

# The Eagle Huntress -- Or, What Girls Actually Can Do

Columbia ★ Star

By Jan Collins

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My two youngest granddaughters are 6 and 8 years old. They are (ahem) smart, verbal, and athletic. By no means do they appear to believe that boys are inherently smarter and more talented than girls. In fact, they seem to think just the opposite.

But according to a study of 400 children that was published recently in the journal **Science**, by the age of 6 or 7, girls were “significantly less likely” than boys to say that girls are “really, really smart”, and less likely to want to play a board game described as being for super-smart kids.

This is shocking. Just a year or two earlier - at age 5 - these same children, over a series of experiments, tended to associate brilliance with their own sex, i.e., most of the girls said girls were really, really bright, while most of the boys chose their own gender as super-smart.

So, it appears that as children become older and begin attending school, they begin absorbing sex-role stereotypes.

Not at adolescence, mind you, when girls are known to experience a deep dive in self-esteem, but by age 6 or 7. Young girls, say researchers, are very attuned to social signals. So they have plenty of years to become less motivated to have unconventional adventures or pursue ambitious careers.

Is this why women are still underrepresented today in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields? Is this why movie-goers viewing the recent film “Hidden Figures” were astonished to learn that three African-American female mathematicians were crucial to launching Americans into space in the late 1950s and early 1960s?

The sex-role stereotypes that take hold of most kids by age 6 or 7 don’t appear to dissipate when we become adults. Parents tend to think their sons are brighter than their daughters, according to The New York Times, and are 2.5 times more likely to do a Google search for “Is my son gifted?” than “Is my daughter gifted?”

Happily, however, there are parents in the United States and elsewhere who aren't hemmed in by gender stereotypes. One of these parents lives in Mongolia, where the prevailing culture is unabashedly male-dominated. That's why the story of Aisholpan is such a surprise.

Aisholpan is a 13-year-old girl from Mongolia's nomadic Kazakh tribe, and her story is told in the glorious film "The Eagle Huntress", which was nominated for an Academy Award in 2017 for Best Documentary.

With lyrical dialogue and soaring cinematography, the film follows the girl's unlikely journey as she attempts to become the first female hunter to compete in the eagle festival at Ulgii, Mongolia. (Eagles are used by the Kazakh people to hunt for their food.)

From an early age, Aisholpan was determined to become the first female eagle hunter in her family in 12 generations, and her father was determined to help her succeed. Despite opposition from some of the tribe's elders ("Girls can't be eagle hunters," scoffs one of the old men. "They have to go into the mountains to do this, and it's cold there."), the girl captures and trains her own eaglet.

Thrills abound as Aisholpan wins the competition and her fierce-looking eaglet smashes a speed record.

It is a stirring film with electrifying visuals, and it concludes with Aisholpan and her father braving the severe cold to trek into the snowy mountains, where her eaglet kills its first fox. At the end, the radiant young girl confides that she wants to study medicine and become a doctor.

It seems that Aisholpan knows what girls can actually do.

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**Jan Collins** is a Columbia-based freelance writer, editor, and journalist. A former Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, she is the co-author of *Next Steps: A Practical Guide to Planning for the Best Half of Your Life* (Quill Driver Books, 2009).