

# GIRLS IN CANADA TODAY

NATIONAL OPINION POLL & REPORT  
ON THE STATUS OF GIRLS

MARCH 8, 2011 - 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY



GIRLS ACTION  
FOUNDATION

The vision of **GIRLS ACTION FOUNDATION** is that all girls grow up strong, smart, fierce and free.

On March 8, 2011, the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day, GIRLS ACTION is pleased to present Girls in Canada Today.

**WHAT ARE THE ISSUES FACING GIRLS IN CANADA TODAY?**

**WHAT DO CANADIANS THINK ABOUT GIRLS' OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES?**

**HOW IMPORTANT IS EQUALITY BETWEEN BOYS AND GIRLS AS A CANADIAN VALUE?**

These are the questions Girls Action Foundation answers in this report. We found that equity is important to the vast majority of Canadians. Still, inequity persists and Canadians are concerned about the significant barriers girls face as they grow up.

This report draws from two sources:

1. A public opinion poll of Canadians conducted by Angus Reid Public Opinion in January 2011
2. A review of statistics and literature on girls and young women in Canada

Girls Action Foundation is sharing this report to raise awareness of the struggles still facing girls today, and to empower more Canadians to make a difference for the next generation.

# RESULTS OF NATIONAL PUBLIC OPINION POLL

In January 2011, Angus Reid Public Opinion conducted a national poll of a representative sample of Canadians, commissioned by Girls Action Foundation. The results of the survey shed light on Canadians' perceptions of the challenges and opportunities facing girls today.

## **NATIONAL CONSENSUS: GENDER EQUALITY IS A KEY CANADIAN VALUE.**

Survey results clearly show that equity between girls and boys is thought to be an important Canadian value. Over nine in ten Canadians (93%) agree that "the belief that girls and boys should have equal rights and privileges is fundamental to what it means to be Canadian."

## **GIRLS & LEADERSHIP: MYTH AND REALITY**

Over three-quarters of Canadians believe that girls have the same or better chances than boys to enter leadership roles. The survey found that 76% of Canadians think that girls have greater or equal opportunities to make it into positions of leadership.

The poll also found that 86% of Canadians agree that it is important to have equal representation of men and women in leadership roles.

Despite these beliefs, startling gender disparities between men and women continue to exist:

- Men outnumber women 4 to 1 among Canada's elected representatives (Equal Voice, 2009).
- Only 4% of CEOs in Canada's top 500 companies are women; 96% are men (Catalyst 2010).
- 2/3 of minimum wage workers are women (Statistics Canada, 2004).

Interestingly, fewer Canadians are concerned about these gender disparities than those that believe it is important to have equal representation of men and women in leadership roles. Regarding the current inequity in elected representatives, only 69% of Canadians believe it should be of national concern. Regarding the fact that almost all CEOs are men is concerning to 74% of Canadians.

## **CANADIANS ARE CONCERNED ABOUT GIRLS' WELL-BEING**

The poll showed that a strong majority of Canadians are concerned about specific challenges that girls today are facing in their daily lives.

### **DEPRESSION & MENTAL HEALTH**

Canadians are concerned about the mental health of girls. Teenage girls are 3 times as likely as boys to suffer from depression, a fact that concerns 85% of Canadians. (source: Leischield et al, 2000).

Aboriginal girls have particularly high rates of attempted suicide, an issue that 9 in 10 Canadians (89%) say should be a concern for the entire country. In British Columbia, 29% of Aboriginal girls report that they seriously consider suicide (source: McCreary Centre, 2005).

