



# The girl powering of global politics

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## Abstract

Recent years have seen unprecedented interest in girls' activism, and yet our understanding of their politics is still limited. More broadly, children have largely been absent from International Relations scholarship, despite the centrality of childhood and our understandings of it to global politics. Where they have featured, it is often as victims of phenomena beyond their control, or as the perpetrators of crimes, but rarely as active subjects able to influence politics for the better. In this article, I review the emerging literature that aims to conceptualise girls' agency in global politics. I show the parallels between recent work in Girlhood Studies and in feminist and postcolonial IR, in exploring the potential for feminist activism within and against neoliberalism. Finally, I outline how a 'transnational girlhoods' approach might enable feminist scholars to explore how girls across a range of different contexts are challenging inequalities

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## Introduction

In recent years, girls' activism, and a small number of girl activists in particular, have risen to global prominence. From Malala Yousafzai addressing the United Nations, to Greta Thunberg mobilising millions of her peers to demand action on climate change, to Iranian and Afghan girls standing up for their basic rights, girls are at the centre of global movements for indigenous rights, climate justice, gender equality, civil rights and many more causes besides. Girls have historically been excluded from formal politics because of both their age and their gender, perceived as not interested in, or not capable of, political agency. And yet, they are starting to claim their place in global political forums and to capture the attention of media and

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publics worldwide. As Jessica Taft writes, ‘Girl activists have gone rapidly from being a present but basically unrecognised political force to celebrated cultural figures’ (Taft 2020: 1–2). Indeed, a handful of girl activists are now held up as spectacular celebrities, capable of saving the world all by themselves (Projansky 2014; Switzer et al. 2016: 35).

It is no surprise that this girl powering of global politics (Loveday et al. 2023) comes on the back of more than two decades of the girl powering of international development (Koffman and Gill 2013: 86). The early twenty-first century has seen neoliberal governance institutions, transnational corporations, national governments, NGOs and wealthy philanthropists embrace the figure of the girl as the saviour of the Global South, capable of lifting entire countries out of poverty (Khoja-Moolji 2015a: 87–88). In particular, the 2000s saw the establishment of the UN Interagency Taskforce on Adolescent Girls, the launch of the World Bank’s Adolescent Girls Initiative, the first ever World Economic Forum plenary session on adolescent girls, and the launch of two influential campaigns; Plan International’s Because I Am A Girl and the Nike Foundation’s Girl Effect. The 2010s saw the first ever International Day of the Girl, the launch of the UN Foundation’s Girl Up and the (then) UK Department for International Development’s Girl Summit (Chant 2016: 316).

Girls have become the idealised subjects of neoliberal development. In girl power discourses in development, girls in the Global South are the world’s greatest ‘untapped’ resource (Calkin 2015b: 5). Give a girl in the Global South an education, the logic goes, and she will marry later; have fewer, healthier and better educated children; get a job or start a business; invest more of the money she earns in her family than a male peer might do; and so help to lift her entire community, or even country, out of poverty. In short, ‘investing in Third World Girls can break cycles of poverty in Third World nations and help sustain the stability of Western civilisation’ (Desai 2016: 248). Just like girl power discourses in the Global North, the girl powering of international development is rooted in the neoliberal language of choice, in which girls are seen as rational, capable, even powerful actors providing they make the right choices and adapt to the constantly changing demands of the market (Gonick et al. 2009: 2; Zaslow 2009: 3). Drawing on essentialist discourses that see girls as naturally industrious and altruistic, girl power discourses in development position girls in the Global South as just waiting for the right investment so that they can ‘choose’ to delay motherhood, become economically active, and provide for their families and communities. Unleashing this economic potential has become something of a ‘cause du jour’ in the Global North (Robinson 2022: 266; Shain 2013: 3.9; Valdivia 2018: 86).

