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## Reading girls' participation in Girl Up as feminist: club members' activism in the UK, USA and Malawi

Rosie Walters

### ABSTRACT

The United Nations Foundation's Girl Up campaign has been criticised by many feminists for perpetuating patronising discourses that see girls and women in the Global North as the saviours of their counterparts in the South, while doing little to challenge underlying global inequalities. This article draws on focus group data with Girl Up club members in the UK, USA and Malawi, and explores how they are adapting the aims of the campaign to better fit their own vision of empowerment. From girls in New York attending women's marches together to girls in a township of Lilongwe marching to their friends' parents' houses to demand that they send their daughters to school, the girls have shown courage and creativity, their actions rejecting discourses of empowered Northern saviours and passive Southern girls in need of rescue. This article explores the agency with which girls negotiate discourses emerging from powerful international institutions, and puts forward the argument that these girls deserve recognition as feminist activists who are adapting campaigns, such as Girl Up, in order to challenge the many and complex injustices that they face in their own communities and globally.

### KEYWORDS

Girls; United Nations; girl power; activism; feminism

La campagne de la Fondation des Nations Unies *Girl Up* a été critiquée par de nombreuses féministes, qui l'accusent de perpétuer des discours condescendants présentant les filles et les femmes de l'hémisphère Nord comme capables de sauver leurs homologues de l'hémisphère Sud, sans faire grand-chose pour mettre en question les inégalités sous-jacentes. Cet article se base sur des données recueillies dans le cadre de groupes de réflexion avec des membres de clubs *Girl Up* au Royaume-Uni, aux États-Unis et au Malawi, et examine comment ils adaptent les buts de la campagne pour qu'ils correspondent mieux à leur propre vision de l'autonomisation. Des jeunes filles new-yorkaises prenant part, ensemble, aux marches des femmes, aux filles d'un township de Lilongwe qui se présentent chez les parents de leurs amis pour exiger d'eux qu'ils envoient leurs filles à l'école, les filles ont fait preuve de courage et de créativité, et leurs actions ont rejeté les discours évoquant les « sauveuses » autonomisées du Nord et les filles passives du Sud attendant d'être secourues. Cet article examine le libre-arbitre qui caractérise la manière dont les filles négocient les discours émanant d'institutions internationales puissantes, et avance l'argument selon lequel ces filles méritent d'être reconnues comme des activistes féministes qui adaptent des campagnes comme *Girl Up* pour lutter contre les injustices nombreuses et complexes auxquelles elles

**CONTACT** Rosie Walters  [rosie.walters@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:rosie.walters@bristol.ac.uk)

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sont confrontées au sein de leurs propres communautés et à l'échelle mondiale.

Muchas feministas han criticado la campaña de afiliación a los clubes Girl Up patrocinada por la Fundación de las Naciones Unidas, en tanto consideran que perpetúa discursos condescendientes según los cuales las adolescentes y las mujeres del Norte son las redentoras de sus contrapartes del Sur, además de que no cuestiona las desigualdades subyacentes a nivel mundial. El presente artículo da cuenta de datos recabados en grupos de enfoque realizados con integrantes de clubes Girl Up en el Reino Unido, Estados Unidos y Malawi. Al respecto, se constató que las adolescentes de Nueva York, que participaron en marchas de mujeres, y las jóvenes de un pueblo de Lilongüe, que marcharon hasta las casas de sus compañeras para exigir a sus padres que éstas ingresen a la escuela, mostraron valentía y creatividad. Sus acciones rechazaron los discursos centrados en las “salvadoras empoderadas del Norte” que llegan a rescatar a las “jóvenes pasivas del Sur”. En este sentido, el artículo examina la agencia con que estas jóvenes sortean los discursos de poderosas instituciones internacionales, y sostiene que las adolescentes merecen ser reconocidas como activistas feministas que moldean iniciativas como Girl Up, cuestionando las variadas y complejas injusticias que deben enfrentar en sus comunidades y a nivel mundial.

## Introduction

Girl Up is one of many schemes that has emerged in recent years with the aim of empowering girls in the Global South through formal schooling. Launched by the United Nations (UN) Foundation in 2010, Girl Up encourages girls in the Global North to set up clubs and fundraise for the education of the world's ‘hardest to reach girls’ in the Global South (Girl Up n.d. a). As then UN Foundation Executive Director Elizabeth McKee Gore explained at its launch, the purpose of the campaign is to ‘give girls in America an opportunity to become global leaders themselves, and then in the meantime be supporting their sisters overseas’ (Biddle 2010). The campaign only allowed girls in the USA to register clubs, although membership has since been opened to girls anywhere in the world with access to the internet. The resources on the website, however, remain targeted towards girls in the Global North, encouraging them to become the ‘sisters, saviours, and “BFFs”<sup>1</sup> of their Southern counterparts (Koffman *et al.* 2015, 161). Girl Up is typical of the many girl power campaigns that have emerged in recent years, in what Ofra Koffman and Rosalind Gill label the ‘girl powering of international development’ (2013, 86). There is a wealth of literature on this subject, although, to date, it has largely focused on analysing girl power discourses and has had little to say on the possibility that girls might be subverting or resisting them.

