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## **GALVANISING GIRLS FOR DEVELOPMENT? CRITIQUING THE SHIFT FROM 'SMART' TO 'SMARTER ECONOMICS'**

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### ABSTRACT

This paper traces the mounting interest in, and visibility of, girls and young women in development policy, especially since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when a 'Smart Economics' rationale for promoting gender equality and female empowerment has become ever more prominent and explicit. 'Smart Economics', which is strongly associated with an increased influence of corporate stakeholders, frequently through public-private partnerships, stresses a 'business case' for investing in women for developmental (read economic) efficiency, with investment in younger generations of women being touted as more efficient still. The latter is encapsulated in the term 'Smarter Economics', with the Nike Foundation's 'Girl Effect' being a showcase example. In this, and similar, initiatives linked with neoliberal development, 'investing in girls' appears to be driven not only by imperatives of 'female empowerment', but also to realise more general dividends for future economic growth and poverty alleviation. Yet while it may well be that girls and young women have benefited from their rapid relocation from the sidelines towards the centre of development discourse and planning, major questions remain as to whose voices are prioritised, and whose agendas are primarily served by the current shift from 'Smart' to 'Smarter Economics'.

## INTRODUCTION

'If investing in women is "smart economics" ... catching them upstream, as girls, is even smarter' (Ngozi Okonzo-Iweala, 2009).<sup>1</sup>

The above comment, by former Managing Director of the World Bank, Ngozi Okonzo-Iweala, was made at the first-ever plenary session on adolescent girls at the 2009 World Economic Forum in Davos (see Elias, 2013). The creation of this space in the most elite and exclusive of global business gatherings not only brought to bear that girls and young women had traditionally been excluded from consideration in macro-economic decision-making fora, but the thrust of the messaging, in the immediate aftermath of the 2007/8 global financial crisis, was that directing more efforts to female inclusion might help to avoid such cataclysmic scenarios in future (ibid.; see also Prügl and True, 2014). If 'Smart Economics', promulgated chiefly by the World Bank and its corporate allies, had already captured the imagination and allegiance of a host of multilateral and bilateral development institutions, as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the 'Smarter Economics' agenda, in which girls as well as women have been enjoined to improve their circumstances and advance gender equality through market mechanisms, has arguably provided even more persuasive grist for the mill.

In stressing that gender inequality is 'bad for business', 'Smart Economics' advocates investing in women and girls to (re)invigorate economic growth and alleviate poverty (see Calkin, 2015a,b; Caron and Margolin, 2015). Although gender initiatives still represent a minority of public-private partnerships (PPPs) (Prügl and True, 2014:1139), emerging forms of 'neoliberal governmentality' have recognised that 'gender equality delivered through responsibilised selves is no longer costly; instead inequality is' (ibid.: 1143). Bolstered by a rising trend of corporate involvement in gender interventions, dubbed by Roberts (2015) as 'transnational business feminism' (TBF), one of the earliest and most enduring incarnations as far as young women are concerned is the Nike Foundation's 'Girl Effect'. This digitally sophisticated movement -- characterised by Calkin (2015a:656) as a 'visually arresting and glossy corporate campaign with multiple online platforms including a website,

YouTube channel and Twitter feed' -- was launched in 2008 and has partnered with various NGOs in developing countries, as well as with major multilateral and national agencies such as the World Bank and the UK's Department for International Development (DfID). The professed aim is to promote girls' 'empowerment' and agency through interventions in education, vocational training, entrepreneurship, health and reproductive awareness, alternative forms of girlhood and womanhood, and sensitisation to human rights. Yet while 'empowering' girls is a worthy objective, it should also be borne in mind that one of the major justifications for the Nike Foundation's initiative, is that adolescent girls are the 'world's greatest untapped solution' to eradicate poverty (Calkin, 2015a:655). As articulated by the Nike Foundation's President and CEO, Maria Eitel: 'In the world today, there is an estimated 250 million adolescent girls living in poverty. The untapped potential of these 250 million girls is the most powerful source for positive change'.<sup>2</sup>

This 'positive change' according to the Girl Effect's publication '*Smarter Economics: Investing in Girls*',<sup>3</sup> appears to be firmly wedded to the financial dividends likely to accrue from facilitating girls' participation in markets in Global South countries, prospectively best achieved through strategies spanning from helping them to complete secondary education to avoiding adolescent motherhood. In turn, the rationales provided by the 'Girl Effect', and cognate initiatives such as UN Foundation's 'Girl Up' (see Table 1), align very much with 'Smart Economics' insofar as beneficial spin-offs are envisaged to extend beyond girls per se, to their families and communities, as well as to states and firms (Calkin, 2015b: 613). As articulated by Grosser and Van Der Gaag (2013), who identify that '...the Girl Effect remains largely driven by the rich world and the corporate sector' (ibid.:74) : '...less focus is being given to how this new agenda will benefit girls and young women themselves, and more to what it can achieve for the rest of us' (ibid.:76).

