

Undesirable Girls: The Politics of Desire, Love, Self-Making in Dropping Out of School to Work

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Putting Girls' Education on the Map

Girls' education arose as a main focus in international sustainable development policies at the turn of the new millennium. Building off of political openings from third wave feminism, global discourse on human rights, and international commitments towards the developing world, girls of the developing world became the center of discourse on girls' education. In 1992, former chief economist for the World Bank, Lawrence Summers, delivered a famous keynote lecture titled "Investing in All People", where he offered the economic case for investing into girls. With increasing economic and sociological research into the effects of girls' education he offered a simple math equation: every \$30,000 spent on educating 1,000 girls would prevent 500 births, whereas a typical family planning program would spend \$65 dollars per girl to prevent a singular birth, which amounts to \$33,000 for 500 girls (Murphy, 2013). With a \$3,000 difference, Summers concluded that education was a more cost-effective intervention than contraception method. Similar to Summers' approach to maximizing the economic productivity of poor girls and women, researchers King and Hill (1993) took account of school enrollment in low-income countries, presenting a research that showed critical gender disparities in access to education. Using a combination of mixed methodologies and theories such as human capital theory, King and Hill found that girls' education has the highest rate of return on investment in the developing world (King & Hill, 1997). Positioning girls' education in relation to maternal mortality rates, the study pushed for girls' education as a means to break the vicious cycle of poverty that not only provides economic efficiency but also social efficiency.

Throughout the decade, continued research into the economic returns of investments into girls' education has placed girls' education at the forefront of global policy priorities in topics of education and much broader, global development. Studies have attributed girls' education as the key to critical advances within a woman's lifetime through increased formal economic opportunity and wages, decreases in pregnancy rates, early and/or childhood marriages, reduction in both child and maternal mortality rates, with additional spillover effects on further generations with increased political participation, decreased climate risk, and more resilient economies (Herz & Sperling, 2004). With scholarship on the

positive attributes on global development through girls' education, the 1995 Beijing United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women prominently established a global agenda towards the issues of women, calling for the end of systemic discrimination and barriers that hold women and girls from fully participating in all parts of life—both private and public spheres (Kwauk, 2020). Since then, educating girls has been framed as one of the most efficient economic and social investments into the developing world, as shown by the prominence of such discourse in large international frameworks and agreements like the 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the 2000 Education For All Platform for Action, in which many governments, the United Nations and other intergovernmental developmental bodies, and nongovernmental organizations have committed to working towards.

Privatizing Social Development: Selling the Girl Effect

A couple of years after the formal implementation of the MDGs, the private sector joined governments worldwide to forefront the mission of educating every girl. In 2009, for the very first time, the World Economic Forum held a session specifically on adolescent girls. The session, entitled “The Girl Effect on Development”, featured a panel led by many notable figures including Mark Parker, then-CEO of Nike, and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the Managing Director of the World Bank. At the session, Parker and Okonjo-Iweala announced the Nike and World Bank joint Adolescent Girl Initiative, a project that funneled \$20 million dollars to ‘empower’ young women by helping them build employable ‘skills that match market demand’ and eventually ‘find job placements’ (Hickel, 2014, pp. 1355-1373). Girls, through funded empowerment, would be able to “end poverty for themselves, their families, their communities, their countries, and the world” (Girl Effect, 2020). By putting girls at the center of this initiative, Nike and the World Bank argued that investing in girls and their futures is smart economics that not only stimulates the overall economy, but also provides returns for women at both the structural and the individual level.

Nike's Adolescent Girl Initiative established the Girl Effect, a global corporate social engagement campaign that emphasized the spillover returns for investments into the self-making of girls and women in the developing world (Bent, 2013, pp. 3-20). The Girl Effect as a corporate-backed, return-based investment quickly grew in the private sector, as corporations have been searched for new frontiers of capitalist growth in the context of ongoing economic crises around the world. Following the Girl Effect, other policies and campaigns from international bodies and multinational corporations—the IMF, Goldman Sachs, the US Agency for International Development (USAID)'s ‘The Spring Initiative, and even the White House's ‘Let Girls Learn’—encouraged similar commitments to invest in the untapped resource of adolescent girls, and their education, to

