‘the revolution will be led by a 12-year-old girl’: \(^1\)
girl power and global biopolitics

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abstract

This paper presents a poststructuralist, postcolonial and feminist interrogation of the ‘Girl Effect’. First coined by Nike inc, the ‘Girl Effect’ has become a key development discourse taken up by a wide range of governmental organisations, charities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). At its heart is the idea that ‘girl power’ is the best way to lift the developing world out of poverty. As well as a policy discourse, the Girl Effect entails an address to Western girls. Through a range of online and offline publicity campaigns, Western girls are invited to take up the cause of girls in the developing world and to lend their support through their use of social media, through fundraising and consumption. Drawing on a wide range of policy documents, media outputs and offline events, this paper explores the way in which the Girl Effect discourse articulates notions of girlhood, empowerment, development and the Global North/South divide.

keywords

girl power; development; policy; empowerment; girlhood; virals
introduction: the girl effect

In 2009, in the midst of the Global Financial Crisis, the World Economic Forum held its first ever plenary session on adolescent girls. An alliance of multinational corporations, charity and non-governmental organisation (NGO) leaders and government representatives put forward a bold claim: that girls hold the key to ending world poverty and transforming health and life expectancy in the developing world. Investment in girls, they argued, would unleash financial growth that would put an end to the intergenerational cycle of poverty said to be crippling developing nations. Girls who were healthy and well educated would marry later and have fewer children. This in turn would improve their economic prospects and lead to better health among their children. Family health and life expectancy would improve, and with it the economic situation of developing nations would be transformed. This sequence of transformations was termed ‘the Girl Effect’.²

The notion of the Girl Effect is fast becoming a prominent feature of global development discourse and practice, representing a shift in which key organisations (including the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organisation (WHO)) change their investment strategies in order to target girls in developing countries. However, the significance of the Girl Effect does not end here. It also entails an intensification of the neo-liberalisation of development fused with neo-imperialist notions of ‘saving’ oppressed Southern women (Abu-Lughod, 2002), leading to a ‘feminisation of responsibility’ (Chant, 2006). Moreover, it represents a new and distinctive form of address to girls in the Global North and West. Via an extensive range of social media campaigns, ‘roadshows’ and merchandising promotions, girls in affluent societies, particularly the US, are hailed variously as the allies and saviours of their Southern ‘sisters’, using discourses of girl power and popular feminism. The Girl Effect, then, is not a singular entity, but an assemblage of transnational policy discourses, novel corporate investment priorities, biopolitical interventions, branding and marketing campaigns, charitable events designed to produce a social movement for change, and designer goods that invite young women in the North/West to express pride in ‘being a girl’—an act that Girl Effect marketing suggests will contribute to efforts to improve the lives of girls in other parts of the world.

Our aim in this paper is to sketch out the contours of the Girl Effect and explore its key features. We understand the Girl Effect to be a discursive construction that materialises across a range of sites, and perform a ‘double reading’ of the multiple forms of address it entails to and about girls in the North and South. To do this, the paper will move dynamically back and forth between the language of development policies targeted at the Global South and discourses of the Girl Effect that are designed to interpellate young women in the North/West.³

We do not seek to evaluate the Girl Effect as a development strategy within a framework concerned with the measurement of economic ‘outcomes’, nor do we

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³ The notions of the North or West are of course highly problematic—not least because of the growing range and force of discourses of girl
power in Asia and Latin America. As with other designations, for example "developing" versus "developed" and First/Third World, the nations of Global South and North serve only to attempt to speak of a world characterised by massive geographically patterned injustice and inequality, while failing to capture complexity and specificity.

offer a contribution to the important body of feminist research that evaluates the impact of interventions on women’s lives (Johnson, 2009; Bee, 2011; Maclean, 2012). While these evaluations are important, they do not exhaustively address feminist concerns, or indeed fully scrutinise the power dynamics at play. In this paper we choose to focus on what we believe to be a crucial part of any critical feminist interrogation: a consideration of the political ramifications of the discourses and practices being mobilised. Our theoretical approach can be described as feminist, poststructuralist and postcolonial—an approach that recognises that global inequalities that are gendered and racialised remain entrenched. We are informed by the critique articulated by Marxist and postcolonial scholars who argue that development policies, dominated by neo-liberal ideologies, frequently reinforce rather than mitigate economic inequalities (Roy, 2002; Escobar, 2010). In addition, we recognise the persistence of ‘ways of seeing’ the ‘Third World woman’ whose origins are found in colonial times. Continued inequalities mean that much of the critique raised by postcolonial feminism of those who claim to speak for ‘third world women’ remains pertinent. The homogenisation of third world women, paternalistic attitudes and notions of Southern women as oppressed by an essentialised ‘culture’ continue to haunt development and humanitarian work (Narayan, 1995; Mohanty, 2003; Dogra, 2011; Wilson, 2011).