**TABLE 1 - SELECTED LANDMARKS IN THE RISING VISIBILITY OF GIRLS**

- 1991-2001 - UN Decade for Girl Child
- 2007 - Launch of Plan International's 'Because I Am a Girl'
- 2007 - UN Interagency Taskforce on Adolescent Girls established by UNICEF, UNIFEM and WHO
- 2008 - 'Girl Effect movement' launched by Nike Foundation
- 2008 - World Bank launch of Adolescent Girls Initiative
- 2009 - World Economic Forum (WEF), first ever plenary session on adolescent girls, led by CEO of Nike, Mike Parker
- 2010 - 'Girl Hub' launched by UK's DfID in collaboration with Nike Foundation
- 2010 - Girl Up Campaign launched by UN Foundation
- 2012 - First 'International Day of the Girl Child' (11 October)
- 2014 - Girl Summit launched by DfID

Sources: Calkin, 2015a,b; Caron and Margolis, 2015; Cobbett, 2014; Grosser and Van Der Gaag, 2013; Hickel, 2014; Koffman and Gill, 2013; Shain, 2013.

Little wonder, therefore, that the Girl Effect has been widely critiqued by feminist scholars a number of counts. These include first, the rather instrumental and essentialist view of young women in developing countries as innately altruistic. A second factor is the manner in which the economic and societal returns to be derived from investing in girls tend to overshadow the political and moral exigency of promoting their individual (and collective) rights as an intrinsic good and goal.

Further related concerns about the Girl Effect and its offshoots include that boys (and men) are largely absent from the frame, except as a marginal or negative influence (Cornwall, 2014:133; Grosser and Van Der Gaag, 2013:78). This cross-generational, but decidedly non-gendered, broadening in the shift from 'Smart' to 'Smarter Economics', makes it hard to conceive how genuine transformations in gender roles, relations and inequalities might come about (Chant and Sweetman, 2012).

Another preoccupation is how interventions such as the Girl Effect and Girl Up enlist the support and solidarity of young women in the Global

North for their poorer Global South counterparts. Not only does this enshrine the idea that developing countries need assistance from wealthier nations, thereby arguably perpetuating neocolonial legacies, relationships and representations, but it also posits girls in the Global North as sufficiently empowered to lead the way (see Koffman and Gill, 2013; Koffman et al, 2015; Mohanty, 2003; Wilson, 2011).

An additional worry is the way in which corporate interests have now insinuated themselves in producing knowledge about, and solutions to, gender disparities, particularly by integrating young women into markets (Roberts, 2015). This in many respects is paradoxical, when the combined forces of neoliberalism and globalisation over the past few decades have arguably led to the emergence or intensification of a host of socioeconomic inequalities which have particularly disadvantaged poor female populations in developing nations (ibid.; see also Cornwall, 2014; Elias, 2013; Hickel, 2014; Wilson, 2015).

With these provisos in mind, my discussion first outlines some of the key challenges to young women's equality with their male peers. I then proceed to describe what could conceivably be construed as 'celebrations' insofar as the targeting of young women and girls, albeit of relatively recent vintage, has now been definitively embraced in development agendas. I then turn to some cautions as to the ways in which girls and young women have been taken on board in 'Smart(er) Economics'-driven development through the Girl Effect and similar campaigns. In my conclusion I offer some reflections as to how the rights of girls and young women might be more meaningfully advanced in the post-2015 era than what is presented by current corporate-influenced neoliberal strategies.

## CHALLENGES

In 2007, Plan International (Plan), a long-established children's charity and a pioneer in focusing on young women, asserted that 'Girls are getting a raw deal. They face the double discrimination of their gender and their age, and in many societies remain at the bottom of the social and economic ladder' (Plan, 2007:1).

This statement helped to justify Plan's launch of a major initiative for girls, which comprised, inter alia, the production of annual reports on the

*'State of the World's Girls'*, dealing with timely themes such as girls and war (2008), girls and the global economy (2009), digital and urban frontiers (2010), disasters (2013), and culminating with the 'unfinished business' of girls' rights (2015). These reports have also included year-on-year updates on the lives of 145 girls born in 2006 in nine developing countries. <sup>4</sup>

Through its extensive work on and with girls at the grassroots, Plan has identified a wide range of discriminations which play out in such arenas as education, vocational training, paid and unpaid work, lack of freedom, lack of voice and power, early and/or forced marriage, limited access to contraception within and outside wedlock, Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C), and gender-based violence (GBV) and violence against women and girls (VAWG) (see Plan, 2007). Plan has further identified that discriminations against girls and young women may reach their most pronounced incarnations in the contexts of war, climate change, disasters, and disease pandemics, as well as in the arguably less exceptional state of poverty.

In relation to war and conflict, for example, not only do girls comprise an estimated one-third of child soldiers, but they are also particularly vulnerable to abduction, abuse, slavery, and rape, as evidenced, inter alia, in the 2014 seizure of more than 200 Chibok schoolgirls by Boko Haram in Borno State, Nigeria, and by the forced enslavement and marriage of Yazidi girls in northern Iraq by Islamic State militants.