In popular depictions of girls, those in the Global South are depicted as having ‘dormant’ or ‘inactive’ agency, which only needs an intervention or investment from the North to be unleashed (Calkin 2015a: 657). Meanwhile, a handful of girls in the Global North are seen as seizing the stage and changing the world ‘all on their own’ (Bent 2016: 107). Despite the clear differences between the girl powering of development and the girl powering of global politics, there are also many similarities. Both encourage girls to ‘choose’ to be successful (Bent 2020: 47); both eradicate the need for adult and community support; both prevent more nuanced understandings of the many reasons why some girls are able to make themselves heard and others



are not (Cobbett 2014: 310–1); and both function to reassure adults that girls, and future generations more generally, are already setting about solving the world's most pressing issues, which were not of their making (Hickel 2014: 1356). In many ways, girl power discourses contain girls' activism, by framing the issues they are trying to address as already in the process of being solved (Taft 2020: 4).

As this brief discussion illustrates, much has already been written across different disciplines about girl power discourses, their resonance with neoliberal discourses of individual choice and success, and their ultimate containment of the more radical potential of girls' activism. And yet, to date, little has been written about the many ways in which girls can and do create change, within and against neoliberalism. This is especially true in the discipline of International Relations, which has historically paid little attention to the active role that children might take in global politics (Lee-Koo 2020: 23). Children are 'among the agents of status quo politics and of movements of resistance. And yet they are relatively absent as such from IR' (Beier 2020: 7; see also Basham 2020: 137; Holzscheiter 2020: 65; Watson 2020). Even feminist IR theorising has devoted little attention to date on the agency of children more broadly, or indeed of girls (Pruitt 2020: 209). Perceptions of childhood and childishness vary across time, culture and context, refusing any simplistic definition based on age criteria alone (Brocklehurst, 2015: 30). And yet, a particular conceptualisation persists of the child 'as a gradually unfolding potential' (Wells 2011: 18).

Such a conceptualisation leaves little scope for agency, for which I employ Katrina Lee-Koo's definition of 'the capacity of individuals to make independent decisions about one's life, and to seek to enact those decisions in ways that shape that person's life trajectory and—in this way—also shape their environment' (cited in Lee-Koo 2020: 31–32). Agents are those who can 'actively shape the political/material reality' (Martuscelli and Bandarra 2020: 225); they are 'actively constructing his or her own "childhood"' (Uprichard 2008: 304), whether they are demonstrating 'positive agency,' by which is meant young people's ability to make 'any particular positive societal contribution' (Watson 2006: 247) or indeed 'negative agency,' in becoming the perpetrators of injustices against others (Hoban 2020: 295).

In considering the 'state of the field' of scholarship on girls' activism in International Relations, there are a number of key challenges, not least deciding exactly which 'field' or 'fields' to survey. There is a very real risk of reproducing masculinist and careerist politics of knowledge production in academia that value claims to originality, often at the expense, or critique, of the excellent work that has come before, or at the expense of accountability to girls themselves (Enloe, 2004: 92–3). In this article, then, I survey the existing literature on girlhood in global politics with the aim of showing how, despite a relative lack of engagement with the topic in IR to date, there is much work to draw on in theorising their contributions to global politics. I start by discussing how children have been conceptualised in much IR scholarship as either the passive victims of phenomena beyond their control, or occasionally as subjects with negative agency, as in the case of child soldiers, but rarely as positive agents, able to influence global politics for the better. I then discuss recent work in the relatively new, interdisciplinary field of Girlhood Studies, where scholars are highlighting the everyday and informal ways that girls across a range of contexts are pushing back against inequalities. I then draw parallels between this work



and feminist scholarship in International Political Economy, which explores the complex ways in which women find space for resistance within and against neoliberalism. Finally, I suggest a future direction for feminist scholarship on girls' activism in IR, building on insights from Girlhood Studies, feminist security studies, feminist IPE, and postcolonial feminist scholarship in IR, and seeking to employ a 'transnational girlhoods' approach. Such an approach would recognise that girls' lives everywhere are shaped by gendered and racialised forms of capitalism and colonialism, but that they nevertheless find ways to influence their own communities and lives for the better.

