The Big Picture

Healthy role models help young people make healthy choices by inspiring them to make a difference, respect one another and achieve goals. Young people desperately need positive role models and there is a plethora to choose from. Unfortunately the majority of the UK media, obsessed with celebrity culture, intentionally chooses to elevate heiresses, sex objects and surgery addicts as female role models and abusive, image-obsessed celebrities as male role models.

Many inspirational women who have achieved incredible feats or prestigious positions are negatively scrutinised by the media instead of being celebrated. For example, the physical appearance of sportswomen and female MPs is often ridiculed, yet their male counterparts are never subjected to an analysis of their fashion sense and physical appearance. The media’s obsession with superficial celebrity role models correlates with the absence of women in influential positions like law courts, government and business. For example, only 29% of MPs are women¹ and there are only six female CEOs in the FTSE 100 companies². Many girls can’t aspire to be what they can’t see.

What You Should Know

Children often look to their family members as role models but by the time they reach their teens, many young people look to celebrities and to TV shows for a blueprint of what life should be like.

Reality shows become important sources of ideas and expectations and they follow the ups and downs of celebrities’ lifestyles and relationships.

The media’s fixation on a narrow group of celebrity role-models is negatively affecting young people’s expectations, confidence and aspirations particularly at a time when they are forming their own identities. This can manifest itself in a number of ways within a young group including a lack of aspiration amongst members, increase in risky behaviour (like promiscuity and excessive drinking) and increase in body anxiety resulting in low confidence.

As individuals detached from family lives, youth workers have an opportunity to be positive role models for young people as well as sharing a Gospel message about young people’s true identity, purpose and worth.

Experts in the Field

- **PinkStinks** ([www.pinkstinks.org.uk](http://www.pinkstinks.org.uk)) is a campaign that targets the products, media and marketing that prescribe heavily stereotyped and limiting roles to young girls. It promotes media literacy, self-esteem, positive body image and female role models for kids.

- Amy Poehler’s **Smart Girls** ([www.amysmartgirls.com](http://www.amysmartgirls.com)) is an online community for young girls which celebrates inspirational women from around the world and encourages girls to aspire to be themselves.

- **The Girls’ Brigade England & Wales** ([www.girlsb.org.uk](http://www.girlsb.org.uk)) seeks to create safe and fun spaces to help the holistic development of girls (aged 4 to 30). GB has an extensive, practical programme selection which equips girls to explore issues like self-esteem, sexuality and ambition while developing confidence, worth and hope.

- **The Esther Collective** ([www.theesthercollective.jimbo.com](http://www.theesthercollective.jimbo.com)) is a nine month leadership course for 18-30s women which develops their leadership gifts in order to serve the world.

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¹ UK Political Info: [http://www.ukpolitical.info/FemaleMPs.htm](http://www.ukpolitical.info/FemaleMPs.htm)
² [http://www.thisismoney.co.uk/money/markets/article-3092471/Sixth-FTSE-100-female-CEO-named-Lloyds-bank-executive-Alison-Brittain-joins-Whitbread.html](http://www.thisismoney.co.uk/money/markets/article-3092471/Sixth-FTSE-100-female-CEO-named-Lloyds-bank-executive-Alison-Brittain-joins-Whitbread.html) (This statistic is constantly changing, but the low % is still dismal.)
Peter’s Story

Peter* runs a church youth group and is really passionate about encouraging young people to develop their leadership skills. Recently, he became increasingly frustrated with the young women in the group; they never volunteer to help or lead any of the activities. They also rarely contribute to any of the group discussions unless they’re directly asked.

Initially Peter thought that they were being lazy, causing him to become even more impatient. When he decided to broach the subject in a discussion with the girls, he discovered the real reason for their hesitancy; they lacked confidence. Stepping into their shoes, he realised that this was a result of his own unconscious gender bias. There were more male leaders than female leaders leading the group and they were more comfortable exploring male Bible characters. Unconsciously, the girls had started to wrongly believe that they did not have leadership qualities.

Passionate to rectify this imbalance, Peter and his team created a strategy to encourage the development of leadership skills amongst the girls including appointing new female leaders, offering leadership equipping sessions for all the young people and ensuring that female Bible characters were also explored.

* Name has been changed to protect identity.

Getting Stuck In

- Facilitate a discussion about role models – what characteristics do you look for? Challenge young people’s views if they are conforming to society’s obsession with celebrities.
- Create a programme which cultivates good character values like integrity, community and service.
- Celebrity culture is very ‘me’ driven. Encourage your youth group to think and serve others through different activities.
- Organise a celebration night which explores some amazing historical and contemporary role models. Perhaps create a wall display, vlog or podcast for International Day of the Girl (11 October) and International Women’s Day (9 March).
- Encourage the development of leadership skills in girls and young women by intentionally creating a leadership training programme and including them on the leadership team rota. Also ensure young people get an opportunity to use their gifts and talents in the wider church family and/or community.
- Correct the media’s dearth of healthy female role models by inviting inspirational women from your local community to take the hot seat for the night!
- Visit your local council and help engage young people in politics so they aspire to make a positive difference in their community.
- Have a movie night! Watch Miss Representation - a documentary that explores the under-representation of women in positions of power and influence in America, and challenges the media’s limited portrayal of what it means to be a powerful woman.
- Be conscious of the gender dynamics in your leadership team. Do you have passionate female leaders who regularly lead devotions and activities? Do you only concentrate on male Bible characters?

Dr Claire Rush is Advocacy Co-ordinator for GB England & Wales and a trustee of Sophia Network. She’s passionate about equipping and empowering young women to be critical, not passive, consumers of culture so they can fulfil their unique God-given potential.