In respect of climate change and natural disasters, girls are less likely to rescue themselves or be rescued (see Bradshaw, 2013). Moreover, there are often some very serious social implications which follow disasters, as exemplified in the aftermath of the 2010 Haiti earthquake where there was a reportedly unprecedented increase in rape and other forms of sexual violence against young women (Chant and McIlwaine, 2016: 147).

With regard to disease pandemics, it is well known that in several sub-Saharan African countries young women aged 15-24 years are at least twice as likely to be HIV-positive than their male peers. In countries affected by severe outbreaks of Ebola from March 2014 onwards, notably Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea, women and girls allegedly constituted up to 75% of infected persons, partly because of feminised care burdens for the sick and dying.<sup>5</sup>

## CELEBRATIONS?

In light of the preceding, we must surely celebrate that girls' visibility on the international development agenda has shot to scalar heights in recent years. As Shain (2013:8), summarises:

'Girls have until recently been invisible in development discourses, or marginalised as the sexless dehumanised symbols of poverty, crisis and famine... In the last decade, however, girls and women have come to occupy a central place as subjects, objects and conceptualisers of development' (see also Calkin, 2015a:654; Cobbett, 2014:311-2; Elias, 2013:162; Caron and Margolin, 2015:1-2).

Whether or not girls can actually be regarded as 'conceptualisers of development', it is certainly true that many initiatives for girls which have emerged in the past decade profess to encourage girls' participation in their design and implementation. The first objective in Plan's '8-point Action Plan: A Better Deal for Girls', for example, is to 'listen to girls and let them participate' (Plan, 2007:120-1). As for the DfID/Nike Foundation's 'Girl Hub', which aims to 'unleash the girl effect', and to empower 250 million girls living in poverty 'to reach their full potential', the claim is made that 'Everything we do is built on what girls tell us they need and what they tell us will work for them'.<sup>6</sup> In principle, therefore, girls are not only brought on board as beneficiaries, but as consultants and decision-takers, although I doubt that the strapline on the Girl Effect's Global Giving donation website '600 million adolescent girls are ready to change the world'<sup>7</sup> reflects a robust canvassing of quite so many girls' opinions.

The landmarks itemised in Table 1 have emerged in amazingly rapid succession, especially if we compare this trajectory with the century-long, and decidedly punctuated evolution of rights for young women in Global North countries such as the UK (see Dyhouse, 2014). This clearly begs the question as to why this sudden and widespread interest in girls in the Global South, especially on the part of so many 'stakeholders', including the corporate sector.

Among various reasons for this rising tide, it would probably be unwise to dismiss the significance of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) of 1989, the most ratified of all UN conventions, and which nominally requires all states parties to report on children and youth.

A further factor is mounting recognition that youth offer a key entry point for changing gender. As CPRC (2010), *inter alia*, has noted, it is often far easier to inculcate values of gender equality among young women and men than their older counterparts.

On top of this there continues to be genuine concern on the part of many feminist scholars and activists, development organisations and young women themselves to address the injurious barriers facing female youth in exercising their rights and attaining equality with their male peers. To this end, and common to many initiatives launched in the past decade and a half, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and now the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), great store is set on increasing girls' education, and especially to completion at secondary level. Although education *per se* does not necessarily guarantee good jobs or gender equality in labour markets (Grosser and Van Der Gaag, 2013:780), it is undoubtedly vital in increasing girls' access to work and 'empowering' them economically. In turn, the prospects are enhanced by the removal of other prejudicial obstacles such as early child marriage, adolescent motherhood, and GBV in and around schools, as featured, *inter alia*, in Plan's mission goals for girls, and in the Girl Summit launched by DfID in 2014. The latter also emphasises the importance of eliminating FGM in line with the UK Prime Minister David Cameron's pledge to 'end FGM within a generation'.<sup>8</sup>

However, while many of the principles behind the launch of initiatives for girls are seemingly benign and well-intentioned, questions remain about the bases on which some actors have entered the scene, and about some of the directions in which this trajectory is going, especially in the context of 'Smart(er) Economics'. In particular, what does 'Smart(er) Economics' mean in terms of the discursive framing of young girls in Global South countries (not to mention Global North countries too), and how far can its stereotypically gender-essentialised and market-oriented tenets go in actually promoting girls' full human rights and advancing gender equality?

In the next section I highlight a suite of cautions which might be borne in mind, detailing briefly, first, the origins and character of 'Smart Economics'

## CAUTIONS

### Smart Economics

Accepting that the 'discourse of Smart Economics is, like all discourses, a broad, amorphous and unwieldy subject' (Calkin, 2015b:614), its bottom line is that gender inequality hampers economic growth nationally and internationally. As such inclusion of, and investment in, women and girls are necessary for more effective development outcomes (see also Chant, 2016a; Prügl and True, 2014; Wilson, 2015).

Even if 'Smart Economics' has only been explicitly articulated as such in the past ten years or so, its roots can be traced back to the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985), and perhaps particularly to the 1980s when, in the wake of crisis and aggressive neoliberal economic restructuring, an efficiency rationale for 'engendering' development policy became increasingly discernible (Moser, 1989). This stemmed largely from recognition of the role played poor women's efforts in mitigating the adverse impacts on household livelihoods through individual and community-based intensification of their paid and unpaid activities (ibid.; see also Chant, 2012; Moser, 1993).