The current political moment, we argue, makes the need to critically consider the Girl Effect discourse particularly evident. The Girl Effect’s continued ascent into public and policy prominence occurs against the backdrop of a global crisis of neo-liberalism that threatens to call into question the role of international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank and the economic policies they espouse (Chorev and Babb, 2009). In addition, the Girl Effect emerged post-9/11, following the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Its continued prominence is maintained as Western forces discuss their impending withdrawal from Afghanistan (Traynor, 2012) and amid fears that any gains for girls and women will be undone by the Taliban. The social transformations occurring in the Middle East following the events of the ‘Arab Spring’ have also highlighted the complex dynamics linking gender, religion and the relationship between the Global North and South. Thus, the global shifts currently under way strongly suggest that the discourse of the Girl Effect will become a focal point in the relationship between the Global North and South in the years ahead.

The paper is organised around four themes and divided into corresponding sections. First, we will examine the ‘turn to girls’ in policy and popular discourses, highlighting the Girl Effect’s contrasting constructions of girls in the Global North or South as, respectively, empowered, postfeminist subjects and downtrodden victims of patriarchal values. Second, we will discuss the depiction of girls in developing countries as entrepreneurial ‘subjects in waiting’, in which extreme poverty is regarded as having the potential to stimulate entrepreneurial capacities. If this is how girls ‘mean business’ in the Global South, it will be juxtaposed with
discussion of the iconic role played by successful global female entrepreneurs involved in sponsoring the Girl Effect, whose stories are repeatedly mobilised in promoting the initiative. In the third section of the paper, entitled ‘i matter and so does she’ we discuss the Girl Effect’s address to North American young women and its very particular form of ‘commodity feminism’ (Goldman, 1992). The feminist forms of identification promoted will be examined, looking at how they erase difference and power and questioning whether the Girl Effect is about global sisterhood and/or cultural imperialism. The fourth section of the paper examines the Girl Effect as a biopolitical strategy that makes an explicit link between ‘empowerment’, fertility and the economic well-being of individuals and nations. It documents the way in which a Northern-centric policy concern with ‘teenage motherhood’ is imposed upon developing countries in a manner that occludes discussion of very different situations and contexts. Finally, the conclusion pulls together the threads of the argument, bringing a postcolonial feminist analysis to bear upon the Girl Effect as a discursive object. We discuss its selective uptake of feminism and how it yokes discourses of girl power, individualism, entrepreneurial subjectivity and consumerism together with rhetorics of ‘revolution’ in a way that—perhaps paradoxically—renders invisible the inequalities, uneven power relations and structural features of neo-liberal capitalism that produce the very global injustices that the Girl Effect purports to challenge.

the turn to girls and the ‘girl-powering’ of development

The notion of the ‘Girl Effect’ was coined by the Nike Foundation in the mid-2000s, and it is hard to exaggerate the impact it has had on development discourse and policy. Within a few years, the majority of the key global players in the field of health and development have signed up to this agenda. In 2007 the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and WHO established the UN Interagency Task Force on adolescent girls.4 In 2008 the World Bank founded its Adolescent Girls Initiative, aimed at improving girls and young women’s economic opportunities.5 By 2009 girls’ role in development was being discussed at Davos, and in 2010 the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) launched ‘Girl Hub’, a collaboration with the Nike Foundation whose declared aim is to scale up the implementation of the Girl Effect policy (Independent Commission for Aid Impact, 2012).6 In October 2012, the first UN-designated International Day of the Girl Child was marked amid extensive public endorsement by NGOs and governmental bodies. This process constitutes a ‘girl-powering’ of development, the latest in a succession of ‘waves’ of development policy that have included Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD) and Gender and Development (GAD). This ‘girl-powering’, however, does not replace policy preoccupation with gender, but instead represents

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a prominent theme within it. To a certain extent the current focus on girls is linked to long-standing concerns about the human rights of the girl child (Burman, 1995; Bunting, 2005; Switzer, 2010). Attention to adolescent girls has also been increasing within the work of the United Nations since the late 1990s (Croll, 2006). Nevertheless, it is only in recent years that these earlier themes have come to constitute a broader policy ‘turn’ and to achieve a high level of public prominence.

