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Heather Switzer, Emily Bent, Crystal Leigh Endsley

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Precarious Politics and Girl Effects: Exploring the Limits of the Girl Gone Global

Heather Switzer, Emily Bent, and Crystal Leigh Endsley

This paper considers the compelling intersections of gender, age, and nation in human rights and development discourse aimed at empowering girls in the global South. We show how the concepts of vulnerability and precarity travel transnationally via development discourse and trouble the prominent deployment of adolescent female exceptionalism as the "key" to eradicating global poverty and realizing girls' human rights. It is our contention that even as adolescent girls are today hypervisible as ideal subjects of neoliberal development, they are also illegible as normative subjects of human rights. Based on our experiences as scholars, activists, and artists in Sub-Saharan Africa and the halls of the United Nations, we examine how Kenyan, Ethiopian, and North American girls experience local and transnational expectations animated by the "turn to the girl" for development with differential and sometimes (dis)empowering effects. We ask, What does it mean when members of the world's "most vulnerable" population are also positioned as the "saviors of humanity"? What does it mean for girls' rights policy? What about for girls themselves? Taken together, our work suggests girls' (in)visibility requires feminists working in transnational spaces to recalibrate our politics and epistemologies.

Keywords: development / Girl Effect / girls' education / girl power / human rights / performance / precarity / United Nations

> "The danger of a single story . . . is not that [it] is not true, but that it is incomplete."
>
> —Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie 2009

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Introduction

As the subject of human rights, girls continue to occupy a precarious position between women's rights and children's rights agendas. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination and Violence Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) Committees rarely collaborate to address systemic gender discrimination and violence experienced by girls (Goonesekere 2014; Taefi 2009).[1] As feminist legal scholar Savitri Goonesekere notes, "The near-universal ratification of the CRC is sometimes referred to by members of the CEDAW Committee . . . as a reason for not addressing the rights of girl children" (2014, 488). Yet, because the CRC is framed in gender-neutral terms, the Convention occludes the gendered realities of childhood. Consequently, the CRC Committee often addresses girls' experiences with discrimination and violence in an ad hoc manner (Goonesekere 2014).

Despite overlapping interests, feminist approaches to children's rights remain scant (Price Cohen 1997; Goonesekere 2014; Lim and Roche 2000; Olsen 1992).[2] Frances Olsen (1992, 193) asserts, "Children have too often been used as hostages" against women's interests and consequently, the "legal protection(s) of children can be used as a basis for controlling women." Childhood scholars similarly warn of children's increasing regulation and caution against paternalistic blending of children and women's interests (Bunting 2005; Lim and Roche 2000). While girls' education garners concerted attention, it has been limited to an instrumental concern with rights *to* education rather than substantive rights *in* or *through* education (Subramanian 2005; Unterhalter 2007). Elaine Unterhalter and Amy North (2011, 6) illustrate moreover how the absence of "a wider social-development agenda and alliance with other women's rights activists" hinders the realization of girls' rights. As Elizabeth Croll (2006, 1289) argues, "There have been few attempts to address the practical, let alone strategic, needs of girls as members of the female gender or as female children." In response to the United Nations (UN) Secretary General's recent Synthesis Report on the Post-2015 agenda, more than eighty non-governmental organizations called for the inclusion of "adolescent girls' specific priorities . . . in their own right, not hidden beneath the broader categories of women, children and youth" ("Unleash Adolescent Girls' Potential" 2015, 2). The absence of an explicit girls' rights agenda in this report illustrates how easily girls not only fall through the cracks between women and children, but are effectively rendered invisible as a discrete category of person; paradoxically, despite their hypervisibility in development discourse, girls are not legible as rights-bearing subjects with particular needs. As a result, girls' recognition is repeatedly redefined to fit within legal frames constructed outside the scope of their everyday experiences.

(In)visibility as a Form of Precarity

It is our contention that even as adolescent girls are today hypervisible as ideal subjects of neoliberal development, they are also illegible as normative subjects of human rights. This (in)visibility, or the entanglement of visibility and illegibility, we suggest, is best understood as a form of precarity tied to the "spectacularization" of the (female) human-rights subject (Hesford 2011). Precarity has emerged as a rubric for characterizing those lives "who do not qualify as recognizable, readable" (Butler 2009, xiii). For us, the girls' rights gap—the space of (in)visibility girls occupy, suspended between women's rights and children's rights agendas—demonstrates the ways girls' lives render them "unreadable" as rights-bearing subjects (Butler 2009). It is in this sense, we argue, that girls can be understood as precarious subjects within development discourse and human rights frameworks.

Building upon previous analyses of how the Nike Foundation's Girl Effect marks adolescent girls with differential and sometimes (dis)empowering effects (Bent 2013b; Switzer 2013), in this paper we consider the empirical implications of girls' (in)visibility with respect to recent development discourses aimed at empowering Third World girls through education and economic participation.[3] The "invest in girls" rhetoric now reaches beyond the Nike Foundation and other multinational corporations as institutional actors within the UN system to grassroots organizations, national governments, bilateral aid agencies, and multilateral governance; these disparate institutions rely on a singular and problematic storyline of girls' economic empowerment to base their claims. We contend it is likely because of girls' (in)visibility that neoliberal narratives of "adolescent female exceptionalism" (Switzer 2013, 350) have solidified as the most pervasive and persuasive knowledge regime for girls' rights globally (Bent 2013b; Hesford 2014; Switzer 2013). Consequently, instead of articulating comprehensive and transformative rights for girls, including economic, political, social, and cultural rights, market-centered rationalities drive the idea of "tapping into" girls' economic potential to fill the gap. Indeed, the idea of girl effects—the purported outward ripple of positive social and economic benefits resulting from an investment in adolescent girls—authorizes all narratives about girls in the global South. This narrative "brand[s] adolescent girls as a means to development rather than as ends in and of themselves" (Moeller 2014, 577).