The Girl Up campaign has been criticised by feminist scholars and activists for perpetuating patronising discourses that see women and girls in the Global South as awaiting rescue by the North. Criticisms include the following key points. The campaign encourages girls in the North to see gender inequality as something that only happens elsewhere, and that can be solved through fundraising. It encourages girls to take individual

responsibility for solving issues such as universal access to education and ending child marriage, which the international community itself has so far failed to solve. Finally, with their claims that girls work harder, take on greater domestic responsibilities, and invest more of their income in their families and communities, campaigns such as Girl Up advocate investing in girls in the Global South not because they have an equal right to such investment as boys, but because of the promise that they will help to achieve other development outcomes. These criticisms are discussed and referenced in the next section.

Despite this evidence of intense interest in Girl Up and similar initiatives, much of which is critical, one element has not been researched. This is girls' own participation in Girl Up clubs, and the extent to which participation may be experienced by girls as empowering, enabling them to challenge constraints on their agency and further their own goals. In this article, I draw on my recent fieldwork with club members in the UK, USA and Malawi to argue that girls' participation in the campaign constitutes a form of feminist activism.

Girls' participation in politics has frequently been overlooked by campaigning organisations, the media, academia, and girls themselves, despite research showing that girls are 'equally (if not more) civically minded and politically oriented than their male counterparts' (Bent 2013, 174). Jessica Taft, drawing on her work with girl activists, argues that if feminist scholars are to embrace fully the mantra that 'the personal is political', then those studying girls' activism need to acknowledge all forms of girls' political participation. These include, for example:

Online blogging that challenges the sexualisation of girls, resisting and confronting a domineering boyfriend, father, or brother, everyday practices of interaction across differences in a public park, mentoring other girls, media-making, participation in human rights organisations, and social movement activism. (2014, 263)

In this article I show that the girls in my research were engaged in activities of this kind in every setting I visited, even when they did not match official Girl Up activities. Members adapted the campaign with creativity and agency, fitting it to their own vision of what is empowering for girls.

In the following sections, I review the current literature on girl power campaigns in international development, before introducing Girl Up, its position within the UN Foundation, and the construction of Northern and Southern girlhood in its promotional materials. I then outline my research design for this study. In the second half of the article, I discuss my findings, showing how girls frequently rejected or ignored the official purpose of Girl Up, and instead engaged in a range of activities that would come under Jessica Taft's broader interpretation of girls' activism. Many of these activities also rejected Girl Up's model of Northern girl-saviour and Southern passive victim. Finally, I note that, in every setting, girls experienced and resisted stigma, and even bullying, for participating in Girl Up clubs and for championing girls' rights and feminism. I conclude that these girls are feminist activists, whose work in challenging discrimination in their own communities and more broadly deserves recognition both from feminist scholars and from organisations such as Girl Up.



## The 'girl-powering' of international development

Since the Nike Foundation launched its campaign, The Girl Effect, in the mid-2000s, with the aim of persuading key decision-makers in international development of the benefits of investing in adolescent girls, a process has followed that Ofra Koffman and Rosalind Gill have labelled the 'girl-powering of international development' (2013, 86). Campaigns such as The Girl Effect and Girl Up have created 'feel-good' advertisements and viral videos, claiming that when a girl in the Global South receives an education she marries later, has fewer, healthier children, earns more income, and invests more of that income in her family and community than a boy would do. It is a logic that is epitomised by the tagline to one of The Girl Effect's first promotional videos: 'Invest in a girl and she will do the rest' (Girl Effect, n.d.). This logic has been embraced by transnational corporations, international institutions, and celebrities alike. At its core is a targeting of girls, both as Northern donors and as Southern recipients of international aid.

Feminists' critiques of this logic can be grouped around two main themes, the first of which is the simplistic and individualistic solution to complex problems that it advocates. For many it is a continuation of previous instrumentalist approaches to gender in development, which see the rights of women and girls in the Global South not as a goal in and of themselves, but rather as a means to achieving other development outcomes. As Janet Momsen (2004, 14) argues, these are approaches that question 'what women could do for development rather than what development could do for women'. Investing in women and girls becomes a way of facilitating 'development on the cheap' (Chant and Sweetman 2012, 521). Campaigns such as these resonate strongly with neoliberal discourses that have taken the feminist concept of empowerment and 'economised' it (Shain 2013, 5), reducing calls for gender justice to campaigns focused almost entirely on providing education as a means to gaining work-based skills (Khoja-Moolji 2015). Where alternatives to girls' education are proposed, they are criticised for being based on an individualistic, neoliberal view that all that is needed to achieve gender equality is to provide a girl in the Global South with a loan to buy a cow (as in Girl Effect n.d.) or a sewing machine (as in Girl Up 2010), thus placing the responsibility to lift herself out of poverty firmly on the shoulders of an adolescent girl (Hickel 2014, 1356).