One of the things that makes the Girl Effect different from previous initiatives is its explicit borrowing and mobilisation of discourses of ‘girl power’ that have been circulating in the West (and now increasingly elsewhere) over the last two decades. As has been well documented by gender and youth scholars, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, girls have become increasingly visible in contemporary popular culture and in governmental literature. Girls are depicted as educationally successful, economically independent, and in control of their sexuality and their reproductive capacities (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001; Dricoll, 2002; Aapola, Gonick and Harris, 2005; McRobbie, 2007; Ringrose, 2007). Notions of choice, agency, independence and empowerment have gained prominence in discussions of girlhood, and this is sometimes contrasted with constructions of young men, particularly in those media discourses that paint masculinity as ‘in crisis’. Young women have become ‘luminous’ (McRobbie, 2009), they are depicted as ‘can do girls’ (Harris, 2004), and middle-class girls in particular are often presented as the ideal subjects of neo-liberalism: hardworking, entrepreneurial authors of their own ‘choice biographies’.

However, alongside this depiction of girls as empowered and successful, another significant construction has been the representation of girls as vulnerable. Harris (2004) analyses the way in which discussions of girlhood are structured by movement between discourses of ‘can do’ girls and ‘at risk’ girls. To some extent these discourses might be said to map onto different girls—that is, girls who are differently located in relation to class and race—but more than this an oscillation between these constructions of girls constitutes the discursive field for talking about all girls. Even the most privileged, the ‘top girls’ (McRobbie, 2007) who succeed in becoming high-earning celebrities in the worlds of TV, fashion or pop music, are often constructed as fragile and troubled, marked by struggles with weight and eating disorders, alcoholism or drug addiction (see McRobbie (2009) for a discussion of how these postfeminist disorders might be understood as ‘illegible rage’). Girlhood is thus an unstable category, marked both by ‘trouble’ and risk, and by the suggestion of extraordinary capacity.

The promotion of the Girl Effect is striking for the way in which it draws on both these discourses of girlhood, but with a particular, novel inflection. While girls in the US are portrayed as active, empowered free agents, girls in the Global South are depicted as inhabiting a patriarchal order, where their freedoms—such as
the right to vote, and to own or inherit property—are constrained. In a familiar neo-imperialist move, Girl Effect campaigns suggest that the barrier to girls is constituted by 'cultural' beliefs and practices—such as the failure by families in developing countries to view girls as future economic actors and therefore to invest in their education.8,9 Girls, it is argued, are kept away from the public sphere by the burden of domestic chores. They are often required by their families to be 'the water carrier, the wood gatherer and the caretaker of the young, old and sick'.10 The cumulative effects of these practices, it is suggested, mean that girls' life chances are more limited than those of boys.

It is this gender inequality that the Girl Effect aims to tackle—primarily by exporting from North to South the very idea of girlhood or feminine adolescence, in ways that are redolent of the construction of ‘childhood’ as a cultural category (Aries, 1962; Castañeda, 2002; Burman and Stacey, 2010). At its core the Girl Effect seeks to promote in countries of the Global South a notion of female potential of 600 million adolescent girls to end poverty for themselves and the world—indicating what Andrew Wernick (Wernick, 1991) has called the spread of 'promotional culture'—

The Girl Effect describes girls in the South as victims of patriarchal culture (a point we will return to in the conclusion), but it also, as the above quotes make clear, describes them as subjects of extraordinary potential (Dogra, 2011). Indeed, the contrast between girls' powerlessness and their exceptional capacity is a rhetorical device infusing a range of 'Girl Effect' media outputs. The Nike Foundation's media outputs repeatedly deploy the slogan 'invest in a girl and she'll do the rest',14 while the UN Foundation purports that '[w]here there’s a girl, there’s a way'.15 Similarly, one of Nike's promotional animation clips employs an ironic tone (Chouliaraki, 2012) and asserts that the solution to the world's problems is not to be found in 'money', 'science' or 'the government' but in 'a girl'.16

It is important to note that this rhetoric is not reserved for the media outputs aimed at popular consumption, but can be found throughout the policy and political interventions too. Indeed, the rhetoric of the Girl Effect is strikingly different from the usual discursive register of policy documents, characterised by linguistic styles that are much more familiar from advertising and marketing—bold claims, hyperbole, rhetorical contrasts, emotional appeals, etc—indicating what Andrew Wernick (Wernick, 1991) has called the spread of 'promotional culture'.
throughout the polity.\textsuperscript{17} For example, normally sober and cautious UN bodies call to ‘Unleash the Power of Girls’\textsuperscript{18} and claim that deprived adolescent girls are ‘the unexpected solution to many of the world’s most pressing problems’.\textsuperscript{19} Thus, claims regarding the extraordinary capacity and potency of adolescent girls permeate the policy literature. This is not simply the ‘girling’ of development but its ‘girl-powering’, seeking to export the particular fusion of agency, independence, consumerism and entrepreneurialism that has become the hallmark of Western discourses of girlhood.