In the course of the 1990s and 2000s, the 'business case' for investing in women gained momentum, including in the Bank's *Gender Action Plan 2007-2010* which was sub-titled: '*Gender Equality as Smart Economics*'. Notwithstanding that in the Bank's flagship *World Development Report 2012 (WDR 2012)* on *Gender Equality and Development*, greater rhetorical space is devoted to gender equality as a goal in its own right, Calkin (2015b:614) regards this as another 'important building block in the Smart Economics architecture'. Certainly, given abundant evidence in WDR 2012 of what I have called 'clever' (or 'cunning') conflation, whereby 'Smart Economics' and 'women's rights' are often shoehorned into the same or consecutive sentence (Chant, 2012:205), this does little to detract from promoting an economically utilitarian version of gender equality which emphasises the dividends to be leveraged from mobilising nominally 'untapped' female efforts and energies.

Capitalising on essentialist notions of women and girls as not only altruistic but also safe-bet, risk-averse entrepreneurs, this hitherto neglected constituency represents serious 'value for money', promising unprecedented returns (ibid.; see also Cornwall, 2014; Cornwall and Edwards, 2010; Koffman and Gill, 2013; Prügl and True, 2014; Roberts, 2015; Shain, 2013; Wilson, 2011). Elias (2013:164) further underlines essentialist views of women business leaders as 'better able to incorporate compassion and humanitarianism within business practice'.

On top of this, 'Smart Economics' is not just about harnessing the capacity of women and girls for the purposes of economic growth, but also sports an agenda of population reduction, with notable reference in WDR 2012 to '...helping girls make "smart" reproductive decisions' (World Bank, 2011:316). 'Smart' reproductive decisions are effectively about girls avoiding early and frequent pregnancy in order to improve their health, and to circumvent inter-generational poverty from domestic to global levels (see Koffman and Gill, 2013:95-7; Wilson, 2011:326). Yet while the rhetoric may be about 'empowering' girls in the Global South to determine their own fertility, there is perhaps more in the way of population control than reproductive choice in the equation, especially as climate change has come to be linked with a return to neo-Malthusian preoccupations with 'over-population' rather than a crisis of corporate exploitation and over-consumption (see Hartmann and Barajas-Román, 2011). As Wilson (2013:4) has asserted:

'Central to the strategy of which the return of population control is a part, is the intensification of women's labour, with responsibility for household survival increasingly feminised, and more and more women incorporated into global value chains dominated by transnational corporations. It is this drive to intensify and incorporate the labour of women in poor households in the global South, rather than feminist concerns about reproductive and sexual rights, which underpins the now ubiquitous slogan of "investing in women" '.

The intimate interconnections of the World Bank with corporates, accountancy firms and investment banks has been underlined in forensic detail by Roberts and Soederberg (2012), who highlight that:

'...the gender as smart economics framework carefully constructed by the emerging partnership between private corporations such as Goldman Sachs and public institutions such as the World Bank completely effaces the role of these very same institutions in helping to bring about global financial crisis that has made it so pressing to economically empower women' (ibid.:960).

That so many non-corporate development organisations, including NGOs, have jumped on the 'Smart Economics' bandwagon is perhaps less easy to comprehend. However, and undoubtedly testifying to the immense influence of the World Bank in development discourse and policy (see Chant, 2016a: 4), 'Smart Economics' has become an increasingly guiding mantra for so-called 'Gender and Development' justifications in numerous arenas. This even extends to UN Women, an organisation which might be construed as primarily concerned with promoting women's rights in and of themselves. However, soon after its launch in 2011, UN Women not only started talking about a 'business case' for gender equality<sup>9</sup> but also embarked upon engagements with corporates such as Coca-Cola to 'increase the empowerment of women entrepreneurs'.<sup>10</sup>

As far as girls are concerned, there were exhortations as far back as the 1990s to focus on younger generations of women. For example, in 1992, then Vice President of Development Economics and Chief Economist at the World Bank, Lawrence Summers, stated that: 'investment in the education of girls may well be the highest return on investment available in the developing world today' (Cobbett, 2014:312). In 1995, emphasis on girls as a development category was also in evidence at the Fourth World Women's Conference in Beijing, as encapsulated in the edict that 'the girl child of today is the woman of tomorrow' (Elias, 2013:162). However, the 'Smart Economics' case for girls has arguably gained most traction in the 2000s, as indicated in Okonjo-Iweala's statement at the beginning of this article, and in her endorsement on the back cover of Plan's *Report on the State of the World's Girls 2009*, that 'Investing in girls is the right thing to do. It is also the smart thing to do' (Plan, 2009).