stimulate developing economies, slow down population growth, and address larger issues of gender equality in the Global South (Khoja-Moolji, 2015, pp. 40-57). With many girls and women held back from reaching their personal economic potential in the global economy, many corporations have increasingly made their own business cases to invest in girls and women in the global south praising the high rates of returns on many issues of gender—health, early marriages, employment opportunity—that if liberated, could provide measurable, and often quantifiable, economic growth results. A research study done by the World Bank on the Girl Effect (2011) found that investing in girls so that they would complete the next level of education would lead to lifetime earnings of status quo cohort of girls in school that is equivalent up to 68% of annual gross domestic product in 14 different developing countries. Seeing an increase in wages girls receive in correlation to completed education level, in which wages indicate overall economic growth and development, the study also concludes that investment into girls' education also sees decreases in adolescent pregnancies and early marriages (Chaaban & Cunningham, 2011, pp.1-36). The corporate focus on poor girls and women is simultaneously infused with the language of, and the desire for, high rates of returns—whether real and/or imagined. Seeking economic efficiency, any large companies, then, partnered with NGOs, traditional development organizations, and bilateral and multilateral agencies to come up with funding strategies to be directly invested into girls and women around the world. Venture capitalists have also started to enter the Girl Effect market, broadening the access to capital and market that would substantially increase the scale of preexisting interventions and investments (Moeller, 2018).

The introduction of private sector involvement into the global fight for accessible girls' education emphasized the individual responsibilities of joining the global fight for protecting vulnerable, young girls from barriers and obstacles to accessing education. Advocates of girls' education policies in development curriculum highlight the critical advances in gender parity in education as a result of worldwide commitments towards girls. In the fifteen years after the implementation of the MDGs, the number of girls in school has increased, climbing closer towards gender parity in enrollment, especially the primary level (Monkman & Hoffman, 2013, pp. 63-84). Overall, the number of all children in school has increased, where primary school enrollment in developing regions reached 91% (UNDP, 2021). Around 66% of countries around the world has reached gender parity in primary education, a trend that encourages communities across the developing world to support enrollment of girls in school as much as they do for boys (UNICEF, 2020).

However, heading into the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) call to action framework, issues of girls' education continued to be a prominent focus of the new framework, citing that progress has not been

enough. In indicators other than school enrollment, including rates of violence in and on the way to school, representation of women in teaching, quality of education and gender sensitive curriculum, have been slower through implemented projects and programs (Monkman, 2011). In the status quo more than a decade since the MDGs, there are an estimated 132 million girls out of school worldwide (Monkman, 2011). Continued structural barriers to girls' education—including global poverty, childhood marriages, and gender-based violence—contribute to an overwhelming disparity of girls and their ability to achieve their fullest potential in the global economy.

Measuring Progress in Girls' Education

Both the 2000 Millennium Development Goals and 2015 Sustainable Development Goals center narratives that empower the girl and their self-making potential as a key component of extreme poverty reduction and alleviation. These international frameworks, among many other commitments across different scales and acting bodies, continuously call for specific investments into girls' education in the developing world as a solution for economic development and reducing inequalities. The way poverty is understood related to educating girls globally, or related to broader issues of gender and education, shapes the way policies engage with and approach such issues. Policy discourse shapes our understanding of the complexities of poverty, gender, and education by defining what is within and outside the scope of tangible actions (Unterhailer & North, 2011, pp. 1-22). The decision-making process from the understanding of the issues, creating indicators, and measurements of progress all reflect how large international bodies, whether supranational organizations or corporations, perceive poverty and girls' empowerment. For these large international frameworks, getting girls into the classroom at equal rates as boys has been discursively framed as one of the strongest priorities, which is reflected in targeted efforts to increase enrollment. With the end goal of maximizing the largest returns through investments into girls of the developing world, these frameworks direct the funding channels with decision-calculus of girls' education as the most efficient untapped natural resource.

