

The GDST family of 20,000 students and over 70,000 alumnae is bound together by the same mission to help 'Girls Learn without Limits,' so they can lead lives without limits. Our purpose is to reach as many girls as possible, with the aim of supporting and empowering young women to achieve their potential.

This year, the GDST celebrates 150 years since it was founded. In 1872, four pioneering women dedicated their lives to giving girls a first-class education at a time when this was not considered a societal norm. Our anniversary is a chance to reflect on the journey to equality over the past 150 years, as well as to take stock of today's society and the world that awaits these young people outside of the classroom.

With this in mind, it is important to examine the challenges that still exist around girls' and womens' equality, and look

ahead at how we can equip all girls to lead the lives they want. This research is a chance to step back and understand the world through the eyes of the girls themselves, look at what they want to achieve out of life (rather than what society assumes they want to achieve) and what they perceive as obstacles to reaching those goals.

This report takes insights and data from a nationally representative sample of young people from different schools across the country to give us a broad view on the skills, careers and issues that they perceive to be of most interest and importance to them.

We began this research at the beginning of 2022, with a series of discussions with equality and education experts. Working with the research organisation, YouthSight, we conducted a multi-stage research journey to provide a comprehensive view of girls' own outlooks on their

lives now and into the future. This drew from an online survey of girls across England and Wales, as well as follow-up qualitative interviews, which provided us with a significant understanding of the trends shaping girls' views. For comparative purposes, we also surveyed a small control sample of boys. We drew on experts in the fields of leadership, entrepreneurship, academia and psychology to provide further qualification to our findings.

Our research investigates the mindset and perspectives of young women when they are thinking about their future and their potential impact on the world, showcasing their voices, hopes and dreams. Through this report, we hope to advocate for the conditions that girls need throughout their education and in society to put them in charge of creating their own futures.

Our purpose is to reach as many girls as possible, with the aim of supporting and empowering young women to achieve their potential.



METHODOLOGY

The research for this project was undertaken by YouthSight in April 2022, a specialist youth research consultancy with panel and data services owned by Savanta. An initial qualitative exercise was carried out through an online 'homework' task sent to 22 children aged 13–18, from across a number of regions. The tasks were focused on interests and hobbies, professions, role models, life after leaving school, and reflections on the world post-Covid.

This initial task informed the direction of a wider quantitative survey, covering current feelings and attitudes, personal priorities for the future, the world of work, and information and culture. The survey took 15 minutes for participants to complete, and two versions of the survey were issued – one designed for ages 9–13 and one designed for ages 14–18, with the majority of questions being statistically comparable across the two questionnaires.

The survey was sent to 1,358 nationally representative girls from a range of schools – state, private and academies

– aged 9–18 across England and Wales, as well as a control group of 374 boys across three age points (9, 14 and 18). Almost all respondents told us whether they went to a co-ed or single-sex school with 84% reporting that they attend a co-ed school and 16% that they attend a single-sex school. Both the nationally representative girls and boys were approached through the YouthSight online research panel. GDST students were also surveyed; however, the data from this sample is **not included** in this report, and our results focus on the nationally representative cohort of girls only.

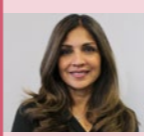
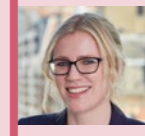
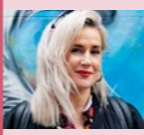
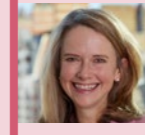









In order to understand the respondents' priorities for the future, in one limited area of the survey only, their answers were analysed using the MaxDiff technique, a robust and reliable method allowing us to assess the relative importance of each attribute in a large set. By asking respondents to trade attributes off against one another, we are able to provide a clear hierarchy. Respondents are faced with a series of choice-based exercises, forcing them

to consider factors in relation to one another in order to make a decision about what is most important to them. Forcing a choice means that we avoid a scenario where everything is deemed to be important and instead are able to establish a hierarchy of priority outcomes through MaxDiff analysis. We are ultimately able to understand what is important when it comes to future success factors, so an item with a score of 200 is twice as important as an item with a score of 100.

After the initial quantitative phase, a round of qualitative interviews took place from June–August 2022 to gain further insight into the findings. These took the form of roundtable discussions and one-on-one conversations with nationally representative students and teachers. We also spoke to some GDST alumnae. Interviews had a specific focus on the key themes of leadership, confidence, and skills for the future. Year 12 students submitted essays in June 2022, which were also used to further inform the findings on leadership.

OUR EXPERTS

Key research findings were further analysed by experts across psychology, education, careers and leadership positions to provide additional context to the views of participants and students.

	<b>Dr Nihara Krause</b> Consultant Clinical Psychologist		<b>Jo Sharrock</b> Head of Shrewsbury High School, GDST
	<b>Anna Whitehouse</b> Founder of Mother Pukka		<b>Julie Taylor</b> Principal, The Belvedere Academy, GDST
	<b>Jude Kelly CBE</b> CEO and Founder of The WOW Foundation		<b>Rebecca Mahony</b> Principal, Birkenhead High School Academy, GDST
	<b>Dr Randy Testa</b> Associate Director of Kindergarten to 16 Programs, Harvard Graduate School of Education		<b>Alison Sefton</b> Head of Norwich High School, GDST
	<b>Debbie Wosskow OBE</b> Co-founder of AllBright		<b>Fionnuala Kennedy</b> Head of Wimbledon High School, GDST
	<b>Gina Miller</b> Campaigner and Leader of the True & Fair Party, Founder of MoneyShe		<b>Dr Kevin Stannard</b> Director of Innovation and Learning, GDST
	<b>Josephine Hansom</b> Director of YouthSight Research and a Fellow of the Market Research Society		



Our key research findings were analysed by experts across psychology, education, careers and leadership.

# Foreword

## Cheryl Giovannoni

CHERYL GIOVANNONI  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE, GDST



It might be tempting to think that we have achieved equality in education: to assume that, because girls tend to do better than boys in exams, that means the job is done. But a quick look at today's workplace shows that the fight to achieve gender equality is far from over. Even now, more women are shouldering the burden of care for both children and parents; we have a gender pay gap which, at its current rate, will take 168 years to close, and there are fewer female CEOs of the UK's FTSE 100 companies now than there were three years ago.

At the GDST, we believe that the proof of the right education is what happens after girls leave school: the choices they make in choosing what work they do, how quickly they progress once they are in that job, the qualities they are valued for as they progress through their careers, and perhaps most importantly, the people they become. This is not just important for the girls themselves. When it comes to ensuring fair and equal decision-making that has everyone's best interests at heart, it is essential that women are involved and that their voices are heard: whether that is in business, government, the academic world or advocacy.

I had the fortune to meet Shabana Basij-Rasikh, President of the School of Leadership Afghanistan. Shabana's mission is to give Afghan girls an education at a time when girls' education is illegal in her country. Her courage and determination to give this fundamental right to her fellow countrywomen highlighted for me the essential role that women play in removing barriers for other women and in raising each other up. It is so important we empower girls to take control of their- and our-futures.

As the GDST celebrates its 150th year, I am reminded of the determination of our four fearless founders to give girls the same opportunities as their brothers. Rather than spend too long reflecting on our achievements so far, we must continue their mission.

In the research we have undertaken to mark this milestone in our history, girls have told us of their hopes and aspirations for their lives ahead. They have told us of the challenges they face and the barriers entrenched in society that they fear will impact their future. They have painted a

picture of a life where they have control of how work intersects with home and family and where they can lead in a way that prioritises compassion and community. We learn how their confidence drops off at the onset of puberty and, through girls' own words and the wisdom of experts, we explore why that might be. Girls have told us in no uncertain terms that they want to be equipped with practical tools for the future, and this pragmatism is a significant and reassuring part of their outlook. Equally, they want the skills to navigate a world driven by social media,

to be able to distinguish fact from fiction and to maintain courteous conversations when polarising views threaten to overtake society's most sensitive discussions.

As a society, we must prepare young people to build a better world for the future. We must talk frankly about what kind of education will achieve that goal. We hope that you will join us, the Girls' Day School Trust, in this mission.

23%

of girls in senior school say that school helps them understand the wider world and society.



# Executive summary

“There’s no point in calling yourself successful if you can reach the top level in your job, but you just aren’t happy.”

– Sixth form student

83%

of girls in senior school<sup>1</sup> want to do a job that they enjoy, and two-thirds want to make a difference to society through their careers.

There has been a clear impact of post-pandemic working patterns on girls’ visions of their careers, with the vast majority looking for flexibility in the workplace and almost universally aspiring to roles that are conducive to their expectation of a healthy work–life balance.

Girls we surveyed, from age 9–18, are twice as likely to say they want to do a job they enjoy rather than to be rich; they are nearly three times as likely to prioritise being healthy and safe than a leader and also twice as likely to prioritise being respected than being a leader<sup>2</sup>.

But while ‘being rich’ is not the goal, financial stability certainly is, with four in five of those surveyed acknowledging that this would

play a part in their happiness. This pragmatic approach is one that emerged as a common theme in our qualitative interviews.

That is not to say that girls don’t want to be leaders, just a different kind of leader. The girls we spoke to told us that they aspire to a type of leadership where measures of success are multidimensional and not necessarily reliant on traditional measures such as salary, prestige or power. Interviewees told us that girls at school today do not necessarily see those currently in positions of power as role models, citing values including honesty, integrity and resilience as qualities they believe leaders should possess.

**“Oestrogen heightens emotional responses, making girls more observant and more cautious, and social cognition is also enhanced in girls at this time, which can leave them more vulnerable to comparison and more hesitant of competition.”**

– Dr Nihara Krause, Consultant Clinical Psychologist

Our research shows that girls’ confidence seems to dip between the ages of 14 and 18 and does not recover significantly. While girls seem to remain broadly positive about their futures, doubts and perceived barriers seem to cement themselves in teenage years. The number of girls who feel positive about their future falls from three in four to just over half in this time, with the number of those feeling negative about the future almost doubling.

In addition, the percentage of girls who think it will be easy to get the job they want more than halves between the same ages, and only one-third of girls surveyed say they feel prepared for the future by the time they are 18<sup>4</sup>.

Although the majority of senior school girls know what they want to do in their futures, almost two-thirds of them feel it will be hard

to get the job they want. Almost a third of girls nationally between the ages of 9 and 18 have felt unable to participate in certain activities or subjects because of their gender<sup>5</sup>.

Consultant Clinical Psychologist Dr Nihara Krause told us that both nature and nurture have an impact at the time of puberty. Oestrogen heightens emotional responses, making girls more observant and more cautious, and social cognition is also enhanced in girls at this time, which can leave them more vulnerable to comparison and more hesitant of competition. Dr Krause explains that this is compounded by the media’s focus on body image and by societal expectations and social experiences for girls and boys during this time, all of which shape personal expectations, self-identity and behaviour.