## Girls, agency and global politics

Childhood, and our understandings of childhood, have always been central to global politics, even if they have been far from central to International Relations scholarship (Beier 2020: 5). Children labour, fight, consume, migrate, parent, mobilise and resist (Watson 2006: 237–238). While a generally accepted definition of childhood in international law sees anyone under the age of 18 assigned the status of 'child,' this does not necessarily correlate to the rights and protections that children are afforded, nor indeed to their development, with research suggesting humans' physical development can continue well into the 20s, while 'in terms of moral and cognitive development, children may reach comparable adult levels between the ages of 12 and 14' (Brocklehurst 2015: 30). Furthermore, feminist and postcolonial scholars (amongst others) have demonstrated how adults are frequently attributed with traits of childishness, especially when they belong to groups historically positioned as 'other to' or 'less than' the white Western man (Brocklehurst 2015: 30). Nevertheless, childhood persists as a taken for granted category, denoting children as having less developed intellectual, emotional and physical capacities (Beier and Tabak 2020: 287). Children's active roles in global politics are frequently overlooked and they are still overwhelmingly understood to be at best passive observers of global politics, and at worst, the unwitting victims of global phenomena beyond their control.

A particular, liberal and Western conceptualisation of childhood dominates in IR theorising and international law, in which childhood is an idealised state of innocence, to be protected at all costs (Wells 2007: 57). As Katrina Lee-Koo argues:

From the iconic 1972 photograph of nine-year-old Kim Phuc running naked down the street after a napalm attack on her Vietnamese village, to the 2015 image of the lifeless body of three-year-old Syrian Alan Kurdin on a Turkish beach, the experiences of children and our understanding of childhood filters our interpretation of global politics. It helps us to cast political actors as 'good' or 'bad' and provides us with a compass that orients us towards what we imagine to be moral, merciful and humane politics. (Lee-Koo 2020: 21)

Childhood is framed as a time free from politics, a time of innocence and vulnerability. And, it is precisely because of this framing of childhood as apolitical that politicians, media and NGOs alike are able to draw on images of children's suffering to



make seemingly neutral calls for intervention in even the most politically charged of settings (Pruitt 2021: 587; see also Berents 2016: 522). Scholars working in postcolonial and poststructuralist theory have demonstrated how this conceptualisation of childhood as vulnerable and inferior has been used to construct the West as a benevolent benefactor in global politics, intervening not only to protect children (e.g. Walters 2016), but also ‘childlike’ states, perceived as in an earlier stage of development (e.g. Doty 1993), with a form of ‘paternalistic caring’ (Narayan 1995). Childhood, then, and our understandings of it, can be seen as both ‘an empirical reality within and between communities and also a sociological construct which may be operationalised’ in the interests of power (Brocklehurst 2015: 32).

The critique of this liberal conceptualisation of childhood is that it ‘confuses the idealised perception of children as apolitical beings with a belief that this is their inherent nature’ (Lee-Koo 2020: 24). In other words, because childhood is seen as an innocent time, children are assumed to be innocent, and ignorant, of all things adult (Watson 2004: 16). And yet, we know that children frequently do take on ‘adult’ roles, from fighting in conflicts, to parenting their children or siblings, to earning a family’s income, to leading a protest. Indeed, many national laws allow for children’s ‘negative agency’: for example, in many countries, children can be held responsible for crimes they have committed years before they are able to vote (Watson 2006: 247; see also Spitka 2018: 199). The work of scholars of childhood and security has been crucial in highlighting how policies approach children ‘either as objects of security to be rescued and protected, or as subjects to be feared, corrected and regulated’ (Hoban 2020: 296). While young people whose childhood was anything but innocent can be held accountable as rational actors in courts of law for their actions as part of warring parties, protest movements, or terrorist networks, for example, they are still frequently deemed too irrational to participate in efforts at resolving conflicts and all too often left out of peacebuilding efforts (Berents and Mollica 2022: 69). If children must take on adult roles, they lose many of the additional protections and rights afforded to them, without being granted the agency to help shape their and their communities’ futures.