The "Turn To the Girl" and the Production of Girl Effects

Over the past thirty years, the political economy of development has been irrevocably shaped by changes in the globalizing socioeconomic system referred to as neoliberalism (Molyneux 2008; Hickel 2014). Ongoing critical feminist engagements with neoliberalism posit the ways in which neoliberalism serves as a platform of political-economic policy prescriptions as well as a "more diffuse, all encompassing" structure of feeling associated with the terrain of late capitalism (Cornwall et al. 2008, 1). Transnational feminist scholars have tied neoliberal policies to a variety of shifts in the configuration of economic (and thus, socio-cultural) life that map to the deepening of gendered precarity as unevenly distributed embodied vulnerabilities; analyses of women as formal workers in export-processing zones, informal micro-entrepreneurs, flexible migrants, and "cosmopolitan citizens" sit beside those of women as disposable, "displaced, devalued, and disenfranchised diasporic citizens" (Hawkesworth 2006, 202) living in a world characterized by the feminization of responsibility (Chant 2006) and survival (Sassen 2000).

Girls' studies scholars have likewise persuasively tied the gendered and generational politics of girlhood to the "feminization" of late capitalism. They maintain that within the contemporary political economy, girls and young women are positioned as "can-do" winners or "at-risk" losers (Harris 2004, 10). This discursive structure assumes the can-do girl succeeds and the at-risk girl fails to mitigate shared vulnerabilities because they have made respectively good, or bad, individual choices (Bent 2013b). In this way, Marnina Gonick (2006, 1) argues, the can-do and at-risk constructions reflect mutually constituting "configurations of subjectification" required by neoliberalism and reinforced as precarity. Because neoliberal paradigms that produce precarity compel subjects to be "rational, calculating and self-motivating," girls learn to "make sense of their individual biographies in terms of discourses of freedom, autonomy and choice—no matter how constrained their lives might actually be" (Gill and Scharff 2011, 6).

It is against this "neo"-liberal rationality positing adolescent girls as inherently "vulnerable" yet simultaneously "responsible" for global social reproduction that we emphasize the recent "turn" to the girl in the global South as the ideal subject (and object) of economic investment and neoliberal success. Over the last ten years, in a process Lyndsay Hayhurst (2011, 532) has called the "girl(ing) of development," all major development institutions have enfolded "adolescent girls" as a distinct category into their target range. This growing archive of research and advocacy focuses on getting adolescent girls "on the radar" of powerful multinational actors (Kanani 2011). In this discursive regime, adolescent girls are made visible for their capacity to embody development imperatives defined by neoliberal principles. Discourses of girls' economic empowerment mobilize "traveling" (Koffman and Gill 2013, 252) notions of postfeminist girlpower from the global North as the ideological scaffold for rationalizing global gendered social change through development as economic growth harnessed to girls' bodies in the global South. Thus the vulnerable girl in need of protection is newly targeted as the "empowered girl" (Khoja-Moolji 2015) endowed with the "unleashed" capacity to "save the future of humanity" and who now dominates the girl effects regime (The Girl Effect 2008).

Yet the processes of "protecting" *and* "targeting" girls in the global South "belong to same rationale of power" (Butler 2014, 112) in which girl effects, as "investments in explicitly gendered and implicitly racialized young humans" (Murphy 2013, n.p.), can be seen as the strategic distribution of life chances among differentially positioned girls' lives. While vulnerability may be an intrinsic feature of embodiment (Butler 2014) and precarity appears ubiquitous, neither condition is uniformly experienced (Nyong'o 2013). Positioning girls in the poverty contexts of the global South as victims of localized patriarchy not only rationalizes development interventions on behalf of vulnerable girls, it also nullifies critical analyses of the socio-political and economic relationships between the global North and South (Grewal 2005; Murphy 2013; Wilson 2013). Consequently, only certain girls are represented as "readable" and thus as having the potential to realize development's promises, whereas "other" girls are relegated as "risky" investments or erased from the frame of recognition altogether (Moeller 2014). As we go on to elaborate, the girls in our cases experienced these politics in complicated ways, ultimately leading us to ask how transnational feminist scholarship might effect more productive, relational approaches to girls' (in)visibility.

Thinking with Precarity across Different Contexts

Based on our experiences as scholars, activists, and artists in Sub-Saharan Africa and the halls of the United Nations (UN), we examine how Kenyan, Ethiopian, and North American girls, ages 10–21, experience local and transnational expectations animated by the "turn to the girl" for development. Each section presents qualitative data from three distinct research projects, from differing time periods and locations, and utilizes diverse analytical strategies to understand contemporary girlhood in a transnational context. Putting our projects in conversation enabled us to see the saliency of precarity as an "intercontextual" tool for thinking about the relationships among girls' (in)visibility as human-rights subjects and the contextual realities of differently positioned girls' everyday experiences (Hesford 2011, 10). Immanent to theorizations of precarity is the political valence of "the terms of recognition," which not only "condition in advance who will count as a subject, and who will not" (Butler 2009, iv), but also influence how recognition is "read" and distributed. The discursive economy of girl effects produce, and are produced by, the textual and contextual entanglements constitutive of girls' hypervisibilty and illegibility. In our attempts to unpack these relations, we ask: In what ways do economic rationalities travel transnationally to configure the possibilities and limitations of girls' recognition as normative subjects of rights? What might it mean when members of the world's "most vulnerable" population are also positioned as the saviors of humanity? How do girls in our cases experience this positioning? How do they mobilize embodied vulnerability to mitigate (in)visibility and voice their own needs and desires?

