

“Teach girls bravery, not perfection”

Transcript:

0:00 So a few years ago, I did something really brave, or some would say really stupid. I ran for Congress.

0:10 For years, I had existed safely behind the scenes in politics as a fundraiser, as an organizer, but in my heart, I always wanted to run. The sitting congresswoman had been in my district since 1992. She had never lost a race, and no one had really even run against her in a Democratic primary. But in my mind, this was my way to make a difference, to disrupt the status quo. The polls, however, told a very different story. My pollsters told me that I was crazy to run, that there was no way that I could win.

0:49 But I ran anyway, and in 2012, I became an upstart in a New York City congressional race. I swore I was going to win. I had the endorsement from the *New York Daily News*, the *Wall Street Journal* snapped pictures of me on election day, and *CNBC* called it one of the hottest races in the country. I raised money from everyone I knew, including Indian aunties that were just so happy an Indian girl was running. But on election day, the polls were right, and I only got 19 percent of the vote, and the same papers that said I was a rising political star now said I wasted 1.3 million dollars on 6,321 votes. Don't do the math. It was humiliating.

1:43 Now, before you get the wrong idea, this is not a talk about the importance of failure. Nor is it about leaning in. I tell you the story of how I ran for Congress because I was 33 years old and it was the first time in my entire life that I had done something that was truly brave, where I didn't worry about being perfect.

2:08 And I'm not alone: so many women I talk to tell me that they gravitate towards careers and professions that they know they're going to be great in, that they know they're going to be perfect in, and it's no wonder why. Most girls are taught to avoid risk and failure. We're taught to smile pretty, play it safe, get all A's. Boys, on the other hand, are taught to play rough, swing high, crawl to the top of the monkey bars and then just jump off headfirst. And by the time they're adults, whether they're negotiating a raise or even asking someone out on a date, they're habituated to take risk after risk. They're rewarded for it. It's often said in Silicon Valley, no one even takes you seriously unless you've had two failed start-ups. In other words, we're raising our girls to be perfect, and we're raising our boys to be brave.

3:07 Some people worry about our federal deficit, but I, I worry about our bravery deficit. Our economy, our society, we're just losing out because we're not raising our girls to be brave. The bravery deficit is why women are underrepresented in STEM, in C-suites, in boardrooms, in Congress, and pretty much everywhere you look.

3:33 In the 1980s, psychologist Carol Dweck looked at how bright fifth graders handled an assignment that was too difficult for them. She found that bright girls were quick to give up. The higher the IQ, the more likely they were to give up. Bright boys, on the other hand, found the difficult material to be a challenge. They found it energizing. They were more likely to redouble their efforts.

3:59 What's going on? Well, at the fifth grade level, girls routinely outperform boys in every subject, including math and science, so it's not a question of ability. The difference is in how boys and girls approach a challenge. And it doesn't just end in fifth grade. An HP report found that men will apply for a job if they meet only 60 percent of the qualifications, but women, women will apply only if they meet 100 percent of the qualifications. 100 percent. This study is usually invoked as evidence that, well, women need a little

more confidence. But I think it's evidence that women have been socialized to aspire to perfection, and they're overly cautious.

40 (Applause)

4:51 And even when we're ambitious, even when we're leaning in, that socialization of perfection has caused us to take less risks in our careers. And so those 600,000 jobs that are open right now in computing and tech, women are being left behind, and it means our economy is being left behind on all the innovation and problems women would solve if they were socialized to be brave instead of socialized to be perfect.

45 (Applause)

5:27 So in 2012, I started a company to teach girls to code, and what I found is that by teaching them to code I had socialized them to be brave. Coding, it's an endless process of trial and error, of trying to get the right command in the right place, with sometimes just a semicolon making the difference between success and failure. Code breaks and then it falls apart, and it often takes many, many tries until that magical moment when what you're trying to build comes to life. It requires perseverance. It requires imperfection.

