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Poverty Ends with a 12 year Old Girl: Empowerment and the Contradictions of International Development

An Honors Paper for the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

By Meghan Bellerose

Bowdoin College, 2017

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Glossary of Abbreviations

CAG – Coalition for Adolescent Girls

CARE – Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere

CGD – Center for Global Development

DFID – Department for International Development

GAP – Gender Action Plan

IAC – Inter-African Committee

ICAI – International Commission for Aid Impact

ICRW – International Center for Research on Women

INGO – International non-governmental organization

Sida – Swedish International Development Corporation

UNAIDS – United Nation's Programme on HIV/AIDS

UNICEF – United National Children's Fund

UNIFEM – United Nations Development Fund for Women

WHO – World Health Organization

1. Introduction

"50 million 12-year-old girls in poverty equal 50 million solutions. This is the power of The Girl Effect. An effect that starts with a 12-year-old girl and impacts the world"
– Girl Effect, 2009

On International Day of the Girl Child, adolescent girls from ten countries gathered in the White House for the first screening of *We Will Rise.* The documentary, filmed throughout the summer of 2016, captures Michelle Obama's travels to Liberia and Morocco to meet young women overcoming incredible odds to pursue an education. The film was produced as part of Let Girls Learn, Michelle and Barack Obama's ongoing initiative to empower girls across the world to achieve their full potential. Since the campaign's launch in 2015, the U.S. government has invested more than $1 billion dollars in Let Girls Learn programing in over 50 countries and has established nearly 100 private sector partnerships to promote adolescent girls' empowerment. On October 11, 2016, the same date as the film's release, the World Bank contributed to these efforts by pledging $2.5 billion dollars to the initiative to be distributed over the next five years. President of the World Bank Group, Jim Yong Kim, said of the investment, "Empowering and educating adolescent girls is one of the best ways to stop poverty from being passed from generation to generation. It can be transformational for entire societies" (World Bank 2016).

Over the past decade, the international development community has increasingly focused on the power of adolescent girls to end global poverty. Let Girls Learn is only the latest in a series of initiatives seeking to empower and unite adolescent girls in the

global South[1]. From Plan International's Because I am a Girl campaign to the United Nations Foundation's Girl Up Program, proponents argue that girls are the key to unleashing economic growth in their communities and halting intergenerational poverty. Among these initiatives, the Nike Foundation's, Girl Effect platform has had the widest influence on development programing and policy. The Nike Foundation defines The Girl Effect as "the unique potential of 250 million adolescent girls to end poverty for themselves and the world" (Nike Foundation 2008). In 2010, Nicholas Kristof estimated that the first Girl Effect video had been viewed by over 10 million people, and in the years since, The Girl Effect has released three additional promotional videos boasting over 2 million views on YouTube (Kristof 2010).

It is difficult to exaggerate the impact that The Girl Effect has had on development discourse and policy. Within a few years, the majority of the world's major players in the fields of health and development had taken up The Girl Effect agenda. In 2007, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), and World Health Organization (WHO) established the UN Interagency Task Force on Adolescent Girls. In 2008 the World Bank founded an Adolescent Girls Initiative, intended to improve young women's economic opportunities; and in 2009, the World Economic Forum held its first ever plenary session on adolescent girls (Hickel 2014). By 2010, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) had launched Girl Hub, a collaboration with the Nike Foundation with the stated

[1] In this thesis, I use the terms global North / South, Western / non-Western, and First World / Third World somewhat interchangeably. Building on Mohanty's (2003) conceptualization of North and South, I am utilizing these words to distinguish between societies and nations that hold economic and political privilege or disadvantage relative to one another.

aim of scaling up the implementation of the Girl Effect. Then in October 2012, the first UN-designated International Day of the Girl Child was celebrated amid extensive public endorsement by NGOs and governmental bodies. Today, across the field of international development, adolescent girls are given special priority.

At first sight, the investment in adolescent girls seems to be paying off. As adolescent girls have soared to the top of the development agenda, dramatic improvements in girls' health and human rights have been documented across the world. In addition, today, more than ever before, sustainability, accountability, and transparency underlie programmatic efforts to support adolescent girls. However, I contend that despite their good intentions, international empowerment programs are damaging to girls in the developing world.

In this thesis, I argue that international development programs focused on adolescent girls reproduce problematic and contradictory depictions of girls in the global South. Using Girl Effect marketing materials and interviews with INGO staff, I demonstrate that present-day international aid programs center on the neoliberal notion that an empowered adolescent girl holds the unique potential to end global poverty. Through empowerment programs, girls are encouraged to recognize their agency and take personal responsibility for improving the wellbeing of their communities. However, I argue that even as development leaders claim that an empowered adolescent girl is a source of indefatigable strength who can transform her community, they carry a deep conviction that such a feat is not possible without significant Western aid. Despite the empowerment rhetoric that The Girl Effect and related international initiatives espouse, their programs depict adolescent girls in the developing world as vulnerable and

oppressed by poverty, local men, and their cultures. Thus, Western donors are called upon to save "Third World" adolescent girls. I argue that these contradictions in the language of international development contribute to the perception of girls in the global South as weak, inferior, and homogenous and lead to the establishment of programs that strengthen inequitable structures and sideline girls' sexual rights.

In chapter 2, I discuss the research methodology used to create this thesis, focusing particular attention on the process by which I recruited and interviewed thirteen staff at three major international NGOs in Washington D.C. whose work is focused on adolescent girls. The interviews played a key role in directing my research and form a primary component of my analysis of the contradictory language of INGO programs.

In chapter 3, I provide context for my argument by describing the process through which adolescent girls' empowerment came to occupy a central position in the field of international development. I begin with a description of the early Western understanding of adolescence as a period of heightened vulnerability for a girl, when her emerging sexuality poses a threat both to herself and to society. I then argue that over the past 50 years, the rationale for international development programs targeting adolescent girls has shifted considerably. Programs initially focused on population control came to be motivated by concerns about adolescent girls' human rights and health and then on girls' lost economic potential. I outline each of these shifts before arguing that, today, programs are driven by the neoliberal notion that girls in the global South hold the unique ability to end poverty in the developing world. I conclude the chapter with a description of neoliberalism and its relation to the uncertain language of empowerment.

In chapter 4, I provide a detailed description of The Girl Effect as an example of an influential international program focused on adolescent girls' empowerment. I describe the campaign's history and highlight the ways in which The Girl Effect uses media and marketing materials to position girls as key instruments for alleviating poverty, slowing population increase, and generating economic growth. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of The Girl Effect's broad reach within the development community to demonstrate that the contradictions I will later highlight within The Girl Effect campaign are widespread.

In chapter 5, I argue that the language of international development programs is contradictory and leads to the subordination rather than empowerment of adolescent girls in the global South. The first contradiction I highlight is that Western INGO staff design programs with the intent of increasing equality, yet those very programs reinforce inequalities between the global North and South. Using my interviews, I show that, both explicitly and implicitly, INGO staff express the belief that Western approaches to adolescent girls' reproductive health, sexual education, and social participation are superior to those used by staff in developing countries. This conviction informs their shared understanding that Western oversight of programs, particularly those focused on girls' health and human rights, is justified even when resisted by locals, for girls need to be protected from damaging cultural norms. The second contradiction I outline is that adolescent girls are depicted as simultaneously empowered and weak within INGO marketing materials. I demonstrate that this portrayal of adolescent girls is highly apparent within The Girl Effect campaign, which centers on the implausible description of girls in the global South as both victims of patriarchal culture and subjects of

incredible potential and strength. I then argue that international empowerment programs homogenize the experiences of "Third World" adolescent girls, portraying them as uniformly weak and oppressed. In addition, in harmony with neoliberal ideas, these programs ignore the broader social, political, and economic structures that impact girls' lives and sideline girls' sexual rights. I conclude the chapter by noting that despite their awareness of the hierarchies reinforced by international development work, NGO staff continue to advocate for adolescent girls' empowerment programs, believing that the positive outcomes outweigh the negative.

In my conclusion, I grapple with the question of how to weigh the positive and negative outcomes of how international empowerment programs. How important is pursuing global equality versus providing interventions that could improve the health and economic status of adolescent girls? How much is the funding for international empowerment programs dependent on presenting an image of adolescent girls in the global South as oppressed and in need of aid? In pondering these questions, I reflect on my own interest in pursuing a career in global adolescent sexual and reproductive health and the dilemmas that this research has raised for me.

2. Research Methodology

Interviews

During the summer of 2016, I conducted thirteen interviews with staff at three international NGOs in Washington D.C. whose work involved adolescent girls' education, health, or empowerment in the developing world. I met each of the interview subjects through contacts formed while I was an intern at Save the Children in the International Division. My internship provided me with an opportunity to attend the Coalition for Adolescent Girls' quarterly meeting, where I met many of my interview subjects, and to network with development professionals from major U.S. based INGOs.

After my project received approval from Bowdoin College's Institutional Review Board, I solicited the participation of interviewees both in person and through email. Of the 20 staff members whom I contacted, two did not respond to my email and five were unavailable to interview during my time frame due to extensive travel for work or vacation. Among the thirteen interviews I did arrange, nine took place in person and four occurred over the phone to accommodate staff working outside of the United States.

During each interview, I asked a number of general questions regarding girl-oriented work, such as:

- Do you think there has been a rise in the attention placed on girls, and if so why has it occurred? Do you think it will last?
- What are the challenges of working at an international NGO in the field of adolescent girls' education (or health / empowerment)?

- What trends in programming or funding for adolescent girls have you seen?
- What do you see as the gaps in programs for girls?
- How can we bring about real change in how girls are perceived?

In addition, I asked questions regarding the barriers to working with governments, communities, or local partners to implement programs involving adolescent girls, about funding and sustainability, about media involvement, and about collaboration across organizations and sectors.

Not all questions were asked during each interview; rather, the interview outline was used as a guide to help shape my conversations. This structure allowed me to engage in flexible conversations and respond to the specific thoughts and directions offered by my interviewees. The interviews, which ranged in length from 45 minutes to an hour and half, were taped using a digital voice recorder, transcribed, and open coded. In addition, all identifying information, including organizations, corporate partners, and program names, was removed from each interview to protect the confidentiality of all respondents.

While all of the interviewees were employed by international NGO's with headquarters in the United States, over 200 employees, and an annual budget greater than $25 million dollars, three of the interviewees worked in regional offices within developing countries (Nigeria, Guatemala, and Egypt). These staff members were often more involved in direct program implementation and described their offices as smaller and less well resourced than the organizations' U.S. headquarters. Although they frequently engaged with national, regional, and grassroots level organizations, the staff interviewed were each employed by a major international agency, so I cannot comment on the opinions of practitioners working at domestic organizations.

Of the thirteen staff interviewed, twelve were female and one was male. While this ratio appears skewed, it seemed fairly representative of the distribution of males and females working in departments focused on adolescent girls within the organizations from which I drew interview subjects. This was determined by comparing organization staff charts, shared with me by the three INGOs employing my interview subjects. In addition, all twenty-three development professionals in attendance at the Coalition for Adolescent Girls meeting I attended were female. Six of the staff interviewed were people of color and five were not native-born U.S. citizens, allowing for interesting conversations about the role of race and nationality in international development.

By chance rather than design, the staff members' regional concentrations were fairly evenly spread, with individuals focused on Northern Africa, Western Africa, South Asia, Latin America, and Central America. This allowed for vast differences in the answers I received when discussing barriers to program implementation surrounding adolescent girls; government regulations, financial resources, community push-back, religion, and culture took different forms in the diverse contexts the staff were working in. The interviewees also ranged in experience level, from two program coordinators directly out of graduate school to organization heads with decades of experience in the field. Still, with such a small sample size, I have not come close to representing the range of experiences held by the employees of these large INGOs.

Overall, the in-person interviews were far smoother than those conducted over the phone, as poor Internet or cellular connections often posed a problem. However, some of the most pertinent and insightful comments I gathered occurred during the phone interviews, perhaps because the experience of working in a developing country for a

foreign NGO influenced the staff members' notions of the international aid sector. All thirteen interviewees were very open about their experiences working for INGOs and willing to discuss the issues present within their day-to-day work and the broader development sector. A number of the interviewees expressed their eagerness to help someone like me, who was just starting out in the field.

As a result of my status as an intern at an INGO, I received a number of questions during the interviews about my career interests, which I spoke openly about. While these questions tended to come at the end of the interviews, my responses may have biased some of the results, as the participants could have spoken more highly or critically about adolescent girls' empowerment programs knowing that I am considering entering that field.

Reports from agencies

In addition to the interviews, my thesis is informed by a number of reports published by major international NGOs and the U.S. government regarding adolescent girls' health, education, and empowerment. In this thesis, I both draw information from these reports, such as statistics regarding adolescent girls across the world, and critique their language. In particular, I focused on locating trends in the ways that programs intending to improve the health of adolescent girls were framed and rationalized over time.

Girl Effect Media

To support my case study on The Girl Effect, I sought out and analyzed a number of Girl Effect campaign and marketing materials. These included promotional videos, posters, web content, cultural brand sales platforms, music videos, stories from girls

involved in the campaign, and PBS news clips. Some of this material was still available on the official Girl Effect website at the time I was writing between 2016 and 2017; however, much of it had been replaced by new messages. In addition, I explored some of the promotional materials employed by the initiatives: Because I Am a Girl, Girl Hub, Girl Up, Girl Rising, Half the Sky Movement, Let Girls Learn, and the Coalition for Adolescent Girls.