Our analyses suggest that differentially positioned girls actively negotiate the terms of recognition marking them as precarious subjects, and in so doing, mobilize vulnerability to push back against the normative scripts projected onto their bodies. In the first section, Emily Bent explores how North American girls are made visible relative to their "sisters" in the global South, challenging then troubling dichotomies that unequivocally differentiate girls within a transnational system and compelling reconsideration of this oppositional construct. Extending this epistemological shift, Heather Switzer presents the paradoxical character of empowerment for girls who go to school within the shifting politics of local gender regimes in rural Kenya. Lastly, Crystal Endsley foregrounds the power of performance to rescript Ethiopian girlhoods and enact politicized vulnerability. Taken together, Kenyan, Ethiopian, and North American girls' everyday experiences expose the problematics of girls' global visibility as "the most powerful force for change on the planet" (The Girl Effect 2008) and challenge the reducibility of girls' lives to human capital indicators of development. These cases thus collectively evince how historically hierarchical geopolitical relationships, recuperated by "market logics" as "geopolitics" (Grewal 2005, 19), position the bodies of adolescent girls in the global South and global North to take on different burdens of representation and material obligation in the movement for gender equality via development (Hesford 2011, 2014). These discussions, we assert, suggest the need for feminists working in transnational spaces to recalibrate our politics and epistemologies in order to think critically about vulnerability and precarity as fundamental to girls' political subjectivity.

"I really do have faith that if we invest in girls then change will come":[4] The Precarious Politics of Representation at the United Nations

The increasing visibility of girls in the global South as objects of development intervention corresponds with rising interest in girls in the global North as "the saviors or caretakers" of Third World girls (Sensoy and Marshall 2010, 296). From the UN Foundation's Girl Up initiative to the appointment of Emma Watson as Goodwill Ambassador, the message is clear: "Not only do we want to support girls internationally . . . let's create the equal goal of inspiring American girls to be global leaders" (Hunt 2011). Human rights agencies and foundations have made concerted efforts to engage North American girls in the "invest in girls" project by capitalizing on their desire to "help" girls in the global South, effectively leveraging affective appeals to Western girlpower. Within this discursive frame, North American girls "ingest a pedagogy that positions the project of feminism . . . as helping less fortunate others" (Sensoy and Marshall 2010, 308); they therefore learn to become "agents of missionary girl power" (307) who then can act on behalf of "other" girls positioned as the beneficiaries of postfeminist neoliberal empowerment.

Missionary girlpower is therefore key to girl effects logic, which relies on the persistence of hierarchal geopolitical divisions in order to mobilize girls' vulnerabilities and political agency as oppositional (Bent 2013b). Accordingly, North American girls are directed to define human rights as something they already have and that "other" girls need, while Third World girls are made visible as ideal objects of neoliberal investment but not as subjects of rights. To make "other" girls legible to power, North American girls are required to be silent about their own experiences, vulnerabilities, and needs (Bent 2013a). The girl effects logic insists they leverage Western responsibility to put girls in the global South "on the radar" of policy makers and maintain their respective oppositionality as empowered versus vulnerable subjects. Yet in the process of advocating for "other" girls, North American girls also negotiate the terms of recognition ascribed by missionary girlpower to gain political legibility vis-à-vis their relationship with girls in the global South. These oppositional positions call attention to how all girls share (in)visibility as political subjects with "limited access to intelligibility" (Butler 2009, xi). Because the girl effects logic fails to address the lived vulnerabilities associated with age, gender, and power, girls everywhere mitigate precarity. Analysis of interviews with North American girl delegates invited to the 2010 Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)[5] to advocate for girls' human rights indicate that they are acutely aware of the precarious politics shaping their participation.[6] Within the adult-centered institutions of the UN, I suggest, the practice of missionary girlpower makes North American girls both hyper-visible and illegible as political actors.

To take one example, Andi, a 14-year-old white honors student from the United States, describes the impact of development discourse on her activism during the CSW:

> After I saw [the *Girl Effect* videos], I thought, I want to go visit that website and explore the whole thing, I want to donate money, I want to go to workshops and help or do whatever I can. I thought that was really good . . . and you could visually see that they were all connected and you could see the sequence where like, you give a girl a cow and the cow goes to the market and that whole thing . . . the message is still in my head.[7]

Andi, like several CSW girl-delegates, got involved in girls' rights advocacy because she was inspired by the familiar girlpower rhetoric as the cornerstone of individual and global socio-economic development. As Sasha, a high-school senior from an upper-middle-class white New York City family further explains,

> When you give girls the skills to be self-reliant then they have a voice in her own village and they are respected and then that whole video about the girl getting the cow and the cow raising money and then she has money to buy

> another cow and then all of a sudden, the village respects her and the village becomes a community and that branches out. I do believe in that happening.[8]

Sasha's reiteration of the girl effects logic illustrates how the investment paradigm sets the parameters of "eligib[ity] for recognition" of girls in the global South (Butler 2009, iv). It also provides a roadmap for Sasha and Andi to empower "other" girls, legitimizing their political authority as girl-delegates. To be effective girls' rights advocates, girl-delegates must affirm (or at least speak to) girl effects rationale; this narrative solidifies the purpose of their activism and authorizes their participation in the CSW as representatives of Third World girls at the UN.