Such solutions do seem very simplistic and reductive. It is difficult to imagine any organisation advocating the provision of a sewing machine as a solution to a girl's struggle with poverty, lack of education, and/or risk of sexual exploitation in the Global North. Furthermore, the assertion that a school education or a loan to buy a cow is enough to unleash the incredible potential of the Southern girl ignores the complexity of the injustices faced by girls everywhere and the socioeconomic factors that mean they might not overcome them.

The second criticism of campaigns such as The Girl Effect and Girl Up focuses on the way these construct the Global North as a well-meaning benefactor of the Global South. In Girl Up, Northern girls are encouraged to see themselves as always already empowered, with nothing holding them back. In contrast, the Southern girl is seen as constrained by outdated gender norms that only intervention from the Global North will help to

break down. The construction of the Northern girl as an individual with agency is dependent on the construction of the Southern girl as victim. It is typical of a representational trend in development campaigns, in which, as the author Uzodinma Iweala argues, ‘Africans are the props in the West’s fantasy of itself’ (cited in Cameron and Haanstra 2008, 1482). This depiction leaves no space for girls in the Global South to claim agency in their own lives, nor for girls in the Global North to be the victims of patriarchal norms.

The construction of benevolent Northern saviours also serves to mask the inequalities within the global economy that disadvantage Southern economies. This is perhaps most evident in the sponsorship of such campaigns by transnational corporations whose business activities in the Global South are at times extractive or harmful. Examples include the Nike Foundation’s central role in *The Girl Effect*, despite previous claims of child labour at sweatshops producing Nike clothes in the Global South (Calkin 2015, 664), and the partnership between Girl Up and Caterpillar, whose selling of military construction equipment to the Israeli Defence Forces in the occupied Palestinian territories was criticised in 2012 by the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights as violating international human rights and humanitarian law (United Nations 2012). It is deeply problematic that corporations such as these use partnerships in girls’ education projects in the Global South to position themselves as benevolent investors in Southern girls and their communities.

In summary, then, campaigns such as *The Girl Effect* and Girl Up are criticised for being based on a logic that ‘works to explicitly racialise, depoliticise, ahistoricise, and naturalise global structural inequities and legitimise neoliberal interventions in the name of girls’ empowerment’ (Switzer 2013, 347).

### **Girl Up and the construction of ‘oppositional girlhoods’**

The UN Foundation was launched in 1997 with a billion-dollar donation by CNN founder Robert Edward ‘Ted’ Turner. The donation came at a time when the UN was grappling with a budgetary deficit of US\$272 million, exacerbated by the USA’s refusal to pay its membership dues (Williams 1999, 430). Ted Turner’s donation was intended to send a clear message to President Bill Clinton in support of the work of the UN. Its priority from the outset was to raise money towards, and build public support for, the work of UN agencies. The Foundation’s first President, Tim Wirth, described a crucial part of its work as being ‘telling the [UN] story to Americans’ (*ibid.*, 428).

From the outset, one of the policy areas central to the work of the Foundation has been adolescent girls’ access to education and reproductive health services, both of which are particular passions of Ted Turner and his then wife, Jane Fonda (Toepler and Mard 2007). It is within this context that the Foundation launched Girl Up in 2010, which encouraged girls in the USA to raise money for UN agencies’ girls’ education projects in the Global South. Girl Up now claims to be a ‘community’ of ‘more than 1,900 clubs registered in 48 US states and territories and 98 countries’ (Girl Up n.d. b). However, a brief survey of the map of Girl Up clubs on the website reveals that they are still heavily concentrated in North America (Girl Up n.d. c) and to date, none of the website’s resources appear to have been translated into any language other than English.

This North American focus is especially evident in the promotional materials available on the Girl Up website, some of which have not been updated since 2010 and are thus aimed at girls in the USA. One promotional video, entitled 'Connecting the Dots' (Girl Up 2010), is exemplary of the discourse that Emily Bent and Heather Switzer (2016, 123) identify as 'oppositional girlhoods', in which 'global girlpower discourses reduce the intersectional complexity of girls' lives into opposing representations that reinforce artificial, neo-colonial divides between and among girlhoods'. As suggested earlier, this is a discourse that positions Northern and Southern girlhoods as completely opposed to one another: girlhood in the North is characterised by supposed gender equality and opportunity, while girlhood in the Global South is characterised by oppression and constraint.