Throughout my thesis, I also engage with the work of theorists and scholars who have explored international development programs and policy, drawing heavily on neoliberal critiques and postcolonial analyses.

3. The "Third World" Adolescent Girl

"All geniuses born girls are lost to the public good" – Stendhal

Over the past 50 years, the rationale for international development programs targeting adolescent girls has shifted considerably. Programs initially focused on population control came to be motivated by concerns about adolescent girls' human rights and health and then on girls' lost economic potential. In this chapter, I outline these shifts, beginning with a description of the early Western notion of adolescence as a period of heightened vulnerability for a girl, when her emerging sexuality poses a threat both to herself and to society. I then argue that today, programs targeting adolescent girls in the global South are driven by neoliberal ideologies. Importantly, each of these changes was incited by Western NGOs and governments. Therefore, I focus particular attention on perceptions of adolescence in the Western World. As Greenfield and Cocking note, "the field of developmental psychology is an ethnocentric one dominated by a Euro-American perspective" (1994: ix cited in Lancy 2014). Indeed, Western ideas about girls' chastity, population control, feminism, health, and human rights have fundamentally shaped the ways in which adolescence is viewed around the world. Specifically, western influence has played a key role in the problematization of adolescent motherhood and the portrayal of girls in the global South as both vulnerable to health and human rights abuses and possessing incredible economic potential.

Emerging Sexuality and the Vulnerable Adolescent Girl

In the opening chapter of her 1994 bestseller, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Lives of Adolescent Girls*, Mary Pipher wrote, "Adolescent girls are saplings in a hurricane. They are young and vulnerable trees that the winds blow with gale strength" (23). For centuries, adolescence has been seen as a critical juncture in a girl's life, when she will go through significant physical, emotional, and social changes that permanently shape her future. Although the transition from childhood to adult life is marked by growth and independence, as Pipher's words highlight, for girls it is also seen as a period of heightened vulnerability. Across the world, adolescence is viewed as a precarious time for a girl, when her burgeoning sexuality poses a threat to herself and to society.

Today, there are shared notions of adolescence that traverse the globe; yet, the term "adolescence" and its cultural significance are relatively modern constructs. Michael Rutter (1976) argues that the word adolescence, derived from the Latin term "adolescere," meaning "growing into maturity," was rarely used in the Western world prior to the 18th century. He explains that before then, "the characteristics of puberty were well recognized, [but] little psychological significance was attached to them. The reaching of adulthood was determined by the acquisition of independence, a point having no direct connection with physiological maturity" (Rutter 1976: 5).

Adolescence, as we think of it today, emerged as a significant life stage in the United States and Europe in the early 1900's, fueled by a number of essays written on the transition to adulthood. Central among these texts was Stanley Hall's 1904 study, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology*. Hall defines adolescence as a period of "storm and stress" when all young people go through some degree of

emotional and behavioral upheaval before establishing a more stable equilibrium in adulthood (Driscoll 2013). According to Hall, the onset of puberty triggers a series of hormonal changes that regulate physical growth and throw the emotions of girls and boys into disarray. Thus, in his conception, adolescence is marked by specific and distressing biological changes. Herant Katchadourian supports this view of adolescence with his statement, "reproductive maturation is the most distinctive feature of the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is also potentially the most problematic" (1990: 330, see also Feldman and Elliot 1990).

This discourse that "biology is primary" and hormonal changes trigger behavioral ones employs a model of human behavior termed "biological causation" (Fausto-Sterling 1985: 100). In *Myths of Gender*, Fausto-Sterling (1985) argues that the application of this model to gender has allowed for the widespread adoption of negative beliefs about menstruation and females' leadership potential. In a number of cultural contexts, the emotional changes that accompany fluctuations in women's menstrual cycle are believed to render them untrustworthy in positions of responsibility. For example, Abu-Lughod explains that in Bedouin societies, women are not allowed to pray or touch holy objects while they are menstruating and therefore cannot take on the role of religious or cultural leaders. This restriction is in place because it is believed that "menstruation compromises a women's virtue… As a natural force over which they have no control, it also represents inescapable weakness, and lack of self-control or independence" (1999: 129). In the United States, women are not legally withheld from positions of leadership due to their reproductive status, yet many uphold the view that women are biologically prone to instability, irrationality, and emotional swings, and therefore should not be trusted in

positions of great social weight. The cross-cultural nature of this belief is reflected in the fact that as of January 2015, only 22 of approximately 200 world leaders were female.

Fausto-Sterling notes that "the idea that women's reproductive systems direct their lives is ancient" (1985: 91). In 350 BC, Aristotle wrote that women are "more mischievous, more impulsive, more compassionate… more easily moved to tears… more jealous, more querulous…[and] more prone to despondency" than men (cited in Henry 2009). As adolescence marks the onset of hormonal changes, it also signals the moment when a girl is considered most susceptible to these problematic "womanly" characteristics. Indeed, Hall argues that many of the trademark characteristics of adolescence, such as "malleability," "uncertainty," and "turbulence" are more closely associated with females. Additionally, he writes, "a woman at her best never outgrows adolescence as a man does, but lingers in, magnifies and glorifies this culminating stage of life with its all-sides interests, its convertibility of emotions, its enthusiasm…" (Hall 1904: 624). The association Hall creates between both adolescence and the female sex with emotional turbulence positions adolescent girls as particularly dangerous to society, as well as vulnerable within it. Indeed, in her *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England,* Carol Dyhouse discusses the early definition of female adolescence as "a time of instability; a dangerous phase when [a girl] needed special protection from society" (2012: 122). Thus, Hall contributed to a discourse, which persists today, that girls, like boys, face new obligations and freedoms during adolescence, yet for girls alone, adolescence is a problematic period.

In her work on teenage pregnancy in the United States, Nathanson (1991) argues that female adolescence came to be regarded as a time of life that was "sexually

troublesome" beginning in the middle of the 19th century, during Hall's early years of scholarship. However, decades before this dialogue about adolescent girls' sexual vulnerability emerged, the chastity of young women was believed to be of the utmost importance in a range of societies around the world. In Medieval Europe, for example, the virginity of adolescent girls was tested prior to marriage to ensure that they remained pure and untouched for their husbands (Kelly 2000). Goody (1973) points out that the loss of virginity diminished a girl's honor and therefore reduced her marriage prospects. While the practice of virginity testing has been abandoned in many Western countries, it remains prevalent in numerous societies in the global South, carried forward by both tradition and practicality. For instance, Erika George reports that in South Africa, virginity testing is viewed as a solution to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, for it is believed to "reduce teen pregnancy, to detect incest and sexual abuse, and to re-instill and promote lost African cultural values and traditions…of chastity before marriage, modesty, self-respect, and pride" (2008: 1457). Widmer and colleagues (1998) compared attitudes toward non-marital sex in 24 countries and found that even within societies considered "modern" and "progressive," the majority of individuals believe that unmarried adolescent girls should not be engaging in sexual activities. In fact, 58 percent of respondents involved in the study condemned teenagers having sex as "always wrong." Although the specific parameters of a safe passage from puberty to womanhood, virginity testing, and average age of marriage have shifted over time, the notion that adolescent girls' chastity and virginity must be protected has remained steadfast across many cultures.

At the center of past and present notions of girls' adolescence is the idea of nascent sexuality, beginning with menarche, a girl's first period. Burrows and Johnson explain that in Western societies, menarche "conveys conflicting societal messages; it represents the beginning of womanhood and sexuality, but girls of this age are seen as too young to be sexually active" (2005: 236). However, Kirk and Sommer (2006) point out that in other cultural contexts, menarche serves as an indication to parents and community leaders that girls are newly fertile and therefore marriageable. Bruce and Chong (2006) emphasize this point in their study of global adolescence, explaining that beginning at menarche, a girl's self-esteem, sense of agency, and worth in the eyes of relatives is increasingly centered on her marriageability, sexuality, and fertility. An adolescent girl's body –its ability to bear children, pleasure men, and complete domestic work– may be viewed by community members and the girl as her sole contribution to social and economic life.

In many contexts, young brides face enormous pressure to bear children as quickly as possible to prove their fertility and worth (U.S. Government 2015: 6). As a result, each year, approximately 16 million adolescent girls aged 15-19 years old and one million girls under age 15 give birth, comprising 11 percent of all births globally (WHO 2014). To provide an example, in Bangladesh, although the legal age of marriage is 18 years old, the continued practice of early marriage and childbearing has led to an adolescent fertility rate that is among the highest in the world (Huda et al. 2014). In their study of unintended pregnancy in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Huda and colleagues (2014) found that more than half of the pregnancies (53%) among married adolescent girls in urban slums were unintended. Sedgh and colleagues (2014) report that in 2012, a similar

percentage of pregnancies in the United States were unintended (51 percent) and 40 percent of all pregnancies worldwide were unintended; however, it is important to recognize that unplanned pregnancy has very different consequences for girls' health, education, and economic potential in different regions of the world. Bearinger (2007) points out that adolescent girls in the global South typically have less license over the timing and frequency of reproduction, as well as less access to contraception than girls in the global North (see Bearinger 2007, WHO 2012).

For nearly a century, governments and INGOs have labored to end early marriage across the world, first as a strategy to reduce rates of reproduction in the developing world by increasing women's age at first pregnancy and later in an effort to protect the health and human rights of adolescent girls. For example, in India, legal reform around child marriage began in 1929 when it was outlawed through the Child Marriage Restraint Act. By the 1980's, firm opposition to child marriage across the globe was well established within international human rights law (Psaki 2014). However, scholars argue that programmatic interventions to eradicate the practice have only gained momentum since the 1990's, coinciding with the attention to women's reproductive health at the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 and the assertion of women's rights at the UN International Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (Malhotra et al. 2011). Today, several international agreements – including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on Consent to Marriage, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women – limit marriage or unions to individuals over the age of 18 and emphasize that consent is an essential component; yet, the practice of child marriage continues (Psaki 2014).

According to the World Health Organization (2012), over 30 percent of girls in developing countries marry before the age of 18 and roughly 14 percent do so before age 15. Rates of child marriage are highest in sub-Saharan Africa, where approximately 40 percent of girls marry before age 18, and about 1 in 8 were married before age 15, followed by Latin America at 24 percent before age 18 and the Middle East at 18 percent (UNICEF 2016). In 2013, child marriage was the highest in Niger, where 75 percent of girls married before 18 (UNICEF 2013). If present trends continue, over the next decade 150 million girls will be married before their 18th birthday– an average of 15 million girls each year (ICRW 2015).

Population Growth and Control

According to the scholars from the International Center for Research on Women, by 2007, there were more than 66 NGOs addressing child marriage in over 30 developing countries (ICRW 2007). Initially, much of this programmatic focus on early marriage and adolescent girls' sexuality came from a fear of population growth and environmental scarcity, for girls who get married younger are able to have children for a longer period of time and may have fewer resources to care for their children. Vogelstein (2013) explains that, historically, child marriage was used as a tool to maximize fertility in the context of high child mortality rates. However, by the 1960's, large improvements in child survival had produced rapid population growth, growth which was widely perceived as threatening by the international development community. Thus, attention to adolescent girls' reproduction grew out of the general concern about population growth and the resultant push to reduce women's fertility rates in the global South.

The shared understanding that reproduction must be curtailed in order to slow population growth was clear at the 1965 Conference on Population in Belgrade. In their report on the conference, Cox and colleagues (1966) stated that the need for greater attention to be placed on methods of fertility control was implicit in the discussion of nearly every major topic from migration, labor supply, and employment to educational advance. They note:

> No hope was offered that increased food supplies could possibly match the growth of world population during the next decade whilst housing development and economic growth were clearly seen to be dependent upon a policy of planned population growth. Against this background, the discussions on fertility control were both urgent and optimistic (Cox et al. 1966: 13).

While efforts to reduce fertility rates were initially aimed at all women in developing nations, adolescent girls and age at marriage began to receive additional attention in the 1970's and 80's as a result of the finding that reducing the number of years that girls are "exposed to pregnancy" significantly reduces fertility rates. For example, in 1971, a policy of "later, longer, and fewer" was introduced in China in an effort to slow the rate of population growth. Under the policy, the government required that young people in urban areas delay marriage until age 25 for males and age 23 for females. This delay would extend birth intervals and, it was hoped, would lead to slower population growth (Chen and Kols 1982). Thus, prohibiting early marriage was an effective strategy for demographers, governments, and NGOs interested in lowering fertility rates.

The combined efforts of NGO and government leaders led to massive improvements in access to family planning across the developing world. By the 1990's, large changes in access to reproductive healthcare had occurred in Latin American and Asia, including some of the world's poorest countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal.

Additionally, fertility decline had begun in sub-Saharan Africa (Cleland et al. 2006). In their 2003 report on levels and trends of contraception use, UN Population Division reported that between 1960 and 2000, the proportion of married women in developing regions using contraception rose from less than 10 percent to about 60 percent, and the average number of births per woman fell from six to about three (UN 2004).

