



# “Men, Women, or Both?": Perceptions of Gender Power Differentials in Young Children

Daniela Galvez-Cepeda<sup>1,2</sup>, Adam Stanaland<sup>2</sup>, & Andrei Cimpian<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Williams College, <sup>2</sup>New York University



## 1. Introduction

- Men hold disproportionately more power than women in politics, business, science, and other influential areas (Warner et al., 2018).
- Past work suggests children as young as 6 years are aware that higher status jobs are more likely to be held by men than women (Liben et al., 2001), but less is known about whether they also endorse these status differentials.

### Research Questions and Hypotheses

- Do children endorse these gender power differentials?**  
H<sub>1</sub>: Given that children are actively learning from their surroundings, we expect to find that they will endorse the traditional power differentials in our society.
- How does this endorsement change over time?**  
H<sub>2</sub>: We expect to see a shift in endorsement after awareness develops, that is, by 6-7 years of age.
- Are there gender differences underlying in endorsement, and do they vary by age?**  
H<sub>3</sub>: Because men benefit from these inequities, we expect to see boys' endorsement to be higher than that of girls.

## 2. Method

- Participants.** We tested eighty-eight (88) 5- to 9-year-olds at local NYC parks and online over Zoom.
- Procedure.** 10-minute survey-like interviews with 6 questions to assess children's power differentials endorsement ( $\alpha = 0.61$ ).
- Measure.** 3 dimensions; 2 Qs per dimension:
  - Economic:** having money, ability to buy a lot of things
  - Social:** others listening to you, others respecting you
  - Political:** telling others what to do, being in charge of others

### Endorsement Example Question



Zeppy wants to know, in our world, who *should* people *listen to* more? Should people listen to women more than men, or should people listen to men more than women?

☐ women
 ☐ men

Should people listen to men *a little bit more* than women or should people listen to men *a lot more* than women?

