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Female Youth Participation in the Urban Milieu: Unpacking Barriers and Opportunities

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Abstract

Although the literature on youth civic engagement is copious, little light has been shed on the factors that either enable or impede girls' civic participation in urban settings. In this paper, we examine girls' motivation for and spaces of community involvement in the Greater Toronto Area. In particular, we highlight the drivers and patterns of girls' civic engagement using the findings from our research study entitled Engaging Girls, Changing Communities (EGCC). Girls who participated in the EGCC study cited a number of factors that hindered their community participation: lack of opportunities and encouragement, a disconnect to community members, cultural and/or religious barriers, gender bias, antipathy towards the community, low self-esteem, and lack of time. The data also pointed to the importance of family/adult support in nurturing girls' leadership aspirations. We conclude this paper with a discussion on the implications associated with girls' civic participation that is characterized by an adult-informed paradigm.

Keywords: youth civic engagement, youth leadership, disadvantaged communities, youth studies, female empowerment

The struggle for equality is not just a woman's struggle. It is the struggle of every person who demands respect, justice and dignity. I strongly believe that we have everything to gain when we give women the means to change their lives for the better. Empower women and you will see a decrease in poverty, illiteracy, illness and violence.

Former Canadian Governor General Michelle Jean's comments on the eve of the Together for Women's Security conference, September 9, 2010, Ottawa.

Introduction

While much has been written about community participation by youth in general, it is less common to read a scholarly article that examines girls' perspectives on civic engagement. Our paper contributes to the discussion of youth civic engagement, focusing in particular on the civic engagement of girls in the greater Toronto area, which we investigated in our 2011–2014 study, Engaging Girls, Changing Communities (EGCC).¹ The results from this study suggested that little is known about girls' civic engagement in a changing urban setting, and this finding led to the formation of the Tikkun Olam project (2014–2017). This project builds on and broadens EGCC's efforts by including young women and men in the research; as well, it supports and offers resources

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to those youth who want to engage in change-oriented projects and community advocacy. EGCC was conceptualized with a framework that would (a) recognize the impact of changes in the urban environment and in Canada's population makeup, (b) position youth as assets and knowledge-brokers, and (c) underline the importance of youth community engagement. In this paper we first offer the context of the ever-changing urban environment. Next, we present literature that enumerates on the importance of community engagement for youth and their role in changing urban context. Last, we offer a description of EGCC, the study we conducted to examine girls' patterns of civic engagement, which is followed by a presentation and a discussion of the data.

Urban Environments and Canada's Population

Urban environments, such as the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), are, among other things, products of globalization, which has led to major shifts in both family structure and other social arenas. These shifts are facilitated by innovative global systems (e.g. Information Communication Technology) that are spreading across continents and providing new opportunities while simultaneously disrupting cultural traditions, including those here in Canada (Daniel, 2007). Scholars in urban studies underline that today, 50% of the world's population live in cities and that half of the world's population is now under 30 years old, which means that youth are in a position to influence the progression of urbanization and are highly committed to constructing urbanity.²

These statistics aside, it is important to acknowledge the recent debates in urban studies that point to the dramatic wave of urban restructuring since the 1980s and show how the territorial inequalities associated with previous cycles of industrialization are being replaced by a new mosaic of spatial unevenness, which can no longer be explained with traditional dichotomies like urban/rural, metropole/colony, First/Second/Third World, North/South, East/West, etc. (Brenner & Schmid, 2015, pp. 151-152). Moreover, scholars emphasize that the uneven spatial development under capitalism simultaneously produces divergent conditions of wealth and poverty, growth and decline, inclusion and exclusion, centrality and marginality, at all spatial scales from the neighbourhood to the planetary (Amin, 2007).

In Canada, the effects of the uneven distribution of wealth in major urban centres have been countered through, among other things, the launching of neighbourhood action for change. These initiatives identify marginalized neighborhoods with demonstrated concentrated levels of poverty and then target them with place-based community development³ initiatives. These initiatives are part of broader municipal urban renewal/revitalization efforts, and they increasingly involve community development that emphasizes resident engagement, collective decision-making, and collaborative forms of leadership. Well-known examples of resident-focused neighbourhood initiatives in Canada include Action for Neighbourhood Change in Toronto's "priority neighbourhoods," Calgary's United Way Neighbourhood Strategy, and Hamilton's Neighbourhood Action Strategy. While each initiative is unique in its design and structure, the initiatives together share a commitment to ideals of resident leadership, collaboration, and building on community strengths and assets.