However, this success came at a cost. Sen and colleagues (1994) note that the strategies used by some Asian programs to reduce fertility were criticized as coercive and the quality of family planning services in many countries was deemed unsatisfactory. Jeffery and Jeffery (1998) argue that throughout the 1970's, women were the main target of population programs to the virtual exclusion of men, and population concerns have often subverted policies designed to improve the position of women. Additionally, in her essay "Population and Ethics," Sissela Bok remarks that the policies and programs that resulted from a fear of population growth "too often continued to leave women without any say, even about matters that affect their lives as intimately and powerfully as sexuality and procreation" (1994: 8). Although women across the globe were fundamentally affected by these programs, their health, human rights, and desires were paid little mind until the 1990's.

Human Rights of the Girl Child

Over time, the numbers of NGO and government programs focused on women's sexual and reproductive health have grown, yet their focus has shifted. Where family planning programs were once driven by a desire to restrict population growth, they came to be propelled by a concern for women's and girls' human and reproductive rights. Bok (1994) explains that this transition began in the 1990's when a split formed between those

who believed priority should be given to population control and those who stressed individual choice and human rights.

Those in the first camp included environmental experts, such as Garrett Hardin, who argued that without more forceful efforts to control the world's population, individual rights would be violated as resources were depleted and social unrest placed a burden on all peoples worldwide. In his famous article, "The Tragedy of the Commons," Hardin maintains that when many people make individually justified decisions to avail themselves of collective resources, such as the commons for cattle or a body of drinking water, they deplete the resource to the detriment of all (Hardin 1968). He asserts that "freedom to breed will bring ruin to all," and population growth threatens humanity on such a large scale that drastic methods are required to avoid it. In his later works, Hardin equates wealthy nations to a "lifeboat" surrounded by the poor of the world swimming in the sea, hoping to be rescued. He explains that if the rich take in more people than they can cope with, "the boat is swamped and everybody drowns" (Hardin 1974: 37).

Those who upheld the second position, that women's health and human rights should be prioritized, highlighted the ways in which individuals had been coerced by government family planning policies and NGO programs backed by powerful western spheres of influence. Additionally, they noted that environmental damage does not stem solely from population increases in poorer regions of the world but rather from the harmful effects of industrialization and consumerism in developed nations (Bok 1994). Bok argues that this division "culminated in sharp disagreements" at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (1994: 8). The result of these conversations was a shift away from family planning as a means of

population control and a new conviction that the reproductive rights of women and girls were paramount.

This shift is reflected clearly in the outcomes of the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, where delegates from the governments of 179 countries and more than 1,200 NGOs agreed on a 20-year program of action to improve sexual and reproductive health, foster reproductive rights, and stabilize the world's population. For the first time, international population policies were couched in a concern for the rights and wellbeing of individual human beings across the world, including women and girls in the global South, and population control was deemphasized. Indeed, within the 15 guiding principles underpinning the program of action, there was a new recognition that gender equity, elimination of all kinds of violence against women, and women's ability to control their own fertility should be cornerstones of population and development-related programs (Glasier et al. 2006).

Where early marriage was originally condemned for giving rise to uncontrolled population growth, by the mid-1990's, it was framed as detrimental to the wellbeing of girls and an abuse of children's right to consent. In 1990, the African Charter on the Rights and the Welfare of the Child was re-written to include a declaration that child marriage, defined by the Inter-African Committee (IAC) as "any marriage carried out below the age of 18, before the girl is physically, physiologically and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and child bearing" be prohibited (IAC 1993). Mikhail (2002) cites the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare as a reflection of the changing discourse around child marriage. She then draws comparisons between child marriage and child prostitution, noting that both involve economic transactions,

lack of freedom, and the violation of a child's right to consent. Mikhail states, "Traditionally, child marriages and child prostitution have been regarded as being in moral opposition to each other. While early marriages have been respected and valued as desirable and honorable, prostitution has been denounced as an absolute disgrace," yet she points out that both acts take away a girl's basic rights to reproductive choice (2002: 43).

Throughout the 1990's, conversations about all facets of reproductive health came to be fundamentally re-shaped by the burgeoning conviction within the international development community that women and girls are entitled to basic human rights. At the 1995 Conference on Women in Beijing, a platform of action was created, which stressed the United Nations' new commitment to women's rights, stating:

> The advancement of women and the achievement of equality between women and men are a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice…They are the only way to build a sustainable, just and developed society. Empowerment of women and equality between women and men are prerequisites for achieving political, social, economic, cultural and environmental security among all peoples (UN 1995).

In addition, the Beijing Platform of Action included a section entitled "The Girl-Child," which specifically addressed the reproductive and human rights of adolescent girls. The document affirms:

> Full attention should be given to the promotion of mutually respectful and equitable gender relations and particularly to meeting the educational and service needs of adolescents to enable them to deal in a positive and responsible way with their sexuality… the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. Support should be given to integral sexual education for young people with parental support and guidance that stresses the responsibility of [adolescents] for their own sexuality and fertility.

These documents were instrumental in the rise of NGO programs focused on adolescent girls' reproductive health and rights. Not only do they mark a fundamental shift in the

rationale for family planning programs from population control to human rights; they also sparked a series of transformations in how programs involving adolescent girls in the global South would be rationalized and justified over time.

In addition, as adolescent girls were afforded greater attention in government and NGO reports and statistics, the definition of "adolescence" was clarified. In 1986, the question of what age range encompasses adolescence was still fuzzy enough to elicit three full pages in the World Health Organization report, "Young People's Health: A Challenge for Society," in which it is noted that the United Nations has, at different moments, used the term adolescence to describe people between ages eight and 24. Today, the World Heath Organization's definition of adolescence as "the period in human growth that occurs after childhood and before adulthood, from ages 10 to 19" is widely accepted[2] (WHO 2016).

Health of Adolescent Girls

The discourse around women and girls' human rights that developed in the 1990's led to a heightened focus on adolescent girls' health. Over the course of the late 20th century, a large body of research was compiled demonstrating that early pregnancy is associated with an increased risk of maternal mortality, that the infants of adolescent girls are more likely to experience health issues and attain lower levels of education, that adolescent girls face greater risk of abuse and sexual assault than other groups, and that adolescent girls are at the greatest risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. Since the start of the 21st century, NGOs and governments have increasingly highlighted the poor health

[2] The age range 10-19 was used in all subsequently mentioned reports unless otherwise stated.

outcomes of adolescent mothers as a rationale for their investments in girl-centered programming.

Maternal and Infant Mortality

Compared to young women, adolescent mothers are far more likely to experience miscarriage, complications at birth, obstetric fistula, and death (U.S. Government 2015). Although overall maternal mortality worldwide fell over 50 percent between 1990 and 2015, complications during pregnancy and childbirth remained the second leading cause of death for 15 to 19 year-old girls (WHO 2016). Nove et al. (2014) report that adolescents, ages 15 to 19, have a mortality rate of 260 per 100,000 live births compared to 190 per 100,000 in women ages 20 to 29. According to the U.S. Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls, the majority of maternal deaths are preventable when women have access to quality antenatal and postnatal care and when a skilled birth attendant is present at delivery. Yet adolescent girls are the least likely group to have access to health care and information, especially when they are married at an early age, leave school, or become isolated in their husband's households (U.S. Government 2016).

Furthermore, NGOs note that children of adolescent mothers have higher rates of infant mortality and malnutrition. The World Health Organization (2014) reports that stillbirths and newborn deaths are 50 percent higher among infants of adolescent mothers than among infants of women aged 20-29 years (WHO 2014). The children of adolescent mothers are also less likely to be educated than children born to mothers older than 18 (U.S. Government 2016). In addition, many adolescent girls who become pregnant are aware that they do not have the resources to give birth or care for a child, leading many to undergo unsafe abortions. Shah and Ahman (2012) report that in 2008, an estimated 3.2

million adolescents were undergoing unsafe abortions every year. This is a critical issue as unsafe abortions may result in devastating and permanent consequences for women and girls, including, sepsis, perforation of the uterus or intestines, hemorrhage, chronic pelvic infection, and infertility. Although unsafe abortions in developing countries peak between the ages of 20 and 29 and only 14 percent of all unsafe abortions are among girls under 20 years of age, adolescent girls are given particular attention as unintended pregnancy is more likely to be the result of sexual violence (Bayer et al. 2011).

Abuse and Sexual Assault

In 2016, UNICEF reported that as girls transition into adolescence and begin to show the physical signs of puberty and fertility, their vulnerability to sexual exploitation and gender based violence increases. While this rise could be a reflection of greater reporting of adolescent abuse than of child abuse, it highlights a serious threat to adolescent girls' health and human rights. In fact, the 2016 U.S. Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls states that more than 1 in 10 girls worldwide have experienced some form of forced sexual activity. Pooling data from their meta analysis of the prevalence of child sexual abuse around the world, Stoltenborgh and colleagues (2011) estimate that this number is closer to 16.4 to 19.7 percent of girls. The UN General Assembly (2006) reports that worldwide, an estimated 150 million girls and 73 million boys have experienced sexual violence, and nearly half of all sexual assaults are committed against girls younger than 16 years of age. Furthermore, girls in conflict or emergency settings, in minority or indigenous communities, or facing poverty are at increased risk of gender-based violence.

These high rates of sexual abuse, and the related fear that girls' purity and marriageability will be tarnished as a result of rape, are one reason (of many) that thousands of girls are entered into marriages during adolescence. According to the International Center for Research on Women, girls who marry before 18 are more likely to experience domestic violence than their peers who marry later. For example, a study in two states in India revealed that girls who were married before 18 were twice as likely to report being beaten, slapped, or threatened by their husbands than girls who married later (ICRW 2015). Additionally, across many cultural contexts, child brides are more likely than adult brides to show signs symptomatic of sexual abuse and post-traumatic stress such as feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and severe depression (ICRW 2015).

HIV/AIDS

NGO and government bodies also frame adolescent sexual and reproductive health as a critically important issue given the higher rates of HIV infection among adolescent girls. Globally, 15 percent of women living with HIV are aged 15–24 (UNAIDS 2015). Despite major advances in the global HIV response over the past two decades and large increases in the percentage of girls in school, each year, approximately 380,000 adolescent girls, ages 15 to 19, are infected with HIV (US Gov. 2015). This issue is of particular importance in sub-Saharan African, where 80 percent of women aged 15-24 living with HIV/AIDS reside. These numbers mean that as of 2015, 2.2 percent of young women in sub-Saharan Africa were living with HIV (UNAIDS 2015). Additionally, in that region, women are 76 percent more likely to have HIV than men and acquire HIV five to seven years earlier than men (UNAIDS 2015).

In their essay on sexual knowledge among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa, Bankole and colleagues (2007) note that the current rate of HIV contraction among adolescent girls should be justification for greater NGO and government investment in that age group. At present, there is no cure for HIV/AIDS, so when adolescents contract the disease, it will negatively impact their lifelong health. In addition, UNAIDS reports that there are a number of behavioral and biological factors that lead to a higher incidence of HIV among adolescent girls than other groups. For example, they note that adolescent girls engage in transactional sex more than women between the ages of 20 and 29 in order to access basic needs, increase their social status, or receive material expressions of love from male partners, and highlight data indicating that females who engage in transactional sex are more likely to become HIV positive. In addition, adolescent girls may be at increased risk of HIV infection due to their biology, as a greater proportion of genital mucosa is susceptible to HIV in an immature cervix (UNAIDS 2016). Thus, there are significant health concerns used to justify a particular focus on adolescent girls in international development programs.

Lost Potential and the Economic Rationale for Investing in Girls

In the mid-2000's, the language used to discuss adolescent girls shifted once more. Although health and human rights abuses were still addressed, the rationale provided for programs focused on adolescent girls' sexuality came to be centered on girls' unique potential to improve the economic conditions in developing counties. Since this period, NGOs and western governments have rarely proposed a strategy to aid adolescent girls without recognizing the "lost potential" of a girl who is unable to access health, educational, and economic resources as a result of her social circumstances.

In 2004, the international NGO Save the Children published a report entitled "Children Having Children" to call attention to the immense challenges that young mothers and their infants face. In his opening statement, Save the Children's CEO, Charles MacCormack, explained the rationale behind his organization's concerns about adolescent childrearing across the globe. He argued:

> If there is one common denominator that enables children to survive and thrive against seemingly impossible odds, it is a healthy and caring mother… But when mothers are children themselves – when they begin to have children before they are physically and emotionally ready for parenthood – too often everyone suffers: the mother, the child and the community in which they live (MacCormack 2004: 2).

With this statement, MacCormack highlights three of the central discourses regarding adolescent pregnancy that I have discussed: 1) teenage girls are physiologically and emotionally immature, 2) a mother's health has a significant impact on her children's health, and 3) entire communities are adversely affected when young mothers cannot provide their children with sufficient economic support. While the first two points focus on the health and human rights of an individual girl and her children, the final point focuses on how investing in a girl could impact communities around the world. Thus, this passage reflects the burgeoning logic that governments and NGOs should invest in the adolescent girl to utilize her potential and avoid the devastating societal consequences should she fall through the cracks.

This shift in reasoning is clear in the 2016 U.S. Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls. While the document recognizes the health and human rights rationale for focusing on girls with its statement that child marriage is "a human rights abuse that contributes to economic hardship and leads to under-investment in girls' educational and health care needs," it places greater emphasis on the recent rhetoric that the international

community should utilize girls' unique potential to spark economic and social change. The document reads:

> [Early marriage] undermines economic productivity, threatens sustainable growth and development, and fosters conditions that enable or exacerbate violence and insecurity, including domestic violence. It produces devastating repercussions for a girl's life, effectively ending her childhood. Early marriage forces a girl into adulthood and motherhood before she is physically and mentally mature and before she completes her education, limiting her future options, depriving her of the chance to reach her full potential, and preventing her from contributing fully to her family and community" (U.S. Government 2016: 6).