39%

of girls feel negative about their future aged 18, double the percentage (20%) who feel this at age 14<sup>3</sup>.



“We should learn more practical life skills, such as money management, preparation for the working world and independent living.”

– Recent school leaver

8%

of girls in senior school feel that school fully prepares them for the adult world, although two-thirds believe it prepares them for some aspects<sup>6</sup>.

In looking at the skills that girls consider the most important, while soft skills such as communication and teamwork are acknowledged as useful and undoubtedly necessary, they are not the skills that girls feel are the most immediately helpful as they make their way in the world.

Just over one in 10 girls in senior school said they felt school had provided adequate guidance around financial education, a similar number on different ways to earn money, and 16% on what the working world will be like<sup>7</sup>.

Additionally, while girls feel confident discussing their opinions and hearing others'

conflicting views, they have told us they want support in navigating the wider world of current affairs. Only 23% of girls in senior school say that school helps them understand the wider world and society.

With only four in 10 senior school girls saying they know what to do when they see fake news online<sup>8</sup>, they say they need greater confidence in analysing what they see on social media and pinpointing fake news, so that they can have an impact on the issues they care about, such as diversity, equality and inclusion.



# How girls' attitudes to leadership and the workplace are changing

Our research has shown that girls want to carve out their own career and their own ways to work and are less interested in rigid models of work and leadership. Girls want to reshape the workplace so that it fits them, their preferences and their aspirations. They want to be able to work flexibly in a job that makes a difference to society, with less emphasis on being their own boss or becoming rich.

Whilst girls hold strong ambitions and passions about what they want to achieve, they don't necessarily want to lead in a traditional 'from the front' way, but our qualitative exploration has found they want to bring

more collaborative and open traits to leadership. They want to succeed without compromising their own well-being for career success.

With changing perceptions of who and what makes a great leader, there is an opportunity for schools to approach the notion of leadership in a different way. Girls and wider society would benefit from being empowered to challenge and redefine current models of leadership. This might involve encouraging students to think critically about what good leadership means in different contexts in order to encourage students to embrace less obvious but no less valid ways of leading.

**Girls want to be able to work flexibly in a job that makes a difference to society.**



AMBITIONS AND PRIORITIES

Girls are passionate about taking on roles that they both enjoy (83%)<sup>9</sup> and that make a difference to society (66%). However, they are also pragmatic and understand the importance of job security (79%) and good pay (75%).

They have recognised the significance and are reacting to changing working habits since the pandemic, with three in four girls wanting to work flexibly and nine in 10 wanting to work in an environment that best suits them. Fewer than one in five want to work in an office<sup>10</sup>.

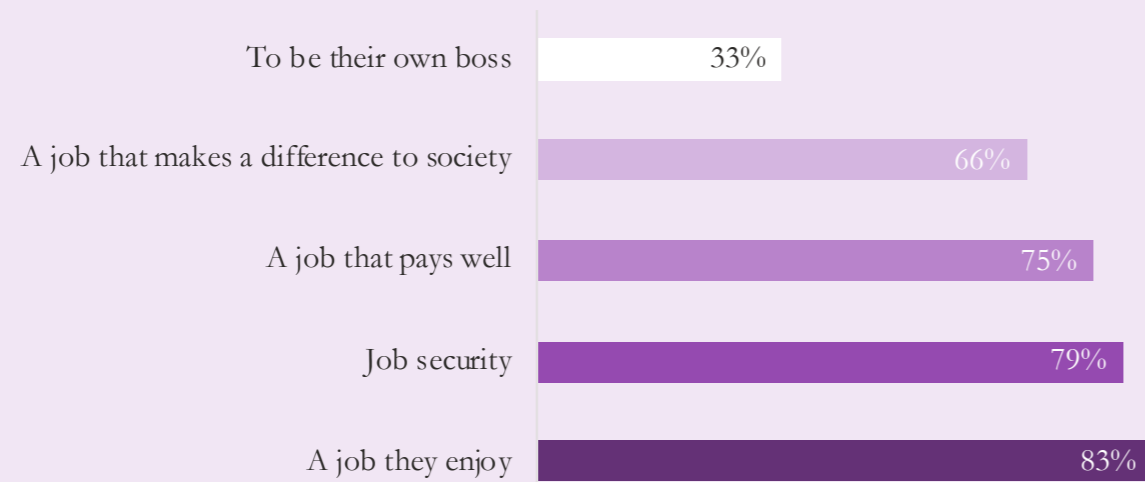
While 42% of girls<sup>11</sup> want to take on leadership roles, when asked to rank their career ambitions, 'being a leader' ranked as the lowest priority out of a list of 17 attributes – a startling finding we sought to understand later through our qualitative research. Even fewer, one in three, wanted to be their own boss<sup>12</sup>. As we will see in our qualitative research, there are likely to be more complicated reasons for this data than it might seem at first glance.

The highest priorities instead were based on well-being – being healthy, being safe and doing a job that they enjoy.

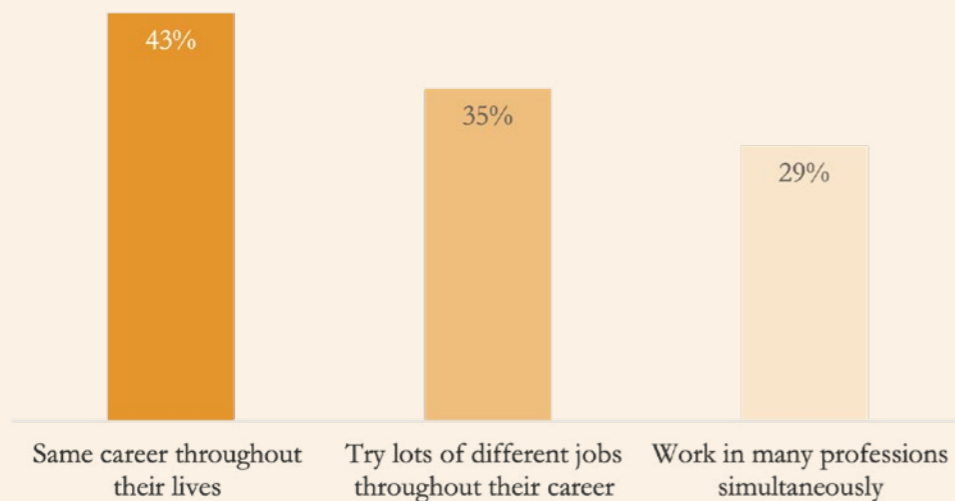
Depicted through a Word Cloud, we found that girls'<sup>13</sup> highest priority ambitions are focused on their well-being rather than being rooted in leadership or financial ambitions (ranked by text size from highest to lowest priority).



WHAT GIRLS WANT TO GET OUT OF WORK<sup>14</sup>



WHAT GIRLS WANT FROM THEIR WORKING LIVES<sup>15</sup>



ISSUES AND PASSIONS

**“You spend so much time working that it’s so important to enjoy what you do. Even if that means you don’t have the money to do everything you want, you will spend most of your time doing something you really enjoy.”**

– Sixth form student

Girls understand the role of their generation in making a positive impact. Three out of four<sup>16</sup> believe it is their generation’s responsibility to make the world a better place, although very few consider it to be their direct duty (5%)<sup>17</sup>, an aspect we explored during our qualitative research.

This is not down to a lack of good intentions: a further 35% of girls<sup>18</sup> say that they do their best to take responsibility for social issues, and 36% want to make a difference but do not feel that they can.

Mental health (39%), environmental issues (33%), racism (28%), women’s rights (27%) and poverty/cost of living (27%) were cited as the top five issues that girls cared about, with unemployment (3%), extremism (5%), terrorism (6%) and accessibility and inclusivity (6%) ranked as less important<sup>19</sup>.

DEBBIE WOSSKOW OBE



The entrepreneur Debbie Woskow OBE, who co-founded AllBright, a professional networking community for women, said that while women should choose to work how they see fit, there must be a role for face-to-face networking and development.

“There’s so much pressure at big firms to have 50/50 intakes of men and women, and most succeed. But at a senior level, women remain far less likely to reach those positions. It gives girls a lack of senior role models in business and politics and means girls see the world as by men and for men. So, when we talk about sisterhood, that means we must encourage girls to collaborate and be supportive. We all need to lift each other up, showcase each other’s success and help each other to shine.

“We’re better together and, sometimes, we’re better in person. I think many business leaders feel like we survive, not thrive, when we are remote, and this is a perception girls will face as they enter the workplace. Young women need to enter the world of work thinking about how they’re going to get the best out of it and how it’s going to get the best out of them.”

The issues that girls are passionate about do not directly equate to those they think they can impact: most notably poverty and the cost of living, which were ranked in the top five most important issues for girls in senior school but in the bottom three in terms of what they believe they can influence<sup>20</sup>.

When asked to rank their top three passions, one in five girls (21%) answered that they think about their dream job. Three times as many cited spending time with family and friends (60%), while their hobbies (46%) and their studies (38%) were also considered more important<sup>21</sup>.

At younger ages, girls are significantly more passionate about their hobbies than their studies (61% compared to 21% at upper primary school age and 63% compared to 40% in lower secondary school), but by 18, studies overtake hobbies in importance (52% prioritising their studies over their hobbies (45%)<sup>22</sup>.

MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES FOR GIRLS

1. Mental health
2. Environmental issues
3. Racism
4. Women's rights
5. Poverty/cost of living

The issues girls believe they can most likely impact do not necessarily align with those they are most passionate about<sup>23</sup>.

ISSUES GIRLS BELIEVE THEY CAN IMPACT

1. Environmental issues
2. Sustainability
3. Women's rights
4. LGBTQ+ rights
5. Extremism

**“I often feel that my place in the world won't make much of a difference, but I still want to play my part and do everything that I can to help people.”**

– Sixth form student

GINA MILLER



Campaigner and Leader of the True & Fair Party and founder of MoneyShe, Gina Miller, feels that the traits that our national sample of girls defined as integral to leadership should be raised up if we are to see more women enter leading roles.

“I think that there has been a perception that to embody leadership, to be a leader, you have to be tough, you have to be aggressive, it's all about profit. Actually, this data shows us their strength is going to be about shaping the world in a more caring and kinder way. Women and girls should be aspiring into positions where they can influence change, becoming the change. Taking their life experiences, their authentic selves and driving the conversation.

“We all have a duty to encourage girls to realise that if they don't like what they see in the world, they have to be the change. We have to teach them and empower them to realise that they can take up space, challenge and be heard when it comes to businesses, cultures, leadership, the future, politics and finance.”

ANNA WHITEHOUSE



The writer and founder of Mother Pukka and Flex Appeal campaigner, Anna Whitehouse, says that social media has given women more of a space to use their voices for causes that matter to them.