In 'Connecting the Dots', a black and white animation shows a girl in jeans and a t-shirt, with her hair tied back, while a voiceover actor with a US accent asks the viewer to imagine that she is 12 again. We are told that her life will play out as follows: getting 'decent grades', making 'good decisions about boys', studying at college and finding work, buying shoes, falling in love, and planning for the future (Girl Up 2010). As the girl gets a job, a pile of bank notes increases in size and then morphs into a sparkling pair of shoes. Her future love holds the hand of her adult self, while thought bubbles from them both are united in an image of a swaddled baby.

The narrator then asks us to rewind. A globe spins around the girl, and the viewer is asked to imagine that, instead, she is 'one of the eighty-five percent of all the world's adolescent girls with a lot fewer options' (Girl Up 2010). Her jeans become a full-length skirt, her long hair falls loosely and, as she sweeps the floor, a school building in the bottom corner of the screen disappears from view. We are told that the Southern girl will be forced to marry at 13, will contract HIV from her unfaithful husband (who appears to be much older than her), and will have four children by the age of 20. The girl is left alone in darkness.

As the video zooms out, we see that she is one black dot on a map in which the Global South has been covered in black dots, and the narrator asks us to 'multiply' that story 'by the six hundred million adolescent girls in developing countries' (Girl Up 2010). As a coin spins in the air, the video tells the viewer, 'when you connect the dots, you start to improve the options for girls around the world' (*ibid.*). It rewinds once more to see that, as a result of that coin, the girl attends a school with a UN flag flying, she has access to health care, a loan to start a business (represented by a sewing machine), and she therefore creates 'a better future for herself, her family, her community and her world' (*ibid.*). The video tells the viewer that she can make this change happen by clicking on the Girl Up website, and demands to know, 'what are you waiting for?' (*ibid.*).

In just under two minutes, 'Connecting the Dots' establishes girlhood in the Global North as characterised by success, opportunity, delayed childrearing, and consumption, while it establishes girlhood in the Global South as characterised by poverty, disease, and early marriage. It makes a sweeping claim about hundreds of millions of girls, reducing a map of the world to countries covered in black dots and those left white: countries where girls wear jeans and buy shoes, go to school and have careers; and those where girls



wear long skirts and live in poverty, are married and in poor health. It proposes a solution to poverty and abuse – a sewing machine representing self-sufficiency – that would never be deemed appropriate for a young girl in the Global North. And it sets up the supposedly empowered Northern girl as the saviour-in-waiting of her passive, victimised Southern counterpart.

However, while this video may be exemplary of neoliberal, individualistic discourses of girls' empowerment and patronising assumptions about North–South relations, what it cannot tell us is whether Girl Up members themselves subscribe to this logic and reproduce these patronising discourses. Alternatively, are they able to use their membership in ways that enable personal goals to be met and do they therefore experience their participation as positive, maybe even empowering? This is something that has yet to be explored in the literature on this topic, and to which the rest of this article is dedicated.

### Research design and methodology

The findings in this paper are drawn from a wider study analysing girls' participation in Girl Up. My theoretical approach is poststructuralist, feminist, and postcolonial, an approach that 'recognises that global inequalities that are gendered and racialised remain entrenched' (Koffman and Gill 2013, 85). As discussed above, while much has been written about girl power discourses in international development, little has been done to analyse how girls themselves negotiate these discourses. With this aim, I conducted fieldwork in 2016 and 2017 with Girl Up club members in schools in the UK, USA and Malawi. The schools were as follows: a state-funded secondary school and sixth-form centre in North Wales; a state-funded, selective high school in New Jersey; a Catholic, fee-paying (approximately US\$15,000 per year) school in New York; a fee-paying (approximately US\$40,000 per year) high school in New York; a fee-paying (between US\$13,000 and 20,000 per year depending on parents' tax status) international school in Lilongwe; and a fee-paying school (approximately US\$20 per term) in Lilongwe. The latter school, while fee-paying, was being run at cost price by the two directors in order to give as many children as possible from the surrounding townships an education, and was cheaper than the local government-run secondary school.

The fieldwork sites were chosen to include girls on both sides of the discursive divide between the Global North and South established in Girl Up resources. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) currently ranks Malawi as 170th in the world in its Human Development Index and estimates that a girl in Malawi will spend an average of just 3.8 years in school (compared to 5 years for a boy) (UNDP *n.d. a*). This, coupled with the fact that Malawi is one of six countries that funds raised for Girl Up go towards, places it firmly within the Global South in this divide. By contrast, the UK ranks 16th in the world on the same index, and the USA 10th, and in both countries girls can expect a slightly higher number of years of education on average than boys (16.7 compared to 15.9 in the UK, and 17.3 compared to 15.8 in the USA) (UNDP *n.d. b*; UNDP *n.d. c*). This places both countries firmly in the Global North in this discursive divide, both in terms of development and of girls' educational opportunities.