The EGCC project targeted residents in Toronto's priority neighborhoods, with the aim of exploring the ways that girls participate in the development of these spaces. It is also a well-known fact that a high number of new Canadians settle in these neighbourhoods (City of Toronto, 2011). Thus, the overall goal of EGCC was to investigate how changes in urban settings impact families (especially immigrant families and youth), focusing on elements of congruence and divergence between country-of-origin culture and host/Canadian culture and the effects that these sometimes-clashing cultures have on youth community participation.

Youth as Assets and Youth Community Engagement

Conceptually, EGCC legitimized the framework where youth are presented both as assets with possibilities (Forman, 2004; Ginwright & Cammarotta, 2002) and as sources of knowledge and power (Dlamini, 2015; Fox, Mediratta & Ruglis 2010). The study of youth in urban areas has evolved from a framework that focused on the psychology of young people and the opportunity for interventions to improve future behaviours, such as ways to reduce teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, and other risky activities (Morrow, 2001), to a framework that (a) focuses on the challenges and deficiencies facing youth living in low-income environments, and (b) recognizes youth, not as problems to be studied and managed but as assets with possibilities.

Young people are particularly affected by the current transformation of the urban environment into a context of consumption, surveillance, and control. Although youth stress that their opinions about the future design of cities are seldom recognized and that indexes and city rankings rarely include a youth perspective, city governments and the private sector increasingly seek to maximize the potential of youth as both consumers and producers in the urban setting. Their efforts intersect with how young urbanites define themselves and with youth's varied and often contradictory ways of (re)imagining and (re)building urban spaces and places. These activities generate shared cultural spaces and lifestyles, and thus urban learning environments. The danger is that such emerging urban learning environments may also include illegal and violent activities and extremist (religious, right or left wing sociopolitical, etc.) local, national, or transnational communities. Thus, in the EGCC project, we were interested in supporting and building positive youth development for leadership and change in local communities.

The importance of youth civic engagement cannot be overemphasized. Some studies link civic engagement to good citizenship; that is, youth who are civically engaged do so in ways that are consistent with democratic principles and that benefit both participants and communities (Mernad, 2010). Knowledge of the democratic principles guiding their community can make youth who are civically engaged capable of analyzing their neighbourhoods; in so doing, they can identify problems and challenges in them (Daiute & Fine, 2003). To this end, civic engagement is seen as a tool that can prompt action leading to social change.

Moreover, in studies of positive youth development, civic engagement is often associated with leadership; that is, among the other benefits of civic engagement is the development of leadership abilities. Flanagan (2004) argues that civic engagement has the potential to foster social trust, solidarity, and accessible opportunities for the learning of leadership skills. Other scholars even go further and link local engagement in community organizations to providing a foundation for later civic leadership and global engagement (Perry & Katula, 2001; Kirlin, 2002; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997).

Literature on the importance of civic engagement runs parallel to literature that documents a decline in youth civic engagement; most of these latter studies originate in the United States (see Putnam, 2000). Canadian-based studies examining trends in youth civic activities originally focused either on youth's civic literacy, their general disposition towards politics, or their level of participation in traditional electoral politics such as voting, interest in politics, and membership in political parties (see Llewellyn & Westheimer, 2009; Barnard, Campbell & Smith, 2003; Bastedo, Dougherty, LeDuc, Rudny & Sommers, 2012; and Young & Cross, 2004). Weak interest and little knowledge about political issues or what O'Neil (2007) classifies as the "psychological dimension of politics" were seen as the main causes for youth's non-engagement in civic life (Dostie-Goulet, 2009; Blais & Loewen, 2011). For instance, Youniss et al (2002) discuss the importance of developing young people's civic competence to prepare them for political participation in the 21st century. They define civic competence as "an understanding of how government structure functions and the

acquisition of behaviours that allow citizens to participate in government and permit individuals to meet, discuss and collaborate to promote their interests within a framework of democratic principles” (p. 124).