Similarly, WHO Goodwill Ambassador, Liya Kebede adopts this rhetoric of lost potential with her statement, "When young girls become pregnant before they themselves have grown up, both they and their babies face an uphill battle to survive. The world loses the enormous potential of yet another generation of girls" (Temin and Levine 2009: 25). Additionally, at the International Day of the Girl in 2014, Secretary of State John Kerry proclaimed, "The United States understands that when a girl is kept from achieving her potential it is a loss not only for that individual girl, but also for her family, community, and country." The language used by these influential speakers reveals that today, investments in adolescent girls are justified on the grounds of a specific idea about girls' potential to elicit positive economic change.

In her discussion of early pregnancy, Nathanson notes that until recently, young women's futures in the United States were ideologically defined in terms of marriage and motherhood. While this conception has not disappeared, in Nathanson's words, "it must compete with an alternative ideology in which priority is given to young women's preparation for work outside the home" (1991: 209). In their 1986 publication, *Teen Pregnancy: What is Being Done?,* the House of Representative's Committee on Children, Youth, and Families wrote about adolescent mothers, "Strategies which have only

recently begun to direct girls into higher-paying, nontraditional fields will be lost on a generation of child mothers who, lacking an education, may become dependent on public assistance for long periods of time." Today, the effort to prevent teenage pregnancy so that girls can receive complete educations and achieve their full economic potential is the hallmark of public health and social policies across a range of Western nations (Koffman 2014).

This concerted policy has recently achieved a global reach. Across the world, adolescent pregnancy and sexuality is being discussed in terms of its impact on women's future economic prospects (Koffman 2014). This discussion is fueled, in large part, by Western global health and development stakeholders (Koffman and Gill 2013). In 2012, UNICEF and the WHO formed an Interagency Taskforce on Adolescent Girls whose objective is to help adolescent girls delay marriage and childbearing (UN Interagency Taskforce on Adolescent Girls). Furthermore, a decrease in the rate of adolescent births has been incorporated as an indicator of progress within the Millennium Development Goals with the goal of improving economic development. Today, adolescent girls in the global South are purported to hold incredible potential to drive economic growth in their communities. In the following chapter, I will describe The Girl Effect, a program born out of this rhetoric and the idea prevalent in modern international development circles that "an investment in girls is smart economics." However, to understand the discourse invited by The Girl Effect, it is first necessary to discuss neoliberalism and the rise of "empowerment" programs.

Neoliberalism

I argue that today, international development programs are largely driven by neoliberal ideologies. Neoliberalism is an approach to economics that has gained prominence since the 1980's, although its origins can be traced back to Adam Smith's 18th century essays on *laissez faire* economics. It is founded on the belief that economic systems and societies should be granted the freedom to operate unrestrained in order to reach their full potential (Sparke 2012). Today, neoliberalism is broadly characterized by government decentralization, increased consumer power, privatization, free market strategies, global competition, and the elimination of social differences.

Those opposed to neoliberalism highlight the ways in which the idea of "freedom" that it espouses is a fallacy. They note that free markets perpetuate income inequalities and often lower the quality of life experienced by marginalized populations. Under neoliberalism, individuals are increasingly made to bear responsibility for their own wellbeing. As Rose and Miller (1992) explain, neoliberalism demands that "each individual must render his or her life meaningful, as if it were the outcome of individual choices made in the furtherance of a biographical project of self-realization" rather than highly regulated by global structures and hierarchies (185). Poverty, then, is deemed an outcome of individual shortcomings rather than a reflection of systematic inequalities (Simone-Kumar 2007).

Under the influence of neoliberalism, adolescent girls in the global South are compelled to take personal responsibility for their triumphs and failures, as well as for the economic wellbeing of their communities. In this fashion, the Western ideals of autonomy, freedom, and choice seem not only possible, but also desirable for adolescent girls across the world. Although written sixteen years ago, Escobar's *Encountering*

Development is highly useful in considering modern-day international aid programs. Escobar argues that development work has relied exclusively on a Western knowledge system and therefore has "dictated the marginalization and disqualification of non-Western knowledge systems" (2001: 13). Poverty was and continues to be seen as the essential characteristic of the Third World, and Western notions of the free market economy, entrepreneurialism, and economic growth are accepted as the only viable solutions. As James Ferguson argued in his 1990 publication, *Anti-Politics Machine,* the construction of Third World societies as underdeveloped is an essential feature of the development apparatus. Within the modern-day neoliberal development framework, deeply entrenched power structures and political instability fade to the background, and the free market, individualism, and self-reliance are promoted as simple solutions to the problems faced by adolescent girls. It is within this context that the empowered adolescent girl, imbued with agency and economic potential, rose as a celebrated figure (Koffman et al. 2015).

Empowerment

In many ways, empowerment programs are a natural extension of neoliberalism, for they center on the idea that marginalized populations can be given the confidence and tools to elevate themselves to positions of power. Following neoliberal ideals, the weak are reminded of their individuality, freedom, and economic potential and given responsibility for improving their own life circumstances. While empowerment is a fuzzy concept used inconsistently throughout development programs and policy to evoke ideas of agency and freedom, empowerment programs are consistent in their discussion of adolescent girls as capable of driving positive change.

Thirty years ago, Amartya Sen (1985) defined agency as what an individual is free to do and achieve in the pursuit of whatever goals and values he or she regards as important. Agency implies the ability to question and confront instances of oppression and deprivation, to overcome barriers, and to have influence in society. In liberal feminist discourse, agency is afforded intrinsic value; it is important in its own right regardless of whether it is used to improve one's wellbeing or social position (Hanmer and Klugman 2016). Naila Kabeer (2005) argues that women's agency leads to empowerment when its exercise challenges or changes regressive norms and institutions that perpetuate the subordination of women. Thus, in her formulation, empowerment is the capacity to realize one's own interests *against* the weight of custom, tradition, and social obstacles; empowerment is a form of resistance. In her work on women and Islam, Saba Mahmood (2005) challenges this notion of empowerment as resistance, arguing that women are not inherently suppressed if they choose to uphold systems that keep them subordinate in society. She notes, "freedom is normative to feminism, as it is to liberalism," yet freedom is not requisite for a good life across all cultures (Mahmood 2005: 10). According to Mahmood, women can be empowered by navigating social norms and negotiating for distinct demands in their lives without challenging existing structures of authority. Today, INGOs frequently ground their work on adolescent girls in a conception of empowerment resembling Kabeer's, in which empowerment is framed as "the removal of constraints, the achievement of autonomy, and the ability to make choices" (Eyben and Nappier 2009: 290).

However, the definition of adolescent girls' empowerment is inconsistent both across and within INGOs. Eyben and Nappier (2009) point out that "empowerment," as

it is used by international development organizations, is a fuzzy concept. They argue that today, "a privileging of instrumentalist meanings of empowerment associated with efficiency and growth are crowding out more socially transformative meanings associated with rights and collective action" (1). The polysemic nature of the term empowerment allows development workers to strategically employ the meaning that will curry the most favor within the international policy arena. In their detailed account of empowerment as a "fuzzword," Eyben and Nappier note that empowerment is, at different moments, used to suggest individual choice, decision-making, realizing opportunities and potential, or community action. It evokes agency and implies what the World Bank terms the removal of "unfreedoms" that constrain individual choice (2006: 4). INGOs speak of their work to "empower women" and describe what Western donors can do to "lift women out of poverty" while simultaneously arguing that "women should empower themselves" and can "lift themselves out of poverty." This uncertain language has led Tony Proscio to mock the term empowerment in his book, *In Other Words: A Plea for Plain Speak in Foundations.* He writes:

> To establish one's bona fides as a person concerned about the poor, the disenfranchised, or even ordinary people in general, it is essential in every setting to use empowerment as early (and, in some circles, as often) as possible. The coiners of empowerment invested it with only the broadest meaning, perhaps to make it usable in nearly every context—or anyway, that has been the effect (Proscio 2000: 29).

While these variations within INGO reports and government action plans may seem minor, they determine how people imagine and strive to reform societal structures. As Cornwall and Brock put it: "If words make worlds, struggles over meaning are not just about semantics: they gain a very real material dimension" (2005: 1056). Additionally, Paul Riesman notes that the existence of "a convenient term for a complex

entity risks creating the false impression that in knowing the term we know the entity which it designates" (1998:136). Over time, the various meanings of empowerment have shifted, fundamentally shaping the way that programs focused on women and girls are framed and carried to fruition. Today, in the context of international development programs, the term "empowerment" carries many meanings; however, each places the responsibility for improving adolescent girls' social circumstances on the girls themselves.

While females are still perceived as vulnerable to health and human rights abuses, they have been elevated to the position of economic and social champions. Ananya Roy explains, "if… the Western eyes of development [once] constructed the Third World woman primarily as the victim, now she has become an icon of indefatigable efficiency and altruism" (2010: 69). Over the past decade, the feminization of poverty has increasingly shifted its focus from women to adolescent girls. While women are portrayed as a vanguard for reducing poverty in their communities, adolescent girls can stop poverty before it begins. Thus, campaigns like The Girl Effect, focused on the economic empowerment of adolescent girls, have risen to great prominence within the international development community. In chapter 5, I will discuss the way in which the neoliberal discourse that informs present-day empowerment programs produces contradictions in the language of international development. I demonstrate that while empowerment programs assert that adolescent girls in the global South can bootstrap themselves and their communities out of poverty, they simultaneously position girls as weak, oppressed, and in need of Western aid.

4. The Girl Effect

"Girl Effect, noun. The unique potential of 600 million adolescent girls to end poverty for themselves and the world" – Girl Effect Website (2011)

Unveiling The Girl Effect

In 2009, over 2,000 leaders from government, industry, media, and civil society organizations convened at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland to discuss the economic crisis affecting political stability across the world. For the first time, this meeting included a plenary session on adolescent girls. At the session, world leaders argued that "investing in girls is smart economics," for tapping into the labor potential of adolescent girls not only stimulates economic progress, but also improves family health and slows population growth (World Bank 2009). Mark Parker, CEO of Nike, and Ngozi Okanjo-Iweala, Managing Director of the World Bank, gave weight to this claim by announcing their jointly established Adolescent Girl's Initiative, which pledged over 20 million dollars to "empower" young women in eight low-income countries. The initiative sought to challenge the restrictive social norms that prevent girls from "improving their lives" and help young women access education and "skills that match market demand" based on the understanding that girls with higher levels of education marry later, have fewer children, and enjoy better economic prospects (World Bank 2014). As a result, their children's health will improve, life expectancy will rise, and the

economic situation of developing nations will be transformed. This sequence of transformations is termed "The Girl Effect."

The notion of "The Girl Effect" was conceived of by the Nike Foundation in 2008 in collaboration with the NoVo Foundation, a private charitable foundation run by Peter and Jennifer Buffet. As a theory of change, The Girl Effect is predicated on the bold claim that girls hold the key to ending world poverty and transforming health in the developing world. As articulated in a document produced by the Nike Foundation in partnership with the U.K. Department for International Development (DFID):

> The 'girl effect' theory of change hypothesises that by investing in an adolescent girl, we not only transform her life chances, but also the life chances of her future children and her community. If we invest in enough girls, we can unleash the potential of whole nations (Nike Foundation & DFID: 11).

This transformation is believed to occur as the result of multi-generational "ripple effects" across several development aims, including alleviating poverty, reducing fertility rates, controlling the spread of HIV/AIDS, and promoting economic growth. The Nike Foundation claims that this ripple effect can be catalyzed by a small amount of resources targeted toward the empowerment of adolescent girls.

At the World Economic Forum, the Nike foundation launched its first Girl Effect film, "The Clock is Ticking" to highlight the current vulnerability of adolescent girls and summarize the aims of The Girl Effect campaign. The video begins:

> When a girl turns 12 and lives in poverty, the future is out of her control. In the eyes of many, she's a woman now. No, really she is. She faces the reality of being married by the age of 14, pregnant by the time she's 15, and if she survives childbirth, she might have to sell her body to support her family, which puts her at risk for contracting and spreading HIV. Not the life you imagined for a 12-year-old, right?

Thus, within The Girl Effect framework, adolescent girls in the global South are positioned as vulnerable to early marriage and motherhood, abuse, and a host of health risks. The video conveys the message that without aid, these girls are powerless to change their life circumstances. They will struggle to maintain their health and human rights while providing for their children. However, the ultimate message of The Girl Effect is hopeful. The video continues:

> But the good news is that there's a solution. Let's rewind to her at 12, happy and healthy. She visits a doctor regularly. She stays in a school where she's safe. [At age 18] she uses her education to earn a living. Now she's calling the shots, and it looks something like this: she can avoid HIV, she can marry and have children when she's ready, and her children are healthy like she is. Now imagine this continuing for generation after generation. You get the picture right?
>
> 50 million 12-year-old girls in poverty equal 50 million solutions. This is the power of The Girl Effect. An effect that starts with a 12-year-old girl and impacts the world. The clock is ticking.

With this segment, the Nike Foundation positions Western NGOs, donors, and corporations as having the power to ignite small changes to protect and empower girls, such as improving the quality of reproductive health services and increasing young women's exposure to messages regarding equality. From there, the girls will do the rest, taking hold of their futures and elevating the health of their communities for generations to come.