Andi and Sasha's comments suggest girl-delegates enjoy a degree of political legibility despite their own illegibility as young people in an adult-centered institution; their visibility however is in large part determined by their willingness to play the requisite roles of empowered North American girls. Pre-designated with the desire to "break the cycle of backwardness and free the non-Western girl from the conditions that do not recognize her potential" (Sensoy and Marshall 2010, 301), the scope of girls' activism is delimited; within the boundaries of the CSW, the consequences of going "off script" are significant. As Jessica, a 15-year-old with learning disabilities from a small Midwestern town in the United States recalls, "[CSW members] were going on and on about how we are the people who are going to change the world, and then when we tried to say something that wasn't strictly to [the theme], we were silenced and they took the microphone away."[9] Girl-delegates' visibility and political legibility thus depends upon their ability to sell the investment message projected onto their bodies. This precarious positioning does little to assuage their political vulnerabilities as (in)visible subjects at the UN. Instead, Marie, a 16-year-old, first-generation Chinese-Canadian and aspiring chemist, suggests, girls' voices are tokenized: "Girls aren't really part of it. They are kind of just putting a girl for decoration, like oh look we included a girl!"[10]

Despite pressure (and permission) to represent girls' interests in the global South in pre-scripted ways, girl-delegates struggle with the parameters dictated by the "invest in girls" logic. They actively interrogate the extent to which they can or should represent girls' vulnerabilities in the global South. For instance, Sasha rejects the colonial legacies of Western influence around the world; she argues,

> I don't ever want to go in and be like, "What you are doing is wrong and I am going to change you and fix you and show you the right way." . . . I mean, who am I? . . . I feel like it is de-humanizing to have like an outsider, someone who is from the Western world for example, who doesn't understand their culture, to go in and it's not going to make them feel respected or like part of the solution.[11]

By identifying her outsider status, Sasha tempers her initial affection for the "invest in girls" message to resist colonizing dynamics. She rebuffs Western practices as ideological goods and subverts her status as the empowered "savior" of her Southern counterparts. Andi, similarly, troubles the girl effects logic as she considers the financial sustainability of adolescent female exceptionalism. She finds when she tries to move beyond the investment directive, she arrives at an impasse:

> Most think that it is a campaign to raise money for girls in Africa to go to school for a year, cause that is what most things are—like, "Oh our school raised $4000 so eight girls in Maasailand can go to school for one year." It's like, well awesome but what about for the rest of their life and all the millions of other girls?[12]

In this moment, Andi pivots the burdens of change from an individual girl to the larger community; she also counters her earlier desire "to donate money" to support girls' empowerment and challenges the absence of sustainable economic development in the investment framework. Rather than undermining her activism, this seemingly contradictory position makes visible the precarious politics of representation within which she is situated.

Like other girl-delegates, 17-year-old Elena feels compelled to "do something" to address the needs of girls, particularly after learning about global gender inequality in school. She is a member of a national organization that educates North American girls about human rights violations in the global South and then invites them to participate in national and international meetings on behalf of "other" girls. As a first-generation Pakistani Canadian, Elena's ethnic identity marks her with a different set of political vulnerabilities and agencies. During the CSW, Elena balances her desire to speak against gender-based violence with the unquestioned authority that her race, ethnicity, and location provide. Despite never having experienced a lack of education or harmful traditional practices, she is repeatedly called upon to speak for girls with these experiences in the global South. But Elena consciously resists this precarious positioning. She explains, "I try my best to keep it personal . . . because I am not going to speak for someone else's situation, so I can't you know, say that I was exactly there—cause it is fake and not right. But we do have facts, so we use our facts as best we can to get our message across."[13]

Unlike Elena, at 18-years-old, Ann embodies the normative ideal of white North American girlhood; she has attended the CSW for three years and with each year learns to navigate CSW politics more effectively. One of her strategies includes looking the part of an empowered young woman—in fact, she arrives to the interview wearing a professional business suit and carrying a leather resume folder. Because of Ann's racial identity, she is not called upon in the same ways as Elena; rather, her race qualifies her to speak from an empowered distance about girls' vulnerabilities in the global South. Yet, in describing her girl-delegate role, she offers a collective vision of her activism: "When I am in a session where I am either the only girl under 18 . . . I feel honored in that I am doing my part because now, I at least know for a fact that *we* are getting heard in at least one session, where had I not been there, *we* may not have ever been heard."[14] Ann pushes against the boundaries of girl effects logic to articulate girls' global relationality and not their oppositionality. In doing so, however, she risks possible erasure of girls' differing vulnerabilities and visibilities as intersectional human-rights subjects. This relational approach, despite good intentions, reinforces her predetermination as the empowered "voice" of global girlhood. As a function of the precarious politics of representation, she gains legibility vis-à-vis a missionary girlpower script projected onto her body, whereas the "other" girls for whom she advocates become illegible and unintelligible, unless spoken for by girl-delegates themselves.