Some scholarly works on youth civic engagement in Canada have recognized the limitations of the arguments of lack of political interest and lack of knowledge and have sought to offer more nuanced explanations for low youth engagement in formal politics. Blais and Loewen (2011), for example, posit that stage of life, political interest, and involvement in politics all influence the voting behaviour of youth, and that sociodemographic factors including age, income, gender, and residence have some moderate effect on youth voting pattern. But more importantly, and in line with the findings of Chareka et al (2006), Blais and Loewen’s analysis showed that youth perceive voting as a form of political engagement with little capacity to spur change. They stated that Canadian youth (a) regard participation in the electoral process as offering minimal real choice between political options, (the political parties and politicians, when you get rid of the bells and whistles are pretty much the same), (b) view the existing political system as unresponsive to their concerns, and (c) consider that ordinary politicians have very little real power to effect change.

Perhaps not surprising, however, Blais and Loewen discovered that Canadian youth are more likely to be involved in community-based activities than in formal politics. In line with this finding, some scholars have argued that civic engagement among Canadian youth is more likely to occur in the form of volunteerism and humanitarian work as opposed to traditional ways of political participation such as campaigning for a politician and putting up lawn signs (see Chareka, Sears & Chakaera, 2006; Gauthier, 2003). This argument reaffirms the findings of the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating conducted by Statistics Canada (1997, 2000), which revealed that young people between the ages of 15 and 24 account for 15% of volunteer hours in Canada. Gauthier (2003) explained that in order to achieve sustained youth engagement, it is important to create spaces for youth to function in a decision-making capacity. In light of his findings, he went on to recommend the “broadening [of] the concept of political participation” so as to embrace an interpretation that transcends electoral engagement (p. 275).

While all these Canadian studies present important insights into youth civic engagement, we did not find any that offered an analysis of the gender dynamics of youth participation, nor did we encounter any that examined how the concept of “space” in our now “networked society” where “digital natives” function, may in fact influence youth forms of participation. Hence, as well as underscoring the importance of civic engagement by youth, we also want to begin a dialogue about the importance of girls’ participation spaces. In this regard, we are influenced by the work of Ash Amin (2004, 2007) that presents spaces as no longer “bounded territories” but rather as diverse sites of practice shaped by ever-changing “topologies of actor networks, which are becoming increasingly dynamic and varied in spatial constitution” (Amin, 2004, p. 33). We therefore propose a dialogue that pays attention to the actors within the spaces of youth involvement: (a) at how these actors both influence and are in turn influenced by various networks (of culture, communication, economy), and (b) at how they facilitate or limit this involvement. Moreover, while emphasizing the importance of positive youth development, we further propose that youth in general and girls in particular can be prompted into community-changing action only if their civic engagement is (a) linked to a sense of “belonging,” (b) value-laden in that it links directly to their everyday social well-being, and (c) supported by their parents and other adults in the communities in which they live.

In examining the kinds of activities that urban girls participate in, EGCC wanted to determine whether or not such activities could be seen as contributing to the rebuilding/development of the spaces where the girls live. As well, this examination could enrich our understanding of the depth of girls’ civic engagement and at its sophistication and complexity, thus, rendering it different from that of earlier generations. Further some scholars have urged

researchers to look at the complex ways that youth use the Internet as a community-building tool and an instrument for civic engagement and political participation (see, for example, Cassell, Huffaker, Ferriman & Tversky, 2006). Thus, we used data from EGCC to look at the places (e.g., schools, community centres, churches) where girls said they participated (a) to examine the reasons they offered for their involvement, and (b) to discuss what they identified as barriers to their participation.

The following section offers a description of EGCC, the study we conducted to examine girls' patterns of civic engagement. This description is followed by a presentation of the data and a discussion that uses concepts by Hooks (2009) and Amin (2007), respectively, of "belonging" to and acting in a particular space to facilitate our discussion of the girls' statements about the barriers to their engagement.

Engaging Girls, Changing Communities (EGCC) Methodology

EGCC was a SSHRC-funded three-year community–university research project and partnership development grant that examined girls' concepts of and experiences with leadership and civic engagement in an urban environment. The community dialogue approach (Anucha, 2013; Anucha 2009-2014) framed EGCC.⁴ Using elements of traditional action research, the community dialogue approach conceptualizes (a) community engagement as a methodological practice, and (b) research as a community dialogue that must fully engage community stakeholders. Community partners are extensively involved in defining the focus and implementation of the research. The community dialogue approach emphasizes the use of multi-methods and encourages applied research that is meaningful to the community, yet maintains rigorous research standards.