“I never wanted to be an entrepreneur or a leader. I wanted to be in control of my own time, and entrepreneurship was the by-product.

“Social media is a powerful tool to project the voices of the underheard and the marginalised. When I worked in journalism, I'd go into pitches with men who had no interest in talking about the gender pay gap. I never got permission to speak about these things. Through the internet and social media, I was able to create my own platform to amplify these issues. I hope my daughter and her schoolmates will have greater opportunity to amplify their voices.”

# What girls told us

Our qualitative research demonstrates an independence of thought and ambition from girls today that disrupts traditional models of what it means to be successful or to be a leader.

Girls have described office roles as “unappealing” and want to work in a comfortable environment, backing up our data that few students today aspire to work in an office. One student explained she saw this as the best way to be able to progress: “If you are uncomfortable in your environment and do not feel secure, it is harder to do a good job.”

“You spend so much time working; it is important that you enjoy what you do,” said a respondent. “Even if that means you do not have the money to do everything you want, you will then be spending most of your time doing something you really enjoy.”

This was backed up through interviewing teachers, with one highlighting that a number of her recent alumnae were “juggling a number of jobs around their

interests, likes and enthusiasms”, jobs that were not necessarily financially rewarding.

Alongside a work–life balance, girls want to make an impact. As our research found, they care about a wide range of issues, with interviewees describing the difference they want to make as something that could be big or small, “whether in my local community or on a global scale,” as one student said, with another adding: “I want to feel like I am making contributions and that my work is not trivial.” A further respondent said: “there is no point in calling yourself successful if you can reach a high level in your job, but you just aren’t happy.”

There is certainly an element of pragmatism involved in girls’ thinking, however: “To enjoy yourself, you need a salary that sustains and supports you,” one interviewee said. Others recognised that leadership is a catalyst for having an impact: “While my principal ambitions in life are having a fulfilling job, earning money and making a

difference in the world, I think leadership is unavoidable for achieving this,” said one respondent.

This takes us to what girls today see the word ‘leadership’ to mean, citing qualities such as working in a team, not giving up, being responsible, inspiring others, ensuring individuals are understood and appreciated and that team dynamics work: “a leader should be respected, and this is only if all individuals in a group are satisfied by their work ethic and behaviours.”

Few girls see political leadership today as aspirational, describing government as lacking in the above qualities and in need of “competent, honest and thought-through leadership to form a system that people can trust and have confidence in.” This informs negative perceptions of what it means to be a leader, with interviewees saying that “if this is what a leader is, I do not wish to be one,” and “I am worried that people at the top do not necessarily care about the rest of us.”

Although in some cases, this has impacted specific young people’s leadership ambitions, others have become motivated as a result to be a better, kinder form of leader. “I will lead a country or a class, but it needn’t be as the King or a teacher but merely as someone who observes and loves their community,” said one respondent, with another student

adding: “I feel as though it is my obligation to undertake positions of leadership to empower and inspire other women and other ethnic minorities to grab any chance they have, to go into education and seize a position of leadership.”

And there was certainly a recognition from a number of

participants that they ought not to resist leadership and should actively embrace it as women: “I am just as entitled as anyone else to be in charge, and I won’t be belittled by the male gender. As women, we must stand up for ourselves and in a traditionally male-dominated society, we should not stand for any less than what we deserve.”

JUDE KELLY CBE



**CEO and Founder of the WOW Foundation, Jude Kelly CBE, argues it is important that girls are driven by purpose but that to truly lead, we must avoid falling into age-old perceptions and stereotypes.**

“It’s marvellous to see that girls today are driven by purpose and that they are equipping themselves to think in this way. I hope they are inspired by young leaders like Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai, and others involved in mission-led campaigns, and would like to feel as if that is the emergence of female leadership in a values-driven world, which boys and men should subscribe to. But we should also understand that the other side of that desire is the traditional kitemarks associated with girls as ‘sensitive, caring, nurturing’, which often strip them of their power in the world as it currently is.

“Girls and women grow up feeling frightened. Our culture, movies and TV put the visions of violence against women into their consciousness from a young age. That impacts girls’ psychology about their security. We are also conditioned into feeling that part of our femininity is to be looked after and part of our relationship with men is for them to look after us. Even independent women find it hard to navigate these expectations, and this conditioning makes us cautious about practising risk-taking.”

# Insights from educators

JULIE TAYLOR



**Julie Taylor,  
Principal,  
The Belvedere Academy.**

"An amazing aspect of academy schooling is the huge range of destinations for our pupils when they leave us. We have very few pupils who follow the same route or course. Girls are skilled at finding a very bespoke route into a career and potential lifestyle that suits them. To help facilitate that lifestyle, it's important we listen to what our pupils want from us beyond the curriculum."

JO SHARROCK



**Jo Sharrock,  
Head,  
Shrewsbury High School.**

"There is valuable information in this survey that we as educators, parents and indeed society as a whole can make excellent use of to ensure we continue to evolve and meet the needs and wants of our current and future students.

"Whilst much of the research confirmed what I would expect with regard to confidence in particular, I was pleased to see such a positive focus on the world of work, careers and life beyond school or university. There was very little obsession with exam grades, which was heartening, and above all a real sense of ambition among the UK's young women to shape the world in which they live and embrace a life of meaning and purpose. This is tremendously exciting and bodes well for the future."

FIONNUALA KENNEDY



**Fionnuala Kennedy,  
Head,  
Wimbledon High School.**

"Opportunities to lead need to be in abundance throughout a student's journey through school, whether that's sitting as a Year 1 on School Council, mentoring a younger student when you're in Year 10, helping them with homework and friendship issues, or leading on whole-school initiatives on the Student Leadership Team in Year 13. But there are also less explicit routes to becoming a good leader: developing skills of self-efficacy, motivation and clear, compassionate communication will also assist our young people to become the leaders of the future.

"It's interesting that these traits should be considered as being in binary opposition to more traditional markers of success such as wealth and power: I don't see that they need to be. Our young people are entering into a world that they have the ability to shape, and it absolutely should be the case that honesty, integrity and service are rewarded remuneratively. The fact that they tend not to be – or are perceived as not being worth rewarding – itself calls into question the ways in which we operate as a society, promoting and heralding those who do not exhibit those qualities and thereby reinforcing negative stereotypes of leadership and success.

"Strong leadership is about human connection and understanding what drives individuals and communities to strive together with purpose. It's no surprise then that our young people will look to those with whom they already have established relationships to learn about leadership and seek to mimic what they see. It's a real responsibility, then, that those of us who build relationships with young people are authentic in our leadership, modelling compassionate, values-based authority whenever we can."



## Analysis from Dr Kevin Stannard, Director of Innovation and Learning at the GDST.

The girls and young women in this survey project themselves as balancing realism with a desire to challenge and redefine some of the boundaries they expect to encounter.

The fact that mental health takes the number one spot in terms of issues should not be taken as symptomatic of so-called snowflakes. Read alongside the follow-up interviews, it radiates resilience: a desire to be properly equipped to cope with whatever life might bring. And these young people know that the future is going to bring change and challenge in spades.

Faced with a list of key global issues, they have a clear understanding of which they are most likely to be able to address directly, and they show an appetite to do just that. Concerns around the environment and racism stand out as twin peaks to be conquered through advocacy, activism and lifestyle choices.

They are already seeing changes in the world of work, and there is a growing awareness of, and even an emerging appetite for, more flexible and non-traditional ways of working.

The resounding rejection of leadership as an aspiration has been helpfully unpacked by the subsequent interviews. It is traditional models of leadership that are under scrutiny here, and current leaders – economic and political – stand accused of turning a generation off that stale male model. Girls and young women in the survey prefer more collaborative models and feel that earning the right to lead is a more commendable aspiration than just wanting to be a boss.

A recurring pattern in this survey is that younger age groups appear more open and optimistic, while the respondents in their late teens are already starting to trim their sails. To some extent this is to be expected, but as educators, we must ask ourselves whether schools could do more to tend the flame of idealism and optimism.



# Why girls lose confidence and how we can address this

There is clear evidence from a number of different measures that girls' confidence drops during puberty, meaning there is work to be done to mitigate this around both internal and external factors. Girls told us that factors such as expected models of behaviours and roles in school and social situations – as well as a heightened focus on body image and the pressures of exams play a part in limiting their ambitions.

We need to address this crisis in confidence in schools, for example, by helping girls to maintain their self-esteem and focus on their ambitions in a non-judgemental and neutral arena. However, as a society, we need to look at other relevant factors that have a negative impact on girls' confidence levels on their way to womanhood.

**“I haven't got to that point where I need to worry about anything.”**

– Primary school student

## CONFIDENCE IN THE FUTURE

Across all age groups, two-thirds (66%) of girls feel positive about the future<sup>24</sup>. But while this increases from 61% to 74% between the ages of 9 and 14, it then decreases to just 56% by age 18. The decrease in positive perceptions of the future is accompanied by an increase in negative feelings. By age 18, 39% of girls feel negative about the future, compared to just 20% between the ages of 9 and 14<sup>25</sup>. This is reflected in data around

whether girls think it will be easy to get the job they want. Nearly half of girls (43%) are confident about achieving this at age 14, but this more than halves to 20% by sixth form<sup>26</sup>.

On average, 61% feel prepared for the future at 14 and 38% feel prepared for the future at 18<sup>27</sup>, we also see a significant percentage edge away from certain careers as they get older. For example, the number of girls wanting to work in digital technology falls

from 43% to 16% between the ages of 14 and 18<sup>28</sup>. This may be due to a natural narrowing of choices as girls reach sixth-form level, and further work should be done to explore comparators with other industries.

While the vast majority of girls between 9 and 18 do not feel restricted by their gender in terms of the subjects and hobbies they partake in, we see in our research that one in four girls (26%)<sup>29</sup> feel like

they cannot take part in certain pathways because of their gender.

Confidence in taking risks is something that significantly reduces in girls in their later teenage years. In upper primary school, 48% of girls have the confidence to take risks, significantly increasing to two-thirds (67%) of girls by lower secondary school but then falling back to 48% by sixth form<sup>30</sup>.