In feminist scholarship in International Relations, and Security Studies in particular, this assumption of children’s lack of agency has mostly been left unchallenged. Feminist security scholars have devoted important attention to the grouping of women and children into the category ‘womenandchildren,’ for which read: innocent civilians and victims (e.g. Shepherd 2008: 109). They have demonstrated how this coupling infantilises women and leads to their exclusion from policy negotiations, peacebuilding and demobilisation efforts, and ignores their specific experiences of conflict. And yet, while countering the infantilisation and trivialisation of women’s experiences and roles is vital, it is crucial to also question the construction of children as secondary citizens (Pruitt 2020: 199). Indeed, in order to assert women’s equality to men in this context and distance them from a passive role, the innocence, vulnerability and victimhood of children is reinforced (Weiss 2018: 979).

The impacts of this discursive move can be seen in policies and scholarship relating to child soldiers, in which Patricia Martuscelli and Leonardo Bandarra argue, girls risk being ‘triply silenced’ (2020: 226). Firstly, within the category of children, and scholarship about childhood, which does not account for the specific



experiences of girls. Secondly, within policies and scholarship about conflict, and about child soldiers in particular, in which the category of ‘child soldiers’ is often gendered as male. Girls and boys might volunteer, be asked, or be forced to take on very different roles in a conflict, or they may take on similar roles but experience them in very different ways. These complexities are frequently lost in discussions that focus only on ‘child soldiers’ as a whole. And thirdly, they are silenced within the category of ‘women,’ and feminist scholarship about ‘women,’ which does not account for age (ibid).

An interesting case study of this blind spot in feminist IR scholarship comes in the stories of Shamima Begum, Amira Abase and Kadiza Sultana, and other girls who, like them, travelled to Syria in order to join the Islamic State. Feminist IR scholarship on the so-called ‘jihadi brides’ to date has explored how gender, race, citizenship and religion intersect in shaping publics’ perceptions of these girls and their decision to travel. With few exceptions (e.g. Jackson 2022), studies so far have largely ignored the role of age in their stories and have used the terms ‘women’ and ‘girls’ interchangeably (e.g. Evans and Da Silva 2021; Labenski, 2019; Schmidt 2020). By contrast, scholars of international law have engaged in lively discussions about their status as girls trafficked into conflict and marriage (Binetti 2015; Greenfield 2021; Nyamutata 2020). Without detracting from the fascinating work that has been done and the important issues it raises about the persistence of gendered orientalist discourses, it demonstrates how feminist IR scholarship risks silencing girls and girlhoods. Taking an intersectional approach (Cooper 2016: 390; Crenshaw 1991: 1242), there is huge scope to explore how age interacts with gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, (dis)ability, nationality and citizenship, language, class and any number of other identities in determining which girls are seen as victims and which are held up as heroes, which are deemed to be in need of protection and which are deemed to be criminals, which are too vulnerable to speak and which are invited to address the world. There is much work already underway within and outside of IR that feminist scholars can seek to build on in exploring the complexities of these interactions.

## Girls’ everyday politics

International Relations is by no means the only discipline to have historically neglected the study of girlhood. Indeed, the emergence of the interdisciplinary field of Girlhood Studies in recent years came out of a recognition by a number of scholars working across sociology, literary studies, cultural studies, youth studies and beyond that feminist work had either overlooked girlhood, or had analysed it only in opposition to womanhood (Driscoll 2002: 9; Kearney 2009: 2). Girlhood Studies aims to treat girls not as future women, but as active subjects in their own right.

Girlhood Studies emerged in the context of pessimism in popular culture and in feminist scholarship about the fate of feminism. Studies with girls and young women in the 1990s and early 2000s focused on how girls were seen to be embracing postfeminism, that is the dominance of understandings that see feminist gains for women as having been fully realised, and feminism is thus ‘taken into account,’ but



simultaneously seen as a 'spent force' (McRobbie 2009: 12). In parallel with broader discussions about how women were positioned within postfeminist discourses about female success and individual choice (e.g. Gill and Scharff 2011; Hall and Salupo Rodriguez 2003), girlhood scholars explored how postfeminist discourses positioned girls as the ideal neoliberal subjects (e.g. Harris 2004). Fuelled by dazzling tales of girls' newfound academic successes in Europe and North America in relation to their male peers, girls were seen as having the 'world at their feet,' so long as they made the right choices (ibid: 13). For example, empirical studies demonstrated that girls and young women were adopting the neoliberal language of 'choice' in relation to their own traumatic experiences of heterosexual relationships and sex, reluctant to identify their experiences as symptomatic of wider patriarchal power relations (e.g. Bay-Cheng et al. 2010; Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008; Buschman and Lenart 1996; Coppock et al. 1995; Phillips 2000; Pomerantz et al. 2013).