The Community Dialogue Approach embraces elements of traditional action research. Action research involves alternating cycles of research, translation and transfer of research findings to government, NGOs and civil society (e.g. parents/caregivers, parent-teacher associations, faith-based and traditional leaders), and action (e.g. the delivery of school and/or community-based interventions) (Nastasi, Varjas, Bernstein, & Jayasena, 2000; Nelson, Poland, Murray, & Maticka-Tyndale, 2004; Smith, Willms & Johnson, 1997). As such, it insures that knowledge translation and collaborative partnerships are an integral part of the research process. Action Research also accommodates a variety of data collection and analysis methods, with these selected based on the specific nature of the research questions being pursued, but with particular attention paid to the "translation friendliness" of research results to communities.

After receiving funding, the EGCC project followed the typical research protocol in which university investigators request and receive ethics clearance from the related Research Ethics Boards. In its application for funding, EGCC had partnered with community organizations with robust histories of youth programs and who had multiple locations across the Greater Toronto Area. These community organizations were central to youth recruitment; furthermore, their varied locations made it possible to recruit girls who would offer information about diverse forms of participation across sociocultural boundaries.

The EGCC project consisted of three stages. First, we held a community forum to engage our community partners and community youth representatives in a dialogue to help shape the project. Here, we introduced the project and its purpose, discussed investigative questions, and presented methods for various ways people could participate. Second, using our community partners and other social media forums like Facebook, we recruited youth girls as researchers to conduct the interviews with their peers. The selection of youth researchers (YR) was purposive (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Ristock & Grieger, 1996), focusing on girls 16 to 22 years who were enrolled in education institutions (high schools, colleges or universities). The YR included five African

Canadians, two Caribbean Canadians and one Turkish Canadian. A faculty researcher along with a doctoral student who was also a researcher in the project trained them in interview techniques. Following their training, the youth researchers conducted and transcribed the interviews with other girls.

The interviews were conducted using the Long Interview method (McCracken, 1988), a qualitative research strategy that allows researchers to illuminate the 'life world' of participants and the content and pattern of their everyday experiences. The Long Interview provides researchers "the opportunity to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves" (McCracken, 1988, p. 9). As well, this method allowed researchers to undertake a 'cultural review'; that is, prior to beginning the interviewing, youth interviewers undertook a review of personal attitudes, values, experiences and the beliefs that might shape the research. Once the interviews were completed, they were read for emerging themes and were coded using the Nvivo software. The university researchers and youth researchers analyzed transcripts together.

The interviewers asked the girls to explain what they understood leadership to be and to situate themselves within that definition; that is, to state whether they viewed themselves as leaders or not leaders in terms of their own definition. The girls were also asked to outline their community activities and reasons for doing them and to describe their perspective on barriers and facilitators to female leadership and community engagement in urban spaces. This interview stage of the EGCC project was followed by an end-of-year celebration forum, which, like the first forum, brought together community–university partners to discuss the next stage of the project and to have the youth researchers share their interviewing experiences.

The third stage of EGCC involved facilitating youth-led community initiatives, with the overarching objective of introducing novel avenues of engaging young women and girls in leadership and community activities. Furthermore, the project's partnership agreement with community organizations proposed harmonizing the leadership aspirations of the young women and girls with existing leadership programs that the community organizations offered. The data and discussion in this paper draw from the second stage of the project: the interview stage.

Findings

In total, 54 girls from different ethnic backgrounds were interviewed. The interviewees culturally identified themselves as Jamaican, Nigerian, South Asian, East African, Turkish, Chinese, Ethiopian, Aboriginal, West Indian, Greek, Caucasian, Latin American, Mixed, and Black. In our analysis of the interview data, we found that girls (a) participated in a variety of venues (e.g., school, church) based to their sense of belonging to the space, which we argue are adult-shaped despite the varying youth-thought reasons for engagement, (b) were aware of the challenges they faced, and (c) were aware of their gender identity and the complex ways that it intersected with potential for leadership roles and community engagement opportunities.