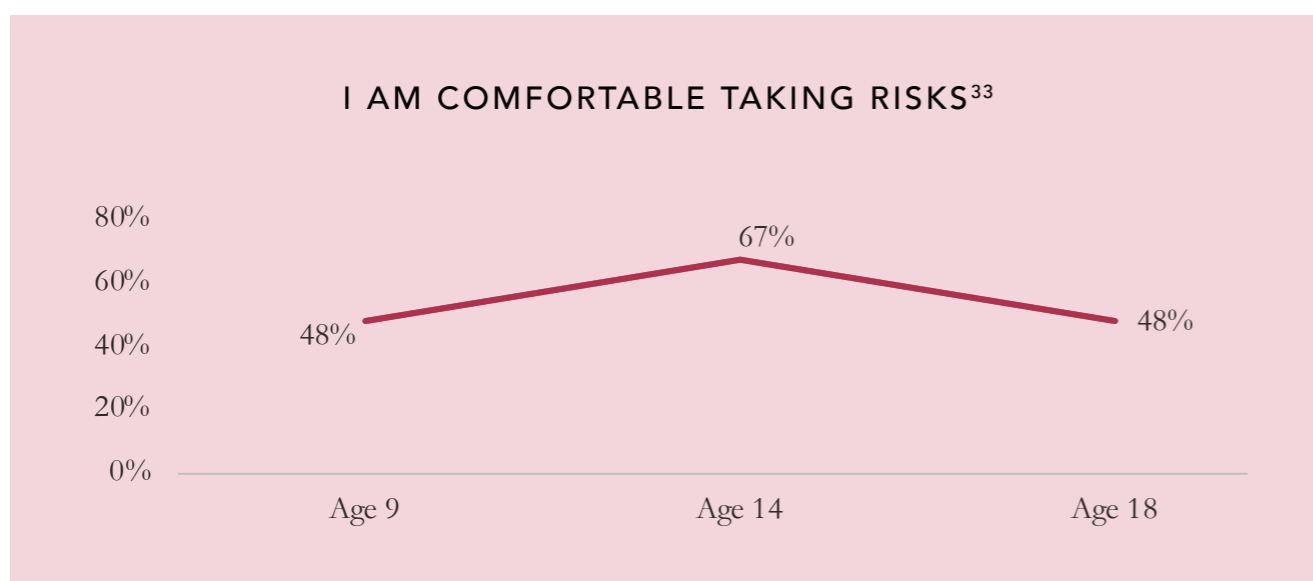
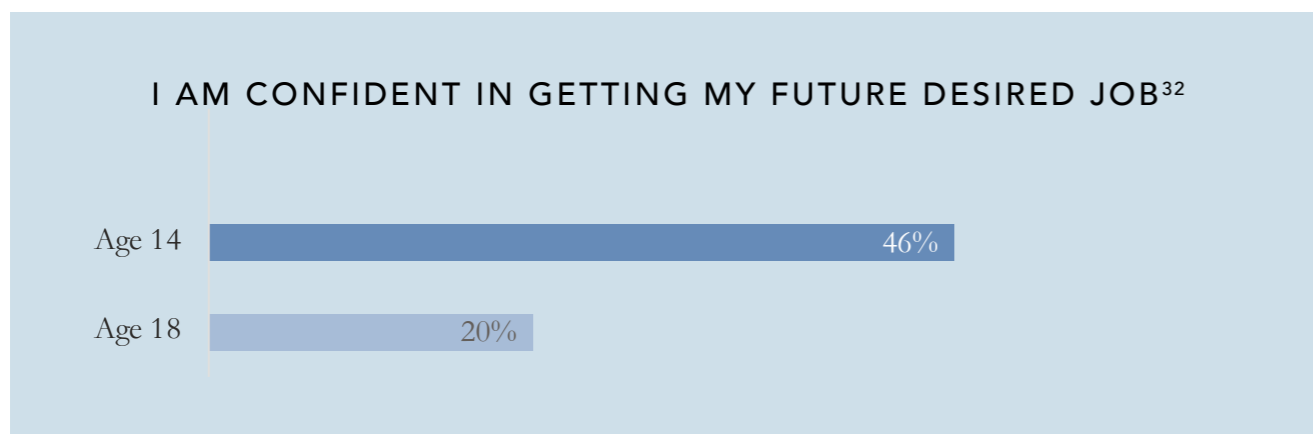
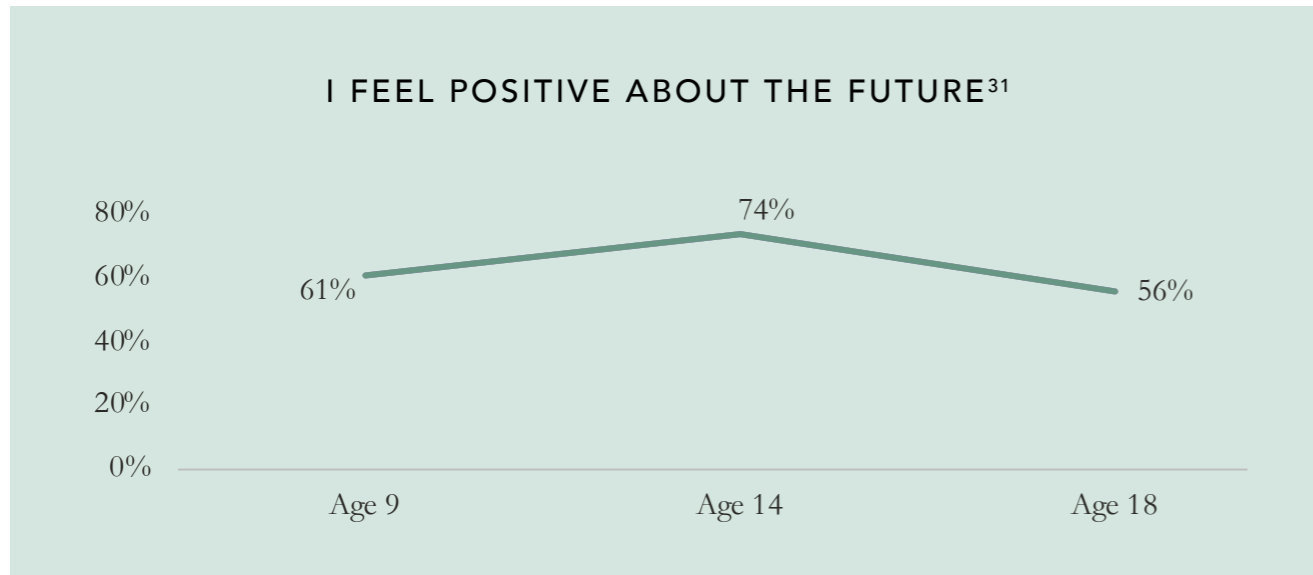
ANNA WHITEHOUSE



**Anna Whitehouse, the founder of Mother Pukka and Flex Appeal campaigner, sees parallels with her own experience.**

“I think there's a real misunderstanding of about how to navigate biological junctures for women and girls, whether that's through puberty, maternity or menopause. You see this sort of biological trajectory through women's lives. Menopause leave doesn't exist. There's no recognition of the huge impact that basic biological juncture has on women's careers, confidence and life. A lack of confidence is something that is so in-built in those very vulnerable years that can then translate to how you handle maternity leave, how you stand up for yourself. I feel I wasn't instilled with enough of that confidence at school, and my confidence dropped off a cliff aged 14–18.

“This is predominantly down to environmental factors that happen around that time. For example, my girls school was closely linked to a nearby boys school, and menstruation was a cause of significant bullying against us as we reached puberty. It causes shame. The same shame that I felt, being told I was oversensitive, overreacting. Girls cry, boys don't.”



DR NIHARA KRAUSE



We asked Dr Nihara Krause, an award-winning consultant clinical psychologist and CEO of the teenage mental health charity stem4, to comment on the findings of our data, regarding the drop in confidence observed between 14 and 18.

“The factors that lead to this diminished confidence are many and varied. In girls, in particular between the ages of 9 and 15, you tend to get a drop in confidence because there are significant neurological changes that come with puberty. There are also varying physical changes that impact at that time and changing socialisation skill levels affecting social confidence. In older girls, it may well be that there’s greater self-evaluation against a pressure to compete more. During puberty, there is also a change in cognitive reasoning, which might affect understanding and interpretation of all the various changes occurring to oneself.

“But certainly, culturally, there’s something about how emotionally supported girls need to be in this period of growth and how in sync they feel with the rest of their cohort. And a lot of this is about shaping self-perceptions: if the messaging they get is about being recognised and valued for their performance, rather than as individuals, then their self-esteem is more likely to be performance-based, driving perfectionism in all sorts of areas. You need personal confidence as well as academic or performance-based confidence.”

“When I was 14, I was really confident. I hadn’t gone through any exams or any sort of pressure. And then when you do go through these, your confidence is all over the place. Your body is changing.”

– Recent school leaver

# CHAPTER TWO

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Generally, girls are confident that they can overcome the main problems they see in life. Two-thirds aged between 9 and 18 believe that they can<sup>34</sup>, while only 14% of those surveyed said that they did not believe they could push through perceived barriers.

Again though, there is a confidence drop between ages 14 and 18.

While four out of five girls (81%) believe they can overcome challenges at age 14, just over two-thirds (68%) say that they can by 18<sup>35</sup>.

For the girls we surveyed, the largest barriers they cited to their success were not having enough money (37%), not knowing what they want to do in life (31%) and not being smart enough (30%)<sup>36</sup>.

26%

of girls feel like they cannot take part in certain pathways because of their gender.

Generally, girls are confident that they can overcome the main problems they see in life.

Depicted through a Word Cloud, we found that girls considered personal barriers as greater challenges to overcome than environmental ones<sup>37</sup>.



# What girls told us

"Nothing really worries me because I haven't got to that point where I need to worry about anything," answered a 10-year-old interviewee in our qualitative research. This simple statement perhaps best summarised the changing confidence levels of girls from primary school as they progress through their education, as we saw in our research.

At a younger age, girls are able to clearly focus on their hobbies and interests, showing a passion for these above their studies. But our findings show a clear drop in confidence after the age of 14, as real-world pressures come to the foreground.

Puberty may be an exacerbating factor, and it is one recognised by the girls we interviewed. This has both physical and mental effects. Several girls highlighted the impact of puberty on their enjoyment of sports, with one girl studying at a mixed school saying that P.E. became stressful "because I didn't want people to see a sanitary pad and things like that. I felt different." This is something we explore with the

psychologist Dr Nihara Krause, in our expert insights.

Another girl cited social pressure and that despite happily playing football when she was younger as the only girl at her club, this later became a reason to quit: "I feel like there's a stigma behind how a girl is expected to behave and they can't do a lot of things that boys do." This, alongside "peer pressure" more generally, as well as "social standards", caused anxiety at school.

The physical impact of puberty alongside increased pressure on studies, particularly due to exams, also affects girls' confidence as they get older: "When I was 14 and had not gone through my GCSEs, I felt really confident. But when you go through these exams, while your body is changing, your confidence is all over the place."

The same interviewee also highlighted that it is at this age that boys become more involved in their lives and that this can have an impact. It is in these mixed environments that differences in confidence can be

most stark, particularly in how others respond, with one girl saying: "Men particularly will say things and everyone will take it as gospel. You find yourself nodding along before realising you do not necessarily agree with the point; they just say it with confidence."