Conversely, Ann's call for relationality also evidences how North American girl-delegates mobilize age and gender as unevenly distributed vulnerabilities shared among all girls. As 15-year-old Hannah points out, "I think sometimes girls feel like their voices are overpowered by other people; like the women who have been here for many years or the governments . . . girls kind of lose the confidence they had . . . and they don't feel like there is an opening for them to speak."[15] Girl-delegates therefore recast their shared vulnerabilities as (in)visible subjects to resist neoliberal empowerment logics and advance all girls' rights against the precarious politics of representation. In this reading, embodied vulnerability as relationality makes space for 'other' girls' visibility, representation, and voice as a different set of girl effects. As Marie consents, "I do feel that we need to hear from girls more, but especially girls from developing nations. Just because their voice—they represent most of the girls in this world, and yet they are the ones who are never heard."[16]

"For those who will listen, fine, let us continue with our education":[17] The Paradox of Girls' Education in the Absence of Recognition

It does not surprise me that Andi, one of the girl-delegates in Bent's study, refers to educational sponsorship for "girls in Maasailand" as emblematic of a predictable (if, to Andi's mind, also inadequate) response to girls' education in the global South.[18] After all, girls from African pastoralist communities are routinely depicted as hopeless and in need of outside intervention, if not rescue, from cultural pathologies and immutable conservatism. Andi has no doubt been exposed to this one-dimensional representation. Contrary to this depiction, the rural Maasai communities in Kajiado County, Kenya with whom I spent time are unanimously interested in education for all children, including girls; schoolgirls themselves are deeply invested in what they—along with their mothers, teachers, and many local elders—believe is the cultural capacity of schooling to change their lives for the better. Additionally, more Maasai girls are attending school than ever before (Archambault 2007). Analysis of interviews with girls ages 10–18 attending the co-educational primary day-schools in Keekonyokee Central Location, suggests the development emphasis on girls' education has enabled new, if narrow, spaces of negotiation along gender and generational lines in the institutional fabric of Maasai life (Switzer 2010; see also Hodgson 1996).[19] Indeed, schoolgirls believe that education is the only achievement that will qualify them to succeed in their world today. Schoolgirls' aggressive faith in the promise of education troubles the limited visibility of Maasai girls as abject.

Yet schools are complex sites of cultural politics; changing gendered social relations by schooling girls is by no means guaranteed. Despite a widespread embrace of girls' education, Maasai schoolgirls, like girls elsewhere, live in "contexts that are hostile to the transformations that education can bring about" (Winestone 2004, 6). Education policy promotion often fails to address "gendered relations of power in cultural, economic and political domains that are not easily rectified through schooling" (DeJaehere and Varvus 2011, viii). Consequently, "economic imperatives which construct schooling as an unequivocal social good have provided little space for the consideration of the possible adverse effects of schooling on the reinscription of gender inequalities rather than their amelioration" (Dunne et al. 2006, 77). Because axiomatic claims regarding the linkages among girls' education, empowerment, and economic growth (and concomitant poverty alleviation) do not recognize girls as rights-bearing subjects within the local politics of schooling, they cannot account for the gendered and generational implications of increased institutional access to schooling based on sex. "Investments," can thus "[become] progressively detached from rights and rewards, creating a new and deeper form of female exploitation" (Chant 2006, 208).

"These are questions we did not have."[20]

To vivify these claims, I discuss a story that Ruth, a local woman respected for her activism around girls' education, shared with me. Ruth has twenty years experience in the primary school classroom. She is also the guidance and counseling teacher, a state function designed, in part, to retain girls in school. At the time of our interview, teachers and parents were deeply concerned that eight girls had dropped out because of pregnancy. It remains commonplace in rural Maasai communities for pregnancy to end schooling and inaugurate the girls' arranged marriage. In a community for which loosing one schoolgirl to dropout is considered a problem, loosing eight, Ruth explained, was considered a crisis.

Ruth held a meeting for all girls in the school; both she and the male head teacher talked to them about "working hard" and staying "disciplined" despite "distractions." Much to her surprise, after the meeting the Class 8 head-girl, Nayianoi, approached Ruth to say, "Teacher, you are wasting your time. These girls will not listen to your advice. For those who will listen, fine, let us continue with our education. For those who will not, then just let them drop" (Ruth, interview). Ruth was shocked by Nayianoi's statement and the idea that some girls would not—or could not—take her advice. She was further amazed when the girls asked to call another meeting on their own terms: they asked to meet Ruth without the head teacher because they had their own agenda planned. The girls gathered and Ruth listened as Nayianoi read aloud their concerns written anonymously on scraps of paper. Ruth said during the meeting the girls were "so open and free, like never before" (Ruth, interview). She took notes and shared with me the testimonies that stood out for her.

The statements shared suggest the "everyday reality of violence" girls experience in the context of schooling (Fyles 2013). The comments describe manipulation, intimidation, and coercion related to sexual relationships with "boyfriends." One girl writes of being intimidated when she tries to refuse sex. She says, "The pastor tells me he sees me when I am standing with other people. When I refuse him he tells me he will tell my parents [about us]." Other comments point to manipulation. One notes, "When I refuse [sex] my boyfriend cries in pain. What can I do?" while another says, " I have a boyfriend who promises to get me everything except a car." Two mention the appeal of "kisses" and "money," but suggest that they also feel manipulated into having sex in exchange for this "love." As one writes, "My boyfriend says he loves me. His kisses touch my heart. He kisses me more than my parents ever have. What can I do?" Another worries, "I have a boyfriend. He gives me love and money. I am addicted to that love and that money. What can I do?" Finally, one of the statements reveals possible rape: "My boyfriend forced me to have sex, but I haven't told anyone." Ruth explained, "The questions they have are questions we have never seen, and we ourselves did not have. . . . When I read these I can laugh at some, but most just make me want to cry." For Ruth, the statements evince new and dismaying realities that trouble the seamlessness of girl effects logic and highlight the incongruity of expectations and experience for many girls who go to school (Ruth, interview).