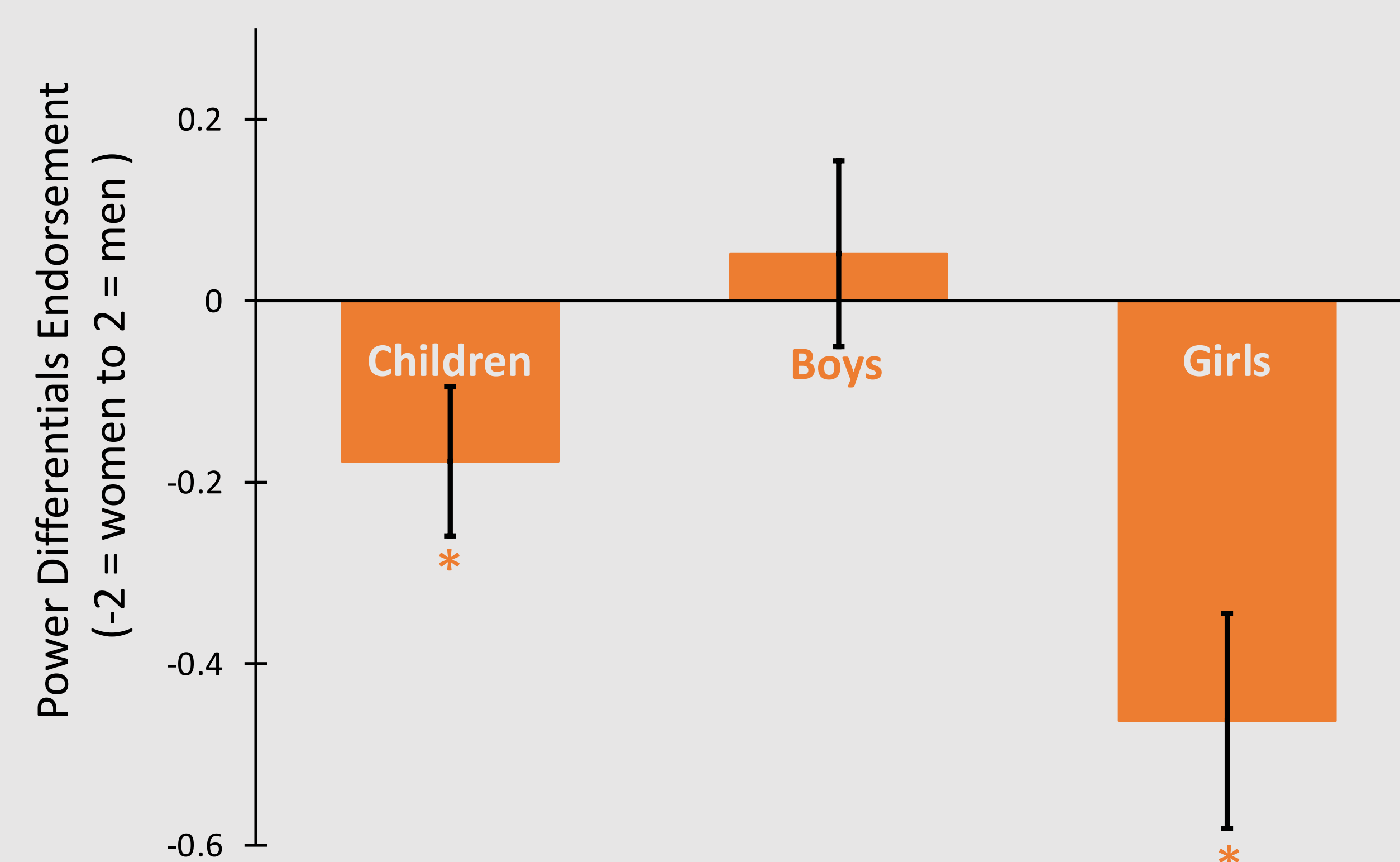
☐ A little more
 ☐ A lot more

## 3. Results

We analyzed the data on SPSS. We first tested H<sub>1</sub> pertaining whether children endorse gender-based power differentials. Results were significant, though not in the expected direction:

- Children endorsed the notion that women should have more power than men,  $t(87) = -2.31, p = 0.012$ .
- Breaking this down by gender, we found that this was driven by girls ( $t(39) = -4.14, p < 0.001$ ), but not boys ( $t(46) = 0.54, p = 0.30$ ).

Figure 1: Power Differentials Endorsement



As for H<sub>2</sub> regarding endorsement development, we found that, across genders, age has not effect ( $b = 0.076, p = 0.36$ ).

Finally, results for H<sub>3</sub> regarding the interaction of age and gender were significant:

- Boys' endorsement decreases with age ( $b = -0.15, p = 0.02$ ), while girls' endorsement shows no change.

Figure 2: Age \* Gender Interaction on Endorsement



## 4. Discussion and Future Directions

### Children endorse counter-stereotypical gender-based power differentials.

The results of the analysis do not align with our H<sub>1</sub>. In fact, they show the opposite—**children's endorsement of who should have more power leaned more towards women than men.**

Interestingly, this seemed to only be driven by girls, since boys did not endorse much in any specific way (i.e., boys thought women and men should have the same amount of power).

Possible explanations:

- Primary caregiver's gender:** Since women tend to be the primary caregiver, children might have said that women should have higher status because they more commonly see women in status-oriented roles (e.g., buying things).
- In-group gender bias:** This along with the explanation above may drive girls' endorsement significantly more towards women and boys' endorsement more towards the middle.

To test this, we would need to collect data on participants' primary caregivers and in-group gender bias.

### As boys grow older, their endorsement of gender-based power differentials decreases, a trend not found in girls.

The results of the analysis did not support H<sub>3</sub>. Though girls and boys' endorsement started out significantly different from each other at age 5, **by age 9, boys' endorsement decreased to match that of girls.**

Possible explanation:

- Awareness of political correctness:** The decrease in older boys' endorsement may be due to increased awareness of popular progressive movements (e.g., equal pay).

A future study could focus on seeing whether this trend stays the same with children raised in more conservative and liberal families

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, **children do not appear to endorse stereotypical power dynamics between men and women.**

Yet, future work is needed to see whether these beliefs hold as this generation grows older.