

Cultivating Confidence in Our Girls

A Conversation with Lily Chang of Girls Inc. NYC



Kayli Mylius: *First off, Lily, it's such a pleasure to speak with you today. I really admire Girls Inc. and all the organization does for the girls of New York City.*

Let's go back. Can you tell me a bit about your childhood?

Lily Chang: I was born in Taipei, Taiwan, and lived above a night market until I was 5, when I moved to the U.S. for kindergarten. I grew up in a traditional, conservative Asian-American family, and I remember feeling, even though it was never explicitly stated, that my parents would have preferred their only child to be a boy.

In the 4th grade, we moved from D.C. to an NYC magnet school, and I was behind in math. My

teacher at the new school was impatient and dismissive with me, as he was with many of the girls in the class. I remember studying extra hard and eventually acing all his tests, and sometimes I helped explain math problems to other girls in my class. Eventually, I was so annoyed with this teacher's attitude that I ended up getting a button machine and made all the girls in the class matching buttons. I told them we were all part of a club, and we were smart and special.

KM: *I absolutely love that and think it speaks to what makes you so perfect for your role at Girls Inc. today.*

Girls Inc.'s vision is "powerful girls in an equitable society." Can you elaborate on what that means and what it means to you personally?

LC: This vision has two wings, and neither can exist without the other. First, we know that all

girls are inherently powerful, but because of a lack of education and opportunity, and because of societal norms, this power never gets to fulfill its potential, or even worse, gets trampled out. We need programs like those from Girls Inc. of NYC to bridge gaps in areas where girls are systemically let down, such as STEM, mental health, financial literacy, and leadership development. Powerful girls are girls who are thriving and leading healthy, self-sufficient lives.

Second, even girls and young women with the most exceptional backgrounds will fail to succeed in an inequitable society. Without equal pay, affordable childcare, fair parental leave policies, and mentors and sponsors who will champion them, young women will continue to face an uphill battle in the workplace. This is compounded by factors such as race and socioeconomic background.

As an immigrant myself, I was the first on both sides of my family to work in Corporate America.

"Even girls and young women with the most exceptional backgrounds will fail to succeed in an inequitable society."

As a first-generation immigrant and female professional working as an attorney in Big Law, I had to navigate so many dynamics I felt ill-equipped to handle, and I wish I had the support of a program like Girls Inc. growing up.

KM: *I do too. What are some challenges girls face today that adults may not understand?*

LC: Being a girl in many ways is harder than ever. With the rise of social media, the pressure to look perfect and present your life in a certain way is especially taxing on teen girls. Social media and digital media in general are speeding up what girls and boys are being exposed to, at ages when their brains are still developing and are especially susceptible to what they see. As lives are being lived more online, teens are feeling increasingly lonely and isolated, which has resulted in the current teen mental health crisis.

Add to that the growing popularity of "manosphere" culture and the "tradwife" movement, the rapidly evolving workplace landscape with the advent of AI, and the increasing costs of higher education, and you have a generation of girls who

are carrying an unprecedented weight. According to recent data, over half of all teen girls are persistently sad.

KM: *That is terrible, and I'm so glad that organizations like yours exist to help quell that.*

What are some signs that a young girl may need more support, encouragement, or mentorship than she's currently receiving?

LC: I'd argue that all girls need more support and encouragement than they are currently getting. But one can look for signs such as anxiety, a sense of loneliness, fear of trying new things, and perfectionism as signs that perhaps she could use some extra encouragement and support.

KM: *I've always been a big believer in talking about the tools I personally use to help cope with different life happenings, and I want my community to feel like they can ask me questions or for help and know that I'm a safe space.*

What are girls finding hard to talk about right now, and how can adults create safe spaces for these conversations to happen? Are there prompts we can use?

LC: Actually having open conversations about their mental health. Schools and families are ill-equipped to deal with the current mental health crisis facing teen girls. Helping girls to connect to safe spaces like Girls Inc. or other "pro-girl" environments can be immensely helpful, where they can open up to their peers and be referred to additional help if needed. With younger girls, check-in questions like asking them about the "roses and thorns" of their day can be a great opener. With older teens, sometimes direct prompts or questions can be too confrontational, and a more "side-by-side" approach, whether it's in the car, taking a walk, or doing an activity like cooking or watching a show, can foster supportive conversations.

KM: *We live in a patriarchal society that adds to the mental load of girls and women. For example, girls are statistically more pressured to look good and to fit in socially than their male counterparts. The consequences of it start at such a tender age.*

What would a world designed with girls' wellbeing in mind actually look like?

LC: This is just the tip of the iceberg, but first, playgrounds might look different. They'd have more sheltered spaces for social hubs, and more creative options for swinging, climbing, or skating that offer alternatives to competitive sports.

There would be opportunities in and after school to foster supportive discussions on gender issues and cross-gender discussions amongst students. Educators would be trained in teaching for gender difference and mental health best practices, and would weave these practices into everyday learning.

Internship programs would pair up young women candidates with women mentors or mentors with similar backgrounds. Companies in historically male-dominated fields would conduct targeted outreach to educate girls and young women about these fields.

Much of what I talk about is being done at Girls Inc. of NYC. We designed the Mind Body Matters program to help girls build inner strength and confidence so strong that it will stand up to external voices telling them they're not enough. We're teaching girls to take charge of their mental health, building self-awareness and agency. This program is now being scaled nationally. We are also working directly with companies to strengthen and expand pathways for young women leaders across industries.