In the 2010s, studies began to emerge that countered the pessimistic tone of much feminist literature of the early twenty-first century, instead focusing on exploring the feminist politics and activism of girls and young women across a range of contexts (e.g. Keller and Ringrose 2015; Kim and Ringrose 2018; Mendes et al. 2019; Renold and Ringrose 2008; Taft 2011, 2014, 2017). Girls, this newly emerging literature argued, were deeply political in ways that perhaps had not been fully recognised by scholars, organisations and institutions alike. Although girls were excluded from formal political institutions and parties, they were still actively engaging in everyday and informal ways to 'do' politics, including but not limited to: 'online blogging that challenges the sexualisation of girls, resisting and confronting a domineering boyfriend, father, or brother, everyday practices of interaction across difference in a public park, mentoring other girls, media-making, participation in human rights organisations, and social movement activism' (Taft 2014: 263). This scholarship sparked many important conversations, not least in working to 'expose the conceptual flaws of an adult-defined political system' (Bent 2013: 175). Further, it opened up conversations about the messy in-between subjectivities that cannot easily be placed in moral panics about girlhood: 'if we approach girls not as problems-to-be-solved or subjects-to-be-rescued, but as agents who face systemic barriers to their own agency and autonomy, we can begin to stop linking them to crisis constructions that denigrate their subjectivities and experiences' (Rentschler and Mitchell 2014: 3). Scholars began to explore the complexities of girls' experiences that did not fit neatly into dichotomous categories of powerful or powerless (e.g. Doull and Sethna 2011: 98; Harris and Shields Dobson 2015: 147). In doing so, they demonstrated the political agency that girls show even while their lives are shaped by powers beyond their control.

This focus on postfeminism, and girls' resistance to it, was initially heavily concentrated on white, heterosexual girlhood in the Global North (Dosekun 2015: 961; Vanner 2019: 120). Until very recently, Girlhood Studies continued to reproduce representations of girls' lives in the Global South, and Africa especially, as characterised by 'poverty, sexual violence, dearth of education, and most importantly, a diligent ahistorical belief that they are victims of their uncivilised environments' (Katshunga 2019: 46–7). Alongside calls for greater care and attention in applying an intersectional lens to analyses of girls' experiences, and in recognising



the ‘everyday’ and informal ways that girls do activism, empirical studies have emerged in the last decade that greatly advance our understandings of the political lives of girls. These include explorations of the activism and experiences of: queer girls (Brickman 2019); Black girls living in the USA and across a range of contexts (Cook 2020; Halliday, 2019; Keleta-Mae 2019; Rogers 2022); Indigenous girls (de Finney 2014); disabled girls (Erevelles and Nguyen 2016); Black African girls (Haffejee et al. 2020; Katshunga 2019; Nyambura 2018; Switzer 2010); ‘undocumented’ migrant girls (Silva 2020); and girls of colour engaged in climate justice and other social movements (Huang and Bent 2022). This body of work expands our understanding of young women’s activism across a range of contexts and continents (Cesnulyte 2015; Homan et al. 2018; Lee-Koo and Pruitt 2020; Leiper O’Malley and Johnson 2018; Liinason 2021; Ma et al. 2018; Marler et al. 2018; Walters 2018). It depicts girls as agentic, engaged in intersectional feminist activism, and pushing back against the co-optation of their stories and experiences (Khoja-Moolji 2015b; Walters 2017: 35).