According to current CEO of The Girl Effect, Farah Ramzan Golant, what sets The Girl Effect apart from other organizations focused on adolescent girls' health and human rights is its emphasis on the "demand side" (Keating 2016). She notes that, historically, development work to transform girls' lives focused primarily on the supply side – improving education, healthcare, financial literacy, and employment opportunities. However, girls continue to be denied access to the services that they need. Working on

the demand side involves empowerment. It begins with encouraging girls to become agents of change in their communities and to embrace leadership roles. Farah explains, "Girls need their collective voices to be heard loud and clear, at the community level – otherwise no system will give them equal access. And before she can speak, she needs to believe that her words are worth hearing" (Keating 2016).

In their quest to empower adolescent girls across the globe, The Girl Effect team has focused on developing culture brands to spread positive messages to young girls, designing mobile technology, and forging collaborations with local NGOs. Golant explains that "brands are a belief system, and as the commercial world shows, they are also able to quickly infiltrate people's mindsets and change the way they think and feel" (Saldinger 2016). To date, the Nike Foundation has established a culture brand in Ethiopia, called "Yegna," and one in Rwanda, "Ni Nyanpinga" (Girl Effect 2016). Yegna is a five-member all-girl music group with the stated aim of empowering women and girls in Ethiopia. In their essay, "Girl Power and Selfie Humanitarianism," Koffman, Orgad, and Gill (2015) refer to the group as an Ethiopian recreation of the Spice Girls, for each singer is styled to represent a specific "type" of girl possessing a set of qualities with which adolescent Ethiopian girls can identify. These identities include the city princess, the tough street-smart lady, the quiet studious girl, and the steady maternal type. According to the Nike Foundation, these role models can unleash social transformation by bolstering girls' self-esteem (Girl Effect 2016). The Girl Effect program has also worked to build mobile online communities to provide teenage girls in the global South with information about gender equality, strategies to overcome adversity, messages crafted to instill self-confidence, and innovative education tools. By the end of 2015,

Girl Effect Mobile media had reached more than 12.5 million people in 45 countries (Girl Effect 2016).

These achievements were made possible, in large part, by collaborations with major international development organizations and backing from influential female public figures. In the years since its launch, The Girl Effect has galvanized support from dozens of NGOs in developing countries, as well as major multilateral and national agencies, such as the World Bank, the United Nations, and the DFID. It has also gleaned funding from large transnational for-profit corporations (Girl Effect 2016, Koffman and Gill 2013). Additionally, one of the signature features of The Girl Effect campaign is its effort to appeal to women and girls in the global North for support. High-profile female public figures, including Sarah Brown and Cherie Blair, the wives of former British Prime Ministers; former Irish president Mary Robinson; and former U.S. secretary of state Madeline Albright, were quick to endorse the efforts of The Girl Effect and promote its message across the Western world.

Promotional Culture

Within its larger efforts to cultivate support among females in the global North, The Girl Effect has crafted specific discourses to target American teenage girls (Koffman and Gill 2013). Through the "Girl Up" campaign, launched by the UN Foundation to promote The Girl Effect's key messages, American girls are encouraged to take up the cause of their peers in the global South. Koffman and Gill (2013) argue that the campaign evokes a notion of girlhood as a basis for solidarity while simultaneously highlighting the differences between girls in the global North and South. Indeed, the campaign emphasizes the "oneness" of girls through slogans like "I am her, she is me,"

yet the Girl Up 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!” (Girl Up 2016). Thus, American teenage girls are portrayed as educated, empowered, and more socially connected than ever, while the campaign underscores that girls in the global South do not currently share those privileges.

In addition to traditional financial donations and fundraising efforts, girls are invited to show their support through the purchase of branded commodities and social media. On the website, girls can purchase a Girl Up tee, tote, water bottle, pen, magnet, and stickers. The girls are then 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!” (Girl Up 2016). Additionally, celebrities at the center of American teenage culture, such as Judy McGrath, CEO of MTV networks, Nickelodeon teen star Victoria Justice, Queen Rania of Jordan, and Olympic swimmer Rebecca Soni, have been utilized to promote The Girl Effect among American teenage girls. These celebrity advocates have participated in Unite for Girls Tours and motivational rallies in major U.S. cities, including New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, Denver, and Washington, D.C. (Girl Effect 2016). Thus, while The Girl Effect’s success has been dependent on funding from multi-billion dollar corporations and government agencies, it has gained influence from the support of individual American teenagers who believe that they hold the power to help girls in the global South change the world.

Koffman and Gill (2013) point out that the rhetoric of The Girl Effect is strikingly different from the typical “discursive register” of policy documents, utilizing a linguistic style more characteristic of advertisements and marketing materials – bold claims,

hyperbole, emotional appeals. This style is exemplified in the title of The Girl Effect's 2012 report, "It's No Big Deal. It's Just the Future of Humanity," which features phrases like "It's not that hard" and "she's the most powerful force of change on the planet." This rhetorical shift is an indication of what Andrew Wernick (1991) refers to as the spread of "promotional culture" through "the polity." Over the past decade, this marketing strategy has enabled The Girl Effect to cross the boundaries of local and transnational NGOs, government bodies, corporations, cultural institutions, and social media to reach adolescent girls across the developing world.

The Girl Effect as a Representational Regime

It is difficult to over-emphasize the impact that The Girl Effect has had on development discourse and policy. Within a few years of its official launch at the World Economic Forum, The Girl Effect's focus on the economic empowerment of adolescent girls had become a key priority area for the majority of the world's major players in the fields of health and development. As highlighted in the previous chapter, focus on adolescent girls did not originate with The Girl Effect campaign or the empowerment rhetoric that it is centered on, but rather with Western understandings of girls' sexual vulnerability and fears of population growth. In addition, prior to the official launch of The Girl Effect, adolescent girls' empowerment was already gaining recognition as a critical development area through the establishment of the Coalition for Adolescent Girls (CAG) in 2005 and the UN Interagency Task Force on Adolescent Girls in 2007. However, since the 2008 World Economic Forum, The Girl Effect discourse has fundamentally shaped the way in which girls in the global South are viewed by the Western World and has influenced programming across all development sectors. Indeed,

rhetoric surrounding "the power of The Girl Effect" has grown into such prominence that Heather Switzer (2013) characterizes it as "a representational regime" (345).

Between 2008 and 2010, international NGOs joined together to affirm The Girl Effect's message that girls hold the key to ending global poverty. Many of these efforts were coordinated by the aforementioned Coalition for Adolescent Girls (CAG). The Coalition's original mission was to "drive new and improve existing programming, policies, and investments that will promote the rights and opportunities of adolescent girls" (CAG 2005). However, over the past decade, this mission has more decidedly adopted the language of The Girl Effect. In 2008, the Center for Global Development (CGD) published the report, "Girls Count: A Global Investment and Action Agenda," in collaboration with numerous CAG partners. Within the report, the mission of the Coalition is stated as: to "recognize the needs and untapped potential of girls and stimulate families and communities to value and invest in girls' futures" (Levine et al. 2009). Here, the focus is shifted from girls' health and human rights to their untapped economic potential. Today, the CAG website states that the goal of the Coalition is to capitalize on adolescent girls' "potential to change the world" (CAG Website 2016).

Since its creation, over 50 leading national and international organizations have come together through the CAG to address the challenges facing adolescent girls in the poorest communities around the world (CAG Website). CAG Partners have initiated multi-million dollar programs such as "Girl Up," led by the United Nations Foundation, "Because I am a Girl," run by Plan International, and "Girl Rising," funded by USAID. Each is centered around The Girl Effect's central message that NGOs, governments, donors, and even teenage girls in the West have the ability to empower girls in the global

South to transform the developing world. This increased attention on adolescent girls led to the celebration, in 2012, of the first UN-designated International Day of the Girl Child, which was followed by a wave of 'girl-powering' policies, events, and programs.

The success of The Girl Effect has been so great that the Nike Foundation and the DFID have twice collaborated to scale up its implementation. In 2010, they launched "The Girl Hub," a 15.6 million dollar program to better combine the top down approach of The Girl Effect –working with donors, governments, and other decision-makers to advance girls' needs— and the bottom up approaches –involving girls in the design of policies that affect them and developing widespread social communication to inspire girls (ICAI 2012). In 2014, the Nike Foundation teamed up with the Unreasonable Group to create "The Girl Effect Accelerator," self-proclaimed as "the world's first accelerator dedicated to the most powerful force for change on the planet: adolescent girls" (Girl Effect Accelerator Website 2016). The program pairs young women in the developing world who are beginning business ventures with financial support and entrepreneur mentors from the global North. Thus, since its inception in 2008, The Girl Effect has grown in prominence, coming to influence program and policy across the world.

Today, adolescent girls in the global South are positioned as key "instruments" for alleviating poverty, slowing population increase, and generating economic growth. An investment in an adolescent girl is purported to generate higher rates of return than development investments in other areas (Moeller 2014). To some extent, this belief is supported by research, such as the finding shared by Helen Gayle, president of CARE, at the 2009 World Economic Forum that while an educated girl will invest 90% of her future income in her family, boys invest only 35% (World Economic Forum 2009).

However, NGO fundraising materials rarely discuss the reasons behind this pattern, such as the unequal roles played by women and men in their families. Rather, bold, hyperbolic statements about the value of supporting adolescent girls are used to further the aims of The Girl Effect. This practice is highlighted by the first president of the Nike Foundation, Maria Eitel's, statement, "Girls are the world's greatest untapped resource for economic growth and prosperity" (Nike Foundation 2012). As Sylvia Chant (2016) points out, in modern development circles, girls' empowerment is heralded as a means that can produce extraordinary ends. Today, there appears to be significant consensus within the international development community that adolescent girls' empowerment is a smart investment.

5. (Dis)empowering Adolescent Girls

"The Achilles heel of empowerment is that it implies that you don't have power. Subordination is built in." - Shazia Hassan

At a glance, the investment in adolescent girls seems to have paid off. Over the past 13 years, The Girl Effect has reached an estimated 25 million girls in over 80 countries with information about gender equality, reproductive health, self-confidence, and women's education. As adolescent girls have soared to the top of the development agenda, dramatic improvements in girls' health and human rights have been documented across the world. For example, deaths due to complications related to pregnancy and childbirth among adolescent girls have dropped significantly since 2000, particularly in regions where maternal mortality rates are the highest. The World Health Organization estimates that South-East Asia, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Sub-Saharan Africa have seen declines of 57, 50, and 37 percent respectively (WHO 2017). In addition, the global child marriage rate declined from approximately 33 percent in 2000 to 25 percent in 2015 (UNICEF 2016). Yet, while these achievements are noteworthy and good intentions underlie ongoing work to support adolescent girls, I contend that the foundation of international empowerment programs is damaging to girls in the developing world.

A central critique of The Girl Effect is that it strengthens hierarchies between the global North and the global South while reinforcing problematic notions of the "Third World" adolescent girl. Postcolonial theorists (Escobar 2011, Mohanty 2003, Said 1978) have long argued that the language of international aid programs is grounded in colonial discourses, which depend on the (re)telling of the colonized stories by the colonizer. In

her influential essay, “Under Western Eyes,” Chandra Mohanty argues that women have had their stories told for them for generations. She notes that while the category of “oppressed women” has been generated through an exclusive focus on gender difference, the category of the “oppressed Third World woman” holds an additional attribute – “Third World difference” (2003: 19). The result is a “composite, singular Third World woman” in need of Western aid (1988: 62).

Moeller (2013) notes that although the Nike Foundation uses the term “adolescent girls” to describe their target demographic group, The Girl Effect is predicated on an understanding of the racialized, classed, and geographically-specific trope of the Third World female. However, as Roy explains, if the Western eyes of development once constructed the Third World woman primarily as a victim, “today she has become an icon of indefatigable efficiency and altruism” (Roy 2010: 69). In line with neoliberal tropes, the Third World adolescent girl is relied upon to end poverty, resulting in what Sylvia Chant refers to as a “feminization of responsibility and obligation” (2006: 206).

In this chapter, I contribute to this body of literature through an analysis of Girl Effect media and marketing materials, as well as interviews conducted with thirteen staff at major international NGOs whose work is focused on adolescent girls. I highlight contradictions prevalent within the language of international development and contend that by mobilizing neoliberal ideals of autonomy, individuality, and choice, The Girl Effect and related INGO programs strengthen global hierarchies; contribute to the perception of adolescent girls in the global South as weak, inferior, and homogenous; reinforce traditionally inequitable structures; and sideline girls’ sexual rights. We will see that even as development leaders strive to increase equality and empower girls to end

global poverty, they do not believe that Third World adolescent girls, oppressed by poverty and cultural norms, are capable of such a feat without significant Western aid.

Advocating for Equality while Reinforcing Global Hierarchies

Overall, the practitioners interviewed were highly conscious of ways in which international aid programs contribute to global hierarchies. In particular, the interviewees expressed frustration with the power differential between international NGO staff based in the United States and staff working in developing countries. One interviewee noted that as a result of deeply embedded global hierarchies, excessive value is placed on Western ideas. She argued that local staff with years of experience in the field and an understanding of a program's regional context should not feel as though they need the approval of international staff. In her words:

> I feel like if [local staff] still need me to come back, then I haven't filled my mandate. My mandate is to lead trainings so that [they] can take it forward, adapt it, make it work for their context, change the things that don't work in their context, improve it. The toolkit isn't some Bible that you have to follow to the T, but in some contexts [local staff] are reluctant to make changes.