Gender Parity

The measurements of progress in girls' education laid out through the original MDGs have offered critical lessons for policymakers, international leaders, philanthrocorporate bodies, and NGOs in rethinking how to best center and support the needs of girls. Measures of progress formally introduced in the MDGs looked at universal target indicators such as school enrollment rates and gender parity numbers to evaluate progress in girls' education worldwide. The World Bank, one of the largest financers of international girls' education initiatives, has created a

robust grant program for developing countries and private lending program for middle income countries to ensure that each government adequate funding to spread access for basic primary education for all students, one of the critical goals established by the 2000 Education for All Dakar Framework, reaffirmed by the MDGs (Mundy & Verger, 2015, p.14). Through large overarching commitments towards ensuring gender parity in the classrooms, as well as establishing emphasis on the importance of formally entering the educational system through accessible basic primary school, the numbers of girls in the classroom has overall increased. Although the original Education for All goal envisioned gender parity achieved by 2005, target parity levels were eventually achieved by 2009 in primary and secondary levels (UNESCO, 2019, p. 7). Although progress differs across different regions, with most improvements in Central and Southern Asia for parity and gross enrollment ratios, the overall increase in girls in the classroom would not have been possible without the international commitment to financially support governments in their feats of creating a national education framework, including the commitment to make at the minimum primary education accessible, if not compulsory.

Literacy Gaps

Another measure of progress in girls' education is reducing the literacy gap by gender. The 2019 UNESCO GEM reports that at the start of the year 2000, gender parity index of youth literary rates was 0.93, increasing to just short of 0.97 at the start of 2016. Adult literacy gender parity rates increased as well, from an index of 0.88 in 2000 to 0.92 by 2016. Girls and women who are illiterate largely represent the most vulnerable and disproportionately affected communities—poverty and displacement uniquely position many girls and women and the margins of civil society, where comprehensive education for all plans do not account for the real lived experiences of many. Recognizing the need to consider a holistic and context-specific approach to girls' education, the 2020 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report centered around questions of accessibility, bringing to light the intersectional ways disability, mobility / displacement, and poverty operate in relation to continued access to education (UNESCO, 2020, pp. 220 – 233). Although comparative data is helpful to understand how different regions interpret and implement nationwide education policies, one of the main lessons policymakers have taken from the foundational establishment of the MDGs is to contextualize universal targets and goals to specific circumstances and the socio-cultural backgrounds of a country (UNECE, 2015). Cultural contexts, distribution of resources, available teachers, school locations, aging demographics are some of many variables that can impact the efficacy of literacy programs. The flexibility that comes from literacy programs for each group recognizes the important intersections of poverty, gender, and education.

The reframed SDGs recognized that the single-issue and universal approaches towards development reduces the complex and intertwined relationships fundamental rights of women have with status quo issues in access to education, poverty reduction, and empowerment of girls and women in both private and public life. Feminist scholars Sen and Mukherjee state that conservative voices in the arena for girls' education policy opted for 'safe' discourses that would directly target or upset existing power structures between gender, socioeconomic class, or other social structures across societies (Sen & Mukherjee, 2014, pp. 188 – 202). The depoliticization of women's rights in the MDGs brought into light the persistent barriers against girls and women that permeate the everyday experience—where progress in numbers for girls inside the classroom has not been able to mitigate the consistent problems for girls and women outside of school enrollment. Heading into the post-Millennium Development Era (2015-), the reframed SDGs for education established goals for expanded access to education, shifting from just basic primary to free primary, secondary, and pre-primary education for all (Goal 4, 2021). For issues pertaining gender equality, indicators such as decreasing childhood marriage rates and increasing numbers of adolescent girls with the capability to make their own decisions on her body, sex, health, and relationships inform the direction of gender equality (Goal 5, 2021). Indicators are still reliant on quantifiable measures like school enrollment levels and proficiency in math and reading, but are bringing more into conversation how women's' rights permeate from education to all other spheres. While education and gender equality are separate goals under the SDGs, new policies, actions, and investments are emphasizing how intertwined girls' education is to other branches of addressing issues in gender equality. Prioritizing key multisectoral policies, interventions, and indicators is crucial to address both the core actors that focus specifically on a special area and the larger structural forces, social and gender norms, that present barriers for girls and women across multiple different development goals.