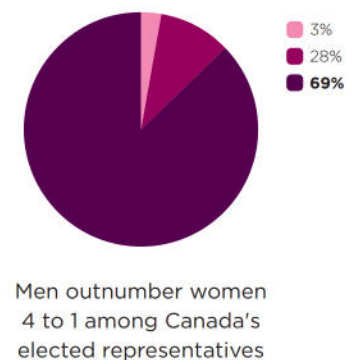
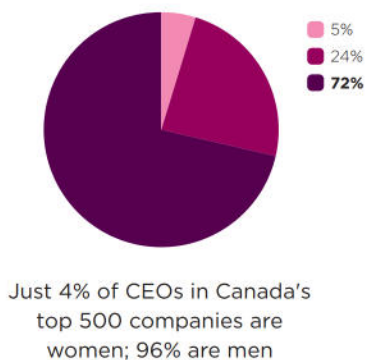
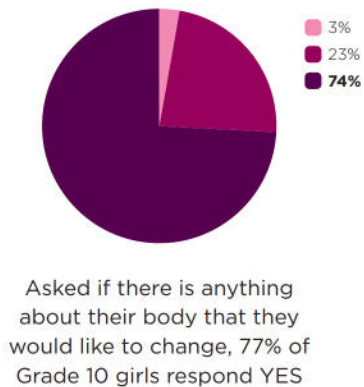
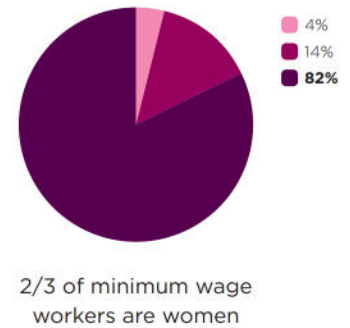
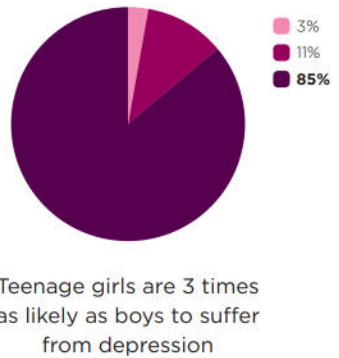
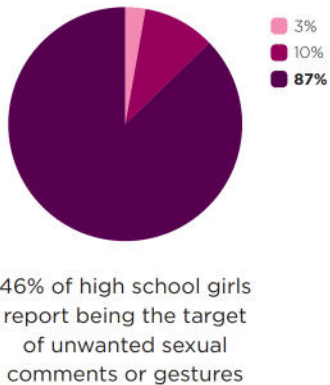
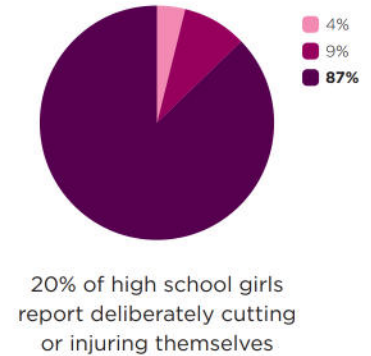
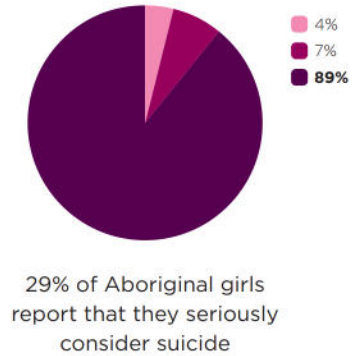
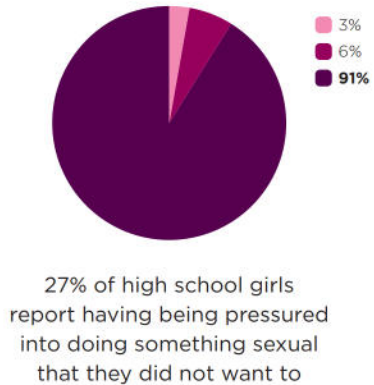
### **SEXUAL HARASSMENT & HYPER-SEXUAL REPRESENTATION OF YOUNG WOMEN**

87% of Canadians think that media advertising puts too much emphasis on young women being sexy and not enough on their abilities and intelligence.

The high rate of sexual harassment experienced by teenage girls concerns the great majority (87%) of Canadians. In Ontario, half of high school girls (46%) report being the target of unwanted sexual comments or gestures in the last 3 months (source: CAMH Centre for Prevention Science, 2008).

# SUMMARY OF SURVEY DATA

IN YOUR VIEW, WOULD YOU SAY THE FOLLOWING FACTS SHOULD BE A CONCERN, OR SHOULD NOT BE A CONCERN OF ALL CANADIANS?



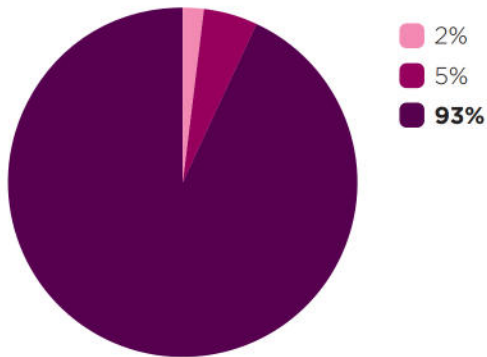
- NOT SURE
- SHOULD BE A MINOR / NOT A CONCERN
- SHOULD BE A MAJOR / MODERATE CONCERN