Here one has to ask whether part of the 'smart' in this equation is about 'prevention' being cheaper than 'intervention', with investments made in women at an early age allowing them to take

care of themselves and their families without entailing further claims on the coffers of national states or international agencies. Indeed, within Plan's 2009 report itself there is reference to notions that girls are key to 'breaking the cycle of poverty for everyone', and that 'girls mean business', with acknowledgement of Nike Foundation 'findings' that specify very precisely (despite a continued and widely-lamented dearth of robust sex-disaggregated statistics) how much is lost to economic growth by constraining girls' development (see also Box 1).

The Nike Foundation's 'Girl Effect' has become something of an authoritative source on girls, which begs a slightly more detailed discussion of a venture that has possibly had the most impact on shaping the tenor of so-called 'Gender and Development' (GAD) policy towards girls in the past decade. I say 'so-called' because the female-only focus in contemporary initiatives for girls, especially those associated with the 'Smart Economics' ethos, does not, in my view, warrant the label 'Gender and Development' (GAD). The latter, in theory, calls for the inclusion of men and boys, and emphasises the importance of achieving transformations in gender roles and relations, even if in practice, 'gender' interventions continue to be more akin to those associated with 'Women in Development' (WID) which have traditionally targeted women in isolation (see Chant and Gutmann, 2000; Cornwall, 2007, 2014; Parpart, 2014; Parpart and Marchand, 1995). Indeed, it is tempting to ask whether despite the critical academically-driven rhetoric of GAD in the 1980s and 1990s, in policy circles this has amounted only to a slight detour from abiding WID approaches over the past four decades. <sup>11</sup>

### The 'Girl Effect'

As noted earlier, Nike Foundation's 'Girl Effect' mobilises support for investment in, and empowerment of, girls, often partnering on projects with NGOs in developing nations, and soliciting charitable contributions from across the world. A recent review of its donation website exhorts the (implicitly Global North) public to help 'build the futures of 100 Zimbabwean girls' through Nike's collaboration with the Zimkids Orphan Trust, to 'equip rural Kenyan girls to GET UP out of poverty' through Nike's allegiance with the Global Interfaith Partnership', and to address 'teen girls' health and empowerment in Uganda' in collaboration with the

Shanti Uganda society.<sup>12</sup> For relatively small amounts of money, private donors are offered options to invest in a diverse range of initiatives spanning from sanitary pads to education, training, self-defence and leadership, which will enable orphaned girls in Zimbabwe ('a dangerous place to grow up female'), to 'surmount the economic and social chaos and lead their community into a vibrant and just future'. In the context of Uganda, which allegedly has the highest rate of adolescent motherhood in the whole of sub-Saharan Africa, donations can help to 'reduce teen pregnancy, improve maternal health, and keep girls in school', as well as assist each girl to make her own re-usable menstrual pad, and learn about nutrition, reproductive health, female role models and 'healthy relationships'.

Aside from the general efficiency rationale for prioritising girls, in which their human rights seem to be rather a small part of the picture (Box 1), the slogans and iconography of the 'Girl Effect' posters, videos and website content are nothing other than confident about the prospective efficiency of 'empowered girls'. These are reflected in the headlines of the Nike Foundation revolution poster: 'The revolution will be led by a 12-year old girl' (see Koffman and Gill, 2013), and other 'buzzword phrases' such as 'girls are the most powerful force for change on the planet', 'change starts with one girl', 'invest in a girl and she will do the rest', and, in July 2014, the caption for the first East London 'Girl Effect Live' festival, 'power of girl', a groundbreaking event to 'celebrate girls' potential to stop poverty before it starts'. This raises the question of whether girls are effectively imbued with incredible (if not 'superhuman') power 'of stopping poverty before it starts', as if poverty through history owes to a simple lack of individual female agency, rather than deeply embedded inequitable structures and systems (see Grosser and Van Der Gaag, 2013:77).

## **BOX 1: WHY GIRLS?, ACCORDING TO GIRL HUB**

### **THE CASE FOR PRIORITISING GIRLS: STOP POVERTY BEFORE IT STARTS**

#### **IT'S A MATTER OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

'Putting girls at the centre 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... When girls grow up healthy, educated, safe and empowered, they emerge as adults better able to ensure their own success and well-being, and that of others'.

#### **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%. In Kenya that means national income could jump \$3.4 billion - almost 10% - 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'.

Source: Chant (2016a: 12, Box 1), adapted from

[http://www.girleffect.org/media/1160/declaration\\_high\\_res.pdf](http://www.girleffect.org/media/1160/declaration_high_res.pdf), accessed 23 Feb 2015)

Among the Girl Effect's numerous videos, the three most popularly viewed and cited are 'Investing in girls has the potential to save the world', 'The clock is ticking', and 'I dare you'. Grosser and Van Der Gaag (2013:76) identify that the first one, as of 2013, had more than 3 million hits, which is '...a number that any development agency would die for'. The messaging in the videos is very much that girls, if given a chance, will be more reliable supporters of household well-being, with the 'I dare you' video pointing out that girls who earn put 90% of their income into their families, whereas boys only manage 35% (Wilson, 2011:325). As Shain (2013:8) comments, radically divergent pathways lie in wait for the impoverished Third World girl:

'She gets a chance: she gets educated; she stays healthy; marries when she chooses; raises a family. As a result "she has

the opportunity to raise the standard of living for herself and her family"; None of this happens: she is illiterate; married off; is isolated; is pregnant; vulnerable to HIV. As a result "she and her family are stuck in a cycle of poverty" ' (see also Calkin, 2015a:661; Cobbett, 2014:313-14; Wilson, 2011:325-6).