Grassroots Efforts in Girls' Education

Non-profits have responded to the limits of overarching international policy frameworks by leveraging the specific socio-economic and cultural factors that shape a girls' experience in education. The Malala Fund, founded by Malala Yousafzai and her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, has noticed that a common reaction to the MDGs on committing to increasing girls' education has been to build more schools.¹ Establishing more schools would suggest higher enrollment rates as increased classrooms would create new spaces for students to occupy. An increase in educational institutions have contributed, in part, to the increase in

¹ This is under the Malala Fund's approach to their work and impact funding. More information about their strategy can be seen on their website.

enrollment numbers for girls around the world but does not address the many other factors that impact a girl's ability to access quality education. Therefore, instead of building schools, the Malala Fund has identified networks as the point of investments: investing into the work of local activists to increase the scale of impact and outreach into to the communities of girls and women they immediately serve.² Additionally, as a multinational aid organization that seeks to empower girls through the means of education, the Malala Fund recognizes the importance of shattering social norms that prop of barriers in girls' ability to learn equally, alongside their boy counterparts. Policies themselves can (re)create the same social norms that render gender disparities in educational attainment, opportunity, and overall gender inequity inevitable.

The Malala Fund has partnered with many local organizations that have come to learn the specific needs of the communities they work with. Supporting local leaders and advocates, most of whom are women, who fight for accessible, safe, and quality education and opportunities has been one distinct strategy that elevates women in leadership positions to not only listen and empathize with the girls of their own communities but also create important precedents of women as decision-makers in initiatives for girls' empowerment through education. Comprehensive approaches to girls' education, including fighting for safe sanitation spaces in school areas, increased modes of transportation from home to school, pushing gender inclusive curriculum and pedagogy, and addressing health concerns of girls and adolescents are all intersecting issue areas to the needs of a girl's experience in education. Grassroot and local-level organizing on the empowerment of girls do not stop at a girl's ability to enter the classroom, it is the permanent expanding of a girl's access to resources, information, and networks, and the constant shifting of the terms that define the potentialities of girlhood.

Crafting Corporatized 'Girlhoods'

Although international developmental organizations like the United Nations in its formation and operation are somewhat distantly removed from any given community on the ground, corporations have direct, intimate, and entangled relationships with the girls and women they seek to empower. The same populations they seek to empower through agentic self-making are the same targeted consumer populations, with companies directly profiting off of gendered marketing that advertise certain products with aspirational ideals of class mobility, racialized beauty standards, and notions of professional womanhood. Evelyn Nakano Glenn describes the ways in which multinational corporations have crafted the ideal woman incorporated in the global economy: a light-skinned, mirror image of the

² Ibid.

American middle-class woman in the developing world that can spend her own earnings to be a consumer of beauty (Glenn, 2008, 283). The educated woman has access to job opportunities that allows one to spend on improving herself, including skin whitening creams that represent an unparalleled access to capital the Third World modern woman now has access to.³

Looking at the educated woman with more opportunities as the new consumer base, multinational corporations have put extensive efforts into the empowerment of the future generation of woman consumers through girls' education. Uniquely, the source of extreme accumulated wealth by many corporations have been poor and uneducated girls and women who have been continuously exploited at the bottom of their global supply chains. Philanthropic investment into a specific subset of poor girls with potential capitalize upon the corporations' accumulated capital and potential to change the structures of inequality, glossing over the source of the surplus capital they reinvest into poor, racialized girls and women which is distinctly accumulated from the intimate exploitation of the same girls and women. Katheryn Moeller captures the intertwined relationship between multinational corporations, their specific investments into girls' education, and their supply chain. The hypervisibility of quantifiable checks of progress and returns on corporate investment efforts in girls' education initiatives, what is obscured is the durable, deeply entrenched inequalities across multiple spaces of difference (Moeller, 2018). So as corporations expand their legitimacy and authority throughout their supply chains across the developing world through large reinvestments into the girls and women they uniquely exploit and capitalize off of, girls education initiatives embody a (post)colonial melancholia⁴ where corporations define both the boundaries and potential possibilities of the empowerment of girls and women.

The dissonance between the subject of empowerment of the Girl Effect campaign (Third World girls) and the consumers of the Girl Effect content (investors) act as a form of spectatorship that capitalizes off of humanitarian appeals of allowing girls and women of the Third World to realize their fullest economic potential. Whereas past forms of humanitarian call for action have been centered around images and narratives of suffering or moral arguments, Lilie Chouliaraki (2010) identifies a new form of "post-humanitarianism" that departs from the guilt/shame gaze and instead focuses on the spectators' self-reflexivity and own agency compared to the humanitarian call in question (p. 110). The

³ Nakano Glenn positions skin whitening as a tangible form of upward mobile capital specifically marketed towards women. The third world brown woman is the newest ideal consumer and, combined with rhetoric of girls as an 'untapped natural resource', also the newest untapped resource for market and business.