**"We had a sports day recently, and we were picking team captains. At first, a lot of girls put their hands up to volunteer, but as soon as more boys put themselves forward, loads of the girls' hands went down."**

– Student aged 14–15

One participant, aged 14–15, gave an example of how this had impacted her in practice: "We had a sports day recently, and

we were picking team captains. At first, a lot of girls put their hands up to volunteer, but as soon as more boys put themselves forward, loads of the girls' hands went down. The teachers then chose the boys to be the captains, as they came across as the leaders in that situation."

There is clearly an impact of social media on girls' confidence, alongside the physical changes they face during puberty. "Most girls get social media around the age their bodies change, when they see what are considered to be beauty standards. It can impact how some might want their body to look, just seeing

that 'ideal' beauty on Instagram for example," explained a respondent, with another adding: "At that age, we are quite young and can be influenced by these sorts of things. Seeing that comparison and then looking at yourself can play a negative role."

DR RANDY TESTA



**Dr Randy Testa, Associate Director at Harvard Graduate School of Education, says the impact that online activity can have on young body image that is particularly worrying.**

"Girls are at the height of confidence in saying (with their feelings attached) what they know about the world and human relationships aged around 9–11. Carol Gilligan's work calls this political resistance – an insistence on knowing what one knows and a willingness to be outspoken.

"As they then move into adolescence, girls start to pick up on what the culture is asking them to do and to be, in exchange for being 'successful'. What we then see is a move toward psychological resistance – a reluctance to know what one knows and a fear that one's knowledge, if spoken, will endanger relationships and threaten survival.

"There's a large body of psychological work that says, at adolescence, there's basically a split. Or as one 12-year-old girl said when asked to write a paper expressing her opinions on a matter: 'Well... Do you want to know what I think or do you want to know what I really think?' This is a girl who understands by 12 how to get a high mark and that voicing her real opinions could get her a low mark. And that is just in the classroom.

"We see girls posting via social media, frankly, shocking stuff about their own body image. There are apps now where you can distort your looks. You can make yourself look skinnier. It's shocking, yes, but it's also self-fulfilling because it's what culture and society are asking them to be. As educators, we must spend time with girls to understand psychological issues around body image and the ways in which social media asks them to compare themselves to an impossibly idealistic standard. Because again, these are the symptoms of patriarchy. It's underlining to girls, at a critical developmental time, they have got to be this thing, this object."

# Insights from educators

JULIE TAYLOR



**Julie Taylor, Principal,  
The Belvedere Academy.**

“The self-reported dip in confidence seen in this research confirms what many educators already anecdotally know. We see this dip in self-assurance come with puberty, as friendship groups get complicated towards the end of year 7 and through year 8. Girls are also trying at this point to find their ‘tribe’. Happily, my experience is that once girls discover that sense of belonging as they go through year 9 and into 10, most of them start to grow in confidence again – the exceptions being those who struggle with issues such as mental health and difficult situations at home.”

REBECCA MAHONY



**Rebecca Mahony,  
Principal, Birkenhead  
High School Academy.**

“The finding from the research and survey which resonates most with me as a school principal is the huge dip in confidence at puberty. We notice this in particular in our setting as the girls move through to the senior school. It’s clear that, regardless of geography, economic status or other social factors, this dip in confidence is something that is affecting all girls.”

DR KEVIN STANNARD



**Analysis from Dr Kevin  
Stannard, Director of  
Innovation and Learning  
at the GDST.**

The apparent loss of confidence in the teenage years is more marked for girls than boys. This, coupled with the tendency for girls to blame themselves rather than external obstacles for failure to achieve goals, paints a picture that should concern us all.

We’re not talking about the brash and shallow side of confidence, and it isn’t about wanting to encourage entitlement. ‘Confidence’ goes hand in hand with other attributes and dispositions, like self-efficacy and risk-taking. Students who limit themselves to more passive roles in school thereby limit their horizons. Depressingly, there is a gender dimension here, with girls more likely to undervalue themselves.

There has been a recent backlash against the thesis of a gender confidence gap, with critics levelling the charge that it ignores the serious structural obstacles facing girls and young women. They oppose the implication that if only girls can get a grip, they’ll be OK. And the survey seems to support this, when we see how ready girls seem to be to blame themselves for any shortfall.

This is a false dichotomy. Beating imposter syndrome won’t magically open every door for young women. But doors are sure to remain closed unless young people actually try to open them. It’s the dialectic of self-limiting mental attitudes and structural obstacles that constitute a double-lock on girls’ futures.

Schools (and societies) need to develop the right mental attitudes, but they also need to design the right structures. And the problem is that most schools are co-ed by accident, not by design. They might appear gender-neutral, but they are not necessarily gender-equal. It is significant that fewer girls than boys think schools provide equal opportunities, and there is by no means universal confidence that their future lives will be free of gendered obstacles. Are we doing enough in our schools to prepare girls to subvert rather than sustain gender inequalities?

There is plenty of evidence that the ‘confidence gap’ can be closed, but it takes effort. It takes design.

# What girls need to truly prepare for the future

Girls recognise that they need practical skills to thrive in the world, and they don't believe they are receiving those skills in a school setting. Similarly, whilst girls feel confident engaging with people who hold different opinions to them, they see a new set of essential skills emerging: the ability to negotiate social media and to determine the facts in a world full of opinion.

And while schools already include topics such as financial education and critical thinking in their curriculum, we now need to marry together the two approaches, teaching girls explicitly that developing these key skills is an essential part of gaining financial and personal independence. This could be a route to significantly breaking through the barrier to greater gender equality and opportunity for all.

**Financial education could be a route to significantly breaking through the barrier to greater gender equality and opportunity for all.**



PRACTICAL SKILLS FOR THE REAL WORLD

Just under half of girls we surveyed said that they felt prepared for the future (49%), with 47% feeling unprepared and 3% neutral<sup>38</sup>. As with many of the questions of confidence, there is a significant decrease from lower secondary school to 18, from 61% of girls aged 14 saying they feel prepared to just 38%<sup>39</sup>.

Much of this comes down to the efficacy with which girls see schools preparing them for the world, with only 8% believing that school fully equips them for adulthood, decreasing from 24% at age 9, to 11% at 14 and just 2% at age 18. Two-thirds of girls overall, however, (66%) agree that school does help to prepare them for some aspects of their future, and 57% believe they will be able to apply the

skills they learn at school to the real world<sup>40</sup>. Communication and working well with others to achieve goals (teamwork) are the skills most cited by girls as those they are prepared for by their schools (42% and 39%, respectively), and most understand that these soft skills have importance for their futures<sup>41</sup>.

However, girls are clearly demanding education in more practical and hard skills, such as understanding finances, which just 11% of girls said they were prepared for at school. A similar number (10%) said they were given education on different ways to earn money and 16% on what the working world will be like<sup>42</sup>.

It is these skills, which girls tend to feel they are lacking, that girls believe to be most important. Seven out of ten girls want more financial education, more than half on how to earn money (53%) and on understanding the working world (51%)<sup>43</sup>.

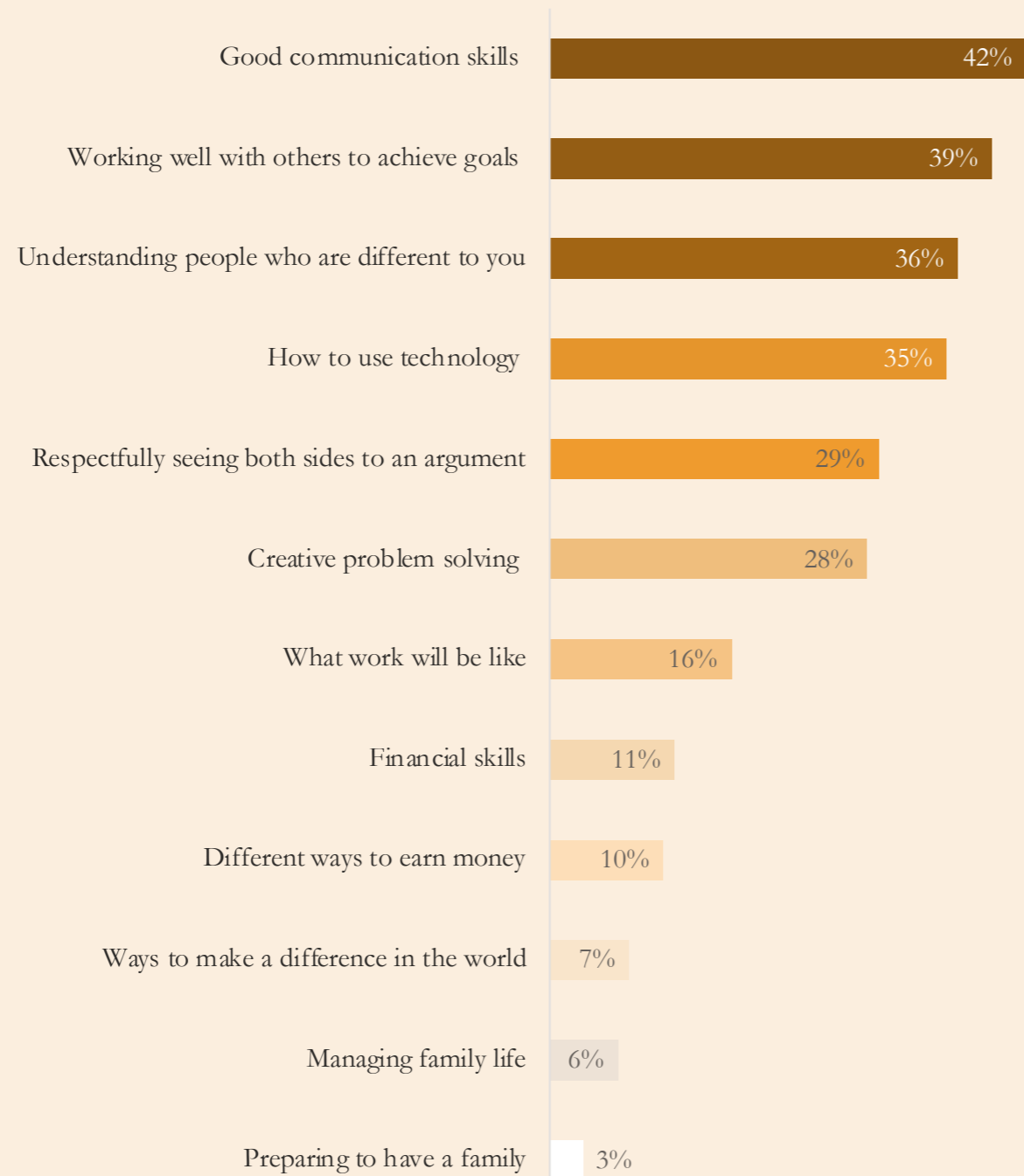
70%

of girls want more financial education.