Leading on from this, Shain (2013:3) stresses the paradoxical situation in which girls in poverty are depicted as vulnerable yet powerful, victims yet agents, constrained yet capable. This is echoed by Koffman and Gill (2013:88) who not only point up how girls in the South are simultaneously portrayed as 'victims of patriarchal culture' yet 'subjects of extraordinary potential' and 'entrepreneurial subjects in waiting', but also the irony that poverty itself 'can be celebrated for the entrepreneurial capacities it stimulates' (ibid.:90)

Clearly, an injection of donor assistance helps to more squarely situate girls in markets and to smooth the transition from 'victimhood' to 'victory', even if as Dyhouse (2014:253), notes historically, with particular reference to the UK: ' It is difficult to forge a political identity out of victimhood. Victims call for protection, and too much protection can easily begin to look like control' .

In the context of poor girls in the Global South, there is arguably a major form of control exerted by the fact that 'victimised' girls are nominally in need of wresting from the clutches of patriarchal customs and practices in their own countries, aided by their First World sisters and corporate saviours.

The appeal to enlist the support of girls in advanced economies is framed appositely in Koffman's and Gill's (2013:86) question as to whether the Girl Effect represents 'global sisterhood' or 'cultural imperialism'. Herein there are '...contrasting constructions of girls in the Global North or South as, respectively, empowered, postfeminist subjects and downtrodden victims of patriarchal values' (Koffman and Gill, 2013:85), with girls in the US framed as active, empowered, free agents who are:

'... invited to endorse feminism but only in relation to the South. They themselves are seen as being the most empowered, socially connected and educated girls in history. The need for change in

gender relations is entirely displaced onto the less fortunate “sisters” in the South. This is ... problematic in the colonial relation of rescue fantasy that it sets up in relation to the South, but it also does significant performative work in the North. In emphasising the postfeminist idea that “all battles have been won” (for privileged women in the Global North), it further underscores the move to individualistic discourses that disavow structural or systemic accounts of inequality’ (ibid.:98)

Indeed, although Dyhouse (2014:254-5) espouses the idea that, on balance, British girls are better-off today than they were at various points in the past, she is keen to remind us that this:

‘...is not to suggest that there aren’t still problems deriving from double standards and inequality... These inequalities constrain and distort the life chances of girls, particularly those from less privileged social backgrounds. The historian bent on taking the long view may discern clear signs of progress, but this is not in any way to surrender to complacency. For history also demonstrates the ever-present possibilities of backlash, reaction and new oppressive forces. Young women need feminism as much as ever, if they are to see their lives in context and to live them fully’.

On top of this, we have to remember that in our decidedly globalised age, geography is not necessarily a predictor of people’s circumstances. There is as much heterogeneity within the so-called developed as in so-called ‘developing’ regions, with considerable mobility of attitudes, perspectives and practices across borders. For example, in various parts of Europe young women originating from countries practising FGM/C may not be any less at risk than they would be in their own or their parents’ source areas.

### Girl Effect and Beyond

Similar, and arguably misguided, dichotomous stereotypes of ‘First World’ and ‘Third World’ girls are apparent in other initiatives spawned in the wake of the Girl Effect such as the UN Foundation’s ‘Girl Up’ campaign, which was launched in 2010, and again appeals to Global North girls to help their Global South counterparts, with the aim of

enabling them to be 'just like you' (i.e. 'free', 'wealthy', 'empowered'), which casts into the penumbra the question of major historical and contemporary differences and inequalities (Koffman and Gill, 2013: 92).

Such a transformation is also advertised as readily achievable, with one of the main ways in which 'empowered girls' in advanced economies are encouraged to aid their less fortunate Global South 'sisters' is through the purchase of iconographic merchandise which they are then exhorted to disseminate on social media platforms (see Box 2). This not only summons-up echoes of what Richey (2010:504) has described in the context of her work on 'Brand Aid' as consumption becoming the new 'mechanism for compassion' in the postmodern 'philanthrocapitalist' age (see also Richey and Ponte, 2011, and Cornwall, 2014), but also contributes to what Koffman et al (2015) have characterised as 'selfie humanitarianism' in which 'helping others is intimately connected to entrepreneurial projects of the self' (ibid.:158), and whereby the 'humanitarian gaze' is deflected from 'those in need and onto the individual donor' through 'entrepreneurial and narcissistic self-work' (ibid.).

**BOX 2: SELECTED CITATIONS FROM GIRL UP WEBSITE**

'Where there's a girl there's a way'

'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'

'Support Girl Up with style - buy a Girl Up tee or tote and fill your bag with a water bottle, pen, magnet and stickers!'

'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'.