Another interviewee supported this point by describing an occasion on which experienced colleagues in Indonesia asked her to attend a large meeting for government and university officials. She recounted:

> One of the Indonesian ladies said to me, "We Indonesian people, we don't listen to each other. We listen to foreigners. The people will listen differently if it's coming from a white person." And I was like "but I'm not white!" And she's like "no that's ok you can speak English." …You are seen as a savior and it's very uncomfortable, because I don't know more. I absolutely do not know more than them; and yet I needed to be there to say some token words in English so that everyone would listen with more respect. And if I were white! Oh my goodness the cameras would have all come out! People come up to you and shake your hand.

> The challenge is that they will treat you like a Messiah, because you come from America and you work for this well-known NGO, and if you have a degree from Harvard, oh my god, they will bow down at your feet. They put themselves in a disempowering position.

In these moments of interaction with local "colleagues," the interviewees were keenly aware of the unequal relationship between NGO employees in the global North and South. However, their language suggests that responsibility for achieving equality should lie with those in the developing world. The U.S. based staff claim that "[local staff] are reluctant to make changes" to toolkits produced in the Western world and note that "[local leaders] put themselves in a disempowering position." In many ways, this manner of blaming the victim for remaining in the disempowered position that he or she has been placed in resembles the neoliberal language of The Girl Effect, which places responsibility for ending global poverty on the shoulders of marginalized 12-year-old girls. In both situations, those at the bottom of a global hierarchy are expected to rise up.

Some NGO leaders felt that the hierarchy between the global North and South is augmented by the fact that inexperienced international staff directly out of graduate school are given greater control over programs than locals who have been invested in a project for years. As one interviewee put it:

> A huge barrier is having inexperienced twenty-something year-olds working with Ministries of Education with the attitude of "I've got something to share. Let me tell you how children should learn how to read" when they themselves have no lived experience in the classroom. Like "I've never taught, but I'm here for five days and I'll tell you what to do"…Meanwhile, this person from the Ministry of Health is 60 years old. He has years of experience, and sure I have a great degree from America, which they will value greatly, but that's all. How can we learn from each other and share what we know?

Another interviewee echoed this thought and added, "There is this kind of small liberal arts college mentality of like everything that I have to say is important." According to

the interviewees, the perception that a Western upbringing and education qualifies a person to educate those in developing countries is not only found among young INGO staff, but also forms the foundation of major U.S. development organizations. For instance, one interviewee who had served in the Peace Corps stated:

> The Peace Corps didn't have any sort of monitoring and evaluation for years. They've been operating since the 60's, and the way they've been getting money is just going to Congress and saying, "Look at this poor starving child. He's hungry. Peace Corps can help him get some food." No numbers, no statistics. So it's also hard to quantify how much work they've actually done.

In addition, one NGO staff member identified the ways in which media campaigns focused on adolescent girls have contributed to problematic hierarchies. The interviewee noted:

> I'm generally supportive of media involvement, but I'm also conscious of how media can perpetuate hierarchies and gender and social norms. For example, the Nike campaign that's big right now is doing a lot of good and raising awareness about the importance of women's empowerment, but a lot of its imaging is fairly stereotypical and maintains a pretty clear tone of western education and livelihoods is better.

Perhaps as a result of their awareness of the hierarchies prevalent within international development work, the majority of NGO staff spoke favorably about ongoing efforts to shift from providing direct Western aid to "capacity building," or enhancing the ability of local staff and governments to provide aid to their people. As one NGO leader explained:

> In the past there has been this very strong focus in the U.S. on actually implementing things. You know, giving things to children or building houses. So you have these thousands of organized church related groups who say "oh I'm just going to go down to Haiti and build a clinic." It was a kind of hands on, get your hands dirty, brick molding American style. And that was typical of many NGOs. Today, there is a real move away from giving people stuff. Instead, we are working more as a watchdog, helping governments boost the capacity of staff, teachers, health workers, and so on.

Indeed, it seems that today, the role that international NGOs play is increasingly centered on technical capacity building with government organizations. Programs that were once driven from NGO headquarters in the U.S. or Europe are being initiated at the country level.

NGO leaders were overwhelmingly positive about this shift, noting that when programs are developed in country, there is typically greater innovation and adaptation to the local context. A director in adolescent health noted:

> When I went into grad school, I had the idea that I would, you know, go and work with my sleeves rolled up to work in a country and teach kids, but even in the time between learning about the field and coming out of grad school, I saw that that's not necessary. We're not just flooding countries with undergraduates who are trying to manage programs anymore. There are locals being hired who know the local context, and that raises the quality of programs.

In particular, the NGO staff hoped to empower adolescent girls in the global South by giving them a strong say in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of programs. As one interviewee stated:

> We need platforms for girls with real lived experience to get involved and share their views. That is important. Then girls could be drivers of change. Then they could feel powerful.

This idea was repeated by another interviewee who explained:

> Youth need to be engaged in decision-making about programs in a much deeper way. Some people have suggested having youth advisory boards at every level, including in the organization's board, and in every step of the program cycle, starting with the design and going all the way through. That theoretically would increase their voice and ensure that programs meet adolescents' actual needs.

Through capacity building and empowerment programs, the NGO staff hoped to lift the quality of programs and reduce the hierarchical structures that underlie international development work.

However, within these discussions of capacity building and girls' empowerment, many of the Western NGO staff expressed the paternalistic outlook that they claimed to disapprove of. For example, many conveyed doubt that local staff and governments could successfully support their people without direct aid from Western NGOs. As one interviewee said:

> International NGOs are really expensive. It uses up a big chunk of budget to fly me to a country two to four times a year, so we're trying to get more local staff on board, but if five years down the road funders are no longer seeing the quality they want, then there will be a rethinking of how much support should come from the technical experts in the Western world. Some countries have been doing this work for several decades. They have highly skilled people working in country, but some might really flounder without guidance.

This lack of trust in local organizations was related, in part, to a fear that small country offices lack the capacity necessary to manage major donations. For example, one interviewee argued that "the big guys like Save the Children and CARE and PLAN will never go away as long as the U.S. government is providing massive amounts of funding. You have to be big to receive those big chunks of money." Another interviewee discussed the limited experience of smaller NGOs and governments of developing countries, stating:

> They're coming from a place of good intention, but maybe haven't come along for the full kind of progression that we've seen in the development community. It doesn't make them bad or mean that they're less qualified, it just means that they haven't learned some of the lessons that the broader community has at this point.

In other words, she feared that without Western input, lessons learned over time within the international development sector regarding funding and program implementation would be lost.

Perhaps more importantly, many of the U.S. NGO leaders expressed fear that traditional gender biases and threats to adolescent girls' sexual health would be

perpetuated without Western control over programs. Today, INGO programs targeting adolescent girls are centered on two key issues: gender equality and sexuality. Programs focused on gender equality typically work to challenge cultural norms that are believed to keep women and girls subordinate to men in their communities. They might emphasize girls' school enrollment and labor participation or strive to give girls equal voice in political and economic spheres. Conversely, programs focused on sexuality are designed to protect adolescent girls' sexual and reproductive health. They address topics such as early and forced marriage, adolescent pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and family planning. Importantly, both focus areas depend on the notion of the "oppressed Third World woman" that Mohanty describes, a woman who is threatened by poverty, by her culture, and by men in her community. The Third World *adolescent girl* is perceived as even more vulnerable and therefore, in need of greater protection. Spivak (1988) offers the phrase "White men saving brown women from brown men" to explain the resulting sentiment that Western individuals have a duty to protect women and girls in the global South from local men and the cultural norms that lead to their oppression.

The interviewees argued that non-Western value systems often hinder Western efforts to aid adolescent girls. For example, a director of adolescent sexual and reproductive health stated that her team tries to give beneficiaries a strong say in what they work on and how it is implemented, but traditional beliefs regarding gender segregation can create barriers. She explained that in certain cultures, it is seen as a sign of disrespect for a girl to stand up to her elders. Therefore, pushing a young girl to share her ideas in a community platform could lead that girl to be punished. The staff member admitted, "sometimes we can focus so much on getting the information we need that we

forget to consider how that might affect [beneficiaries'] everyday realities. We need to be aware of the chain reactions of all of the decisions we make." In addition, the NGO staff pointed out that in some cultures, parents only see their daughter as someone who works in the home and obeys her husband, and in others, policies exist that prevent girls who become pregnant from attending schools. Therefore, community involvement in programs focused on girls' empowerment could hinder the programs' success.

When working with adolescent girls, initiatives involving sexuality were met with even greater resistance. The NGO staff noted that sexual health is a particularly "touchy" topic to discuss with young girls and is, therefore, resisted by teachers, parents, and even local NGO staff in many regions. As one interviewee explained, "there is resistance to any program, but particularly if you want to work with youth, and particularly with young girls, particularly in sexual and reproductive health. People feel threatened." A specialist in School Health and Nutrition explained that in many of the contexts she has worked in within Latin America:

> Parents often feel that adolescent sexual health programs actually incite early sexual debut. When you do those types of education programs and then a teenage girl becomes pregnant, parents will say that it happened because people came into the school and taught the kids how to have sex.

Therefore, a significant amount of community education and buy-in is needed before programs can be implemented. Another interviewee shared a similar experience of facing resistance from parents, then spoke to the need for community education when she said:

> I think the advocacy that you have to do when you introduce something like sexuality education into a community can really throw barriers up all over the place if it's not done thoroughly enough and with enough sensitivity to culture. People are so afraid when they hear that we're giving out condoms to 10-14 year olds, our very young adolescent groups, when they haven't been spoken to, when

> that action is taken out of context. They think that if we talk to the girls about sex it will make them have babies.

In developing countries with strong resistance to sexual education or strong customs regarding early marriage or pregnancy, the Western NGO leaders felt reluctant to trust local adolescent girls, leaders, or even NGO staff to design programs. One interviewee expressed this dilemma particularly well when she asked:

> How do we balance the need to make sure that youth and particularly adolescent girls and their communities are engaged in the decision making process and we're listening to what they want, while also moving towards gender equality? How do we listen to what girls and boys want around gender if they're super entrenched in their own culture's negative gender norms?

Another clear example of this challenge was provided by an interviewee involved in menstrual hygiene management projects in Latin America. She described:

> Today, many development leaders say that we should be more respectful of traditional knowledge and indigenous cosmo-vision, which I take quite seriously. So when a community says that "according to our traditional beliefs, women have some kind of a negative energy when they have their menstruation, and therefore, they shouldn't be going to harvest fruit" [and] then we tell them that that is actually a myth and a young girl can do basically anything when she has her menstruation, people are very critical. But should we just accept girls' restriction to the home?

While upholding local values clearly poses a challenge to INGO staff interested in aiding adolescent girls in the developing world, by maintaining control over programs, the Western staff silently contribute to hierarchies between the global North and South.

At times, the hierarchy between Western NGO staff and locals was implicit in the language used by the international staff interviewed. This was particularly striking in the responses provided by interviewees to the first question I asked: "Can you tell me about your role at X organization?" Answers included: "I do a lot of coaching on how to approach communities, how to explain to communities that sexuality education is nor

harming their children, dispelling some of the myths that they might believe, trying to change norms;" "It's a lot of report writing, because English is not the first language of a lot of our regional colleagues;" "capacity building;" "behavior change work." Each of these activities implies a hierarchy between giver and receiver, Western aid worker and beneficiary in the global South.

With these interview segments, I hope to highlight a contradiction prevalent within international development work: Western INGO staff design programs with the intent of increasing equality, yet those very programs reinforce inequalities between the global North and South. Throughout the interviews, both explicitly and implicitly, the NGO staff expressed the belief that Western approaches to adolescent girls' reproductive health, sexual education, and social participation are superior to those used by staff in developing countries. This conviction informed their shared understanding that Western oversight of programs, particularly those focused on girls' health and human rights, is justified even when resisted by locals, for girls need to be protected from damaging cultural norms. As a result, adolescent girls are made to believe that they are being empowered by international development programs, that they are becoming decision-makers in their communities, while they concurrently surrender control of their educations, sexual health, and livelihoods to Western "development experts."

Empowered While Weak

A second contradiction lies in the depiction of adolescent girls as simultaneously empowered and weak within INGO marketing materials. This portrayal of adolescent girls is highly apparent within The Girl Effect campaign, which centers on the implausible description of girls in the global South as both victims of patriarchal culture

and subjects of incredible potential and strength (Koffman and Gill 2013, Moeller 2014). As Johnson (2015) notes, the construction of "the girl child" as empowered, while simultaneously exploited and excluded, creates a contradiction that has caused many feminist and development scholars to question the uncertain language and practice of programs focused on adolescent girls' empowerment. This dichotomy is vividly illustrated by the claim within the 2012 Nike Foundation Report, "Girl Effect: Your Move," 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… she could be further down the path of economic possibility than she—or anyone else—realizes" (Nike Foundation 2012). While vulnerable to poverty and therefore struggling to survive, girls are celebrated for their entrepreneurial power.