KM: *Speaking of which, part of Girls Inc.'s mission is to inspire girls to be bold, which I think is revolutionary. I hope that, as mothers, aunts, teachers, etc., we're getting better at this, but girls are so often instructed to be likable before a trait like that is considered.*

How can we work together to inspire girls to be confident in using their voices and taking up space?

LC: It starts at home and with our immediate circle and communities. If you say something to a girl, ask yourself if you would say the same thing to a boy, and vice versa. We all mean well, but we have all been impacted by generations of conditioning that can be so insidious we don't even see it. Let's encourage girls to be less agreeable and more challenging, to pursue their interests unabashedly and be who they are, to learn to be self-sufficient, and know that a man is not a financial plan. We also have to model this life to them.

KM: *In New York City, Girls Inc. has a fabulous mentorship program that I can't speak highly enough of. If spots are full or people don't have a formal program like this where they live, how can they mentor girls in their community?*

LC: If you are part of a business or company, invite girls from a local school or organization to visit to explain what you do, and have them



*"You can be anything, and you are enough.
These are two sides of the same coin when
you learn to love yourself."*

meet individuals from various fields so they can see the educational and career paths people have taken. If you have a financial background, you can offer to host a simple financial literacy workshop at one of these schools or organizations. Or just be an unofficial big sis or bro to someone in your life already. That in itself can be a powerful start.

KM: *Can you talk about the “Pro Girl” environment that Girls Inc. champions?*

LC: The pro-girl environment is a supportive space where girls are mentored by a caring adult and where peers mentor one another. It is a space where girls are encouraged to be themselves, discover who they are, and cultivate their skills. Girls are encouraged to take healthy risks in order to learn from experience and grow.

KM: *How can communities emulate this and create more Pro Girl spaces?*

LC: In general, educational settings and workplaces should foster an inclusive environment where everyone’s input is solicited and valued; where trying new things, taking risks, and making mistakes are embraced in the service of growth, development, and innovation. Women and girls tend to suffer from perfectionism and from being their harshest critics, and within this kind of open and embracing culture, they are more likely to thrive. Additionally, we all need to reexamine what true leadership looks like and the many faces it can take. We need to give more recognition to and place more value on skills like collaboration and listening.

KM: *What have you seen from the girls who have been mentored and taken part in these Pro Girl spaces? How does it change the adults they become?*

LC: We’ve seen girls’ confidence and voice grow and flourish. They grow into young adults who

recognize and take advantage of opportunities, or even create their own opportunities. They aren’t held back by societal expectations, and they are unapologetically pursuing their dreams. And the most inspiring part is that they are paying it forward through mentorship and creating other forms of support for girls and young women. For example, the alumna speaker at our recent Gala, Ashley, an emergency medicine resident at Mt. Sinai Hospital, recently launched an initiative that connects Girls Inc. of NYC participants to the hospital through a shadowing program.

KM: *If a girl could hear one thing consistently while growing up, what would you want it to be?*

LC: You can be anything, and you are enough. These are two sides of the same coin when you learn to love yourself.

The Case for the Ordinary

As I grow older, ordinary life has begun to feel far more precious, and during my time immersed in the art world, I’ve learned that this realization, so common it’s almost customary, has a name and a history.

For many years, art had a hierarchy. Mythology, religion, the portrait of the powerful; these were the subjects that deserved a canvas. Everything else was ranked below, treated as less serious.

Realism challenged this understanding. The technique was not revolutionary, but the subject matter was. Gustave Courbet painted stonemasons, tired and mid-task, and made a claim that they

“To look at the ordinary carefully, without exaggeration, feels like a political act, because it goes against what we are constantly being told is worth witnessing.”

were radical precisely because they were so plain: a testament that the ordinary, too, deserved to be documented.

There’s a poem by Turkish poet Melih Cevdet Anday that I returned to recently as I walked home through the city and became mesmerized as I watched a pair of birds lift into the sky while flowers from a street vendor filled the air with their scent:

*A pair of doves take flight,
The scent of carnations, smoldering*

This is *douceur de vivre*, the small, sweet pleasure of being alive. Small, yes. But entirely real.

What we see most often online has begun to function like those old hierarchies. Certain images are repeated and refined until they take on an almost symbolic weight: beautiful apartments showing no signs of life lived, the polished minimalism of the “clean girl” aesthetic, carefully staged exhaustion. Morning routines are filmed as rituals of discipline and self-worth. Productivity becomes identity. Even labor is aestheticized. Exhaustion is reframed as ambition, burnout as proof of discipline and success, as though overwork itself were

evidence of moral value. Not so different from mythology; constructed, curated, and idealized.

But the immediate world need not compete with these glorified standards of life to matter. Look around any room. A half-finished sandwich, a cup of coffee gone cold, shared with someone you love. Someone doing the dishes in mismatched pajamas. The small irritations and the small joys often occur in the same moment. None of these things are arranged to be seen, and that’s exactly what makes them worth noticing.

To look at the ordinary carefully, without exaggeration, feels like a political act, because it goes against what we are constantly being told is worth witnessing. I am still learning how to do this. In front of a canvas, sometimes. To choose a subject is to argue for its importance. And I have come to believe in the ordinary; the fragile, repetitive, deeply human texture of daily life. Full of evidence that we were here at all.



İrem Sençok
Illustrator & Londoner