⁴ I take this phrase from Paul Gilroy who uses the Freudian tradition when discussing melancholia, applying grief not at the individual level but rather a societal crafting of life/death boundaries by neocolonial structures of well-being. He introduces this term in his book, *Postcolonial Melancholia*.

Girl Effect as a consumer-driven philanthropy campaign instead, directly involves the positionality of the consumer, and their ‘freedoms’ to participate in the global economy directly to girls of the Third World who face challenges in their ability to practice their economic agency. Centering the social identity of the investor, donor, or agent of change, post-humanitarian philanthropic efforts corporatize a universal girlhood experience that every girl should have access to, transferring the Global North / Global South dichotomy to mimic that of the philanthropic donor and the invested, educated, empowered girl. The appeal of corporatized girlhoods serves as a call of action to the West to invest in the fragile futures of Third World girls, curating a form of guilt that reifies the power and strength of the investor, rather than the ‘invested’. This post-humanitarianism still operates under the same imperial legacies that mapped the international division of labor between the Global North and the Global South, a humanitarianism that attempts to close the gap between the investor West and the beneficiary Third World girl.

Desirable Subject, Desired Returns

At the core of the call for investments into girls’ education is to emphasize girls as self-reflexive actors in their own choices, individualities, and autonomy. The political significance of Girl Effect as well as the conceptualization of girls’ empowerment and agency in international policy is to depart from the narrative that girls and women of the developing world are rendered implicit victims of oppressive socioeconomic systems. Karishma Desai uses the term ‘Third World girls’ to describe the very girls and women at the center of poverty reduction and gender and development discourse presented by the SDGs, Girl Effect, and other similar campaigns and initiatives that have centered girls’ empowerment through their ability to make decisions for themselves across many aspects of life. When considering such framing of empowerment, it is important to view how international campaigns to invest in ‘Third World girls’ is grounded in neoliberal ideals. Neoliberalism is characterized as a ‘new’ shift from the welfare-orientated state that has been responsible for the well-being of its citizens into privatized forms of social welfare (Desai, 2016, p. 248). Michel Foucault’s work has expanded the boundaries of neoliberalism to enter ‘public’ spaces as well, such as the privatization of education systems, health systems and social programs. Although Foucauldian interpretations capture neoliberalism with the mentality of government expanding into spaces like girls’ education despite universal discourse on the necessity for education for all, neoliberal values also shapes the organizations of subjectivities as well (Bent, 2013, pp. 3- 20; Schaff, 2016, p. 220). The positioning of structural change within the hands of the Third World girl with educational achievement mirrors the neoliberal subject that is an entrepreneur of themselves and their own lives (Brown, 2003, pp. 15-18).

The appeal of investing in girls and women to expand their abilities to make their own agentic decisions is a seductive one, feminizing ambition and self-transformation as a woman's journey now as the global market has created space for new consumers in the global market. Thus, where girls and women are framed as the highest potential actors for self-making and flexibility, neoliberalism favors newly established direct relationships between the global marketplace and the autonomous consuming subject (Bent, 2013, pp. 3 – 20).