I conducted focus groups with each Girl Up club. The focus group method is well suited to poststructuralist research because it opens a ‘window into the formation, contestation, and negotiation of ideas, understandings, and claims’ (Jowett and O’Toole 2006, 464). It is an excellent way to generate public discourses about a topic. The focus on participants’ identity as relational and constructed within a group setting, rather than as an isolated individual, and the ability of the group to steer the conversation towards topics that are of interest and importance to them also make the focus group method well suited to feminist research (Wilkinson 1999, 70; 1998, 112).

In total, 95 girls participated in 29 focus groups across the six schools. Focus groups typically lasted between 45 minutes and an hour, and groups ranged from two to eight in size, with most groups consisting of around five girls. The focus groups were arranged by contacting teachers at schools with a Girl Up club, and they then took place within the school. In three of the schools (in the UK, New Jersey and the township school in Lilongwe), I worked with each group twice, but in the other three schools I only met with each group once. The participating girls were all of secondary school age, ranging from 11 to 18 years old, except in the school in a township of Lilongwe, where a small number of participants were adult women in their early 20s, who had returned to complete their education after having children.

I sorted the transcripts using the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, coding to various tropes identified from the literature on girl power campaigns in international development. I then identified concepts emerging from the data, in the girls’ own words, and conducted a second round of coding according to these. Once this was complete, I began an in-depth analysis of the extracts within each conceptual code, to assess whether they reproduced, adapted, or rejected outright the dominant discourses about girlhood in international development. Over the next four sections, I analyse the girls’ participation in Girl Up, describing the many activities they engaged in that meet Jessica Taft’s broader definition of girls’ political activism.

### **Girls’ rejection of the primary purpose of Girl Up as a fundraising campaign**

Although the main purpose of Girl Up is to fundraise for UN agency projects with girls in the Global South, very few Girl Up members I spoke to were doing activities of this kind. The Girl Up ‘Club Starter Guide’ states that clubs’ activities must be ‘aligned with Girl Up’s mission and directly benefit the UN programs Girl Up supports’ (Girl Up n.d. d, 3). According to the guide, girls registering clubs commit to the following responsibilities: hosting at least five Girl Up activities each year; reporting on their activity each term; recruiting new members; participating in the ‘community’ section of the Girl Up website; and undertaking fundraising activities (*ibid.*, 4). Of the six schools I visited during my fieldwork, just two – the UK school and one of the schools in New York – had held fundraising events with the intention of sending the money raised to Girl Up.

In the school in New Jersey, the girls agreed with the idea of running fundraising events; however, they had been unable to host any so far because of school policies. As Madison, one of the girls, explained:

We come up with ideas but to actually get them approved is a really difficult process ... our administration is just very, very strict. (Focus group, New Jersey, 28 March 2017)

Two rules that the girls felt had been of particular nuisance were the rule that prevented them from organising a charity cake sale, because that was deemed to be competing with the private catering company that ran the high school canteen, and the rule that to hold any event in the evening they would need to hire a security guard, which was beyond the club's budget. Instead, they focused on hosting awareness-raising events and on events linked to women's charities in their own community, as discussed below.

In two schools, the girls overtly ignored the Girl Up fundraising commitment. In the Catholic school in New York, the girls had previously had a women's empowerment club that met regularly to hold discussions about gender inequality in the USA and around the world. They decided to register it with Girl Up because they felt this would give more structure to their club; however, they had not changed their activities in any way. They felt that being part of Girl Up gave them access to resources on the website, ideas and topics for their discussions, and the ability to recruit more members by offering them the opportunity to be involved in an international movement. When I asked them what the main purpose of their club was, Nicola, one of the girls, replied, 'just talking about certain issues that we may not have known about or going into deeper understanding of what's going on in the world around us' (focus group, New York, 10 April 2017).

Similarly, in the international school in Lilongwe, where two girls had just decided to start a club, the girls did not feel that fundraising was the primary focus of Girl Up. They told me that the campaign appealed to them precisely because they felt it was different to the other extracurricular clubs on offer in their school. As one girl, Ahadi, explained, 'I want something that's like more personal, 'cos with the clubs here it's like fundraise [and] donate' (focus group, Lilongwe, 27 February 2017). These girls eventually made contact with the other Girl Up club in Lilongwe, at the school in a township, and established a long-term partnership with the girls there. They had interpreted the campaign to be about connecting girls in different settings and saw it as a welcome change from all the other fundraising clubs on offer in their school.

Finally, although the girls in the township of Lilongwe were hosting fundraising events, they used the money to fund scholarships for girls in their school. This was the decision of the school director who had registered the club. He explained that if they sent that money to the UN Foundation they would never see it again, yet girls at the school were dropping out every term because their parents could not afford fees or wanted them to marry. During a focus group with some of the girls, including the club president, Olivia, I asked them if they thought it was a good decision. A section of the transcript is shown below.

