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GENDER AND POWER: GIRL SCOUTS AND BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA

By Hanna Daleo

Institutions that separate members by gender are an interesting environment where to explore issues that separate man and women in contemporary societies. This essay by Daleo is a provocative reflection on the origins and consequences of gender difference.

Does gender determine what activities are taught to children? In this paper I will compare and contrast Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts to see if there is a difference in activities. They are viewed to be the same basic club with a variance of gender. As a student completing requirements for my degree I was expected to work in a community organization for about four months. I accepted a placement as a Girl Scout leader for a small group of girls in Marina. I came into the position feeling like I could change the perpetuation of negative gender roles by the activities we chose to lead the girls in. Today women have a lot more options in their lives. Is it equitable for the Girl Scouts to move into the views of the 21st century? Have they already? What about Boy Scouts? Their program is viewed to be providing life lessons and strong leadership skills with outdoor team building survival techniques. Does Boy Scouts have any of the creative aspects of Girl Scouts? I chose to be involved in Girl Scouts for I have a background in the organization and have always wanted to research the topic of gender in scouting.

I was a Girl Scout from first grade to ninth grade. The reason I joined was to be in a group and do outdoor activities. We did tons of crafts and cooking with limited outdoor and sporting activities. The fact that my troop only went car

camping, did compass work, and went on short hikes at first didn't disappoint me but the fact that we never got any better at wilderness survival did. I was always envious of Boy Scouts who were going skiing, backpacking, hunting, and many other things deemed too dangerous for us girls. It never seemed fair nor did it seem like there was a way to let girls do what the boys did.

Juliette Gordon Low felt there should be equality of the sexes in a time when women were not even able to vote. She saw the Boy Scout organization in England and even participated in the equivalent of Girl Scouts there. She wanted young girls to have the same options that boys got in Boy Scouts here in America. Juliet Low registered the first two troops of girls in Savannah, Georgia in 1912. In 1916 there were a few thousand Girl Scouts, but by the year 2000 the number ranged in the millions.

In the time of Juliet Low gender roles for women were not as flexible as they are today. Women were only educated to be interesting for men. They were encouraged to do volunteer work, and be teachers, nurses and secretaries. Any academic job was viewed solely fit for men. Women's work has conventionally been in the home with the children. Women were taught to cook, draw and paint, sew, quilt,

and do other crafts. All these things were considered helpful to make women useful in the home. Many women strived for more freedom of choice in their lives.

Girl Scouts was created to give girls an outlet for activities not usually considered for girls. For that time period it was considered revolutionary and a step towards equality of the sexes. There were crafts, along with camping and selling cookies. There have been some improvements within the Girl Scout organization. "Gone are the days when girls worked towards their Laundress and Matron Housekeeper badges. Today, girls can earn Car Care, Computer Fun and Science Sleuth badges." "Girl Scouting still includes traditional activities like camping, selling cookies and performing community service, but with a new twist. Girls don't just camp anymore -- they go rock climbing, backpacking and navigate ropes courses. Girls don't just sell cookies -- they learn important life skills such as communications, goal setting, money-management, marketing, sales and teamwork." Even the uniform has the option of shorts and pants unlike the mandatory skirt of past years.

According to Phelan, "Girl Scouts participate in sports; skill-building clinics; embark on extraordinary field trips; carry out community service projects; enjoy cultural exchanges and environmental stewardships; go camping; perform in plays and sing songs. Through Girl Scouts, girls build character and skills for success in the real world. More than 43 million women in the United States have enjoyed Girl Scouting during their childhood years." Girl Scouts have amazing possibilities when looking at how diverse the creative aspects are.

I was curious first off if Boy Scouts had the same background ethics as Girl Scouts. I had gone through the Girl

Scout basic leadership training online so I looked up the equivalent for Boy Scouts called Fast Start. I went through that training as well to learn as much as I could and compare them. Other than the visual aspects of the website the content was very similar. The Girl Scout site was feminine in pastels and flowers while the Boy Scout site was plain with primary colors if any. Look to Appendix A. It turns out that the oath and promise as well as the motto and slogan are almost word for word. The subtle changes are that Boy Scouts have more emphasis on physical health and the Girl Scouts stress sisterhood. Look to Appendix B. I couldn't tell what the activities were from the website so I went to a more personal source of information.

That information came from interviewing Eagle Scout Blake Cross. He has been in scouting for from the rank of Boy Scout and now is an assistant leader of a troop in San Diego. He explained that all ages of boys are together in one troop unlike Girl Scouts where age determines rank. To advance into a new rank in Boy Scouts there is a test of skills unlike Girl Scouts. The Boy Scouts also have a mandated camping trip once a month. A Girl Scout troop's outdoor activities are entirely based on the leader.

The only crafts Boy Scouts do are basket weaving and leather working and painting. That struck me as interesting for them to have so few creative based activities. I asked Blake what they do instead in the meetings. He explained that everything they do has a practical aspect out in the wilderness. Even within the crafts they do there is a survival technique shown. The baskets they make are water tight and they learn how to boil water in them. There are all sorts of activities with knots and rope work for survival as well as first aid techniques.

They also play a lot of group sports such as basket ball, or a dodge ball like game with a stuffed sock. "The sock game is a fun way to get the guys to let off some steam, but what many people don't see is that this game teaches has a hunting aspect. The precision of throwing at moving targets will help you throw a weapon to hunt a small animal for food." Blake commented on why he thinks that there are so few crafts in Boy Scouts. "Many of these games and activities have a militaristic aspect. Traditionally guys are the ones being conditioned for war from an early age." He feels that there should be a balance of activities though the organization in fairly conservative and probably not be as receptive to change.

Equality of the sexes is a feminist ideal. There are men and women all over fighting for change from stereotypes to gender roles. The activities in Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts reflect a old way of developing young minds. Boy Scouts focused a lot more on outdoor activities, with little emphasis on activities without a survival purpose. Both programs need a new outlook on activities. Girl Scouts should throw out some of the more stereotypical girly activities and integrate ones used by the Boy Scouts. Whereas the Boy Scouts could make their program well rounded with more creative aspects. We are in the

21st century and men should be able to participate in acting, singing, crafts, and art. Women are free to explore higher education, academic careers, and all aspects of survival training so why not give them a program to match. By doing this the Scouts in America would be created equal and could even take gender out of the equation entirely.

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