For example, Lauren Leigh Kelly (2018) explores how Black girls in the USA use social media as a tool in their ‘everyday’ resistance against the institutionalised racism they experience in high school. A recent special issue of the journal *Girlhood Studies* explores how girls in Africa are engaging “vocally and publicly in activism and artistic endeavours to express their visions and aspirations for a future society inclusive of their needs” (Jaksch et al., 2023: vii). Sandra De Finney (2014: 20) argues that Indigenous girls in Canada adopt a strategy she calls ‘presencing,’ often through small acts of humour and contestation, which helps to ‘erode the overwhelming force of gendered, racialised, sexualised colonial narratives, and creates new possibilities for well-being, belonging and everyday solidarities.’ Gopika Bashi et al. (2018: 442) argue that young feminists worldwide are ‘challenging and shifting public discourse about women, gender roles and relations, and gender itself—and doing so at community, regional, national, and international levels. They are showing their ability to organise intersectionally.’ Lilli Loveday et al. (2023) draw on data from a longitudinal study with girls in nine countries across three continents to show how girls gradually, throughout their adolescence, push back against unfair restrictions on their behaviour, often succeeding in changing caregiver attitudes and winning a little more freedom for themselves and their peers. My own previous work (Walters 2018) shows the courage and creativity with which girls involved in the UN Foundation’s Girl Up, which has been analysed by feminist scholars as epitomising the girl powering of international development, adapt the campaign to better fit their own vision of girls’ empowerment. Even from within a campaign espousing individualistic and neocolonial solutions to gendered global inequalities, I argue, girls found space for more collective activism, focused on pushing back against gender inequalities in their communities and on asking their own politicians and community elders to do better for girls (ibid).

This echoes debates happening simultaneously in feminist International Political Economy about the capacity of women, and women’s movements, to organise within and against neoliberalism. Despite pessimistic claims about the neoliberal ‘co-optation’ of feminism (e.g. Fraser 2009; Rottenberg 2014), many scholars are exploring the ‘wiggle room’ that feminists and feminist organisations find to push





back against global neoliberal agendas (Alvarez 2009: 176; Dominguez Reyes 2014: 195). Feminists, and feminist organisations, are ‘entangled but never entirely captured within the complex weave of neoliberal power relations’ (Eschle and Maignashca 2018: 234), seeking out the ‘discontinuities and spaces where resistance can emerge’ (Korolczuk 2016: 40). While there is still much more work to do in exploring the ‘everyday forms of resistance’ that women adopt in resisting (Gregoratti 2016: 923–4; see also Bassel and Emejulu 2017: 1; Grosser and McCarthy 2018: 1101), there is plenty of scope to draw on this body of work in exploring how girls also push back against, and reject, neoliberal girlhoods, including those put forward by transnational corporations and institutions as part of the girl powering of development.

In summary, many important conversations are happening simultaneously within and outside of International Relations on the possibility of feminist resistance within and against dominant discourses. Where they have yet to converge is in developing a body of feminist IR scholarship that takes seriously the capacity of *girls* to act as agentic subjects and to resist neoliberal girlhoods, and neoliberal agendas more broadly. Such a body of work might draw on the insights from feminist security scholars in countering infantilisation, while extending that work to counter the infantilisation of girls and not just women. It would also draw on the emerging literature on childhood in IR, while paying attention to the specificities of girls’ experiences. It would also learn from important discussions around intersectionality in girlhood studies, and from the work being done to recognise how all girls ‘do’ politics in their daily lives, not just the spectacular stories of celebrity girl activists. Finally, it would also build on the work of feminist scholars of IPE in conceptualising neoliberalism as *both* a site of oppression and of resistance. One way to bring all of these literatures and approaches together might be transnational girlhoods.

## Transnational girlhoods

On its most simple level, transnational scholarship is about exploring the flow of people, goods, social movements, labour and cultural practices across national borders. Its focus are the many political and economic phenomena that cannot be contained within the confines of a single nation state. However, as a political project, transnational scholarship, and particularly feminist transnational scholarship, has much more complex aims. It emerged out of postcolonial feminists’ critiques of a tendency to equate feminism with the West (Abu-Lughod 2002) and to measure all other feminisms in relation to the white, Western version (Alexander and Mohanty 2012: xx). Nagar and Swarr (2010: 5) conceptualise transnational feminisms as:

an intersectional set of understandings, tools, and practices that can: (a) attend to racialised, classed, masculinised, and heteronormative logics and practices of globalisation and capitalist patriarchies, and the multiple ways in which they (re)structure colonial and neocolonial relations of domination and subordination; (b) grapple with the complex and contradictory ways in which these processes both inform and are shaped by a range of subjectivities and understand-



ings of individual and collective agency; and (c) interweave critiques, actions, and self-reflexivity so as to resist a priori predictions of what might constitute feminist politics in a given place and time.