6:09 We immediately see in our program our girls' fear of not getting it right, of not being perfect. Every *Girls Who Code* teacher tells me the same story. During the first week, when the girls are learning how to code, a student will call her over and she'll say, "I don't know what code to write." The teacher will look at her screen, and she'll see a blank text editor. If she didn't know any better, she'd think that her student spent the past 20 minutes just staring at the screen. But if she presses undo a few times, she'll see that her student wrote code and then deleted it. She tried, she came close, but she didn't get it exactly right. Instead of showing the progress that she made, she'd rather show nothing at all. Perfection or bust.

7:01 It turns out that our girls are really good at coding, but it's not enough just to teach them to code.

7:09 My friend Lev Brie, who is a professor at the University of Columbia and teaches intro to Java tells me about his office hours with computer science students. When the guys are struggling with an assignment, they'll come in and they'll say, "Professor, there's something wrong with my code." The girls will come in and say, "Professor, there's something wrong with me."

7:32 We have to begin to undo the socialization of perfection, but we've got to combine it with building a sisterhood that lets girls know that they are not alone. Because trying harder is not going to fix a broken system. I can't tell you how many women tell me, "I'm afraid to raise my hand, I'm afraid to ask a question, because I don't want to be the only one who doesn't understand, the only one who is struggling." When we teach girls to be brave and we have a supportive network cheering them on, they will build incredible things, and I see this every day. Take, for instance, two of our high school students who built a game called *Tampon Run – yes, Tampon Run* – to fight against the menstruation taboo and sexism in gaming. Or the Syrian refugee who dared show her love for her new country by building an app to help Americans get to the polls. Or a 16-year-old girl who built an algorithm to help detect whether a cancer is benign or malignant in the off chance that she can save her daddy's life because he has cancer. These are just three examples of thousands, thousands of girls who have been socialized to be imperfect, who have learned to keep trying, who have learned perseverance. And whether they become coders or the next Hillary Clinton or Beyoncé, they will not defer their dreams.

9:15 And those dreams have never been more important for our country. For the American economy, for any economy to grow, to truly innovate, we cannot leave behind half our population. We have to socialize our girls to be comfortable with imperfection, and we've got to do it now. We cannot wait for them to learn

80 how to be brave like I did when I was 33 years old. We have to teach them to be brave in schools and early
in their careers, when it has the most potential to impact their lives and the lives of others, and we have to
show them that they will be loved and accepted not for being perfect but for being courageous. And so I
need each of you to tell every young woman you know – your sister, your niece, your employee, your
colleague – to be comfortable with imperfection, because when we teach girls to be imperfect, and we help
85 them leverage it, we will build a movement of young women who are brave and who will build a better
world for themselves and for each and every one of us.

10:32 Thank you.

10:33 (Applause) Thank you.

10:44 *Chris Anderson*: Reshma, thank you. It's such a powerful vision you have. You have a vision. Tell me
how it's going. Like, how many girls are involved now in your program?

90 10:54 *Reshma Saujani*: Yeah. So in 2012, we taught 20 girls. This year we'll teach 40,000 in all 50 states.

(Applause)

11:03 And that number is really powerful, because last year we only graduated 7,500 women in computer
science. Like, the problem is so bad that we can make that type of change quickly.

95 11:17 *CA*: And you're working with some of the companies in this room even, right, who are welcoming
graduates from your program?

11:22 *RS*: Yeah, we have about 80 partners, from *Twitter* to *Facebook* to *Adobe* to *IBM* to *Microsoft* to *Pixar*
to *Disney*, I mean, every single company out there. And if you're not signed up, I'm going to find you,
because we need every single tech company to embed a *Girls Who Code* classroom in their office.

100 11:40 *CA*: And you have some stories back from some of those companies that when you mix in more
gender balance in the engineering teams, that good things happen.

105 11:49 *RS*: Great things happen. I mean, I think that it's crazy to me to think about the fact that, you know,
right now 85 percent of all consumer purchases are made by women, I mean, women use social media at a
rate of 600 percent more than men. We own the Internet, and we should be building the companies of
tomorrow. And I think when companies have diverse teams, and they have incredible women that are part
of their engineering teams, they build awesome things, and we see it every day.

12:12 *CA*: Reshma, you saw the reaction there. You're doing incredibly important work. This whole
community is cheering you on. More power to you. Thank you.

12:19 *RS*: Thank you. Thank you.

(Applause)

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