As I highlighted in chapter 3, adolescent girls have long been seen as both vulnerable and dangerous in the West. For girls, adolescence is viewed as a period marked by risk and danger, yet also by extraordinary capacity for achievement. The Girl Effect and similar campaigns draw on both of these discourses of girlhood, but with a specific tilt. While girls in the global North are positioned as empowered agents of change, girls in the global South are depicted as victims of oppressive culture, patriarchy, and poverty. Their essential freedoms – the right to education, reproductive health, and economic independence – are constricted. This presentation of the Third World adolescent girl as inexorably oppressed by her social circumstances directly contradicts the neoliberal notion that every girl holds the power to bootstrap herself out of poverty. Thus, despite its focus on empowerment, The Girl Effect campaign reinforces the

depiction of adolescent girls in the global South as victims of oppression, in desperate need of Western aid.

Mohanty (2003) argues that Westerners commonly place themselves in the category of saviors while placing women in developing counties in categories of oppression, such as "universal dependents" or "victims of male violence." She contends that women in the Third World are represented in most feminist and development literature as having "needs" and "problems," but few choices and no freedom to act. In her words:

> This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being "third world" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc). This I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions (1991: 56).

Mohanty terms this categorization of Third World Women "discursive colonialism," or indirect imperialism that results from Western perceptions of women in the global South. As a result, the colonized (here the subordinate adolescent girl) must take on the identity of the "Other" in order to be recognized as "true" or important by the Western colonizer (here the U.S. donor or aid agency). Thus, a fundamental distinction is created between the oppressed Third World adolescent girl and the powerful Western young woman.

In harmony with neo-liberal discourses, The Girl Effect suggests that the solution to poverty and structural inequality is for girls, donors, and advocates in the global North to empower girls in the developing world to rebel against the cultural beliefs and traditional practices that keep them subordinate. In the previous chapter, I discussed examples within Girl Effect and Girl Up messaging used to encourage American girls to take up the cause of their less fortunate "sisters" in the global South. Slogans like "I am

her, she is me," and "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!" evoke a notion of girlhood as a basis for solidarity while highlighting the differences between girls in the global North and South. Additionally, they allege that American adolescents are in a position to ensure that girls in developing countries can come to enjoy the privileges that they do.

This discursive relationship between girls in the global North and South is highlighted in a 2011 PBS report on the Girl Up campaign. In the clip, correspondent Ray Suarez interviews a 12-year-old American girl named Isabella involved in the Girl Up initiative. Isabella and her twin sister were born in Vietnam, but Isabella was adopted by an American family while her sister remained in Asia. When describing her decision to work with Girl Up, she stated:

> I just wanted to help, not just her, but other adolescent girls around the world. There's a huge difference between our lives. I go to school. I play with my friends. I hang out with my friends. She doesn't get to hang with her friends. She gets to do chores and she's got to work 24/7. It's not what a normal teenager would do.

Tamara Cranon, from the UN Foundation adds, "They are similar girls. If they had the same opportunity, they would both probably have the same trajectory. They would both be thinking about being doctors, having dreams" (Suarez 2011). This clip highlights the colonial and paternalistic discourses prevalent within empowerment programs today: benevolent donors and advocates in the West can save girls in the global South from their oppressive cultures.

As Michelle Murphy points out in *Seizing the Means of Reproduction,* empowerment is typically "fashioned through hierarchical relations of rescue" (2012:

138). It exaggerates traditional inequalities between the global North and South and legitimizes Western, neoliberal interventions (Switzer 2013). Nathanson notes that "providing adolescent women who are poor and black with humanitarian assistance not only does not establish or legitimize new sexual norms; it calls attention to and reinforces the traditional sexual values of the dominant community" (1991: 162). The Girl Effect endorses the sentiment that Western approaches to sexuality are superior.

As Emily Bent (2013) has highlighted in her discussion of The Girl Effect, the campaign is clearly framed from a Western perspective, as it assumes a literate, English speaking audience and relies on the viewer's own voice to narrate The Girl Effect dialogue. A clear example of this lies in The Girl Effect's 2008 campaign film. At the onset of the video, the viewer is asked to "imagine a girl in poverty." Anticipating some hesitancy on the part of the viewer, the dialogue continues, "No, go ahead. Really imagine her." Moments later, the world "Girl" is displayed followed by the words "Babies," "Husband," "Hunger," and "HIV," terms intended to help the viewer imagine what a girl living in poverty looks like. These terms homogenize the experience of poor adolescent girls across the developing world and draw forth stereotypical depictions of poverty in the global South that the Western viewer will have observed in mainstream media. Furthermore, these words reinscribe the colonial discourses of difference that Mohanty (1991), Murphy (2012), and Spivak (1988) have articulated in their works.

The unequal positioning of Western and non-Western voices is further strengthened as The Girl Effect film continues and the viewer is tasked to "pretend that [he or she] can fix this picture." Here, the Western viewer is called on to decide the past, present, and future of adolescent girls a world away. In this manner, Western voices and

agency are privileged over the voices of the girls targeted by empowerment programs. While more recent Girl Effect films utilize the voices of real girls living in poverty in the global South, their brief comments, spoken in English, tell the viewer little about the daily realities of their lives. Rather, they re-emphasize the sentiment that adolescent girls in the developing world are singularly defined by the oppressive structures, such as poverty, HIV, gender inequality, and patriarchy, that exist in their lives.

Here we see a strong connection between the two contradictions in international development that I have highlighted. Western NGO staff value equality and feel that adolescent girls should represent their own interests, so they support empowerment programs and encourage the neoliberal notion that girls in the global South are an incredible source of strength and entrepreneurship. Yet, they hold a deep conviction that Western value systems, particularly Western treatment of women, are superior. They see adolescent girls in the global South as oppressed, weakened by poverty, and in need of saving, so they maintain control of programs and call on Western donors to join the cause. Despite the empowerment rhetoric that The Girl Effect and related development programs espouse, they rely on a singular depiction of Third World adolescent girls as weak and vulnerable.

Homogenizing Adolescent Girls and Ignoring Broader Structures

When the Nike Foundation launched its website, it featured the quote, "Adolescent girls are adolescent girls, whether they are living in a rural village in Africa or the center of Paris or in New Jersey. If you know more than one teenage girl, this you know" (Nike Foundation Website 2006). Like many Girl Effect slogans, this quote reflects the desire of the campaign to foster a sense of oneness among adolescent girls

across the world, while masking crucial differences among race, class, religion, nation, and sexuality that form the structural basis of adolescent girls' lives. As Moeller (2014) highlights in her discussion of The Girl Effect, adolescent girls are not equal and cannot be placed in a single universal category. However, importantly, the quote on the Nike Foundation website is also a reflection of a broader issue prevalent within the rhetoric of empowerment programs. It demonstrates the lack of emphasis placed on the distinct cultural contexts and local structures that fundamentally shape the lives of adolescent girls.

In the following sections, I argue that this tendency to make generalizations about adolescent girls across the developing world is largely the product of patriarchal and neoliberal understandings of the global South; however, I will first acknowledge a practical dimension related to data management and funding. The NGO staff explained that although there has been an increase in data collection, accountability, and program evaluation over the past few decades, collecting age- and gender-disaggregated, context-specific data is still a long, arduous, and expensive task. Therefore, it is common for NGOs to transplant a successful program from one region to a new country or region with only a minimal needs assessment. In addition, prior to the 2000's, few studies included data on adolescents as an age group separate from children or adults, producing what one interviewee referred to as a "data desert" for adolescent girls and boys. Many NGO staff argued that more money should be spent on research before programs are implemented, because what works in one context for one age group may be inappropriate in another. However, funding is limited in the NGO world and focus remains on producing tangible outputs.

In each of the interviews, funding was highlighted as a significant barrier to implementing programs to benefit adolescent girls. Many NGO staff simply argued that there is not enough funding to pursue high-level goals while ensuring that programs are sustainable. Others suggested that it is not lack of money, but rather inefficient spending that prevents programs from achieving meaningful outcomes. One NGO leader working in maternal and newborn health explained that limited funding is allocated to adolescent girls, because they are a subset of two larger groups: "youth" and "girls and women." She said:

> Even [at this NGO] where we focus significant attention on children, in the maternal health department, our research is often washed down to mothers and infants. We don't always have the funding or time to perform disaggregated studies to determine how many of those mothers were adolescents.

In addition, as gender norms are deeply engrained within most societies, the NGO leaders noted that changing the roles, responsibilities, and treatment of adolescent girls is particularly time consuming and expensive. According to one interviewee, "changing social norms can take several decades and a comprehensive social movement, but the time we have is so limited, because there is never enough money, and not all governments can absorb the type of project that an NGO puts out there [after the NGO leaves]."

A number of interviewees felt that the success of all NGO programs is limited by the way that funding is distributed within the current system. NGO leaders complained that although they have some flexibility to determine where and how a program is implemented, with many funding sources, particularly large government donors such as USAID, what a given program will look like and its funding timeline has already been

mapped out. For example, an interviewee heavily involved in grant-writing processes stated:

> It just always feels like there's this disconnect between what donors want and what we need to run a successful program. A good program requires research, extensive research that can sometimes cost more than the actual program, but donors want results. They don't want to wait five to ten years while their money is being used on research to see tangible results. They would rather we just run a program that has failed in the past with the blind hope that something different will happen this time.

This sentiment was echoed by another interviewee who explained:

> It takes years to get projects off the ground that will create lasting change, and that's a long haul. It's hard to find a funder for that, because funders are so often interested in supporting the current big thing, the big crisis or initiative, and don't want to spend years tackling an issue that could last forever.

Some interviewees stated that money is being spent on projects that have little chance of producing their target outputs, yet due to the nature of the funding cycle and the lack of research documenting better uses for that money, the organization simply moves forward with the project. One interviewee noted:

> Sometimes we know that money could be spent more efficiently if we had the time to figure out how, but we make a commitment to our donors to help a certain number of beneficiaries within a given time frame, so we just duplicate the wheel hoping that our small adjustments will make an unrealistically big difference. We do good work, don't get me wrong, I just think things move more slowly because we stick to this system.

Although the NGO staff were quick to highlight the financial reasons why sufficient, context-specific data is rarely collected, I believe that if funding were the only barrier, the international development community would have, as one interviewee aptly put, stopped "throwing money at stuff and hope that it's working" decades ago. There is no denying that poorly researched development programs have impacted the lives of millions of adolescent girls. With all of the money that has been spent on adolescent girls

over the last three decades, the ongoing practice of implementing development programs without first conducting research studies or seeking out local perspectives is perplexing. However, when neoliberal and paternalistic discourses regarding the global South are considered, it becomes less surprising. Many development experts remain convinced that a neoliberal, free-market approach will yield economic growth in any context across the world, just as it allowed the U.S. economy to expand.

Within The Girl Effect narrative, the importance of the global political, government, economic, and social systems that govern adolescent girls' lives are diminished. Following neoliberal ideologies, The Girl Effect rhetoric claims that adolescent girls alone can change their circumstances by getting an education and becoming a player in the global marketplace. To elucidate this point, I will return to the 2008 Girl Effect film described above. After the viewer is asked to imagine that he or she can solve the problems faced by girls living in poverty, the viewer is asked to imagine that a girl is given a cow and is able to use the profits from its milk to support her family. The script follows:

> Pretty soon, her cow becomes a herd. And she becomes the business owner who brings clean water to the village, which makes the 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. Village, Food, Peace, Lower HIV, Healthier babies, Education, Commerce, Sanitation, Stability. Which means the economy of the entire country improves and the whole world is better off.
>
> Are you following what's happening here? Girl → School → Cows → $ → Business → Clean H_20 → Social change → Stronger economy → Better world. It's called The Girl Effect. Multiply that by 600 million girls in the developing world and you've just changed the course of history.

In this simple narrative, retold in a variety of ways across The Girl Effect campaign and other empowerment platforms, neo-liberalism is depicted as the force that

can end poverty and halt the oppression of women across the world. Once empowered, girls in the global South can transform the global economy. Building on Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead's conception of "feminist development fables" (2007), Heather Switzer aptly describes this narrative as a "(post) feminist development fable" (2013). As Sholkamy (2010) points out, development initiatives that seek to help women earn an income, such as those reflected in this narrative, have not challenged traditional patriarchal roles. She states, "the enabling environment that confirms [women's] right to work, to property, to safety, to voice, to sexuality, and to freedom is not created by sewing machines, microcredit, [or, in this case, cows] alone" (257). In the video, without interference or support from the government, the girl is able to propel herself through a series of achievements that will improve not only her own life, but the lives of everyone in her community (and country). Once empowered, the massive structural barriers that held her back are purported to be gone, when in reality little has changed.

Moeller argues that the Nike Foundation has done a disservice to adolescent girls by "disarticulating poverty from the structural conditions that produce it" (2014: 578). I would extend this argument beyond the Nike Foundation to the vast majority of adolescent girls' empowerment programs. Too often, claims are made that if an adolescent girl is provided with a strong education and a position within the labor force, she will become empowered to reduce global inequality. These claims do not address how she might go about shifting cultural norms that support male authority or tackling the hierarchy between the "developed" and "developing" worlds.