One aspect of this celebration of girls’ potential is that they are portrayed as a more worthwhile ‘investment’ than older women. As the World Bank managing director phrased it, ‘[i]nvesting in women is smart economics, and investing in girls, catching them upstream, is even smarter economics’.\textsuperscript{20} Because of their youth, girls represent a more lucrative opportunity, an investment that, in the economically orientated rhetoric, is likely to yield ‘higher returns’. Girls, however, are also depicted as more vulnerable than older women, for example through the emphasis on practices such as child marriage, and therefore in greater need of protection. Somewhat paradoxically, girls ‘outdo’ older women by being both at greater risk and representing superior productive potential. This conceptualisation has several implications. It establishes a dichotomous distinction between younger and older women at the expense of other social divisions that impact on women’s lives including those relating to class, sexuality and ethnicity. The emphasis on girls as being more ‘at risk’ undermines the recognition of girls and women’s shared vulnerabilities and the need to protect older women from gender discrimination. Finally, by highlighting greater utility of investment in girls, this policy narrative could reinforce a shift of resources away from the adult population that constitutes the majority of women in the developing world.

‘girls mean business’

A striking feature of the Girl Effect is the way it creates novel alliances between large transnational corporations, national development agencies, charities, and bodies such as the United Nations and the World Bank. As mentioned earlier, the term ‘Girl Effect’ was coined by the Nike Foundation, and it can be seen not simply as a development initiative (and way to channel tax dollars) but also a significant part of Nike’s global branding and corporate strategy—designed to extend its markets (particularly in Africa) and to rehabilitate a US/European image tarnished by accusations of sweatshops and other unfair labour practices (Hayhurst, 2011). Much could be said about this—both the new alliance of development actors and Nike’s distinctive role within this—but here we seek to focus on two other elements of the Girl Effect discourse: the construction of girls in developing countries as ‘entrepreneurial subjects’ hindered by an oppressive culture, and the way in which ‘success stories’ from ‘global’ female entrepreneurs are mobilised.
A key feature of these constructions is the notion that ‘girls mean business’—as the international NGO Plan put it.21 In terms that echo the portrayal of US and European girls, the Girl Effect describes young women in the Global South as competent neo-liberal subjects who, while oppressed by their ‘culture’, have the capacity, with help, to throw off its shackles and to become successful entrepreneurs. In the original Girl Effect video, the viewer is asked to imagine a girl in poverty, and then to replace the image of ‘hunger’, ‘HIV’ and ‘babies’ that it assumes will characterise this with a girl who has been given a loan to buy a cow.

She uses the profits from the milk to help her family. Pretty soon the cow becomes a herd. And she becomes the business owner who brings clean water to the village, which makes men respect her good sense and invite her to the village council, where she convinces everyone that all girls are valuable. Soon more girls have a chance and the village is thriving. Healthier babies, peace, lower HIV, food, education, commerce, sanitation, stability. Which means the economy of the entire country improves and the whole world is better off.22

In this simple narrative, told and retold across multiple iterations of the Girl Effect, neo-liberalism is portrayed as the liberating force through which patriarchy can be defeated. Once they are unleashed, girls’ entrepreneurial spirits can instantly overturn hundreds of years of patriarchy and transform the economic fortunes of the whole world. Following Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead’s influential notion of ‘feminist development fables’ (2007), Heather Switzer aptly describes this narrative as a ‘(post)feminist development fable’.

Indeed, within the Girl Effect the celebration of neo-liberal entrepreneurialism is such that even a struggle with extreme poverty can be cast in terms of empowerment. A Nike Foundation report vividly illustrates this when it claims that ‘A girl living in poverty is already an entrepreneur—in-training. To simply survive, she has already learned to be resourceful. A negotiator. A networker… [s]he could be further down the path of economic possibility than she—or anyone else—realizes’.23 Poverty, it seems, can be celebrated for the entrepreneurial capacities it stimulates. The structural dimensions of poverty remain unacknowledged, as does the potential role played by First World institutions such as the IMF in bringing about the poverty with which women (and men) struggle (Mohanty, 2003; Hartsock, 2006).

As Wilson (2011) has argued, these kinds of constructions are notable for the way they break with older depictions of ‘third world woman’ (Mohanty, 1988), often presented as passive victim. The shift to more ‘positive images’ of women in the Global South by international NGOs, donor governments and other development institutions is partly a response to feminist and anti-racist and anti-imperialist critiques of this figure, and has led to an almost ubiquitous stress in development materials upon women’s ‘agency’. What is at issue, however, as Wilson argues, is the way in which ‘agency’ becomes linked to a specific modality of neo-liberal entrepreneurialism; the
continuities between contemporary racialised representations of women and girls in the Global South with earlier representations of "productive and contented" workers in colonial enterprises (Wilson, 2011: 316); and the way in which girls and women’s own collective struggles for social transformation are occluded in this focus upon individual agency/micro-enterprise. In these depictions, girls are ‘lifted out’ of history and politics to be recast as individual entrepreneurial subjects.