Source: Koffman and Gill (2013:93-5)

Not only is there an issue with perpetuating essentialised binary stereotypes of Global North and Global South girls in which capacity for agency and leadership is defined fundamentally by geographical and class divisions, but also, as mentioned earlier, in positioning girls against

boys, who are largely omitted from the frame. While male exclusion possibly owes to an attempt to reverse historical inequalities in resource distribution, another factor is conceivably that girls might better serve the economic aims of contemporary global neoliberalism (Chant and Sweetman, 2012:524). As articulated by Koffman and Gill (2013:98):

'...women in the Global South are constructed as ideal neoliberal subjects, more "responsible" than their male counterparts and more "worthy" of investment... girls are the "unexpected solution" to "the world's problems" as the Girl Effect would have it, because they will buy a cow, not alcohol or cigarettes'

Clearly, in pursuing such a line, little may be done to unseat essentialising oppositional stereotypes of male "egoism" and "irresponsibility" versus female "altruism" and "self-sacrifice" (Chant and Sweetman, 2012: 524).

Aside from the arguably misplaced emphasis on essentialised female dispositions and agency, various scholars have also seen in the Girl Effect and its companion movements, a disturbing deflection of blame from state, as well as non-state actors -- most notably large-scale multinational companies -- who have arguably colluded in entrenching poverty in the Global South, and stripping away much of the social infrastructure necessary to alleviate unpaid – and largely female -- labour. Instead, through their ostensibly philanthropic gestures, corporates have managed to achieve a face-saving about-turn in which they are celebrated as the vanguard for saving the victims of their cumulative actions through the agency of girls liberated from anachronistic patriarchal cultures. As articulated, inter alia, by Hicel (2014:1356) in relation to the Girl Effect:

'Women and girls are made to bear the responsibility for bootstrapping themselves out of poverty that is caused in part by the very institutions that purport to save them (see also Calkin, 2015a:664; Cornwall, 2014:132; Koffman and Gill, 2013:90; Koffman et al, 2015:157; Roberts, 2015; Shain, 2013:2)

In light of the above, and returning to the question of who is benefiting most from 'Smart Economics' and attention to girls, I would contend that

'Smart Economics' is 'smartest' from the perspective of agencies concerned primarily with developmental efficiency, and for big players in the global economy, insofar as markets expand as they become ever more 'inclusive'. By contrast, whether 'Smart Economics' is equally 'smart' from feminist and grassroots perspectives, especially when considering the reliance of this approach on essentialising gender stereotypes and additional burdens imposed upon women and girls (e.g. Chant, 2008, 2016a; Molyneux, 2006,2007), is more of a moot point. Here I particularly emphasise the onus placed on girls and women to be responsible economic actors and altruistically give back to their families in ways that boys and men do not – or are not exhorted to do - to the same extent.

The recent groundswell of interest in girls seems to be primarily self-serving for corporates, providing a unique chance to demonstrate 'social responsibility' (despite murky past records of exploitation – Calkin, 2015a:664), while at the same time permitting the perpetuation of a 'business as usual' agenda whereby the downsides of aggressive capitalism are 'mopped-up' on the backs of girls' hard work and assumed sense of duty (Elias, 2013:163; Grosser and Van Der Gaag, 2013:81; Prügl and True, 2014:1155-6). In this light, it is little surprise that Roberts (2015:226) calls for:

'...renewed commitment to critical anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist feminist scholarship that disturbs the attempt to reduce gender equality to a simple, measurable, and profitable goal that can be achieved while failing to challenge corporate power and neoliberal capitalism'.

## CONCLUDING POINTS

Drawing on the classic work of Mohanty (1991), Roy (2010:69) points out how the construction of Third World women as 'victims' has segued over time to a newfound iconic status of 'indefatigable efficiency and altruism'. In the past ten to fifteen years, this increasingly popularised notion has extended rapidly and definitively to their younger counterparts, who are nominally not just capable of mediating poverty, but stopping it before it starts. This superficial reading of the causes of poverty and gendered injustice may not only lead to ineffective

solutions, but might also be counterproductive (Grosser and Van Der Gaag, 2013:83).

While it is no doubt important that girls retain their unprecedented visibility in development agendas, I believe it is vital that assurance of their freedoms and rights is not sacrificed on the altar of responsibilities. As it stands at present, there is a serious danger in functionalising the vulnerability and victimhood of Global South girls as a means to convert them into agentic entrepreneurs with a lifetime of contributions to alleviating their families' poverty ahead of them. As Wilson (2010: 301), among others, has argued:

'The construction of poor women as "rational economic agents" exercising choice is elaborated within the moral framework of neoliberalism which ascribes "responsibilities" to the poor as a condition for their enjoyment of "rights" '.

Leading on from this, we need to take care that girls' rights are not simply limited to rights to participate in global capitalist markets as workers, consumers, and clients for credit. The 'insane utilitarianism' described by Narayan (2010) (cited in Hickel, 2014:1362), whereby basic rights and dignities of girls and women are only justifiable if linked to corporate interest and economic outcomes should be displaced by the imperative that the human rights of women and girls are worthwhile goals in and of themselves. This, of course, is a major challenge, since as Hickel (2014:1365) levels, much of the misidentification of causes of underdevelopment 'in the face of obvious evidence is only possible because the narrative of individual freedom that lies at its heart carries such power'. In fact '..moving from kinship/patriarchy to individualism/markets simply replaces one type of crisis with another' (ibid.:1370).