## METHODOLOGY

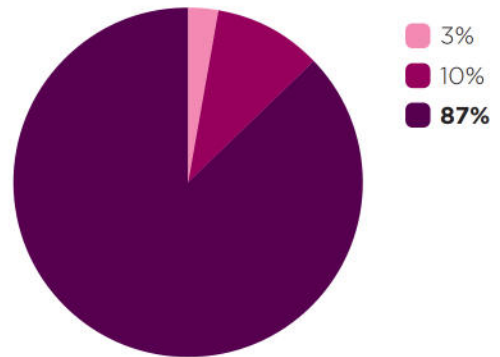
From January 30 to January 31, 2011, on behalf of the GIRLS ACTION FOUNDATION, Angus Reid Public Opinion conducted an online survey among 1,016 randomly selected Canadian adults who are Angus Reid Forum panelists. The margin of error—which measures sampling variability—is +/- 3.1%, 19 times out of 20. The results have been statistically weighted according to the most current education, age, gender and region Census data to ensure a sample representative of the entire adult population of Canada. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding.

# SUMMARY OF SURVEY DATA

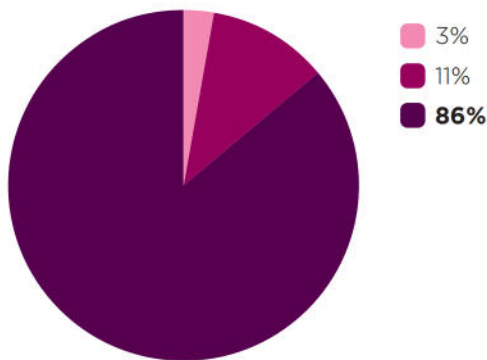
## OVERALL DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?



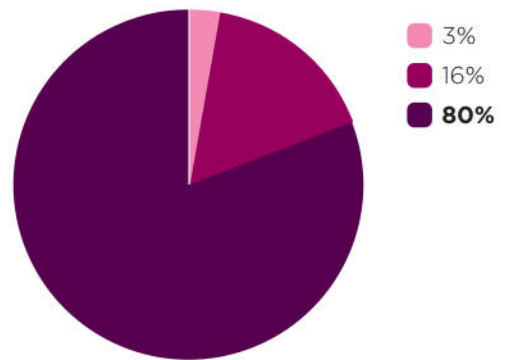
The belief that girls and boys should have equal rights and privileges is fundamental to what it means to be Canadian.



Media advertising puts too much emphasis on young women being sexy and not enough on their abilities and intelligence.



It is important to have equal representation of men and women in leadership roles.



Violence against women is a serious problem in Canada today

- NOT SURE
- DISAGREE
- AGREE

### METHODOLOGY

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# GIRLS TODAY

ISSUES FACED BY GIRLS IN CANADA

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“Girls have a lot to share about  
how to make change happen.”

- GIRL PARTICIPANT

Despite advances over the years, girls in Canada face pressures—new and old—that limit their potential. In this section, **GIRLS ACTION FOUNDATION** presents Canadian statistics and research findings that prove that the real-life challenges of girls haven't been fixed, particularly for girls who are marginalized. In addition to challenges to do with self-esteem, body image and mental and physical health, girls are impacted each day by systemic barriers such as poverty, rural location, racialization, immigration and the colonization of Aboriginal people.

And yet, for every girl – no matter the obstacles she faces – a spark exists within her. **GIRLS ACTION FOUNDATION** believes in the potential of girls and young women to be change-makers. When girls receive the support they need, an incredible ripple effect is created. They grow up courageous. They improve their own socio-economic situation and that of their communities. They help build a stronger economy, environment, and society for all.



## DISCRIMINATION + SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Girls and boys continue to learn through experience that girls have less status, less authority as decision-makers and participators in shaping their public or private lives, and that implicitly or explicitly society approves of 'girls being girls, and boys being boys'

**(Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence, 2001).**

Girls aged 5-19 living in rural areas have an overall mortality rate 2.5 times higher than girls who live in cities

**(Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2006).**

Social messages about who is and who is not desirable and what characteristics constitute 'beauty' converge to affect the self-esteem and self-image of racialized girls. The results include self consciousness about body image, low self-esteem and eating disorders

**(FREDA Centre for Research on Violence against Women and Children, 2001).**

Young immigrant females are much more likely to be unemployed than their older or Canadian-born counterparts. In 2001, 14.9% of foreign-born female labour force participants aged 15 to 24 were unemployed

**(Statistics Canada, 2005).**

The experiences of young immigrant women vary but can include culture shock, peer pressure, a lack of information focusing on their needs, heavy family responsibilities including translation and interpretation for parents, inter-generational conflicts with parents who have different cultural expectations of them, a loss of status after immigration, discrimination, underemployment, and racism

**(Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 2003).**

The experience of difference had such consequences for the [newcomer female] youth as silencing the self, feeling they did not belong in their new country of residence, anglicizing their names to make belonging easier, and feeling they were looked down upon

**(Status of Women Canada, 2005).**

“What matters to me are issues of social change. I like to work with media to show a different message of girls and women of colour. I want to do outreach to other girls so they don’t feel isolated. I want to work with teachers so they can change how we are treated in schools, so we can change systemic racism, which affects us a lot.”