A similar mixture of neo-liberal, entrepreneurial and postfeminist discourse can be found in the narratives of the ‘girls who made business’, that is the successful women who are corporate executives involved in sponsoring or implementing Girl Effect initiatives, which form the perfect complement to the micro-finance strategies promoted. These executives include their own personal narratives in the reports they help fund, and these play a pivotal role in the Girl Effect’s impact. They represent the success stories that ‘prove’ that entrepreneurialism is the solution to global injustice, and present a picture of neo-liberal capitalism as a benign and benevolent force—especially in the hands of women. Furthermore, these high-earning professional women describe their work as being driven by a strong sense of gender solidarity. For example, Maria Eitel, then the Nike Foundation’s president, writes that ‘[a]s a woman and a mother, I couldn’t help but consider the accident of geography and imagine my life (and my daughter’s) if I had grown up in Addis instead of Seattle’.²⁴

Similar claims can be found in an opinion piece by Indra K. Nooyi, Chair and chief executive officer (CEO) of PepsiCo. Nooyi draws attention to the fact that she was brought up in India and highlights the role her mother played in her future success. The climb to the top of a large multinational corporation is described as being enabled by an ambitious and competitive approach cultivated by a mother who did not herself enjoy similar job opportunities. By highlighting her relationship with her mother, Nooyi recasts the familiar neo-liberal story of competition and success as a narrative of female solidarity and empowerment, a solidarity and empowerment that is now to be extended to other women in developing countries who are—by dint of being women—‘just like’ her. It is an impressive rhetorical accomplishment when the CEO of a multinational corporation can claim solidarity with the world’s poorest and most dispossessed people. Nooyi reveals that gender solidarity is at the heart of this when she concludes her account with a pledge to ‘keep working toward a world in which girls...can look to the future with the same sense of possibility my mother instilled in me’.²⁵

‘i matter. and so does she’²⁶

One of the key features of the Girl Effect discourse is its address to Northern/Western publics. A range of high-profile public figures have endorsed these efforts. These include Sarah Brown and Cherie Blair (wives of former British Prime Ministers

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²⁵ ibid., 145.

Gordon Brown and Tony Blair), Mary Robinson (former Irish President) and Madeleine Albright, the former US secretary of state. To help engage the public in the 'Girl Effect', the Nike Foundation created several promotional animation films, which are circulated online. Through the production and dissemination of a range of media outputs, widespread public support for this campaign is being solicited.

Within the larger appeal to Western publics, a specific discourse is the one that takes as its target American teenage girls. In 2010, the UN Foundation, launched a campaign titled ‘Girl Up’, which aims to ignite a grass-roots social movement among American girls.27 Girl Up advocates consist of a range of public figures, mostly women, located at the nexus of celebrity–charity–public life. Queen Rania of Jordan is one of the advocates, as well as Judy McGrath, the chairperson and CEO of MTV networks. Other public figures involved in the campaign are Nickelodeon’s teen star Victoria Justice and Ivanka Tramp, daughter of entrepreneur and reality TV personality Donald Trump.28

The ‘Girl Up’ campaign encourages American girls to take on the cause of girls in the Global South. They are invited to render their support through their activity in social networks, through financial donations and through fundraising. As part of the campaign, a ‘Unite for Girls Tour’ was launched with motivational rallies, featuring celebrity advocates, taking place in several large American cities including New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, Denver and Washington, DC.29

The ‘Girl Up’ campaign is a significant part of the range of discourses and sites that form part of the broader ‘Girl Effect’ discourse. Girl Up events and promotional material articulate the relationship between American girls and girls in the Global South, revealing the notion of girlhood and North/South differences that are being promoted. American teenage girls are portrayed as ‘more educated, socially connected and empowered today than ever before in history’.30 The vast discrepancy between American girls and girls in the Global South is highlighted while evoking a universal notion of girlhood as the basis for solidarity. The website states, ‘With Girl Up, you can join the fight for every girl’s right to be respected, educated, healthy, safe and ready to rule the future. Just like you’.31 American girls are already ‘ready to rule the future’ and are now alleged to be in a position to try to ensure that girls in developing countries enjoy similar privileges.

The ’oneness’ of girls is evoked repeatedly through Girl Up campaigns, as a way of disavowing the tensions and power differences between girls in the US and girls in the Global South. While US girls are hailed as donors, and girls in Africa as recipients, the campaign stresses that these are girls ‘just like you’. The Girl Up website is suffused with the familiar language of girl power, organised around a simply expressed pride in being a girl, and being part of a social movement ‘for girls, by girls’. Slogans such as ‘I am her, she is me’ serve further to reinforce this view of unproblematic identification and solidarity, while necessarily obscuring

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discussion of differences, power, history or social transformation. Indeed, these are further elided by the use of American slang phrases such as ‘BFF’ with which accolade US girls are invited to nominate themselves if they believe they have made an ‘extraordinary contribution’. Charitable giving, then, systematically recast as an act of identity, friendship and girlie solidarity, expressed through consumption and display.