A critical part of this project is the recognition that women's experiences, and the forms of feminism they adopt, are shaped by colonial and neocolonial power structures (Ozkazanc-Pan 2012: 574; Rajan 2018: 279; Tamale 2020: 9), and that those power structures shape experiences in complex and differing ways between and within contexts. Transnational feminisms avoid homogenising claims about the experiences of postcolonial states and subjects, attending to the specificities of colonialism and neocolonialism in different contexts, with an aim of understanding 'the differential effects of scattered colonialisms, neoliberalisms and homonationalisms' (Browne et al. 2017: 1379).

A second important focus is on deconstructing binaries of 'us' and 'them,' 'the West' and 'the rest' (Hall 1993), 'modern' and 'traditional,' 'liberal' and 'repressive' and instead '[emphasising] the uneven ways in which power and resistances have unfolded globally' (Hundle et al. 2019: 3). Such an approach requires constant critical reflection on scholars' positionality, especially for those from, or writing in, the Global North, and an effort to avoid unwittingly reproducing imperialistic discourses of 'rescue' towards women of the Global South that have been the subject of postcolonial feminist critique (Hundle 2019: 38). It also involves recognising the many and complex ways in which women in the Global South have agency, not as a form of 'coping' or 'resilience,' but in ways that 'run counter to the neoliberal model, demanding the redistribution of resources, challenging the operation of markets, or confronting the violence of the "democratic" neoliberal state' (Wilson 2010: 302).

At its most simple level, transnational girlhoods might also analyse the ways that girls, their lives and experiences, are influenced by transnational structures and how girls themselves, and girl cultures and movements, cross borders (Vanner 2019: 123). As a political project, transnational girlhoods might also do much more. The Girlhood Studies scholar Catherine Vanner puts forward a definition of transnational girlhood with the following features: a focus on cross-border connections and the links between global and local power structures; intersectional analyses; a prioritisation of 'the perspectives of girls from the Global South, girls of colour, and other girls who have traditionally not been given equal opportunities to speak on an international stage'; a conceptualisation of girls as agentic despite the constraints of global patriarchal structures; and 'a counter-hegemonic agenda that challenges oppressive global systems to create more equitable societies for all girls' (2019: 126).

In feminist IR, such a project might begin to empirically explore girl activists not as co-opted by neoliberal and imperialist agendas, but as leading resistance against them. It might continue the work of Girlhood Studies scholars in exploring how girls and young women are engaged in intersectional, collective forms of organising, resisting neoliberal models of individualised 'success' and 'choice.' How, for example, are girls working together to make their schools safer and more inclusive spaces for themselves and for other girls like them (Walters 2018)? It might explore



the similarities and differences between girls' forms of activism across different contexts. How, for example, are girls resisting the practice of child marriage across different contexts, cultures and religions (e.g. Haffee et al. 2020)? Scholars might also continue to shed light on the way that girls are organising across different social movements, simultaneously mobilising their peers on climate justice, girls' rights, civil rights, indigenous rights and more. How do girls experience different activist spaces? How do they see these causes as interconnected? They might also explore girls' experiences of intergenerational activism and of being invited into formal political spaces to speak (Bent 2016, 2020). What might it mean to conceptualise girl power discourses in the media and in mainstream political discourse not as a form of containment of girls' activism, but rather as evidence that their activism is seen as a threat? Finally, such a project might also resist the tendency to focus on a few individual girl activists, the spectacular celebrities of girl power discourses, and instead explore the unspectacular, everyday ways that girls resist (Loveday et al. 2023).