Places of and Reasons for Participation

All the female youth participants in our study responded positively to the question that asked if they participated in their community. They offered examples of a variety of activities that they were engaged in that impacted their community. Of the 54 respondents, three said that they were involved only with their school but not with the broader community, one had reduced her level of participation at the time of the interview because of lack of time due to job hours, and two had stopped their community activities because they did not have a good relationship with community residents.

In answering the question that asked them to state the places where they participated, almost all the interviewees named formally structured spaces such as community centres, NGOs, high school or university clubs, church, etc. Table 1 outlines these places and the number of girls associated with each space.

Table 1

Spaces of community participation

Type of space	Number of Respondents
Community centre/youth centre	11
Community organizations/NGOs/cultural groups	13
Community health care centre/hospice/seniors' care centre hospital	6
Day care/child care	3
Church	2
Cyberspace (e. g. blogs)	2
School or high school clubs & organizations	6
University clubs/organizations	4
Production company	1
Surroundings/neighbourhood initiative (e.g., picking up garbage, collecting donation for homeless persons, block parties, etc.)	3
TOTAL	51 ⁵

The number of activities girls were engaged in varied and indicated some level of commitment on the part of each participant. Some mentioned working with young children in places of worship (church daycare, Sunday school, arts and craft held in churches). Others were involved in environmental cleanup, such as picking up litter in the community or around their school, or painting murals on buildings to beautify their community. Still others were involved in teaching or tutoring activities, such as showing seniors in community centres how to use a computer or working with community outreach workers in community centres to conduct workshops for their peers on body image.

There were those who took on a leadership role, serving as board members in the organizations with which they affiliated; a position that then gave them the latitude to select activities on which to focus for the year. These were five of the thirteen girls whose central space of community engagement was community organizations/NGOs/cultural groups. In fact, these particular girls were among those who also explicitly mentioned being involved in advocacy actions

such as giving talks about queer rights or about living as an Aboriginal person in an urban environment.

When asked why they participated, girls predominantly answered that they wanted to help the community or that the activity met their social needs (e.g., a girl who was a member in a school's basketball club teaching younger kids to play basketball) or because they enjoyed what they did and felt safe in the space where they participated.⁶ Other reasons included a desire to be part of the change that they wanted to see happen, or being able to use their community activities to advance future career opportunities, as indicated by the following two quotes:

I feel like you can't [just] live in an area. You know, you have to be willing to be part of it and make a change. If you're not happy with something, don't just live with it and complain. [...] You should do something about it. Get involved and make sure that you care. If you're not doing anything about it, then why complain?

Well, I live in [a] jungle. My community is not the best community. It does not have the best name either, but we're trying to make a better name. I feel that every time I do something better for the community, every time I help out a little bit, the community just gets better and better and makes more people wants to come. In the community, I do a lot of work with, like, kids and stuff. I want to be a teacher so I do a lot of work with kids and stuff.

Barriers to Participation

When asked to name obstacles that made it difficult for them and other girls to participate in the community, interviewees identified several things: lack of opportunities and encouragement, no connection to the community population, cultural and/or religious prohibition, parental objection, gender bias, not liking the community of residence, low self-esteem, and lack of time. While they were aware of the roles that women and girls could play in society, many interviewees pointed out that there was both lack of opportunities and lack of encouragement for them to actively do things in the community. As one participant put it:

The system isn't even set up for us to be involved or even engaged outside of school. [...] I would say [in] a lot of communities, you know, girls technically do sustain the community; they do the social reproductive work, but they have no resources and they are completely marginalized.

Other girls compared the lack of opportunities and encouragement to the situation for boys whom they viewed as having more access. As one girl pointed out: "Men do have more access to do certain things..., like get more things or look for the opportunity, I guess."

The most frequently identified barriers to community participation were parents/family and culture or religion. Commenting on parental influence, one girl stated, "First of all, it's the parents because it depends how the girls have grown up. For me, I always grew up listening to my mom, and when she is telling me to go out and do something, I do it, but when she says no, and then I don't." Another girl spoke about parents and religion as barriers to participation and said:

I think, like, [it's] sometimes your religion and sometimes, like, [your] parents.... Cause sometimes parents don't want their children to or, like, girls to go outside, you know, to do this something that catches, like, attention in religion. Cause I'm [religion X] and I have a lot [more] restrictions on doing certain things than other girls who are not [religion X]⁷.