Agency defined through the lens of economic efficiency and returns on investments posit the Third World girl, the girl in poverty, the educated girl, as a desirable neoliberal subject. Behind many girls' education initiatives are the immense research efforts by the World Bank and other international developmental organizations that have attributed economic efficiency, high rate of returns, and scalability for every dollar spent on girls' education. Empowerment of poor girls and women, then, is inextricable tied to the number of structural barriers they are able to now conquer as a result of attaining education. The vantage point of efficiency constructs girls and women of the Global South as desirable investments because the research confirms and constructs the productive girl, even more than their male counterparts. As girls and women have been historically denied many resources and mobility, educational policies find that girls and women work harder, spend less resources (and time) on themselves, and yet, still find substantial impacts on trends in health, gender inequality, economy, development, and positive benefits for future generations (Schaff, 2016, p. 220). The reduction of the desirable neoliberal subject, the poor girl or woman in the developing world, to implicit efficiency dangerously overlooks the reasons why gendered inequalities of time, resources, access to spaces and institutions perpetuate multiple conceptualizations of the good, highly efficient, selfless woman, mother, and daughter ideal (Schaff, 2016, p. 220). The very indicators of calculating a desirable return on investment to girls' education, in addition, are predicated off the same systems of gender inequality and hegemonic patriarchy that define the poor woman figure as a vessel of economic efficiency and sustainable development—where a woman's sole responsibility is to successfully and healthily rear children, offsetting time spent in informal work force, adhering closer to constructions of respectability politics that position women closer to working and already 'empowered' men, and as a result, ideally encountering less instances of institutionalized and socialized gender-based violence. And it to ascribe empowerment of women and their potential to poor regions in the world in itself crafts the neoliberal project of efficiency; even in systems that formally recognize and incorporate women into organizational structures, institutions, and policy decision-making, gendered education inequality, and largely gender inequality, still persists (Maslak & Wiseman, 2008).

For many philanthrop capitalists, the image of the Third World girl is a racialized, brown girl in poverty, who would be able to defeat all odds

with her own hands through investments into education. It is precisely that immediate image of a vulnerable young brown girl at crossroads at her stage of life, where education would make all the difference in the projection of her ability to attain ‘success,’ that evokes a strong emotional desire to invest and to a certain degree, save, young girls from going down other paths that would limit the girls’ life through structural inequalities. Racialized youth represent middle-class anxieties (Cox, 2015, p. 12), where specific access to resources and opportunity during adolescence can shape trajectories for an individual girl to access certain social classes but also intergenerational changes to raced and gendered boundaries. The active racialization of the Third World girl evokes a distinct affective response by Western leaders, investors, and organizations to become actively involved and take responsibility for global economic inequality, as well as non-Western governance that continues to fail brown girls around the world. A dual commitment of both desirable forms of social good and desired rate of returns on investments in the campaigns of the Girl Effect strongly represents neoliberal participation of private sectors, multi-national corporation, and international non-governmental organizations and their commitment to the well-being of Third World girls. Simultaneously, that dual-commitment expands into the subject of the poor girl, who is positioned at a crux between colonialism and post-colonial futurities of sustainable economic development, nation-building, and the expansion of human / women’s rights. But it is precisely the girl that still has opportunities and future with an education that qualifies as the rescuable image, for there are many Third World Girls who have been left behind, far too old and uneducated to represent the new, modern, empowered, and educated woman consumer in an emerging global market.

The Post-Colonial, Third World Girl Figure

Exploring how policymakers understand the issue of girls’ education, foreground certain perspectives, and frame problems and solutions not only explains the politics the faces of international development organizations present with international girls’ education policy but also the ways policy interprets, socially constructs, and shapes reality (Monkman & Hoffman, 2014, pp. 63-84). Monkman and Hoffman (2013, p. 68) center policy discourse as an integral aspect of understanding issues of girls’ education because “these documents are not mere epiphenomena mirroring objective reality; they proactively shape reality.” The Girl Effect and many other campaigns’ central catchphrase, “invest in a girl and she will do the rest”⁵ assumes a causal relationship between education and girls’ ability to “alleviate poverty, sustain development, spread

⁵ This is a direct phrasing from Girl Effect campaign in their inception in 2008. It is reverberated and used across many other writings and organizations that have circulated the catchphrase.

democracy, and promote peace” (Monkman & Hoffman, 2013, p. 73). Despite the reality that girls and women, as well as their educational attainment, cannot guarantee the results and spillover effects claimed in international policies, Monkman and Hoffman find that they suggest investments into girls’ education as a “simple, direct, and unchallengeable” solution for the development of the Third World (2013, p. 73). International efforts not only emphasize girls’ empowerment through the construction of the Third World girl as the self-making entrepreneur, but also render girls and women directly responsible for the changes in structures of gender inequality that permeate within the educational sector and beyond.