Olivia: Mm, somehow no, somehow yes, no because when we register our Girl Up club, we register to United Nation Foundation that mean every decision that United Nations made we, we should do that decision with they want, they say half million per year,<sup>2</sup> we are supposed to give that money because we are on that foundation.

RW: Mm mm.

- Olivia: So I feel like, somehow it's good to donate our fundraising money to the United Nation, but, no because here in Malawi we have a lot of challenges.
- RW: Mm.
- Olivia: Because Malawi it's a, a poverty country, so, (laughs) so, ah, it's difficult to take money from here and deliver to the United Nation but we support just to give those girls who are not able to go to school because of school fees maybe school (inaudible) uniforms, school bag, boots, so it's better just to put those things to build those who are in need here.
- Aisha: Ah.
- Olivia: I know. (Focus group, Lilongwe, 1 March 2017).<sup>3</sup>

For Olivia, my question posed a moral dilemma, clearly one that she had reflected on long and hard. She hesitated frequently and laughed nervously during this conversation, interrupting her own stream of thought with 'ah it's difficult', suggesting a real dislike of disregarding the rules of Girl Up. Yet she eventually concluded that this course of action is 'better'. Although it is unclear what Aisha meant by 'ah', which she said with a shake of her head, I interpreted it to mean that she too was struggling with the ethics of the situation. Perhaps Olivia's response of 'I know' was intended to reassure her that as club president, she was not taking this decision lightly. Rebelling against the UN Foundation's campaign was not something these girls enjoyed; however, the official purpose of the campaign did not allow space for activism by girls like them.

For girls living in the townships of Lilongwe, who are struggling to find the money to attend school, accepting Girl Up discourses would mean not having a club at all, but rather waiting around for the UN to use the funds raised by girls in the Global North to start funding girls' education in their area. Instead, they took action themselves, and in doing so had to deviate from the official purpose of Girl Up. Interestingly, when I told the girls in the other schools what this group were doing, they expressed nothing but admiration and awe for them, and wholeheartedly supported this decision.

While the Girl Up materials for clubs make it clear that fundraising for the UN Foundation is an essential part of Girl Up membership, for the girls participating in this study this was interpreted as a negotiable or optional part of the campaign. As the following section outlines, they came up with many other creative and interesting activities, many of which had a distinctly feminist and political orientation.

### **Girl Up clubs' engagement with feminist issues**

For most of the girls, the main purpose of a Girl Up club seemed to be about giving each other support and encouragement, discussing the challenges they were facing, and debating issues relating to women's rights. At the Catholic school in New York, the girls organised discussion events about issues such as the gender pay gap, sexual harassment, and intersectional feminism. Their most recent meeting had included a discussion on the stereotypes faced by Muslim women in the USA. One of the girls, Gabriella, explained that Girl Up was a place to 'vent' with like-minded people:

Here like people can kind of understand you 'cos they were like fighting for the same thing or they understood the same thing. (Focus group, New York, 10 April 2017)

Similarly, Chloe, the club president in the UK, felt strongly that she wanted Girl Up club to be a place where girls could support each other:

I know that this goes like outside of what the UN want us to do but I kind of wanna make it like a ... I guess safe space, like anyone can come from like lower school if they need help with anything, 'cos I know being like a kid in high school is really scary. (Focus group, North Wales, 27 September 2016)

For her, this is an important focus of the club, even though she knows full well that it is not a priority of the campaign.

In New Jersey, as well as hosting awareness-raising events, the girls also organised a collection of sanitary products for a local women's shelter. They placed posters in school lavatories to inform their peers that these items were not included in food stamps and were still taxed as luxuries. They collected donations of hundreds of products and delivered them to the shelter. In both the USA and the UK, the girls spoke of the many gender inequalities they had experienced themselves or that they were aware of in their communities. Contrary to the depiction of the Northern girl as always already empowered in Girl Up materials, these club members made it an explicit aim of their clubs to tackle gender inequality in the Global North.

In the township in Lilongwe, the girls were helping each other in practical ways that did not match the Girl Up depiction of the Southern girl either. As well as holding meetings for debates and discussion, they performed songs, dances, and role-plays exploring how girls could stand up for themselves if, for example, their parents or husband should threaten to take them out of school. The support did not stop there though. If a girl should stand up to her parents or husband to no avail, the club members would go to their house and try to persuade them themselves:

Mayamiko: And we will teach the person we will teach the husband you.

Chikondi: Husband.

Mayamiko: Have not do good thing, have married a young girl and can you see there are so many problems here, this one must go to school.