The Girl Up website features a ‘Girlafesto’ that is downloadable as a poster (see picture). It can be purchased in the form of a bag and a magnetic sticker. A sense of ‘cheekiness’ and resistance to power runs through this text. The Girlafesto states:

I AM A GIRL. bright, able, outspoken, soft-spoken, serious, spirited, adventurous, curious and strong ... i am me. i follow. i lead. i learn. i teach. i change my clothes, my hair, my music and my mind. i have a voice that speaks, ideas to stand on, and a world to step up to. i matter. and so does she. she may look different and talk different, but she is like me. SHE IS A GIRL. And together, we will rise up.

The American girl is interpellated as empowered, ‘outspoken’ and ‘spirited’. This empowerment manifests itself, among other things, in her freedom to change her clothes and her hair. The disempowered girl in the developing world cannot do these things, yet through the solidarity of American girls and their joint ‘rising up’, she too will become free (to change her hair!). The Girlafesto, which was put together with the advice of market researchers, reveals uncanny similarities with many contemporary postfeminist style adverts aimed at girls, with a defiant tone, an assertion of individuality and pride in being female (Gill, 2007a). Indeed, it bears strong resemblances to a lip gloss advert described by Harris. The advert included several ‘tick-box’ statements: ‘I have a brain, I have lip-gloss, I have a plan, I have a choice, I can change my mind, I am a girl’ (Harris, 2004: 21–22). The discourse propagated by Girl Up entails references and connotations specific to the US. However, the tone and character of the Girlafesto, and the Girl Up campaign more generally, have broader cultural resonances, particularly in the English-speaking world. They speak to the ‘igeneration’ (Gill, in press) shaped by postfeminist culture, immersion in information and communication technologies—particularly social networking sites—and individualism. The ‘rights’ being championed are not social or collective but relate to consumption, personal growth and individual conduct—including the much-vaunted ‘right’ to be contradictory (Dobson, 2011).

In line with this, young women are invited to participate in Girl Up through engaging in the purchase of commodities (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012). As the Girl Up website puts it, ‘support Girl Up with style—buy a Girl Up tee or tote and fill your bag with a water bottle, pen, magnet and stickers!’.

Girls are then encouraged to celebrate these choices by posting pictures of themselves wearing or carrying Girl Up products. Social networking sites have been established specifically to display these examples of stylish consumption and media-savvy girlhood. Girls are told,
We… want to see you in your Girl Up gear. So, send us a photo of you wearing your shirt, drinking from your water bottle… or post it on our Facebook page!’ 34

Joining the Girl Up movement is not merely an exercise in altruism. It is also promoted as identity work that will benefit US girls directly—as well as those girls in
the Global South it is ostensibly designed to support. Promotional material describes the campaign as an opportunity for American girls to further their career opportunities—promising that a Girl Up rally will be ‘a globetrotting experience that will turn you and your friends into global leaders’. In this way, participation in Girl Up seamlessly blends stylish consumption, networking and social media visibility, with opportunities to enhance one’s CV, while also—almost incidentally—working to empower girls from the Global South who are ‘just like you’.

One of the starkest features of the Girl Up discourse is that while it celebrates individualism, entrepreneurialism and consumption as markers of American girls’ empowerment, it ignores girls’ sexual and reproductive rights. The cultural and political climate in the US, particularly since the Bush presidency, has been one that undermines girls and young women’s freedom to make decisions regarding their sexual health. The promotion of abstinence-only sex education and more recently the resurgence of conservative political attacks on abortion rights reveal a significant threat to the reproductive rights of American women (Schalet, 2011).

The discourse promoted by Girl Up disregards this reality, purporting instead that girls are more empowered than ‘ever before in history’. This denial is particularly glaring considering the centrality of sexual and reproductive rights to the policy rationale at the heart of the Girl Effect, as we discuss in the next section.