Discourse on girls as “agents of change” or as “smart economic investments” creates spaces for programs and initiative to transform young girls into desirable global citizens who shape an imagined post-colonial social order (Khoja – Moolji, 2015, p. 42). Notions of global citizenship, belonging, and successful participation reflect neoliberal ideologies that complicate and reduce colonial pathologies that explain economic inequalities in resources, mobility, and opportunities for many girls and women in the Global South. Desai (2016) writes that the conceptualization of the improved self-made Third World girl centered and constructed in these policies display “Western standards of empowered feminism and embodies flexibility and self-making potential” (p. 248). Western neoliberal ideologies not only isolate the Third world geographically but also the girls of the Girl Effect who are “singularly defined by the experiences of poverty, gender, inequality, and patriarchy” and only achieve success when they “become what the viewer imagines them to be” with education (Bent, 2013, p. 10). Crafting the boundaries of success for Third World girls through a neoliberal framework pushes a post-colonial imaginary that ideologically disassociates colonialism with global inequality and the international division of labor.

Postcolonial subjectification emerges within the neoliberal era in which subjects are required to be ‘rational, calculating and self-motivating’ and are subjects that should be able to makes sense of their own lives ‘in terms of discourses of freedom, autonomy, and choice—no matter how constrained their lives might actually be’ (Scharff & Gill, 2013, p. 6). Neoliberal postcolonial subjectivity thus depends on the consolidation of capitalism, feminism, and colonialism as a part of citizenship and belonging under the Western liberal tradition of individual authenticity and self-mastery in a global market as a function of quality, empowered life for women. The barriers, then, that the postcolonial girl faces are the ‘traditional’ or ‘backwards’ culture of the colonial past that plagues the Third World—lack of established girls’ and women’s rights like that of the Global North or gender-based violence from the men of their communities—in which only empowerment, education, and participation as global citizens will be able to liberate them from their

“oppressive cultures and men”⁶ (Desai, 2016, p. 251). The products of international development agencies, from their research to their construction of the post-colonial empowered Third World girl subject, rests upon colonial institutions that have created and intensified the conditions of exploitation, oppression, and dispossession.

A women’s rights-based approach in the contemporary geopolitical context privileges the West as the universal standards of democracy, rights and liberal values. Navtej Purewal (2015) has a more pointed approach towards neoliberal ideologies and the creation of neoliberal subjects, where “girls’ education as a ‘right’ has become a tool rather than a strategy within the neoliberal economic agenda to proliferate the ideology of the ‘free market’ while simultaneously sanctioning the neocolonial military intervention and occupation of the region” (p. 47). Using the global distribution of labor, multi-national corporations have operated on the plane of a ‘free market’ to source and exploit cheap, and often unpaid, labor in factories all around the Global South. The corporate system of resource extraction, outsourcing for cheaper labor, and exploitation of many communities in poverty reifies the international division of labor caused by colonial structures to render certain forms of social mobility, labor processes, and income / desires to the Global South. The production of the girl subject in many education efforts rests upon intimate colonial processes that allow multi-national corporations to invest in the same girls they seek to exploit for labor—a relationship that posits international development and nation building at the forefront of ‘democracy’ and the universal ‘rights’ for girls and women.

Speculative Futures and the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Girls’ Education

The global COVID-19 pandemic has presented many challenges to existing efforts in girls’ education, even potentially reversing the scope of progress on the SDGs. With almost 90% of countries shutting down schools to reduce the transmission of COVID-19, 743 million girls have had their learning disrupted worldwide experiencing many different consequences and conditions that may risk pushing girls permanently out of schools (Malala Fund). Previous public health crises have informed the way gaps in education disproportionately affect many young girls—stalled economies push many vulnerable families into deeper levels of poverty not being able to financially support their daughters’ learning, even requiring them to pursue work early to contribute to overall household income (Malala Fund). Even if families were to support their girls attending school remotely, economic shocks squeeze education financing, where many schools that serve poor girls can be permanently shut down (Malala Fund). Remote alternatives to learning, if available at all, operate alongside a gendered digital divide, where girls are less likely to have access to internet or technology within the home (UNESCO, 2020, pp. 220

⁶ Many of the authors and myself are shaped by Gayatri Spivak’s 1988 essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak” in thinking about the conceptualization of the Third World girl subject.