Fatsani: For the future. (Focus group, Lilongwe, 9 February 2017)

While the depiction of the Southern girl in Girl Up resources such as 'Connecting the Dots' is of a victim, alone and awaiting rescue, these girls' depiction of Southern girlhood is of girls uniting to challenge domineering husbands or parents. They also helped each other to overcome cultural taboos and to be informed about important issues for girls, such as caring for the body during menstruation. One of the girls, Janet, explained that 'sometimes we miss school as girls ... we feel some pain', but this was changing because 'now in this girl club we teach each other that yeah, you need to do that, do this and you have pain-killer' (focus group, Lilongwe, 2 March 2017).

The girls' school had no access to running water, with only four pit latrines for 200 staff and students, only two of which had closing doors. Research suggests that a lack of access to running water, along with the physical symptoms of menstruation, including pain and diarrhoea, and a lack of information about menstruation all contribute to girls' absenteeism in Malawi (Grant *et al.* 2013, 263–4). While many of these factors



were out of their control, the girls used their Girl Up club as an opportunity to change the one element they could control: how informed they were about managing their symptoms and taking care of their bodies. Once again, they used initiative and creativity to help themselves and support other girls, and to challenge gender inequalities in their own communities.

### **Girl Up members' political activism**

Some of the Girl Up clubs took more overt political action, even though few of the groups said they would describe Girl Up as a political movement. Chloe, the UK club president, complained that women's participation in politics was still treated as a 'joke' in her school, and said that one of her aims for the club was to 'make the school sort of like more used to like girls doing stuff in politics' (focus group, North Wales, 27 September 2017). As well as writing to their congressman's office about why they felt that tampons should not be taxed as a luxury item, the girls in New Jersey also hosted a 'forum' for anyone from the school who wanted to come and discuss the results of the 2016 US presidential election. The girls in the township of Lilongwe told me of their plans to speak to village chiefs about the need to enforce the recently introduced law making it illegal for girls to marry below the age of 18 in Malawi, and they talked of wanting to 'reach the government with our manifestos' (focus group, Lilongwe, 6 March 2017).

Some of the girls in New York participated in the women's marches that followed Donald Trump's election as US president. This was something they wanted to do together as a club, but like the girls in New Jersey, they had found that school rules about trips, as well as a limited budget, had restricted their activities.

Nicola: Well I was gonna go anyway and then in Girl Up we started talking about trying to get like a bus down or something like that, but it kind our plans kind of fell through, so I went kinda separately like, with all the things I've learned in Girl Up just in the back of my head.

Gabriella: Yeah.

Nicola: It was amazing.

Lucia: It was awesome.

Gabriella: It was like such a great experience 'cos like I'd never like done something like that before, like I'd never been as, I think like Girl Up really gave me an opportunity to be educated about this. (Focus group, New York, 10 April 2017)

Here, Nicola and Gabriella both implied that they might not have attended a march if it were not for 'all the things I've learned in Girl Up', or the 'opportunity' that Girl Up gave them to become educated about feminism. Nicola and Lucia's proclamations of 'it was amazing' and 'it was awesome' suggest that this was an extremely positive experience and one they might repeat in future. The girls in the UK were similarly inspired by participating in Girl Up to attend feminist demonstrations, although they had been unable to organise travelling to any of the women's marches. They told me, however, that they were resolved to find a way to get to the next one.

## Girls resisting hostility to Girl Up

It is worth noting that in every fieldwork setting the girls experienced stigma and even bullying for their decision to attend their Girl Up club. In the UK, the girls talked about family members who did not understand the need for a women's rights club in 2017 and who mocked them for attending. When these girls gave an assembly to younger students about girls' rights, speaking to an audience of over 100 of their peers, some of the male teachers at the school did not support their efforts. One of the girls, Rhiannon, explained:

I think also male teachers are also the issue ... if they're on the sides and sat there just like ... sniggering and not taking it seriously then they're just, all the kids are gonna think it's OK to laugh at it. (Focus group, North Wales, 24 January 2017)

Despite the feeling that they were not being supported by their own teachers, the girls continued with their awareness-raising efforts, eventually speaking to every single member of their school through talks and assemblies.

In every school participating in the research, girls talked about negative attitudes from their peers towards Girl Up. This mostly came from boys, although the girls also spoke of their disappointment that it sometimes came from girls too. The most common complaint was that there was no 'boy up' club, or that the money raised was only going to girls' education projects, which the boys claimed was discriminatory. Some boys did not even draw on the language of equality and discrimination to express their negative views about Girl Up; some were more overtly misogynistic. For example, the girls in the township of Lilongwe told me that boys mocked them for attending a club that encouraged them to dream of achieving their goals. One of the girls, Ethel, explained that

... sometimes boys always saying that you are just wasting your time because in future you will be a wife. (Focus group, Lilongwe, 16 February 2017)

When I asked how they felt about this, Aisha, another of the girls, told me, 'we don't care 'cos we're empowered'.