Theoretically, transnational girlhoods in IR would seek to make space for girls as active subjects, not simply as 'less than' adults, from which adult women need to be distinguished. While countering the infantilisation of women in security discourse, what might it also mean to challenge the idea that anyone can or should be left out of decision-making forums? It would also require a great deal of sensitivity and reflexivity on the part of the researcher, embedded as they may be in institutions, literatures and cultures that reify Global North and adult-led political systems and theories. Methodologically, much can be learnt from the participatory approaches adopted in youth and childhood studies that see children and young people as co-researchers and as experts in their own lives (e.g. Åkerström and Brunnberg 2013). Above all, transnational girlhoods open up possibilities of resistance and counter-narratives (Chowdry and Nair 2002: 26), imagining new and different ways to be a 'girl.'

## Concluding thoughts

Girl power discourses in international development and in global politics more broadly serve to contain the activism of girls by positioning them as idealised, neo-liberal subjects with the capacity to solve global political issues all by themselves. Dominant discourses in the policy and practice of international development and in the media hold up a small number of spectacular girls as proof that girls can change the world, despite research with girls themselves showing that they would like support from adults to bring about more equal societies (Loveday et al. 2023; Walters 2018). Despite the clear potential for feminist scholarship in IR to counter this dominant narrative by foregrounding girls' voices and activism, much of the research on girlhood, and more broadly childhood, in IR has positioned them as passive victims or negative agents.

While it remains curious that so little attention has been devoted in IR to children's positive agency, and in feminist IR to the agency of girls, the discussion in this article also demonstrates clear parallels between the work of scholars in



Girlhood Studies and various strands of feminist and postcolonial IR scholarship, and the potential for much richer understandings of how girls ‘do’ political activism and influence the world around them. There is always, of course, the risk of ‘romanticising’ resistance to global systems of power (Abu-Lughod 1990), which in reality for most girls, are beyond their control. Further, just as girl power discourses have the contradictory effect of reassuring adults about the very topics that girls are trying to encourage them to take action on, as Sara Ahmed warns, ‘the desire for signs of resistance can also be a form for resistance to hearing about racism’ (Ahmed 2007: 165). Could it be that a focus on girls’ resistance to neoliberal political and economic agendas could constrain the researcher’s critique of, or turn their gaze away from, the ‘colonising practices of Europe and the USA’ (Chowdry and Nair 2002: 25)? These are important reflections to which there are no straightforward answers.

Nevertheless, as a political project, transnational girlhoods has the potential to disrupt the very sexism and ageism in the discipline that has resulted in girls’ agency being overlooked for so long. While this article makes the case for a respectful engagement with girls’ politics as a worthy and important research project in itself, transnational girlhoods also has clear potential to contribute much more broadly to the discipline of International Relations, and I want to highlight five key contributions here. Firstly, that a questioning of why it is that girls have been left out of both the practice and scholarship of global politics for so long might also prompt us to question which other voices have been left out, simply because those groups have historically not been highly visible in formal political forums. At present, the lack of theorising about children as active subjects in global politics cannot be separated from their marginalisation. As Anna Holzscheiter argues, ‘it is plausible to assume that there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between the invisibility of children’s agency in IR scholarship on the one hand and their limited political representation in global governance on the other’ (Holzscheiter 2020: 66). The same may be true for many other groups besides.

Secondly, and on a related note, we might question which other groups are positioned as incapable of contributing to global politics because they are deemed to lack the physical or cognitive capacity? Here, for example, there might be promising scope for work that combines perspectives on girlhood with scholarship and activism on the rights, agency and politics of disabled people.

Thirdly, a continuing focus on the ‘everyday’ and informal politics of girls speaks not only to girls’ politics but much more broadly to how we understand what it means to be political. Which groups or kinds of activism do we overlook when we draw on outdated and adult-centric notions of what it means to ‘do’ politics or to resist? In what ways are resistances already taking place?

Fourthly, research that seeks to engage with girls, and children more broadly, to take them, their activism, and their perspectives on global politics seriously might also inform much broader approaches to understanding the agency of marginalised groups, both theoretically and methodologically (e.g. Walters 2023). How might researchers engage with groups that are excluded from political decision-making processes? What are the most appropriate methods for doing so?

Finally, transnational girlhoods can contribute to the wider transnational feminist project of increasing our understanding of gendered colonialisms and neoliberalisms



across different contexts, and of how marginalised groups are constrained by global political forces beyond their control, but creatively finding ways to make change regardless.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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