Recognising that global economic and political forces are overwhelmingly responsible for poverty in Global South, such that concentrating on individual agents, without attention to structures, is unlikely to get us very far, we arguably need to continue to campaign for public as well as private investment. Market institutions may at some level be responsive or creative, and as Prügl and True (2014:1157), suggest, PPPs could lead to 'principled business and economic activity'

which might have beneficial impacts on gender equality and women's empowerment. By the same token private investment is also more likely to succumb to vicissitudes of fad and fashion not to mention the relentless logic of accumulation. Public investment, alternatively, arguably embodies more potential to be associated with enduring structures and greater accountability – at least in some contexts. Perhaps one way forward would be to levy more in the way of corporate taxation which could then be used by publically accountable institutions for the global good in South and North alike?

According to the 'Girl Declaration', which came about through consultation of 25 development organisations with 508 adolescent girls living in poverty in 14 countries, the goals the latter prioritised for the post-2015 SDG era were five-fold.

First was education for girls to enable them to participate fully in economic, social and cultural life. Second was health information and services to enable them, inter alia, to avoid teenage pregnancy, and which are geared to ending FGM. Third was safety, including freedom from violence and exploitation, and access to 'girl-friendly spaces'. Fourth was economic security, including access to financial literacy training and services, bank accounts and secure land tenure. Fifth was citizenship – including data on girls, legal identity, and receptivity to girls' voices. <sup>13</sup>

While I am fully supportive that girls themselves should be involved in determining priorities for the future, it is somewhat disappointing that all the suggestions in the Girl Declaration were female-focused, with no mention made, for example, of encouraging boys and men to share unpaid work. As cautioned by Grosser and Van Der Gaag (2013:79): 'Building a better world involves working with the relatively powerful as well as the less powerful'.

The tenor of the post-2015 'Girl Declaration' makes me wonder whether such consultations trade on solutions that are inculcated by the organisations which nominally support girls, but which do not necessarily encourage them to question current modes of development or educate them to be critical of, rather than compliant with, prejudicial gendered social and economic orders. In the spirit of the new altruism paraded by corporates, coupled with the essentialisms promulgated by 'Smart

Economics' approaches, making women and girls the repository of this morally, socially – and economically - important resource should surely not be confined to them alone? If the world is to change for better, including for young women, then more transparent and accessible accounts about the root causes of poverty and inequality need to be made available by powerful bodies such as the World Bank, and responsibilities for transformation shared by the institutions and individuals who perpetuate injustices on the basis of gender, class and geography.

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## NOTES

1. <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTGENDER/0,,contentMDK:22059153~menuPK:336906~pagePK:64020865~piPK:149114~theSitePK:336868,00.html> (last accessed 2 April 2016).

2. Maria Eitel (2012) 'You think you know me? It's all about the Day of the Girl' (<http://www.impatientoptimists.org/Posts/2012/10/You-Think-You-Know-Me-Its-All-About-the-DayoftheGirl>) (last accessed 2 April 2016).

3. Girl Effect (2011) *Smarter Economics: Investing in Girls* ([http://www.educategirls.in/pdf/GirlEffect\\_Smarter-Economics-Investing-in-Girls.pdf](http://www.educategirls.in/pdf/GirlEffect_Smarter-Economics-Investing-in-Girls.pdf)) (last accessed 2 April 2016).

4. The nine countries were Brazil, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Philippines, Cambodia, Vietnam, Benin, Togo and Uganda, although the

original cohort of 145 shrank over time due to the untimely deaths of a number of girls in the panel survey.

5. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/2014/08/14/3e08d0c8-2312-11e4-8593-da634b334390\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/2014/08/14/3e08d0c8-2312-11e4-8593-da634b334390_story.html) (last accessed 2 April 2016).
6. <https://www.developmentaid.org/#!/organizations/view/55637> (last accessed 2 April 2016)
7. <http://www.globalgiving.org/girleffect/learn-more> (last accessed 2 April 2016)
8. <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/girl-summit-2014>, (last accessed 2 April 2016)
9. The Gender Dividend: A Business Case for Gender Equality (UN Women, 2011) (<http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2011/12/the-gender-dividend-a-business-case-for-gender-equality#view>) (last accessed 2 April 2016).
10. <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/2/coca-cola-partnership> (last accessed 3 April 2016).
11. I am particularly grateful here to John Hansen-Brevetti and Adrienne Roberts for drawing attention to the disconnect between GAD rhetoric and 'business as usual' WID approaches.
12. <http://www.globalgiving.org/girleffect/learn-more> (last accessed 2 April 2016).
13. [http://www.girleffect.org/media/1160/declaration\\_high\\_res.pdf](http://www.girleffect.org/media/1160/declaration_high_res.pdf), (last accessed 3 April 2016)

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