In this climate of hostility towards feminism and girls' rights activism, Hailey, one of the girls in New Jersey, even hinted that the decision to register with Girl Up was a strategic one:

Being affiliated with the UN and like, helping like girls in other countries like makes it kind of like, appear less like radical like, I like I don't think like a simply like women's empowerment or feminist club like would've been as popular. (Focus group, New Jersey, 18 April 2017)

While she was keen to stress that this was not why the girls had registered the club, Hailey's comments show a critical assessment of girls' rights discourses. While they were not actually engaged in fundraising, and were instead hosting politically themed events and organising collections for local women's charities, Hailey is aware that being affiliated with a fundraising campaign for girls' education in countries in Africa appears less 'radical' than tackling inequality in the USA. This shows an awareness that discourses of rescuing the Southern girl would resonate more strongly with their Northern peers than claims of enduring inequalities in their own context. Whilst their decision to register as a Girl Up club reproduces these discourses of rescue, the girls also subvert them by using

them strategically in order to facilitate their activism within their own community. Participation in Girl Up, then, for one club, represented a way of dealing with stigma and hostility, and enabling members to carry out the local activism they were so passionate about.

### Conclusions and final thoughts

The girls participating in this research are feminist activists, whose activism aims not only to challenge sexism in their own schools and communities, but also to take their demands for girls' rights to political fora. They encouraged their classmates to be more engaged in politics and feminism, and they continued to do so despite experiencing mockery and stigma from schoolmates, families, and even teachers. Their activities included political debates, confronting domineering boys, parents and teachers, mentoring younger girls, and participating in political demonstrations. They were engaged in almost all of the formal and informal activities identified by Jessica Taft, which deserve to be recognised as activism (2014, 263). Although they were limited by restrictions imposed upon them because of their age, including school rules and financial constraints, these girls should not be seen as activists 'in progress' (Taft 2017, 29). Rather, they are activists now, and their clubs have reached thousands of members of their communities with information about girls' rights, with support to girls experiencing discrimination and with calls to action.

Furthermore, my findings suggest that girls negotiate affiliation with a powerful international institution with creativity and agency. They rarely reproduced powerful discourses about girl power in international development uncritically, frequently adapted them to their own contexts and experiences, and sometimes rejected them outright. The girls in the Global North did not see themselves as living in gender-equal societies, while those in the South were not waiting for anyone to rescue them. They all rejected an individualistic model of empowerment, instead using their clubs to support one another and act together to overcome oppression.

Returning to Heather Switzer's argument, the logic of campaigns such as The Girl Effect and Girl Up 'works to explicitly racialise, depoliticise, ahistoricise, and naturalise global structural inequities and legitimise neoliberal interventions in the name of girls' empowerment' (Switzer 2013, 347). However, the Girl Up members in this study organised discussions on intersectional feminism, attended political rallies, and showed an awareness of global power structures that mean that a club purporting to send girls in Africa to school comes across as less 'radical' than one demanding, for example, the scrapping of luxury tax status on tampons in the USA. The findings suggest a need for research to explore further how girls and women demonstrate agency in relation to neoliberal and instrumentalist discourses in international development. To identify that such discourses exist is to tell only half of the story.

These findings can also tell us a great deal about the kinds of activism in which girls would like to participate. The girls told me that they joined Girl Up because they wanted the structure and resources that a UN Foundation initiative could provide, because they felt the UN Foundation name would make their feminism more palatable to their peers in school, because they wanted to set up meaningful connections with girls in different

contexts to their own, or because they wanted to feel part of an international movement and, as Chloe, the UK club president, said, ‘I don’t think we’d have the opportunity otherwise’. Girls under 18 may be excluded from voting or from meaningful participation in formal political structures in all three of these countries; however, these girls longed for ways to undertake their own forms of activism. They saw Girl Up as one way to do so, even if they did not always undertake the kinds of activities advocated by the campaign.

If international organisations want to mobilise a ‘community’ of girls to make change, then the findings of this study suggest they could start by consulting girls in different contexts about what they see as empowering for girls and taking them and their political views seriously. In doing so, they will not only fill a gap left by girls’ marginalisation from formal political structures, they will also be able to harness the huge amount of creativity, passion, and courage these girls show in tackling sexism. They are already making changes in their own communities and as part of global initiatives and protests, yet they face many challenges because of their age, the restrictions placed on them by institutions such as schools, and hostility and stigma. They are eager to be part of a feminist community that supports them to overcome these challenges and to take their activism further.

## Notes

1. ‘Best Friends Forever’.
2. Half a million Malawian Kwacha, approximately US\$700.
3. All names used are pseudonyms.

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## Notes on contributor

*Rosie Walters* is a postgraduate researcher at the University of Bristol’s School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies. Postal address: School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol, 11 Priory Road, Bristol BS8 1TU, UK. Email: rosie.walters@bristol.ac.uk

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