- YOUNG WOMAN PARTICIPANT

“To me, leadership means making a difference in others’ lives and challenging myself to always do what is right for me.”

- GIRL PARTICIPANT

“I think that violence towards Aboriginal girls and women is perpetuated within society. It is not only one person making us feel worthless. Actually, it’s the generally accepted stereotypes surrounding Aboriginal women.”

- YOUNG WOMAN PARTICIPANT

# MENTAL HEALTH

With the onset of puberty, girls are typically three times as likely as boys to suffer from depression due to low self-esteem, negative body image, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, and stress.

**(Leischield et al, 2000).**

Young women are more likely to report feeling constantly stressed than young men (44.0% vs. 28.7%)

**(CAMH, 2005).**

Girls are twice as likely to be prescribed medication for depression as boys

**(CAMH Centre for Prevention Science, 2005).**

Over 85% of the alcohol consumption reported by females aged 15–24 is consumed in excess of Canadian guidelines. 15% of young women aged 18–19, and 11% of women aged 20–24 reported heavy, frequent drinking

**(Canadian Addiction Survey, 2004).**

Young women face some disturbing risks. They experience higher rates of depression; and while more young men die by suicide, young women have nearly three times the rate of hospitalization for suicide attempts

**(Statistics Canada, 2006).**

20% of high school girls in BC report deliberately harming (cutting or injuring) themselves

**(McCreary Centre, 2009).**

29% of Aboriginal girls in BC report that they seriously consider suicide

**(McCreary Centre, 2005).**

38% of lesbian youth reported attempted suicide in the past year

**(Saewyc et al. 2007).**

Girls 10 to 14 years old are 5 times as likely to be hospitalized for attempted suicide as their male counterparts

**(Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006).**

“Sometimes you can’t really say things to a boy or even your parents. Sometimes you need to talk to a girl.”

- GIRL PARTICIPANT

“My goal is to start a project for other youth in my community to help them be less dependent on drugs and alcohol.”

- YOUNG WOMAN PARTICIPANT

“I am great at speaking up. I can speak out about issues, even things that other people may not want to talk about because it makes them uncomfortable. ”

- GIRL PARTICIPANT

“The main challenge that I face in taking on leadership is when there’s no one to talk to about my dreams and ideas ”

- GIRL PARTICIPANT

## SELF ESTEEM & BODY IMAGE

Because a young woman of colour is bombarded with society's limiting messages regarding both her race and her gender, the damaging affect on her confidence in her abilities and intrinsic worth are potentially compounded

**(Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2006).**

60% of 16 year-old girls in Quebec know friends who are dieting to get thinner; 53% wish they were thinner themselves

**(Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2002).**

Today's girls receive a barrage of hypersexual media images of girls and women, which can impact their ability to concentrate and to feel self-worth.

**(American Psychological Associate, 2007).**

In Canadian girls, dissatisfaction with their bodies increases as they enter their teen years. When asked the question — “Is there anything about your body you would like to change?” 43% of grade 6 girls responded Yes, 59% of seventh graders, 69% of eight graders, 75% of ninth graders and 77% of tenth graders

**(Public Health Agency of Canada, 1999).**

## SEXUAL HEALTH

Young women's sexual health is a major concern. 40% cent of sexually active unmarried girls aged 15-17 report not using contraception consistently. Teen girls aged 15-19 have six times the average rates of chlamydia and gonorrhea infections

**(Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2003).**

The greatest increase in new [HIV] infections has been among young women, aged 15 to 29.

**(Public Health Agency of Canada, 2009).**

Alarminglly, a large and increasing portion of HIV infections are occurring in young Aboriginal women between 15-29 years old. Between 1985 and 1995, roughly 13% of HIV-positive test reports among Aboriginal women were in young women in this age group. However, this percentage has increased steadily to 45% in 2001

**(Gatali & Archibald 2003). (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2004)**

“Just because I put my picture or information on Facebook doesn’t mean that it’s OK to stalk me or ask for naked pictures. I shouldn’t be blamed when other people are inappropriate or violent.”

- YOUNG WOMAN PARTICIPANT

“I struggle with being someone who has achieved many things, but also has many negative experiences and I struggle with thinking I have to only identify as one – a leader or a victim.”