Indeed, invested in girl effects herself, Ruth was stunned to learn that schoolgirls from her own community, assumed to be protected from early sexual debut and motherhood by schooling, were nevertheless at risk for dropping out because of precarious (and in some cases, clearly coercive) intimate relationships. Yet, as scholars have documented, Maasai primary schoolgirls, like schoolgirls elsewhere, endure gender violence[21] as sexual harassment and rape in homesteads, community spaces, and school (Leach and Mitchell 2006; Jones et al. 2008; Parkes and Heslop 2011, 2013; Parkes et al. 2013; Greene et al. 2013; Maternowska et al. 2009; UNICEF 2012).[22] Although I did not explicitly ask about violence in my interviews with schoolgirls, it often came up in veiled terms, as many insisted, "Everyday they disturb us." Jennifer, for example, asked, "How can I stay strong to complete my studies without any disturbances?"[23] Sintaloe said the only "bad" thing about being a schoolgirl is "disturbances."[24] Naishipae asserted, "I will work hard to avoid pregnancy as potential and actual victims of violence threatens the access to agency that schooling affords. Consequently, schoolgirls "who will listen" are enfolded into the category of "recognizable" subjects, whereas those who "will not listen," can be seen as a waste of time. Conversely, we might read the girls' request for a private meeting to voice their concerns and literally write themselves into legibility on scraps of paper as an effort to make their situations "readable" to their teacher, a Maasai woman who might be able to recognize their needs and desires.

These contradictory positions challenge the girl effects logic that schools are inherently safe spaces or that the schoolgirl subject-position inoculates young females from gendered and generational abuse. Schoolgirl subjectivity is a biosocial performance of "developed" adolescent visibility consonant with neoliberal requirements, yet it often clashes with local gendered ideas about (elder) male access to (young) female bodies that, along with poverty, distribute rights in gendered (and gendering) ways. Paradoxically, it is precisely the girls who are most vulnerable to gender violence that girl effects claim to make visible. As Nayianoi's comment suggests, however, some girls are not seen as good investments. Despite their privileged status as schoolgirls, they remain subject to gendered control of their sexual selves. In this shifting terrain, schooling does not necessarily "enlarge life choices, but may even limit them" (Chant 2006, 208). Schoolgirls' questions and concerns beg examinations of the local (in)visibility associated with adolescent female exceptionalism and reinforced by the discursive landscape in which girls' rights are routinely instrumentalized as economic participation without clear recourse to substantive recognition.

"Long live the girls who are complicated . . . like tree roots":[29] Performance and Spoken Word Poetry as Resistance

The Long Live the Girls! project (LLTG), a spoken word poetry workshop designed to "spark an active conversation that would challenge young women to think about the gap between gender policy and everyday life while also contributing to and strengthening a literary culture" (Lichtenstein 2013), debuted in 2013 and was inspired by the Ethiopian government's revised gender equity policies. Founded in partnership with Action for Youth and Community Change in Hawassa, Ethiopia, a diverse urban crossroads, LLTG is co-directed by Ethiopian activist Kidest Tariku and United States-based poet Amanda Lichtenstein. I was invited to co-facilitate the summer 2014 sessions of LLTG as a spoken word artist and scholar.[30] In our workshops, thirty girls grappled with government texts, performing and publishing poetry that "talks back" to dominant scripts on gender and equality. Illustrative examples of their work showcase the disconnect between constitutionally codified rights and constructions of political subjectivity as articulated by girls themselves. LLTG's poetic performances moreover highlight the tensions between girls' embodied desires and the transnational narratives and local contexts that shape their political selves. Girls' participation in LLTG interrupted the single story of Ethiopian girlhood in several ways. First, girls' performances disrupted what it means to be an Ethiopian girl, positioning them as cultural producers of resistance. Secondly, the stories offer a subversive narrative by girls who love their country, yet critique the systemic gender inequality they face within its borders. Finally, LLTG girls counter reductive narratives dictated by girl effects logic. Ethiopian girls' performative practices reconsider the lived experiences that position them as vulnerable as well as politicize their precarity through creative writing and poetry. In this way, LLTG girls mobilize and renegotiate the readings of their bodies using creative performance.

In 2005, the Ethiopian constitution was amended with revisions to the "Family Codes," which articulate laws relating to family conduct, women's safety, and legal protection from violence. These revisions standardize relationships between men and women, offering what appears to be a groundbreaking piece of legislation in the area of women's rights. New edicts range from general admonishments that "spouses owe each other respect, support, and assistance" to specific prohibitions of "domestic violence, female circumcision, rape outside of marriage, abduction of women for marriage, and marriage with a minor, and outlines the penalties associated with each crime" (Ethiopia 2005).

Despite these progressive structural approaches to gendered rights, since the revision of the constitution, these laws are neither enforced (Department of State 2011, 42) nor fully implemented (UN Women 2011b; African Rights Monitor 2010). This lack of everyday efficacy in part explains LLTG participants' initial disengagement with new legislation aimed at protecting them. Prior to our workshops the girls had never read the Ethiopian constitution; when they did, they found it difficult to match its rights-based language with their lived experience. During LLTG, we therefore used writing and performance to negotiate the meaning of these laws in girls' daily lives. Because of the Family Codes' regulation of intimacy and our focus on self-determination in establishing personal boundaries, we titled our project "Love Rules." The "Love Rules" framework invited the girls to engage with the new laws in ways that highlighted the complexities of legislating intimacy. At the same time, we used the title as a way to assert our belief that love should govern intimate relationships.