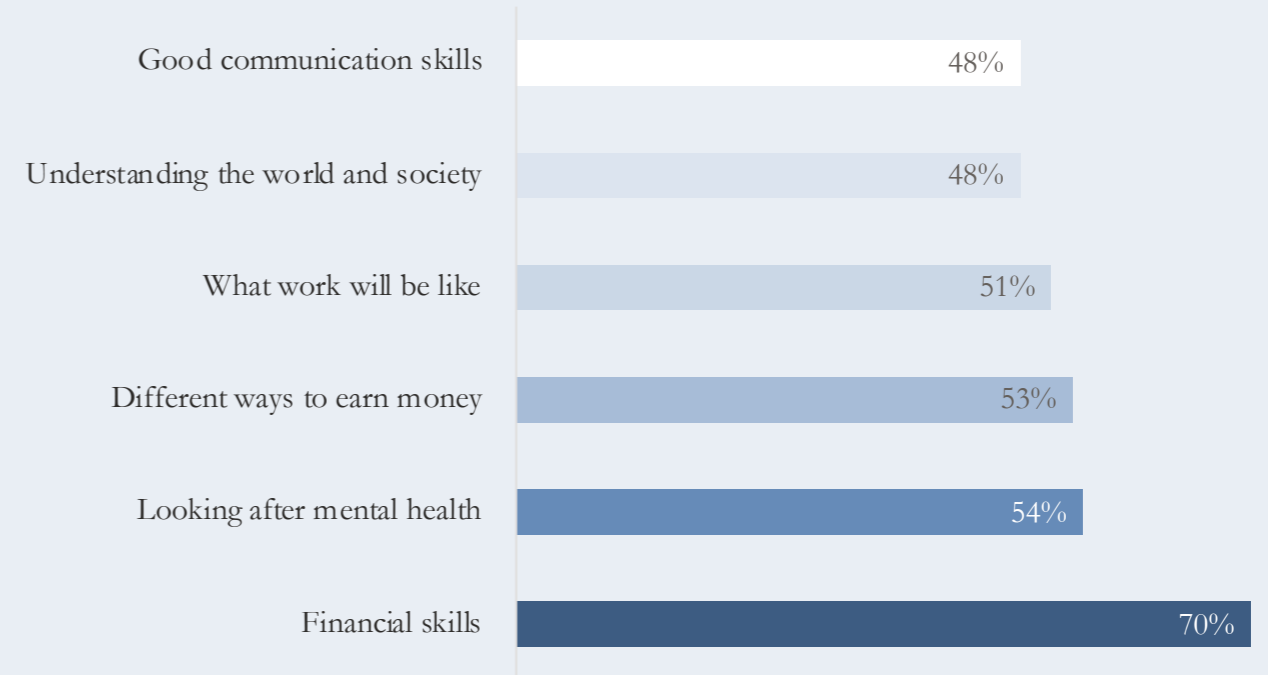
“I would really like to know how the real world works: how mortgages work, buying a house, insurance, money management, even cooking or managing family life.”

– Sixth form student

WHAT SCHOOLS PREPARE GIRLS FOR<sup>44</sup>



WHAT GIRLS WANT SCHOOLS TO PREPARE THEM FOR<sup>45</sup>



JUDE KELLY CBE



CEO and Founder of the WOW Foundation, Jude Kelly CBE agrees that financial education is crucial in order for women to truly change the world.

"If girls want to re-describe the way that work happens, they have to do it vocally and radically as part of systemic change in society. Women need the confidence to say, 'we want to do value-driven work because we think it is better for the world'.

"To achieve this, schools must place the issues of economics in front of girls so they understand and concentrate on the importance of hard skills: their finances, careers, politics. But not because they must all become CEOs. Because we want them to have access to the networks and investment that allow them to live out their purpose. Unless they understand how economics works, they cannot make decisions about how to ensure the world becomes more equal. The politics of economics needs to be linked to the idea of a purpose-driven world."

Girls responding to our survey made it clear that practical skills are not the only aptitude they need to navigate the world today. Social media plays a big part in how girls communicate, consume and understand news, and being able to separate fact from opinion is clearly important to them.

More than half of girls (54%) said that they use social media to follow current affairs, and 42% discuss issues through word of mouth. Television remains important, with 40% of girls watching this regularly for their news. A similar number of girls, around one in three, get their news by browsing the web (33%) as they do through their school/teachers (32%). It is a far less positive outlook for print media, with magazines (5%) and newspapers (6%) the least used media by girls today. Around twice the number of girls we surveyed said they used smart speakers to consume news rather than these print forms<sup>46</sup>.

**“You can have your own opinion, but understanding someone else’s opinion is another, harder skill.”**

– Sixth form student

However, although three out of four girls use multiple outlets to engage with the news, 41% say their trust in the media is at an all-time low. More than half of girls surveyed (56%) say they see fake news online at least once a week. And although social media is the most used medium through which they consume their news, only 28% trust what they see on social media. Only 40% of respondents said they are confident they know what to do when they see fake news, and there is certainly a role for schools to play in helping girls prepare to address this challenge and engage with today’s media<sup>47</sup>.

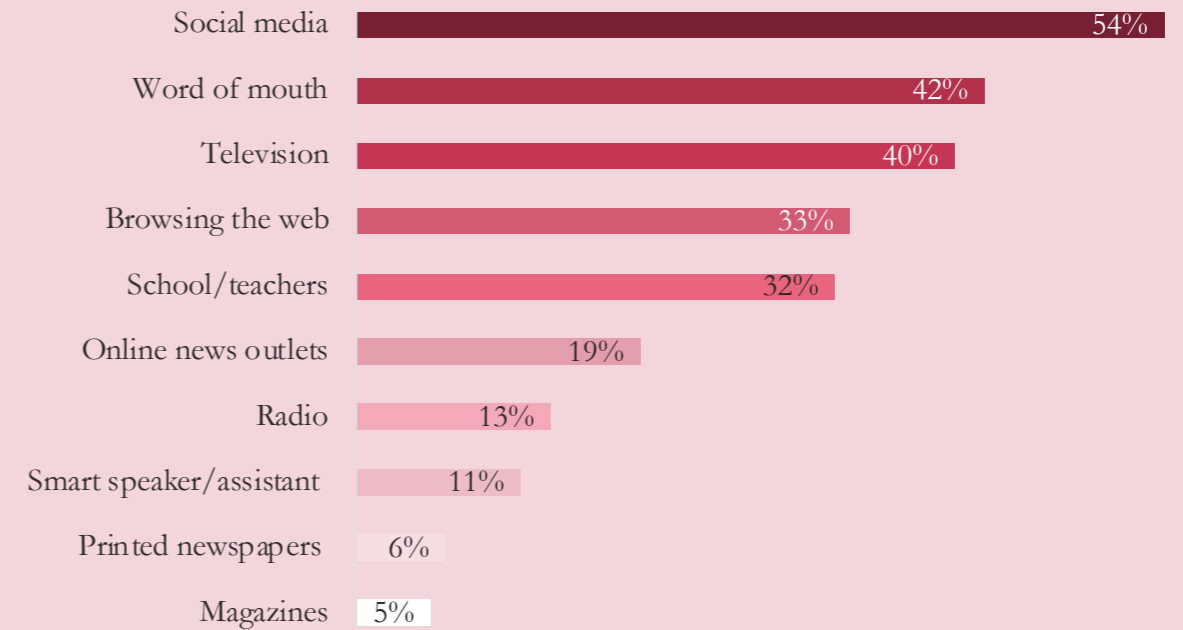
Equally important is the ability to navigate a world where opinions and perspectives differ, sometimes in a polarised way. Half of girls responded that they read news outlets that offer a different perspective to their own, with only 17% saying they actively do not. Three-quarters of respondents said they discussed news with their peers<sup>48</sup>.

A significant majority of girls were also confident about engaging with people who have different views to their own (68%), to discuss difficult topics (59%) and to stand by their opinions even when others disagree (70%). This remains relatively steady throughout school stages, although there is an increase from 51% to 64% of girls who feel comfortable engaging in difficult topics from ages 14–18<sup>49</sup>.

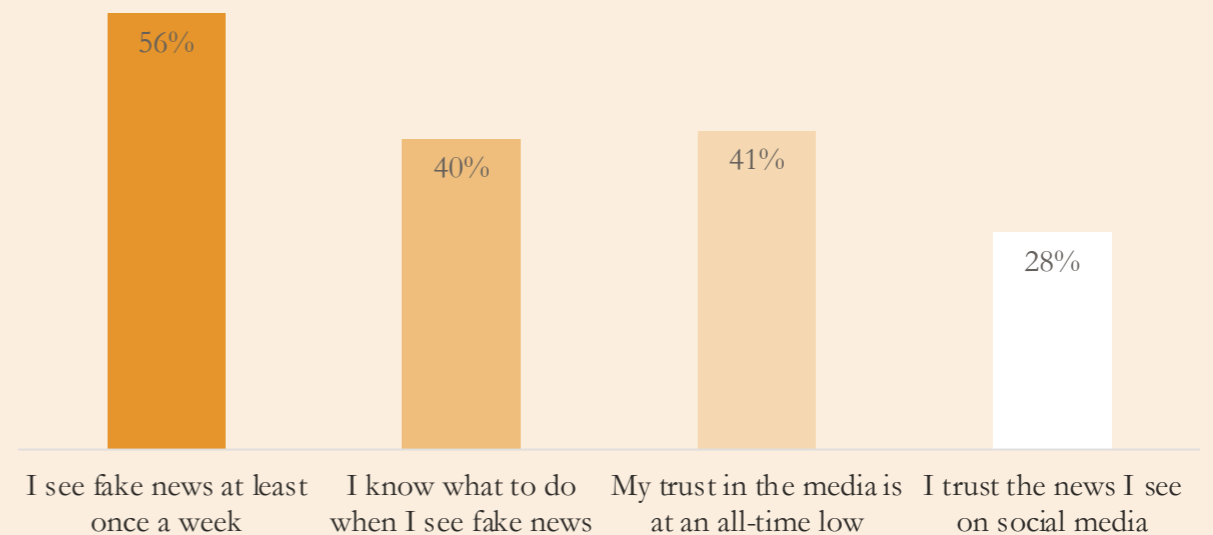
**“I think schools could place more of an impact on how important current affairs knowledge is.”**

– Sixth form student

WAYS IN WHICH GIRLS CONSUME NEWS<sup>50</sup>



HOW GIRLS CONSUME MEDIA CONTENT<sup>51</sup>



# What girls told us

We interviewed girls on how they feel they could be better prepared to face the world. By aligning these findings with the knowledge that their confidence drops through teenage years and the types of roles they aspire to, schools can better respond to their students' requirements.