- YOUNG WOMAN PARTICIPANT

“I am proud of my ability to think, be open, listen, network, resolve conflict, understand, control (in a good way).”

- GIRL PARTICIPANT

## VIOLENCE

27% of Ontario high school girls report having being pressured into doing something sexual that they did not want to do

**(CAMH Centre for Prevention Science, 2008).**

46% of Ontario high school girls report being the target of unwanted sexual comments or gestures in the last 3 months

**(CAMH Centre for Prevention Science, 2008).**

In Quebec, 43% of 16 year-old girls experience violence in romantic relationships with boys. One in five 16 year-old girls has been a victim of physical violence, and 1 in 10 has been a victim of sexual violence at the hands of her boyfriend

**(Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2002).**

The effects of sexual harassment are far-reaching. Girls often drop out of school, develop eating and other disorders, experience a lack of self-esteem, and suffer from depression and isolation

**(The Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence, 2001).**

Girls living with disabilities experience violence at a rate 4 times the national average

**(Razack, 1994).**

Of the more than 580 cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls across Canada, more than half are girls and young women under the age of 31

**(NWAC, 2010).**

Young women under 25 experience the highest rates of partner violence of all age groups

**(Statistics Canada, 2006).**



**GIRLS ACTION**  
FOUNDATION

“It took a while until I realized I wasn’t the only one, and that it wasn’t my fault. I used to think this is just what happens in relationships – that the nasty words and hitting were normal. ”

- YOUNG WOMAN PARTICIPANT

“I want to take the struggles that I’ve been through and let them push me towards fulfilling my goals. But at the same time, I still go through some of these struggles and they pull me back – limits because of my race, class, gender and other social markers. ”

- YOUNG WOMAN PARTICIPANT

“I come from a small and isolated community. I realized I could become a leader and a guide to have a better and safe community.”

- GIRL PARTICIPANT

# GIRLS ACTION FOUNDATION

## ABOUT US

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“The most important thing I took from  
GIRLS ACTION FOUNDATION  
was empowerment. I now feel empowered  
to start and support projects in my community.”

- YOUNG WOMAN PARTICIPANT

Girls Action Foundation is a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting girls and young women to overcome barriers to reach their true potential. We operate on a national scale with a local impact reaching over 60,000 girls and young women annually.

Since 1995, through innovative workshops, programs, arts and social media, Girls Action has built confidence, critical thinking skills, and self-reliance in girls and young women from coast to coast.

We are the only national organization dedicated to girls that acts as a catalyst, equipping local groups to design and deliver top-notch programs that help girls realize their potential.

**WHAT WE DO**

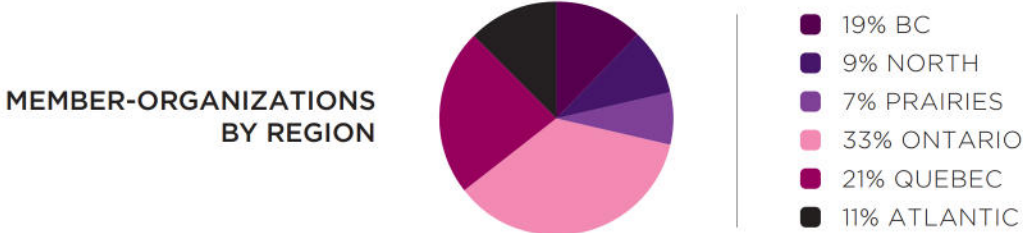
- Empowerment programs for girls in marginalized communities
- Leadership training, mentors and grants for young women making a difference
- Assistance for communities wanting to start new girls’ programs – training, tools and coaching
- A learning and action network that unites 240 member-organizations across Canada.

**WHO WE REACH**

The 240 member-organizations of the Girls Action Network are found in all provinces and territories. To date Girls Action has mentored and trained over 100 start-up initiatives that empower girls and young women across Canada.

We ensure our programs reach girls & communities who can benefit most from the support. 90% of girls & women participating in Girls Action programs come from marginalized communities.

**GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF ASSOCIATE MEMBERS**



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GIRLS ACTION  
FOUNDATION

At GIRLS ACTION  
FOUNDATION, we believe  
in the potential of girls  
and young women to be  
change-makers.

GIRLS ACTION FOUNDATION is a pan-Canadian non-profit organization dedicated to supporting girls and young women to overcome barriers to reach their true potential. We operate on a national scale with a local impact reaching over 60,000 girls and young women annually. Our activities include girls' empowerment programs, training for educators, and seed grants for young women change-makers.