Many girls, like those in Hawassa, have neither been consulted about the relationships they are assumed to desire, nor have they had the ability to reflect upon what it means to be a girl, or more specifically, a girl with access to rights and power. It is precisely this gap that LLTG was conceived to address; the workshops sought to shift Ethiopian girls' experiences, desires, and stories from singular essentialized representations that position their bodies as hypervisible, yet illegible. Although LLTG warrants further analysis as a social justice project, we nonetheless designed these workshops based on our understanding that writing and performing poetry create a unique space to negotiate meaning between audience and performer. According to the participants, as girls they were accustomed to being seen and acknowledged, but not listened to, consulted, or effectively "read." And yet, "creativity thrives without permission" (Brown 2013, 13). Such a space in which to redefine, revise, rewrite, and share their identities was not otherwise available to them.

An exercise in visibility: "Long live the girls who . . ."

Multiple aspects of girlhood identities emerged in response to one particular writing exercise. We asked the girls to write a list poem describing their identities as girls from Hawassa and who they desired to become. They began each line with "Long live the girls who . . ." and then completed a series of statements. Adanech's poem offers a complex reading of her nation and interpretation of girlhood within that nation in two lines. She writes,

> Long live the girls who were never colonized—like Ethiopia
> Long live the girls who are diversified—like Ethiopia.[31]

Adanech shows pride in the knowledge that her country was never subdued under colonial rule and simultaneously articulates her admiration for the girls with whom she identifies—those who resist subordination. Ethiopian nationalism is a site of historic distinction and pride, and as such, is accepted without question (Bisewar 2008). Adanech, who was enrolled in school at the time of the workshop, has a clear understanding of the violent history that ensured Ethiopia's autonomy. Further, she is familiar with the acceptable nationalist script and performs her role as a "good girl" patriot while also rebelling against the exploitation she suffers as a result of this same nationalism. Her declaration expresses support for girls who fight continued domination in their lives; she subversively combines her nation's history with her own story as an uncolonized, sovereign girl. Adanech was not alone. Throughout the course of the workshops, many of the participants shared similar stories in which exploitation and social expectations were tangled tightly with socially acceptable notions of how girlhood should be properly performed. I observed Adanech and her friends take up this singular story of girlhood and challenge it through their poetry. In the second line, Adanech acknowledges the multi-faceted existence of girls throughout Ethiopia, recognizing the power and possibility found in difference as she stands in solidarity with other girls in her country.

Ehthun echoes Adanech's combination of personal sovereignty with the popular script of national unity. She writes,

> Long live the girls who give knowledge like in school.
> Long live the girls who avoid shyness like a hero.
> Long live the girls who are giving love like my country.[32]

Ehthun speaks power to an idea of girlhood that illustrates characteristics she relates to personally. In her first line, Ehthun positions girls as valid knowledge producers, recognizing them with respect in the same ways that a Western model of education might be perceived in Hawassa. For Ehthun's community, those girls who are permitted to attend school gain something precious, as education equates with respect. Formal schooling also implies a family who values education and can afford to send a daughter to school. Ehthun desires a long life for girls who produce the sort of knowledge gained only through formal education and thus demands respect in public spaces. Yet she also notes the challenges of this experiential respect when girls voice explicit defiance in public. She acknowledges that girls who boldly speak out, educated or not, risk violent backlash. Within a context in which good girls are "shy"—and therefore routinely illegible as self-sovereign subjects—speaking out, especially in confrontational ways, requires heroism. Ehthun's call for "avoid[ing] shyness like a hero" highlights the necessity and failures of government interventions like the constitutional revisions, which proclaim the very rights-bearing recognition that remains absent from the lives of most girls.

Performance allowed LLTG girls to both enact and challenge the girlhoods made available to them. The girls used spoken word poetry and performance to invoke and employ their girlhoods, calling upon their "embodied vulnerability" in ways that might benefit them (Grear 2014, 3). Performance amplified the alternative discourses generated by girls themselves and shifted their lives from "not qualifying as readable" (Butler 2009, iii) to sites rich with potential for social change. Their public poetry performances thus "mobilize[d] and expose[d]" the socially structured and legally instituted conditions of precarity and vulnerability shaping their lives (Butler 2014, 111) by calling attention to their embodied vulnerabilities as areas of political legibility. Yet it is not enough that girls' lives be made readable—girls must also exercise social literacy as survival. The uncertainty that shapes Ehthun's life requires that she be able to read social situations and perform appropriately to ensure her own safety. Her compliance is an insistent reminder that "unequally distributed effects of power . . . act on and through bodies" (Butler 2014, 112). Ehthun acknowledges these self-regulating requirements in her line that mentions the love given by her country. This same country that "gives love" revised the constitution to include her as a rights-holder only ten years ago. Love, then, is complicated for Ehthun. In a context where the ruling government has a history of intolerance to challenges to its authority, Ehthun nonetheless admires girls who she positions metaphorically in the role of the state; girls who exercise this same complete power and who do not abide backtalk, much less dissent. She praises "heroic" girls who lay down the law without consultation, unequivocally proud, not seeking verification or validity from anyone as a form of self-preservation. Ehthun desires to become a girl who can demonstrate a complex version of "love"—hers is a love that "rules."