empowerment and fertility

Although expressed through notions of ‘empowerment’, the Girl Effect discourse has a very concrete biopolitical objective at its core. Adolescence is described as a crucial period in the lives of girls and one that has a lasting impact on their future prospects. The main reason for this is the process of sexual and reproductive maturation that takes place at this stage. In developing countries, Girl Effect proponents argue, young women often marry shortly after puberty and begin to have children while in their teens (Buvinic, Guzman and Lloyd, 2007). This pattern is portrayed as a key factor reinforcing the intergenerational cycle of poverty. The young girl who becomes a mother interrupts her education, thereby undermining her future earnings. Furthermore, as a mother, she will pass on her educational disadvantage and ill health to her children (ibid.). However, if a girl is empowered, she will resist this path and a positive chain of events will be set in motion. As the UN Interagency Taskforce proclaims, empowered girls ‘will stay in school, marry later, delay childbearing, have healthier children, and earn better incomes that will benefit themselves, their families, communities and nations’. Girls’ empowerment is a strategy for improving the health and wealth of their countries (Foucault, 1998; Macleod, 2002). It is assumed that education will invariably lead girls to choose to delay childbearing and that this crucial postponement will improve their children’s health.
This narrative brushes aside the immense variation in education, marriage and fertility patterns across different developing countries and promotes a single picture of ‘life in the Global South’ as plagued by ‘child marriage’, teenage motherhood and HIV/AIDS. Rather than acknowledge the historical and structural dimensions of poverty, emphasis is placed on women’s domestic role and their high fertility. Furthermore, proponents of the Girl Effect assume that the life trajectory they sketch out is the inevitable choice of every empowered woman. The possibility that some women may value early motherhood, or indeed a large family, remains unthinkable.

The concern with ‘third world woman’s’ fertility has a long history, dating back to colonial concerns with the fecundity of indigenous populations (Dogra, 2011). Policies that tackle girls and women’s fertility have been a central component of development work from its inception, and this emphasis persisted through the notable shift from coercive population control to an emphasis on reproductive rights. The Girl Effect can be seen as confirming the continued preoccupation with fertility coupled with the current emphasis on empowerment and rights (Connelly, 2008).

However, the Girl Effect narrative is rooted not only in changes occurring in the Global South but also within the social transformations that occurred in the West during the second half of the twentieth century. The life trajectory being promoted in the Girl Effect is a relatively recent invention linked to wide-reaching social and economic changes occurring in the West over the last five decades, including increased secularisation and the liberalisation of sexual, gender and familial norms. These changes saw the decline of the Fordist model of family life characterised by a male breadwinner, a family wage and full-time mothering (Fraser, 1994; Waldby and Cooper, 2008). The two-salaried family—based on women’s increased participation in the labour force—has replaced the earlier model. Economic changes such as the decline of manufacturing and the rise of service industries have also impacted on the gendered and classed life trajectory. Many Western countries have seen a decline in birth rates with a large number of professional women delaying childbirth and having fewer children (Gerodetti and Mottier, 2009; Thomson, Kehily, Hadfield and Sharpe, 2011). It is within this context that preventing ‘teenage motherhood’ became a policy objective, replacing the earlier policy concern with ‘unwed mothers’ (Arney and Bergen, 1984; Solinger, 1992; Luker, 1996; Koffman, 2012).

The Girl Effect discourse seems to draw heavily on Western policy literature on adolescent motherhood. The notion that early motherhood disrupts young women’s educational and professional training and sets them on the path for long-term poverty and ill health is a key feature of this literature (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). This claim has come under sustained criticism. Scholars argue that policy makers’ concern with adolescent motherhood is linked to the fact that it is
primarily economically disadvantaged young women who bear children in their teens. Teenage mothers’ economic disadvantage, however, precedes the occurrence of becoming a mother. Deprived young women who opt for motherhood do not fare any worse than women of similar socioeconomic background who have postponed childbearing (Lawlor and Shaw, 2002; Duncan, 2007; Arai, 2009). Furthermore, qualitative research indicates that young women’s experience of becoming mothers is a positive one that is often described as motivating and empowering (Barn and Mantovani, 2007; Arai, 2009; Rudoe and Thomson, 2009; Duncan, Edwards and Alexander, 2010). In this context, it is unsurprising that the UK government’s efforts to curb teenage motherhood were unsuccessful despite a considerable amount of resources and effort.38

The Girl Effect ‘exports’ a well-trodden policy narrative that despite decades of implementation failed to yield the result policy makers wished for. Having failed to make Western young women of disadvantaged backgrounds adopt the proposed life trajectory, this narrative has now been directed at girls in developing countries. Taking into account the historical and cultural specificity of this policy agenda raises significant questions regarding its implementation in vastly different cultural and social contexts. This includes, of course, the variation between different nations and localities within the Global South (Mohanty, 1988, 2003). Rather than recognise and engage with cultural differences in their multiplicity and complexity, the Girl Effect proposes that girls in the South need to simply emulate privileged Western women.

**Conclusion**

In this paper we have discussed the Girl Effect as it materialises in development policy discourses and changed investment priorities for national and international development institutions, and as a distinct form of address to publics in the US and Europe whose support is sought. The Girl Effect, we have suggested, marks or consolidates a number of ongoing shifts that include the neo-liberalisation of development, the growing role of corporate players such as the Nike Foundation or the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and, above all, the uptake of popular feminist ideas to create what we have called ‘the girl-powering of development’. This emphasis on girl power can be seen to operate in constructions of those in need of ‘aid’, in the kinds of projects supported, and, crucially, in the modes of address directed towards governments and potential donors in the Global North. Taken together, these construct ‘girl power’ as a new ‘globalised’ commonsense, creating new hegemony in development practice.