Our research found that girls feel generally prepared in skills such as teamwork and communication, and there is an acknowledgement that these are useful as they get older: "Whilst writing my personal statement and preparing for university, I realised how important these soft skills are," said one respondent. They also learn how to engage with the perspectives of others, which is considered valuable, with narrow-mindedness viewed as a negative trait: "You can have your own opinion, but understanding someone else's opinion is another skill, a harder skill."

Teachers also encourage these transferable skills, describing them as "essential" to take on the flexible career paths many girls want.

But while the value of soft skills is considered, many students want more significant financial education. Several interviewees highlighted how PSHE classes could focus more on "real life – how to deal with finances, how mortgages work and how to buy a house, managing family life, more practical life skills."

While most said that some element of this education was brought into their curriculum, it was usually not considered to be enough or took place on too few occasions. One girl added: "School doesn't prepare me for independent living in terms of being self-motivated and having new responsibilities in life."

The importance of this is realised further after girls leave school, with a recent school leaver saying: "When you are in your early 20s you end up figuring much of this out on your own; you are thrown in at the deep end. It would be useful to provide materials on financial education, which many girls struggle with." This was backed up by teachers we spoke to, who felt that their students were severely

lacking in these areas: "They are environmentally aware but not economically aware. Lots of them have got very little understanding of how the real world works."

11%

of girls said they were prepared for understanding finances at school.

GINA MILLER



As the founder of MoneyShe, a platform designed to empower women to invest, save and understand finance, Gina Miller is passionate about an increased financial education for girls.

"Skills for life include financial skills because there's a very marked connection between stress levels and financial health. The idea of freedom of choice and empowerment for women is not possible without a financial foundation. And the impact of this is that we have a gender pay gap and savings gap that will take hundreds of years to close. Women are living longer, and the practical effect of that is more women living in poverty in old age; without financial education, your future self is in danger of living in poverty, to the tune of four times that of men.

"There are three practical steps that must be taken, with schools at the heart, to achieve the missing equality pieces here. Firstly, a collective lobbying of government to introduce financial education into the curriculum from year 10 and 11. Embedded, not just a nod to. Secondly, improving the inspiration models that girls have access to. Girls have to see themselves in the people they look up to. Finally, encouraging girls to realise if they don't like what they see, they must be the change in business, culture, politics, finance, the places they are worried about that lack trust."



Our research also found that girls truly value their safety and security, with one respondent calling for schools to better prepare them in "survival skills," saying: "We need to be more prepared for the worst of situations. I see more and more missing or harmed people, and I feel I should know how to take care of myself in a potentially dangerous situation."

Beyond these 'hard' skills, girls have called on schools to better prepare them to understand current affairs, with a number of students we spoke to saying that schools could do more to help them engage with the news, particularly in an era of social media and fake news. One girl said: "Social media is just

a system that sells for other people's enjoyment. It's all different lies and false information."

This is even recognised at a young age, with a primary school interviewee who uses TikTok understanding much of what she sees is "fake" and "over exaggerated."

This backs up our research findings that girls tend to use social media to engage with the news but that they do not necessarily trust what they see: "What could be done at school more more is unbiased political education. I do not think one session out of the entire year is enough to spot fake news."

It is this inconsistency, from financial skills to careers advice to current affairs, that appears to be a significant challenge to be addressed. Having an extremely limited number of lessons around these areas does little to prepare girls to truly understand the world: "A lot of people talk about climate change and sustainability, for example in terms of charities and organisations addressing it, but we don't learn about the underlying problem, how it started or came to this point. In politics too, we do not get taught about issues until we're old enough to vote on them. When you're younger, the decision is made for you, even though it might be you who ends up impacted."



DR RANDY TESTA



**Associate Director at Harvard Graduate School of Education, Dr Randy Testa shared his views on how we empower girls to shape the world.**

"One of the things we have to overcome in girls' education is what Carol Gilligan and Lyn Mikel-Brown call in their book **Meeting at the Crossroads** 'the tyranny of nice and kind'. Here's what I mean: I ask girls when I go into all-girls' schools, 'Have you ever seen your teachers fight'? Over politics, for example. The answer has been no every single time in 30 years. How are girls going to learn how to be confident in their own voices and in their own opinions if this behaviour isn't modelled for them and encouraged in them? I'm talking about how people learn how to argue both intelligently and passionately at the same time. No split in reason and feeling. Gilligan and Brown note that one of the central ways girls learn to disconnect from their own thoughts and feelings is from their female teachers.

"The corrective is schools where girls are encouraged to be outspoken, where the curriculum is messy, where girls have genuine leadership roles. I would teach case studies of Greta Thunberg, Darnella Frazier and Malala Yousafzai – three young women, adolescents who have demonstrated political resistance. Why did they do what they did, and what were the forces around them that inspired it? That's your curriculum.

"Notice also that none of these three are boys. Boys have generally not stepped up in the way girls have. Preparing girls for the world involves an education that ensures they stay connected to their own knowledge and feelings of the world around them and that they can act on that knowledge and those feelings in order to be 'intelligently disruptive'."

**"We need to be more prepared for the worst of situations. I see more and more missing or harmed people, and I feel I should know how to take care of myself in a potentially dangerous situation."**

– Sixth form student

# Insights from educators

JO SHARROCK



**Jo Sharrock,  
Head of Shrewsbury  
High School.**

“Although concerning, a lack of self-assurance in navigating news, media and discerning the truth is no surprise given the current landscape. This is certainly something that those responsible for girls’ education can continue to address. Whilst efforts are already focussed on better preparation and readiness for work and the wider world, there is clearly more that society can be doing to support girls and young women. It will be vital to engage girls directly on how school, employers and society can best support them to thrive as they move through life.”

ALISON SEFTON



**Alison Sefton,  
Head of Norwich  
High School.**

“Society can assume a young person will have fully formed views and can deal with the fallout when things go wrong – that’s not always the case. We need places for young people to be able to learn and debate what has happened so that they can then move forward. We have to be careful not to judge our young people with the way we expect mature adults to work through a problem. We’re still there to scaffold them with these debates and learnings. I say to our students, in the words of Maya Angelou, ‘Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.’”

DR KEVIN STANNARD



**Dr Kevin Stannard,  
Director of Innovation  
and Learning at the GDST.**

The survey results that relate to readiness eerily mirror those that bear on leadership in that headline findings are not necessarily what they seem. The girls in the survey, asked about the skills they think they’ll need, have effectively answered with a much better question: what do we mean by skills? Their responses invite educators to redefine what we think we mean by skills and then to review how we prepare young people for the world ahead.

Schools might push back when faced with evidence about how ill-prepared young people feel. But we might well be arguing at cross purposes. The girls in the survey reject narrow, traditional, definitions of ‘careers’ education and related curriculum content.

There is an appetite for more ‘instrumentalist’ teaching about finance. The sighs from teachers who aspire to more abstract ideals are almost audible. But there is a sharp edge to this appetite, for we know that gender inequalities widen when women who are marginalised in the workforce are left ill-equipped to manage tight budgets. Within relationships, asymmetrical understanding of finances creates its own inequality.

Our young people think that being prepared (skilled) for the future goes well beyond even the World Economic Forum’s wide umbrella – including problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, technology. Respondents to the survey understand and appreciate the need to deal with the overload of ‘news’, much of it fake. The ability to sift and signify information is clearly seen as a vital skill for success and fulfilment in the future.

Being prepared for the future has another crucial dimension according to our survey respondents. Young people want to be able to deal with alternative views, to listen but to be prepared to challenge – being prepared means being equipped with the tools for civil discourse. This is encouragingly robust as a response and should be welcomed by educators who want to prepare students for, rather than protect them from, debates and differences.

# Conclusions and next steps



“We now must recognise that certain topics and areas need to be conveyed in different ways to different groups.”

– Dr Kevin Stannard

CONCLUSIONS FROM DR KEVIN STANNARD

There is a tendency for schools to respond to an emerging concern by adding something to an already over-stuffed curriculum. A different view of leadership? Maybe a lunch-time club or after-school activity. We need to teach more about finance? Add it to the carousel. Civil discourse? Bolt it on.

This is unsustainable. It doesn't just stretch things to breaking point; it massively undervalues whatever is being added and leaves untouched what is already there.

Gender equality in schools must be addressed by design, and that means not adding incrementally to the curriculum

but taking it apart and building it afresh to ensure we are providing young people with robust foundations for their future lives. This is about planning for the long term. And it isn't only about content. Attitudes about leadership and readiness to deal with divergent ideas develop not through what is taught but how it's taught.

We now must recognise that certain topics and areas need to be conveyed in different ways to different groups. Girls' lived experiences are different from boys'. As girls develop into women, they face discrete societal expectations and life choices that will inevitably have

an impact on the paths they take. This is a fact, borne out by the voices in this survey, and it needs to be explicitly implemented and reflected in certain areas of girls' education and learning design.

The survey must be a clarion call to educators to look at the totality of what we do and to hold it and ourselves to account for whether and how each component contributes to designing equality of opportunity and developing confidence and knowledge that will sustain and support girls and young women in their future lives.

JOSEPHINE HANSOM,  
MANAGING DIRECTOR OF YOUTHSIGHT RESEARCH  
AND FELLOW OF THE MARKET RESEARCH SOCIETY



As a research agency, we focus on the journey into adulthood that every young person must navigate and the insights we uncover to help organisations understand what it is like to be young today. What I can say without a shadow of a doubt is that growing up in 2022 is not easy, and this research doesn't shy away from that fact. This report gives a clear, nationally representative picture of girls growing up now and how their motivations, dreams and ambitions are shaped over time.

As a GDST alumna myself (Sydenham High School), I was keen for my research agency,

YouthSight, to work with the GDST to deliver this robust research to mark its 150th anniversary. I was impressed by the commitment in the research brief to use the data from this study outside of the GDST and to improve the delivery of education to girls everywhere.

The end result is a report that I'm proud to be a part of. Of course there will always be areas for improvement and change; however, I hope that this research will mark the progress made, allowing us to look back in the future and see how far we will have come.

“What I can say without a shadow of a doubt is that growing up in 2022 is not easy, and this research doesn't shy away from that fact.”

– Josephine Hansom



NEXT STEPS

This report is just the start of a conversation. The GDST wants to play a part in working towards a world of full gender equality. We have engaged teachers, students and experts in the field of education and equality, but

we must go further and wider. And, while there are significant conclusions to be drawn in this report, it has also uncovered plenty of questions that we will need to consider moving forward.

We should seek to better understand precisely which industries girls want to enter and why they are less likely to enter others.



LEADERSHIP AND AMBITIONS

Our findings showed that girls perceive leadership in a different way to boys. Many remain passionate about becoming leaders; however, their priorities lie in enjoyment, health, safety and security, and following their passions. Our qualitative research suggests this is not an outright rejection of leadership but rather, traditional models and expectations defined by a patriarchal culture. With this in mind, we must explore what girls perceive to be the most appropriate leadership skills and how these skills can be developed and nurtured in schools and elsewhere.