Other girls used the notion of culture to explain the way that gender roles were used in families to prohibit participation outside the home. The following quote highlights this sentiment:

Well, I don't know about other cultures, but in my culture, they have that thing that when we girls don't need to do anything, like, we just sit home and then do our studies and house things. But I guess it depends, it depends on the family. They let you do it or not, and then you can't force them to let you go out and help your community or do something. ...Yeah, they [boys] always have something to do, where they are always being offered certain things, you know, activities. But girls are always... [...] I don't know if it is a cultural thing [or] if it is because they are kind of made to be in the kitchen or.... You know what I mean?

Finally, some of the interviewees mentioned that the space where they live is a barrier. These were girls who live in Toronto's priority neighborhoods such as Lawrence Heights and Jane/Finch. These priority neighbourhoods are often portrayed as incubators of trouble and violence that offer youth a limited perspective of the opportunities they can gain in life. Media coverage has reinforced this negative image of "troubled" communities. Writing on Jane/Finch in particular, James (2012) states, "Even as the media attempt to present 'positive' portraits of the community, or 'look deeper' into it, they often reinforce the very ideas they claim to want to counteract [...] the message tends to be about the importance of an individual's efforts and not about how systemic inequity limits the opportunities that might have helped individuals to better their situation [while reinserting] the reputation of Jane-Finch as a tough, violent and harmful place" (p. 36). The EGCC girls who lived in such neighborhoods did not have a sense of belonging; conversely, they felt unsafe to move around in ways that would positively benefit them. Also, these priority neighborhoods have been the subject of recent research studies (Dlamini, Anucha and Lovell, 2015); however, very little has involved the women and girls that live in the area. As a result, the EGCC girls echoed the general belief that 'nobody cares' about their voices, lives and contributions they make or can make in the community, especially underscoring the gendered inequalities and lack of recognition for female contributions to local civic engagement.

The Gendered Dynamics of Youth Leadership

In addition to asking about the interviewees' choices of spaces and their reasons for community participation, we wanted to learn more about their perspectives on leadership, specifically whether or not they saw themselves as leaders and the barriers that they perceived to taking on a leadership role. When asked specifically about gendered barriers to female leadership, some of the girls pointed to negativity from the community:

A lot of negative and put-downs could stop a girl from wanting to, um, speak up, pretty much. Um, but if you are a person, if you are the type of girl that can get through it and don't care what people say and you want to be heard, then you will be heard, right?

Another participant expressed concern that people often think that "she is just a girl" and "they believe a girl can't make a difference." Another girl commented on the low expectations from her family and local community. Others said that they did not see other women acting in ways that suggested strength and confidence; rather, they were constantly exposed to images of fragile, helpless women. Nevertheless, girls were perfectly aware of what they needed in order for them to think about engaging in their communities in a leadership rather than a subservient role. Some spoke of the need for building girls' self esteem, while others demanded more female-as-leader role models:

I would say more confidence. Girls need more confidence. It needs to be, um, it needs to be clarified by other women who have confidence. Because if you are hearing, if you are talking to a person who doesn't have confidence at all, like that's not gonna help, right? So, I think more...either more guest

speakers or just whoever to come in, not every day, now and then, and just help remind us that it's hard being a girl, but we could get through anything.

As we can see in the responses above, for girls and young women to take on a leadership role in their community, they need family support, high expectations at home and in the community, and exposure to positive leadership role models that will inspire confidence in them and assist them in developing their leadership potential.

Discussion

Our study examined girls' engagement in a changing urban milieu; consequently, as acting subjects located in time and space, there is a need to unpack how what they conceive of as urban culture, is, in itself changing. We found that the interviewed girls were aware of three major aspects to participating in the community: (a) their potential to create a better community for both themselves and others, (b) the obstacles keeping them from community engagement, and (c) the obstacles preventing them from assuming a community leadership role. Put differently, what girls are actually aware of, is that community participation can make for a better community and self but that there are barriers both to participation and to taking on a leadership role.