One primary issue emphasized by the NGO staff interviewed, is the exclusion of men and adolescent boys from the language of empowerment programs. When funding

is limited, programs like The Girl Effect justify their narrow focus on adolescent girls by noting that due to the comparative economic privileges enjoyed by men and boys, more needs to be done to help girls catch up. Additionally, they cite studies documenting the greater financial return of working with girls as opposed to boys. However, this exclusion can and has had negative ramifications. For example, Sylvia Chant (2006) has long argued that focusing narrowly on the agency of girls while failing to address men and boys detracts from empowerment programs' ultimate goal of advancing gender transformation. It is a social reality that men and boys hold power in the majority of societies across the world; therefore, their inclusion in programs seeking social change is vital. Chant (2016) notes that if empowerment campaigns were to successfully drive adolescent girls into the labor force without working with men to ensure that they understand the benefits of female workforce participation, there could be significant pushback. She further states that men's loss of "breadwinner status" could exacerbate stereotypically "disaffected male behavior," such as violence in the home or drug and alcohol abuse.

Sidelining Girls' Sexual Rights

In an interview with Eyben and Nappier, an interviewee explained that in the 1990's, women's empowerment was about transforming society, but today "aid is no longer about transformation. It has become technocratic" (2009: 295). Indeed, critics argue that The Girl Effect and similar empowerment programs have departed from their primary objective of improving adolescent girls' health and human rights. While growth, efficiency, and effectiveness of programs have become stronger, the moral and political rationale for programs has been granted less attention.

As Sida (Swedish International Development Corporation) pointed out over a decade ago, the concept of "development," and in this case of "empowerment," means little if it is not concerned with improving the quality of peoples lives – providing not only the necessities for survival, but social justice, human dignity, and essential freedoms (Sida 1998). This was the initial aim of the empowerment programs I have discussed, to enhance adolescent girls' health and human rights, to achieve a more just global society. However, the term "justice" is used far less in current development documents than in those of the past. Increasingly, as I described in Chapter 3, empowerment programs have come to be centered on the untapped economic potential of adolescent girls instead.

In her critique of the World Bank's 2007 Gender Action Plan (GAP), Elaine Zuckerman argues that while the GAP's objective to involve women in global markets is critically important, the model sidelines "the moral imperative of empowering women" in order to allow them to achieve basic human rights and equality with men (2007: 1). She further notes that the plan prioritizes economic sectors that the World Bank has designated as motors of development, such as agriculture, private sector development, finance and infrastructure, and communications, of which the main beneficiaries have been transnational corporations rather than poor women. Similarly the case for prioritizing girls made by The Girl Effect and the UN Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health have focused limited attention on girls' human rights.

The Girl Effect's 2016 "Case for Prioritizing Girls: Stop Poverty Before it Starts" emphasizes four main rationales, only one of which references girls' rights (Girl Effect 2016). The document reads:

It's a matter of human rights.

Putting girls at the center of the next generation of global development goals provides a framework for ensuring that girls' rights are respected, protected and fulfilled.

Adolescent girls have the power to end inter-generational poverty.

Investing in adolescent girls is not only the right moral decision – it's a smart economic decision.

The return on investing in adolescent girls is high, so are the costs of excluding them.

Just one additional year of secondary schooling boosts girls' future earning potential by 15–25 percent. In Kenya that means national income could jump $3.4 billion – almost 10 per cent - if all Kenyan schoolgirls completed secondary school and the 220,000 adolescent mothers avoided pregnancy.

Investing in girls helps solve global challenges.

Investing in adolescent girls is critical to a sustainable future for us all. Adolescent girls can accelerate change on issues ranging from climate change to peace and security.

Similarly, the UN's 2010 Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health only uses one of four justifications for investing in women's health to discuss rights. The other three focus on productivity, poverty reduction, and the cost-effectiveness of investing in women (Gideon 2014). As Koffman and Gill (2013) highlight in their discussion of The Girl Effect and Girl Up, one of the most striking features of modern-day empowerment programs is that while they claim to celebrate adolescent girls' individuality and entrepreneurialism, they create a homogenous image of the Third World impoverished girl and ignore girls' sexual and reproductive rights. This is not altogether surprising, for the ideas about adolescent girls' vulnerability that have forged the foundation of contemporary development programs have largely sprung from the West, and the political climate in the U.S., particularly during the Bush presidency and again today with Trump's rise to power, has been one that undermines girls' freedom to make

decisions regarding their sexual health (Koffman and Gill 2013). Today, the economic justification for and feasibility of programs seems to take precedence over the social justice rationale for working with adolescent girls.

In 1998, Sida observed that "one of the difficulties of implementing policies on women and development in the past was the tendency to approach development initiatives in a technical or output-oriented way" (42). It seems that today, INGO programs are returning to a way of implementing programs that is focused on technical outputs and efficiency. This trend is clear in the concerns of current practitioners, who discussed funding, data and accountability, and donor control as major considerations when designing programs for adolescent girls. However, there are far more critical issues with adolescent girls' empowerment programs and with international development at large.

Support for Prioritizing Adolescent Girls

Despite their recognition that global hierarchies are accentuated by INGO work, each of the NGO leaders interviewed believed that continued investment in adolescent girls is critical for global health and world economic stability. The interviewees cited studies demonstrating that a woman is more likely than a man to invest the money that she is given by an NGO back into her family and noted adolescent girls' high rates of pregnancy and mortality. They also described structures that prevent girls from learning and gaining financial independence. As one interviewee put it, "in most sexual interactions globally, girls and women are disadvantaged. They have less power, less money, less education. They have less access to income and resources of every kind."

Therefore, the NGO workers believe that girls are both more deserving of aid and more likely to use it to the benefit of their communities. One interviewee explained:

> Girls' education and empowerment may be buzz topics, but I also think they're important areas of programming, because girls are fundamental. Adolescent girls are the mothers of the next generation…If you're educating girls now, they're better able to care for the next generation and have better access to health and better schooling opportunities or economic opportunities. They're hot topics, because they make sense.

Another leader in adolescent sexual and reproductive health acknowledged that "girls are not a magic bullet," but claimed that by understanding the challenges that girls experience and working to eradicate them, international organizations can foster other forms of development within communities in the areas of health, education, and livelihoods.

Although programs are designed with good intentions, they frequently reinforce inequalities between the global North and global South. While the NGO leaders interviewed were cognizant of some of the problematic hierarchies inherent in their work, they did not discuss the ways in which empowerment programs are shaped by neoliberal and paternalistic worldviews, nor did they raise concern about the homogenous representation of the "Third World" adolescent girl that these programs promote. With an awareness of these critiques, how should development experts proceed? Are there circumstances in which it is justifiable to reproduce global hierarchies in order to introduce interventions that could improve the health and economic status of adolescent girls? In the following chapter, I will discuss the impact that this analysis has had on my own career aspirations and the ongoing questions that raises for me.

6. Conclusion

"Good intentions and compassionate action are not immune to the power imbalances and inequalities they seek to redress" –Johanna Crane, "Unequal 'Partners'"

On May 1, 2017, the Trump administration announced its decision to terminate Michelle Obama's billion-dollar Let Girls Learn initiative. In an internal email to Peace Corps employees, acting director Sheila Crowley wrote, "moving forward, we will not continue to use the Let Girls Learn brand or maintain a stand-alone program" (Liptak 2017). I am quick to admit that in the two years it was operational, the Let Girls Learn campaign demonstrated many of the faults and contradictions that I highlighted within The Girl Effect –overemphasis on the potential of adolescent girls to end world poverty, fuzzy empowerment rhetoric, and language that reinforces global hierarchies—yet I was disheartened by the decision to cut the program. Although Let Girls Learn is complicit in the problems of international development, I believe that the platform is addressing a critically important issue and holds the potential to elicit positive changes in the lives of adolescent girls. While I critique the uncertain language and practices of international empowerment programs, I do not believe that we should disband them without a thought. Throughout the process of writing this thesis, I have struggled to reconcile my understanding that international development projects strengthen global inequalities and rely on a depiction of girls in the global South as weak and oppressed with my understanding that these same interventions hold the potential to improve the health and economic status of adolescent girls. With these two opposing facts in mind, what is the best course of action?

Angus Deaton famously states that the international aid endeavor is inspired by the question of "what should we do?" He asks, "Why is it that *we* must do something? Who put *us* in charge?" (2013: 312). What the West truly ought to do, he contends, is stand aside and let poor counrties forge their own paths to peace and prosperity. For decades, scholars like Deaton have argued that foreign aid does not produce economic growth, but rather reinforces colonial hierarchies and impedes the efforts of local governments (see Ferguson 1990, Easterly 2006, Escobar 2011). Indeed, a Google Search of "failed international development" will yield over two million articles on the faults of international aid.

In 2014, when I flew to Ghana with a grant to intern at an NGO focused on maternal health and HIV/AIDS, I was well aware of these critiques. However, I believed, as many INGO staff do, that the key to providing effective aid was to allow the adolescent girls and new mothers I worked with to, as Deaton says, "forge their own path" by ensuring that their desires were represented in the NGO's programs. The first challenge to this plan came when the NGO moved to implement a sexual education program in a local secondary school. The program would involve workshops to teach adolescent girls and boys about the benefits of contraceptive use and delaying first pregnancy. In addition to pushback from parents, teachers, and religious leaders who did not want sex or contraception to be discussed with teenagers, the organization received negative feedback from the adolescent girls involved in the pilot program, some of whom reported that early pregnancy was a good path to marriage and economic security for those who would not excel on their national examinations. Despite this negative feedback, the NGO proceeded with the original project plan.

At the time, I supported the NGO staff's decision to prioritize Western perspectives of adolescent girls' sexual health needs over the desires of the Ghanaian girls involved in the program. Now, after writing this thesis, I see how by choosing to value Western understandings of sexuality over local opinions while claiming to empower adolescent girls, I was participating in the contradictory, neoliberal language used across the field of international development. But was it was the right thing to do if it prevented a few girls from leaving school due to early pregnancy? I still feel uncertain. Perhaps the more informative question to ask is not was this the right decision, but what narratives and power structures influenced the decision? In previous chapters, I discussed the ways in which The Girl Effect campaign depicts adolescent girls as empowered while simultaneously vulnerable, oppressed, and in need of Western aid. Today, this contradictory language has permeated the development lexicon, fundamentally influencing the way that average people across the world view girls in the global South.

A striking example of the broad reach of The Girl Effect narrative lies in the opening chapter of Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's best-selling 2009 publication, *Half the Sky*. Speaking directly to the reader, they write:

> We hope to recruit you to join the incipient movement to emancipate women and fight global poverty by unlocking women's power as economic catalysts. That is the process under way – not a drama of victimization but of empowerment, the kind that transforms bubbly teenage girls from brothel slaves into successful businesswomen. This is a story of transformation. It is a change that is already taking place, and change that can accelerate if you'll just open your heart and join in (xxii).

From the onset of their book, Kristof and WuDunn call on Westerners to "open their hearts" and more importantly their checkbooks to rescue adolescent girls in the global

South. Without mention of the role that American foreign policy has played in reinforcing the structural conditions that encourage violence against women and inequality in the global South, without local context or history, Americans are asked to intervene in the problems of the developing world. Those who do volunteer their time or funds are portrayed as saviors, taking steps to "emancipate" women in the global South from their lives as "brothel slaves" within a culture that keeps them impoverished.

In the first two years after its release, *Half the Sky* sold over 300,000 copies, remaining on the best-seller list for seven consecutive weeks. In 2012, a videogame version of the book was launched in an attempt to reach a younger audience and a four-hour TV documentary was created based on the book, which "follows Nicolas Kristof and celebrity activists America Ferrera, Diane Lane, Eva Mendes, Meg Ryan, Gabrielle Union, and Olivia Wilde on a journey to tell the stories of inspiring, courageous individuals" (IMBD 2017). The official film summary reads, "*Half the Sky* is a passionate call-to-arms, urging us not only to bear witness to the plight of the world's women, but to help to transform their oppression into opportunity. Our future is in the hands of women everywhere" (IMBD 2017). These statements are highly consistent with the neoliberal, contradictory language of international empowerment programs. Between *Half the Sky* and The Girl Effect, the flawed narrative regarding "Third World" adolescent girls that I have highlighted in this thesis has been dispersed to millions of people across the West.

Although critical of the language of global aid, I am well aware that the very viability of international empowerment programs depends on the wide appeal of this flawed narrative. As evidenced by the popularity of Kristof's book and the widespread

adoption of The Girl Effect rhetoric, Western donors are eager to provide support to oppressed, vulnerable, impoverished girls. If funding is dependent on a problematic depiction of girls in the global South, yet greater funding leads to improvements in reproductive health care, human rights, and education, is it worth the cost incurred to girls' position in the global hierarchy? Should donors and NGO staff ensure that the rhetoric they espouse promotes equality even at the risk of losing financial contributions? This is a dilemma that many scholars and practitioners have grappled with.

In *The Bottom Billion,* Paul Collier argues that "citizens of the rich world are not to blame for most of the problems of the bottom billion; poverty is simply the default option when economies malfunction" (2007: 157). Consequently, Collier maintains that Western development professionals and governments should not waste their time worrying that potentially life-saving interventions are contributing to global inequalities. He states, "generally, I do not care much for a rich country wallowing in guilt over development. I find it contrived, and it diverts attention from a practical agenda" (157). I disagree with Collier on both fronts. Citizens of the rich world do play a significant role in contributing to the inequalities that keep the global poor subordinate and this practice is worthy of attention. While I believe wholeheartedly in pursuing the practical agenda of expanding adolescent girls' access to health and education, I feel that wealthy countries must address the harm that has been and continues to be done by international development programs. So I will continue to ask myself and others who are involved in this work: is it possible to maintain the distance required to critique international empowerment programs while addressing adolescent girls' pressing and immediate needs?

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