– 233). Additionally, girls also are vulnerable to distinct forms of gender based violence within the home that disturb the ability to learn remotely or return to schooling; the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that due to disruptions in many programs, for every 3 months of lockdown, there is an expected rise of 15 million cases of gender based violence and an additionally 13 million total childhood marriages that could have been averted between 2020 and 2030 (UNFPA, 2020). Especially when UN Women indicates that a “home environment that prioritizes learning” is critical to ensure that girls complete school, the lack of mobility and economic activity, halt/end of social programs, challenges of remote learning, and quarantining at home as effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has posed larger questions about the sustainability of girls’ education initiatives (UN WOMEN, 2020, p. 10).

What the COVID-19 pandemic has shown is that none of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are new; rather, the pandemic has exacerbated and made hypervisible already existing structures of inequalities that impact the Third World girls’ relationship with education. Overreliance on social programs to get girls into the classroom reflects a lack of resiliency to sudden shocks to the school system, health systems, and the overall economy. A girls’ learning experience goes beyond learning done in a classroom setting but expands to educational opportunities at home and through lived experiences. It also includes flexibility for girls to be able to make a living for themselves and their families, especially to prepare for sudden recessions like those posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and other health crises. It guarantees continued access to support and resources in health and education that can withstand any pandemic or any natural disaster. The instability of the educational system for the most vulnerable girls brings to light the overreliance on broad indicators of ‘progress’ and foreign sources of aid.

The construction of a ‘Third World girl’ in girls’ education policy captures girls and women into a singular experience that reduces the complexities of the intersections of social identities, desires / wants, that complicate translations of empowerment and agency. The construction captures girls in a singular timeframe. Often framed as victims of men, Islam, teenage pregnancy, and their cultures (Khoja – Moolji, 2018), Third World girls and their agentic subjectivities are often bound to the existence of patriarchal subjects and structures. While equally pitted as “results of”, these Third World girls are also defined through redemption and empowerment narratives that crafts the futuristic Third World girl: one who defies all structural and cultural odds and elevates herself, her family, her community, and her nation in global society. Third World girls are constructed in the past and future tense but rarely in the present. After all, it is much easier to discursively erase identities from the present-time. Defined by the failures of patriarchal society that have denied girls their education, the future for the postcolonial girl subject poses many exciting possibilities of change. Shenila Khoja-Moolji writes that the construction

of the ideal educated girl emulates Malala Yousafzai's highly publicized story (2018). As a Pakistani teenage girl, Malala was shot by the Taliban on her way to school in front of her girl classmates. Now, Malala is a Nobel Peace Prize winning advocate for girls' education worldwide. The successful Third World girl is someone who, through foreign investments, can now achieve education and become a leader that addresses the larger structural issues that impact girls and women worldwide.

Positioning the Third World Girl in a dichotomy of non-present times also locks their subjectivity into two frames: the successful educated girl, or the girl who failed to go to school. Anita Harris' conceptualization of the 'at-risk girl' and the 'can-do girl' helps us further understand the rendered futurities of girls of the developing world established by western forms of neoliberal citizenship and progress. Harris' 'at-risk girls', "those who are seen to be rendered vulnerable by their circumstances", pre-determine the future possibilities of girls of the developing world who have dropped out of school as a failure due to circumstances (Harris, 2003, p. 25). On the other hand, 'can-do girls', which Harris defines as those who can "successfully engage in the market" and "believe in their capacity to invent themselves and success" are girls whose lives align with the progress and empowerment envisioned by international development policy; girls who are equipped with the necessary educational skills to overcome teenage pregnancy, childhood marriage, poverty, and all other aspects that potentially limit the livelihoods of Third World Girls (p. 25). Then, this pre-determined notion of the ideal girlhood of girls in poverty represent a 'girling' of development, where girls and women should be held responsible for their own learning, educational opportunities, sexualities and their bodies, and economic futures. Educated girls with such radical potential to not only liberate themselves but also their own economic communities satiate international desire for returns on investment into girls as a natural resource. The dichotomy situates the Third World Girl into one of success and the other of failure, perpetuating the fetishization of the innocent, vulnerable, salvageable, young, brown girl that faces many obstacles that would prevent them from realizing the agentic middle-class modern woman. The hypersexualization of the 'can-do' educated girl pitted against the disposable and failed 'at-risk girl' reduces girls into an untapped resource where investments by corporations and governments are sexy and appealing, leaving many girls who fail to do so, including the very girls that fuel the markets of any corporation and governments in the international division of labor.

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