These findings pointing towards girls' awareness of the major aspects of community participation aligns with studies promoting exploratory rather than self-defined ways of viewing community (Fraser, 2007, 1992; Rose, 2005) signaling a collective of individuals with a common interest or goal, a common problem or issue, and a shared urban space. Exploratory notions of communities allow us to ask why, how, by whom, under which conditions and for what goals a community is built, un-built or reproduced. As well, this exploratory approach allows discovering interesting varieties in youths' motivations and ways of community building in the diverse contexts. For the girls in EGCC, regardless of barriers, they are motivated partly from awareness of what participation can unveil for themselves as well as for the people with whom they live. In other words, the girls were aware of their roles as consumers and producers of the assets in the changing urban environments in which they live.

This is an important finding because, research in urban studies also show that young people are particularly affected by the current transformation of urban environments into contexts of consumption, surveillance, and control (Dee, 2015). Although youth stress that their opinions about the future development of cities is seldom recognized and that indexes and city rankings rarely include youth perspectives, city governments and the private sector seem to be increasingly aware of the political and economic benefits and potential of youth to cities. This awareness of youth potential as consumers and producers meets young urbanites own various and often-contradictory self-definitions and their ways of (re) imagining and (re) building urban space and places.⁸ Youth community activities generate shared (youth) cultural spaces and lifestyles and thus, communities and learning environments that are important to study in order to unpack the diverse contributions that are youth based in these context.

The data also point to the complex interconnection between the girls' culture and gender. As one interviewee mentioned, girls' participation in the community depends, to a greater or lesser extent, on their parents and what they allow their daughters to do. In this regard, there seem to be a traditional cultural dissonance between immigrant parents and their children when the family settles in Canada. On one hand, parents typically want to maintain the values and traditions from their country of origin. Some of these values include not talking to their children about politics and community engagement. The reasons for this culture of "political silence" are numerous, with fear of being reprimanded (or worse), which is a consequence of a history of authoritarian regimes in

countries of origin, playing an important role (Dlamini, 2015). On the other hand, however, youth find themselves wanting to adapt to some of the Canadian values they see around them, including talking about (and perhaps doing something about) what may be prohibited in their home or culture.

Further, our data indicated that current gender roles continue to be enforced and reinforced through repeated privileging of boys over girls; that is, through the way that parents allow boys more freedom of choice, action, and movement in the community than their sisters are afforded. While avoiding problematic “north versus south” discourse, it is safe to say, even if contested, that patriarchal practices are still dominant in many of the countries of origin of the interviewees’ parents. That is, EGCC illuminates how the activities of girls are shaped by both local (Toronto) and global (the parents’ countries of origin) cultures that are steeped in patriarchal traditions. These traditions inform not only girls’ household and community cultures, but their movement to spaces of community participation as well. With Canada being a well-established democracy and the world’s leader in multiculturalism (Cardenas, 2003), debates on the gendered nature of cultural/group rights are very much at the margins. Often, it is commonly assumed that immigrants, especially women who immigrate to Canada will automatically learn, ‘take up’ and exercise their rights - specifically, the equality of genders’ rights- regardless of their history, sociocultural background, and country of origin. Yet, studies show that for a variety of reasons, many immigrant women continue to cling to and reinforce beliefs and practices that can subdue women’s rights and freedoms (see, for example, Dlamini, Anucha & Wolfe, 2012). Our EGCC study suggests that the girls born of immigrant families are often subjected to these beliefs, which consequently constraint their rights to community engagement because of restricted freedom of movement.

Moreover, our data also suggest that most areas of youth participation are predominantly adult-monitored or -approved, with clearly defined boundaries between what girls can do and what adults can do. This finding is important because, it helps explain why, to adults, today’s urban youth is seen to be disinterested in formal, institutional politics and thus politically apathetic. A closer look at youth’s everyday life, however, gives evidence of lively youth activity due to networking technologies and migration. When adults monitor youth’s spaces of participation, rather than engaging and supporting youth towards community engagement, they limit their chances of discovering and learning how urban youth’s political activity that exceeds administrative boundaries, and, is triggered by new technologies, can contribute to community engagement.

Amin (2007) invokes the urban space as one that is no longer a bounded territory; rather, he defines it as a place of “many geographies” with a transnational flow of information and knowledge that is organized differently from traditional arrangements. He questions the meaning of the term “the social” in a world that “increasingly builds nature and technology into the human experience” (p. 102). He further posits that changed spatial arrangements lead to virtual and nonvirtual modes of communication, chains, and cooperate networks resulting in “structured patterns of mutuality and dependency” in a world of affect and attachment that has emerged partially out of global cultural influences and diaspora attachments and partially out of the emergence of new global political spaces (p. 102-103).