We should also seek to better understand precisely which industries girls want to enter

and why they are less likely to enter others. What are their impressions of different sectors? What barriers do they see? How can we change these perceptions, and what can we do to help girls feel better equipped and more confident to overcome them? Forging closer relationships with such industries to help reframe and reshape could be one way of challenging the norms that prevent more girls from entering such professions.

And in inspiring girls to reshape the workplace to their needs and desires, we should acknowledge that despite significant progress, the workplace of today remains one that has been established by and for men.

As AllBright founder Debbie Wosskow OBE suggests, this has implications for how feasible it is for girls to fulfil their wish to work flexibly, whilst also having influence, impact and success in their chosen careers. To address this, we need to proactively explore and develop the role of male allyship, thinking about how we bring boys and men into the conversation to help reframe the working world in a more equitable way.

CONFIDENCE AND PERCEPTIONS

We should look to understand more about how girls' confidence is negatively impacted throughout their teenage years and how environmental factors affect this, and we should analyse different support structures and how successful they can be in helping girls maintain confidence at this crucial stage.

The psychology of risk-taking is another area that should be explored further. We found that girls are less likely to take risks than boys, particularly as they get older, which our interviews have suggested is due to environmental expectations. However, we should consider how girls define risk and

whether this should be viewed uniquely through a negative lens: for example, if risk mitigation leads to more sensible decision-making, this could be presented as an advantage and developed as such. This said, we see girls are prioritising their safety and security, which risks placing limits on what they feel able to achieve; we should thus make it a priority to look more deeply into what safety means to young women, particularly considering high-profile cases of misogyny and violence against women.

There is also significantly more work to be done in exploring the impact of social media on

girls' confidence, alongside, and building on, existing studies. While our research looked at the effect of social media on how girls interact with the news, our quantitative findings did not explore its impact on their confidence more broadly. This was a common theme that came out of both our interviews with students and with experts and should be looked at in greater detail so that schools and teachers are better informed and placed to help girls navigate the complexities of social media.

# We must seek to overturn a culture that has traditionally silenced women's voices and ensure that young women can hold their own in arguments and remain confident in their views.

FEEL WORLD READY

Although specific practical skills were highlighted as missing from or underrepresented in girls' education, we should look at how and why students are defining these barriers and the specific support they feel they need to overcome them. To be clear: the onus of this needs to be on society at large rather than just expecting schools to expand their curriculum.

There is scope for analysing different approaches to education around those practical elements of adult life and how successful they are perceived to be: for example, the difference in impact between annual events and a 'little and often' approach when it comes to financial education. We would be keen to explore the suggestions of our expert contributors, including Gina

Miller and Dr Randy Testa, who offered actionable steps towards providing girls with better financial education. This might involve more explicit discussions, and with girls themselves, of why and how we teach them about financial education. Women and men have different lived experiences and thus different needs. When it comes to issues of salary and pensions, for example, girls need to learn to think critically about gaining and maintaining financial stability, and this content and mindset must be incorporated into school curricula.

This might also involve bringing in a wider range of role models from schools' networks of alumnae and wider industry contacts, as Gina Miller and Debbie Woskow OBE observe,

thus demonstrating more practical ways in which girls can both benefit from and deliver change.

We also need to give due consideration to the ongoing societal issue of how we learn to listen to opposing views and how to disagree agreeably; we must seek to overturn a culture that has traditionally silenced women's voices and ensure that young women can hold their own in arguments and remain confident in their views. Preparing girls to engage actively and courteously in current affairs and polarising issues will be not only a crucial step in amplifying their voices, but also an essential survival skill for them in the modern world.

Finally, this research does not separately document the views of trans or non-binary young people. Young people taking part in the survey were able to identify their own gender with an option for those who describe their gender differently from male or female, although the number identifying as neither male or female was not large enough to include in the quantitative survey itself. For further depth and breadth of understanding and to ensure inclusivity, there is scope for

including transgender and non-binary young people in further iterations of this research as a clearly identified cohort and in a sample size that is statistically comparable. We must acknowledge the ongoing debate and discussion around gender identity and shifting norms and, indeed, all voices need to be heard and involved as we discuss the needs and desires of the next generation of young people to shape the workplace and wider society.



MOVING FORWARD

While there are clear action points for the education and equalities sectors to consider, we now want to work with other stakeholders in the industry: policymakers on how we can better curate curricula so that girls are truly prepared for the world, and we can safeguard against drops in confidence through puberty; universities so that the transition from school into girls' first real world and independent experiences can be far more closely aligned; and businesses to ensure that their mission and values reflect and facilitate the more equitable environments that girls want to see, experience and lead.

We also want to bring families onto this journey to ensure that girls are supported in following their passions, that their education continues beyond the classroom and that they are fully prepared to enter and understand the world around them.

Most importantly, to shape girls' futures, we must involve girls themselves. We should be continuing the conversation with the women of the future, making sure that any solutions work for them and that they have ample opportunity to speak openly and authentically to what they want. We should not be afraid to ask them whether

we need to improve and whether we have listened: give them a seat at the table and a leading role in creating a future fit for all women and girls.

If you want to support GDST on our journey to create a more equitable world for the next generation of women, we are keen to explore opportunities for collaboration and partnership or simply listen to your views. Please contact us if you would like to be involved.

[girlsutures@wes.gdst.net](mailto:girlsutures@wes.gdst.net)

# References

<sup>1</sup> Data drawn from a nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'Thinking about the kind of adult you want to become in the future, which of the following do you find the most and least important?'

<sup>2</sup> Data drawn from a nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'Thinking about the kind of adult you want to become in the future, which of the following do you find the most and least important?'

<sup>3</sup> Data drawn from a nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you feel positive or negative about the future in general?'

<sup>4</sup> Data drawn from a nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you feel prepared for the future?'

<sup>5</sup> Data drawn from a nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'I don't take part in certain subjects or hobbies because of my gender?'

<sup>6</sup> Data drawn from a nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 14–16, in response to question 'To what extent, if at all, do you think school prepares you for the adult world?'

<sup>7</sup> Data drawn from a nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 14–16, in response to question 'Which, if any, do you think school prepares you for?'

<sup>8</sup> Data drawn from a nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 14–16, in response to question 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements in terms of how you consume media content?'

<sup>9</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 690 girls aged 14–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement when considering the work you want to do in the future? - I want a job I enjoy'

<sup>10</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 690 girls aged 14–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement when considering the work you want to do in the future? - I want to work in an office'

<sup>11</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement when considering the work you want to do in the future? - I want to work in a leadership position'

<sup>12</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'How important, if at all, do you find the following when thinking about your future job? - I want to be my own boss'

<sup>13</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'Thinking about the kind of adult you want to become in the future, which of the following do you find the most and least important?'

<sup>14</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 690 girls aged 14–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement when considering the work you want to do in the future?'

<sup>15</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 690 girls aged 14–18, in response to question 'How important, if at all, do you find the following when thinking about your future job?'

<sup>16</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you feel personally responsible for creating a better future?'

<sup>17</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you feel personally responsible for creating a better future?'

<sup>18</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you feel personally responsible for creating a better future?'

<sup>19</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 690 girls aged 14–18, in response to question 'Which three, if any, of the following issues are the most important to you?'

<sup>20</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 690 girls aged 14–18, in response to questions 'Which three, if any, of the following issues are the most important to you?' and 'Do you feel you can have an impact on the following issues in the future?'

<sup>21</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18 in response to question 'Which three are you more passionate about?'

<sup>22</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18 in response to question 'Which three are you more passionate about?'

<sup>23</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 690 girls aged 14–18, in response to questions 'Which three, if any, of the following issues are the most important to you?' and 'And do you feel you can have an impact on the following issues in the future?'

<sup>24</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18 in response to question 'To what extent do you feel positive or negative about the future?'

<sup>25</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18 in response to question 'To what extent do you feel positive or negative about the future?'

<sup>26</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 690 girls aged 14–18 in response to question 'How easy or difficult do you think it will be to get a job you want in the future?'

<sup>27</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 690 girls aged 14–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you feel prepared for the future?'

<sup>28</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 690 girls aged 14–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I want to work in digital technology?'

<sup>29</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I don't take part in certain subjects or hobbies because of my gender?'

<sup>30</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18 in response to question 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I am comfortable taking risks?'

<sup>31</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18 in response to question 'To what extent do you feel positive or negative about the future?'

<sup>32</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18 in response to question 'How easy or difficult do you think it will be to get a job you want in the future?'

<sup>33</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 690 girls aged 14–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "I am comfortable taking risks?'

<sup>34</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 690 girls aged 14–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "I can overcome problems in life?'

<sup>35</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement "I can overcome problems in life?'

<sup>36</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'Which three, if any, of the following are you most concerned will stop you from achieving your dreams and goals?'

<sup>37</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'Which three, if any, of the following are you most concerned will stop you from achieving your dreams and goals?'

<sup>38</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you feel prepared for the future?'

<sup>39</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you feel prepared for the future?'

<sup>40</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'To what extent, if at all, do you think school prepares you for the adult world?'

<sup>41</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 690 girls aged 14–18, in response to question 'Which, if any, of the following do you think school prepares you for' and 'Which, if any, do you want school to prepare you for?'

<sup>42</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 14–18, in response to question 'Which, if any, of the following do you think school prepares you for?'

<sup>43</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 690 girls aged 14–18, in response to question 'Which, if any, of the following do you think school prepares you for' and 'Which, if any, do you want school to prepare you for?'

<sup>44</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 690 girls aged 14–18, in response to question 'Which, if any, of the following do you think school prepares you for?'

<sup>45</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 690 girls aged 14–18, in response to question 'Which, if any, of the following do you want school to prepare you for?'

<sup>46</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'How do you find out about what is happening in the world?'

<sup>47</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 690 girls aged 14–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements in terms of how you consume media content?'

<sup>48</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 690 girls aged 14–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements in terms of how you consume media content?'

<sup>49</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18 in response to question 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? I feel confident speaking to someone who has different views to me, I feel comfortable asking questions about topics that are difficult to talk about, I am confident in my own decisions/opinions even if others disagree with me'

<sup>50</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'How do you find out about what is happening in the world?'

<sup>51</sup> Data drawn from nationally representative sample of 1,358 girls aged 9–18, in response to question 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements in terms of how you consume media content?'

## About GDST

The Girls' Day School Trust (GDST) is a family of 25 independent schools and academies across the UK, with 4,000 staff educating 20,000 girls from ages three to 18. We pride ourselves on the excellent academic and pastoral provision on offer in our schools; GDST girls are supported to be happy, confident and fearless. We tailor our approach to how girls learn best, providing them with the attributes they need to excel.

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