There is much (more) that could be said about the Girl Effect. As already noted, the significant role played by corporate bodies is profound. The place of celebrity culture and the role of social media are also very important developments.
Furthermore, the shift in the very language of development policy, and the uptake of rhetorics from marketing and branding, deserves considerably more analysis than has been possible here. In concluding, however, we wish to highlight a number of points concerned with the specific issues raised by the girl-powering of development.

What we have sought to argue is that the Girl Effect literature is suffused with discourses of girl power, postfeminism and neo-liberalism that have been circulating in the West for at least two decades. The policy strategies that are being ‘exported’ to the Global South are therefore imbued with, and profoundly shaped by, culturally specific understandings and values. The Girl Effect also entails an address to girls and women in the West, reinforcing postfeminist notions of Western women as free from any form of gender discrimination or bias. What is novel about this address is the way in which the postfeminist characteristic of evoking feminism and repudiating it at the same time (McRobbie, 2004) is articulated: in this case the mixture is mapped onto a split between the North and the South. First World girls are invited to endorse feminism but only in relation to the South. They themselves are seen as being the most empowered, socially connected and educated girls in history. The need for social change in gender relations is entirely displaced onto the less fortunate ‘sisters’ in the South. This is of course problematic in the colonial relation of rescue fantasy that it sets up in relation to the South, but it also does significant performative work in the North. In emphasising the postfeminist idea that ‘all the battles have been won’ (for privileged women in the Global North) it further underscores the move to individualistic discourses that disavow structural or systemic accounts of inequality.

This is connected to the very specific use of feminist ideas in the Girl Effect campaign. As others have argued in relation to microfinance and other development interventions, the feminism invoked is individualistic, cut off from collective struggles or historical understandings, and tied to postfeminist, neo-liberal and entrepreneurial ideas (Rankin, 2001; Bee, 2011; Wilson, 2011). Furthermore, capitalist pursuit of profit is described as being wholly compatible with feminist activism. Women CEOs, such as PepsiCo’s Nooyi, can therefore safely claim that they are seeking to increase their company’s profit and help their sisters at the same time.

In this context, women in the Global South are constructed as ideal neo-liberal subjects, more ‘responsible’ than their male counterparts and more ‘worthy’ of investment in a way that therefore—as many have argued—reproduces classed and colonial ideas about the deserving or undeserving poor: girls are the ‘unexpected solution’ to ‘the world’s problems’ as the Girl Effect would have it, because they will buy a cow, not alcohol or cigarettes.

In addition, the Girl Effect can be seen as feeding into the ‘Othering’ of the Global South, a process that is particularly dangerous in the present political climate. As
is well documented, the post-9/11 era saw Western societies becoming increasingly preoccupied with Muslim women and this became the pretext for xenophobic political mobilisations against Muslim minorities in the West (Scott, 2007; Bhattacharyya, 2008, 2011) as well as the invasion of Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Hirschkind and Mahmood, 2002). Within public discourse, gender equality gained salience as a marker distinguishing the (civilised) North from the oppressive cultures of the South (Razack, 2004; Lewis, 2006; Gill, 2007b; Pedwell, 2010; Scharff, 2011), a trope that has deep historical roots dating back to colonial times (Ahmed, 1992; Abu-Lughod, 2002; Fanon, 2004 [1960]). The Girl Effect reinforces these discourses by depicting the Global South as a homogenous sphere plagued by patriarchy and ‘harmful cultural practices’. Furthermore, Northern and Southern girls are positioned differently in relation to their ‘culture’. While Western girls are depicted as empowered agents who have culture, girls in the Global South are (subjected to) ‘culture’ (Lowe and Lloyd, 1997).

Finally, we want to draw critical attention to the constructed relation of solidarity that underpins the Girl Effect. As we have seen, the Girl Effect relies for its force on a repeatedly asserted claim about identification and solidarity between women. It is on this basis of shared womanhood that one of the richest company directors in the world can claim common cause with the most hungry or oppressed. While development practices have taken on board—at least at face value—the critiques of those who challenged depictions of the ‘third world woman’, it appears that similar anti-racist and anti-colonialist critiques of an easy or straightforward universal solidarity or sisterhood have not been heard. While solidarity among women may be a laudable aspiration, decades of discussion within feminism about differences between women (related to sexual orientation, race, geography, disability, etc.) give the lie to the simple assertion that ‘I am her, she is me’. To challenge the realities of global world order marked by profound injustice, a more complex politics is required.

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