We extend Amin’s questioning of the social to a questioning of culture; we assert that culture should be seen as intertwined with technology and with differing spatial arrangements, resulting in a change in both human experience and associated human networks. The participants in our study forced us to see the complexity of valuing adult-informed and -defined spaces where they are permitted to participate. They identified spaces of communication that resembled those of their parents and other adults, which we see, in some ways as limiting “new” and self-defined forms and opportunities for community participation. To nurture girls’ community participation, then, adults must engage with the changing urban setting without fear because although these changes challenge what adults know, they also simultaneously enrich the old ways of being and thinking.

Linked to the above mediating parental factor and to the barrier to girls' engagement in the community is the complexity that arises from the "institutional" nature of the spaces (schools, community centres, seniors' homes, the church) where girls might participate; while they do create a safe place for young women, we also contend that such institutional spaces can reinforce hegemonic practices and stifle millennium-based creativities because institutions are mainly about selected traditions (Williams, 1977).

In *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, hooks (2009) refers to geography and the city to demonstrate how space can silence an individual's potential and create a sense of powerlessness. Having moved from her place of birth in rural Kentucky to attend college in urban Kentucky, hooks argues that her different way of speaking coupled with her different ways of knowing were not valued and were, in fact, shut out by a "symbolic cultural imperialism" that privileged the world view of elitist white males. Years later, when she was established as a writer and a scholar, she relocated herself in a culture of place, which manifested in her a sense of belonging.

The girls in EGCC, too, are constrained by the limited spaces where they can venture because most community spaces privilege adult ways of knowing, thus rendering girls voiceless in similar ways to those described by hooks. First, for those girls living in priority neighborhoods (referred to by one of the girls as 'the jungle'), their voices are typically not represented in initiatives designed to reimagine and rebuild their communities. On the one hand, researchers engage in activities that neglect girls' knowledge about and contributions to these communities; and on the other hand, parents reinforce a sense of powerlessness by stressing the dangers and not the advantages of getting involved in these neighbourhoods. In fact, we believe gender issues interact with place and with parental culture to create barriers to girls' community engagement and leadership potential. The marginal positioning of girls as passive subjects who must follow the rules of sometimes discouraging adults restricts or limits the girls' development and acts as an obstacle to their participation and leadership aspirations. Taken together, gender, culture coupled with changes in urban spaces make it difficult to meaningfully build the capacity of girls to act as community leaders or as independent citizens enjoying the human rights for which Canada is globally known.

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Endnotes

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² <http://www.citiesalliance.org/node/2164>

³ Definitions of community development are widely varied and notoriously contentious (Bhattacharyya, 2004). Nevertheless, Smith & Frank (2006) offer a succinct definition of community development as: "...the planned evolution of all aspects of community well-being (economic, social, environmental and cultural). It is a process whereby community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems" (p. 6).

⁴ This framework was used in previous projects that informed the formation of the EGCC project. These include, Dlamini, 2005, 2006, in which she investigated the civic participation of ethnic minority youth; the community understanding and identity construction of newcomer youth; and the e-learning experiences of youth from African communities. These studies indicate that despite interest, youth are dissatisfied with leadership training programs and the activities of community engagements available to them through community organizations and schools. Moreover and importantly, in these studies, girls were found to be even less engaged, and when engaged, the activities of engagement were traditional and positioned them subservient to males.

⁵ This number excludes 1 girl who had to stop because of her job and the 2 girls who stopped because they didn't get along with community residents.

⁶ Safety here has to be understood in the light of Anderson's (1997) street context concept. Anderson argues that the structural problems of the inner city produce a street context where violence becomes part and parcel of everyday life. Children grow up witnessing the violence perpetrated by adults in public; others experience violence at the hands of adults in private, which in turn creates in them a sense of hopelessness as well as diminishing a sense of a meaningful future. For the girls in our study, participating outside the home was, in some instances a safe space away from harmful adults in their homes.

⁷ In efforts to avoid religious and cultural stereotyping, we have removed the names of the religions and cultures that participants referred to.

⁸ <http://www.youthfulcities.com/>; <http://www.citiesalliance.org/node/2164>; <http://www.unesco.org/most/guic/>