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Same-Sex Schooling, Leadership and Political Participation

Key findings from a new study:

- Women who attended all-female high schools were **4.1% more likely** to participate in civic and political activities than their peers from co-educational schools.
- Attendance at girls' schools increased the likelihood of women holding leadership roles by **7.3%**.
- Benefits were found **only for women** attending single-sex schools – men showed no significant differences in outcomes.
- Single-sex schooling **did not significantly change gender attitudes** such as beliefs about traditional roles. **Leadership opportunities alone** may not challenge entrenched stereotypes. Explicit **curricular or cultural initiatives may be needed** to influence gender attitudes.
- Early leadership and participation opportunities created **enduring habits**, with effects still visible decades after graduation.
- Schools that provide safe spaces for girls to participate and lead can have a **lasting influence on equality in public life**.

How do schools shape students' futures beyond academics? For young women in particular, the environment of secondary schooling may affect how they view leadership, civic duty, and their willingness to participate in public life. A recent study by Amber Hye-Lee and Nicholas Sambanis from the USA draws on a rare natural experiment in South Korea to examine whether all-female high schools influence political participation, leadership aspirations, and gender attitudes. The findings provide significant insights for educators and school leaders seeking to understand the long-term impact of same-sex education on female students.

The study's most striking finding is that single-sex schooling increases women's overall civic and political participation. Survey questions asked about nine activities, including voting, signing petitions, boycotting products, and contacting politicians. Women who attended all-female high schools showed higher levels of engagement across nearly all forms of participation compared to women from co-educational schools. In fact, single-sex schooling increased women's overall participation in civic and political activities by 4.1 per cent. This incorporated increased participation in voting, private activism, political contact, and (to a lesser extent) collective activism. Notably, these effects were found only for women. Men's participation showed no

meaningful differences between single-sex and co-educational schools. This suggests that same-sex schooling may help close the gender gap in civic engagement with particular benefits for female students.

Across many countries, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles in areas including politics, business, and academia. Research shows this gender gap is apparent in attitudes towards leadership and political participation, with women scoring lower than men in surveys that measure these outcomes. This gap often emerges early, shaped by socialisation in families and schools. South Korea provides a unique setting for investigating these dynamics. It has one of the largest gender wage gaps in the OECD and persistent underrepresentation of women in politics.

The study leverages South Korea's High School Equalization Policy, implemented between 1974 and 2009. Under this policy, students in Seoul were randomly assigned to either co-educational or single-sex high schools. This system eliminated the usual bias of parental choice and created conditions ideal for measuring the causal impact of same-sex schooling on long-term outcomes. The data for this article includes survey results gathered in 2022 from more than 3,400 people aged 30 to 50, capturing decades of lived experience after graduation.

The authors investigated four key areas to better understand the impact of single-sex education on girls' political and leadership participation. This included their likelihood to participate in civic and political life, engage in political activism, pursue leadership roles, and internalise gender stereotypes. This gives critical insight into the way peer group composition in high school can influence women's long-term political and social trajectories.

Beyond general participation, the researchers also found that single-sex schooling shaped women's leadership ambitions. Women who attended girls' schools expressed slightly greater interest and confidence in leadership roles. While the difference was considered modest, the impact on women's actual leadership experience was significant. Women who attended all-female schools were 7.3 per cent more likely to have held a leadership role than those who attended co-educational schools. This finding underscores the long-term behavioural impact of single-sex schooling, translating into real-world opportunities and responsibilities. For school leaders, this highlights how providing female students with environments rich in leadership opportunities can foster enduring habits of participation and ambition.

One of the study's surprising findings is that attending an all-female school did not significantly change women's attitudes about gender roles. Measures of hostile sexism and traditional gender beliefs showed no significant differences between graduates of single-sex and co-educational schools. While all-female schooling promoted greater participation and leadership, it did not necessarily produce more progressive gender attitudes, with increased female participation not automatically generating increased activism for gender equality. This suggests a critical distinction: Schools can empower girls to participate and lead without fundamentally shifting their ideological stance on gender equality. For principals, this highlights that leadership opportunities alone may not challenge entrenched stereotypes. Explicit curricular or cultural initiatives may be needed to influence gender attitudes.

The lasting nature of these effects is particularly noteworthy. The study's participants were surveyed decades after leaving high school, yet the influence of single-sex schooling on women's participation and leadership remained evident. Early experiences of leadership and participation appear to create enduring habits, supporting the argument that interventions during school years can be part of a critical pathway to addressing the gender gap in leadership and participation. For schools, this reinforces the importance of structuring environments that encourage girls to voice their opinions, engage in civic activities, and take on leadership roles. Interventions at the high school level can shape adult behaviour, change ambitions, and increase women's visibility in public life.

For principals, schools, and families considering the value of same-sex schooling, this research offers four key takeaways. The first is that participation matters. Schools that encourage girls to engage in civic activities can contribute to higher lifelong political engagement. The second is the reminder that leadership opportunities endure. Creating safe, supportive spaces for girls to lead has measurable, long-lasting effects on their willingness to assume leadership roles. The third theme observed by the authors is that attitudes require targeted effort. Placing girls in single-sex environments may not alter traditional gender beliefs, and additional interventions may be needed to promote progressive gender attitudes. Finally, the article reinforces that role models are vital. Exposure to female peers and leaders may build self-efficacy, reinforcing the cycle of participation and leadership.

Ultimately, the study underscores the powerful influence of school environments in shaping not just academic outcomes but also civic identities. For principals and school leaders, the findings provide evidence that creating and sustaining opportunities for female students to lead and participate can have long-term benefits for both individuals and society. This is central to the holistic goals of girls' schools that are supporting students to strive and attain their full potential – in both their academic and civic lives.

References

Lee, A. H.-Y., & Sambanis, N. (2025). Same-sex schooling, political participation, and gender attitudes? Evidence from a natural experiment in South Korea. *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, 1-12. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2025.6>