Precarious performances of nationalism and independence show up throughout other girls' poems, including Kebebushe's who also declared, "Long live the girls who are liberated like my country."[33] The mention of liberation as desirable and past-tense gives insight to Kebebushe's conceptualization of herself as a girl—she identifies as independent, like Ethiopia, yet she is also poor. Kebebushe has found a way to be proud and powerful, and she does not envision herself as helpless or hopeless. Kebebushe is aware of the local and global dynamics that mold her scripting as a girl, so she celebrates her country in a way that is both resistant and socially acceptable for a young Ethiopian girl of her class status. While Hawassa boasts a population of heterogeneous ethnicities and traditions, Kebebushe equates liberation with freedoms that she cannot exercise. In the same line, she expresses her wish to be personally liberated in spite of growing up amid such varied representations of womanhood. She articulates how much she values self-determination even at the high cost of displeasing authority figures who quite literally determine her life.

Because precarity is often the result of specific security systems that codify needs and vulnerabilities (Lorey 2010), we can read the Ethiopian government's constitutional revisions as an attempt to decrease gender-based vulnerability. But the sanctioning of such laws often functions as a mechanism for gender surveillance and regulation of socially acceptable girlhood rather than protection. Despite Ethiopian girls' (in)visibility in development agendas, local policy, and traditional practices, LLTG girls used spoken word poetry and performance to subvert the normative scripts projected onto their bodies. Their poetry and participation in LLTG offered the girls a method for flipping dominant scripts about what it means to experience life as a global girl; their performances trouble the roles of "good" and "bad" girls (Ringrose 2007) and disrupt the definition of who counts as an "investable" girl and what her empowerment looks like. By engaging directly with the Ethiopian constitution and participating in intentional dialogues about justice and gender equity, the LLTG workshop opened new ways for the girls to reflect on their collective identities and individual experiences. Unpacking the specialized legal language of the constitution further established an atmosphere that encouraged questions and debate among the girls.

Because there were no ramifications for their uncertainties or statements, LLTG girls shared their multifaceted dreams and desires. Writing and performance methodologies provided tools for asserting their experience; the workshops created ways for the girls to claim their rights amid the complex intertwining of vulnerability and agency that characterizes their lives (Endsley 2016). When girls author and perform their stories, their audiences cannot deny their multi-dimensional subjectivity as girls who are always growing, always changing, disrupting and defying any "single story" told about them. As Tesfanesh writes,

> My shining makes you glow more
> Makes you all more powerful
> And now I understand.[34]

Conclusion

A constant in the dynamic and fraught terrain of transnational feminist theorizing has been the attempt to make plain the epistemic and material violence inherent to the hegemonic homogenization of the essentialized Third World Other (Mohanty 2013). Yet within global circuits of feminist thought, "the girl," as the subject/object of intervention in the global South, remains a largely uncontested category. To the contrary, our analyses demonstrate the paradoxical character of girls' hypervisibility in development discourse and illegibility in human-rights frameworks. We contend that without a comprehensive rights platform, market-driven rationalities will continue to problematically regulate girls' political subjectivities, further entrench expectations that girls themselves mitigate precarity to ensure global economic growth, and thwart the possibilities of a transformative transnational girls' rights movement.

Our discussions of the ways North American girl-delegates at the UN, rural Maasai schoolgirls, and Ethiopian girl-poets navigate local and transnational expectations animated by the "turn to the girl" foreground "the girl" as a charged category and rich site for considering the efficacy of neoliberal empowerment. The girls in our research, we suggest, are thus best seen as mutable subjects who actively negotiate and sometimes challenge the contingent structures that position them. In this regard, we recognize that girls' capacity for vulnerability, and therefore resistance, does not conform to liberal feminist notions of the autonomous rights-bearing subject, but rather, is "entailed not only in the those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways [they] [inhabit] norms" (Mahmood 2005, 14–15). Indeed, the problem of rights veiled as the "problem of culture" as the primary regulator of girlhood "is really a problem of power" (Hodgson 2011, 140). For girls in the global South, this problem is both representational and poignantly material, seeded in historically hierarchical geopolitical relationships that authorize contradictory representations and political-economic projects, and which compound girls' responsibilities to alleviate precarity without the corresponding increase in power that explicit recourse to rights might ensure. Transformative feminist practice therefore involves not only open acknowledgement of girls' (in)visibility as a form of precarity, but attendance to how girl effects logic works to obscure the possibilities of a transformative human-rights project informed by girls' everyday political practices.

As Butler (2009, iv) reminds us, "We think of subjects as the kind of beings who ask for recognition in the law or in political life; but perhaps the more important issue is how the terms of recognition . . . condition in advance who will count as a subject, and who will not." Girls' narratives push the boundaries of political legibility as well as "repoliticize normative social practices" (Dunne et al. 2006, 77) at local and global scales. This repoliticization ultimately centers girls as complex politically relational subjects, not cultural objects, untapped global markets, or "potential" economic actors. It furthermore compels us to embrace the comprehensive and complicated aspects of girls' political subjectivity and embodied resistance while rejecting normative recourse to what "we" might gain from reifying girls' gendered capacity to attenuate precarity on a global scale.

In this way, although we critique the paradoxical nature of girls' (in)visibility, we do not dispute the fact that girls want and need economic and political rights. In fact, we understand economic, political, social and cultural rights to be deeply interconnected. Without romanticizing rights as institutionalized (neo)liberal recognition, we nonetheless argue it is precisely this "relationality" (Butler 2014) that girl effects discourses obscure. Girl effects logic makes visible a particular type of girl who embodies a specific type of empowerment defined within globalized neoliberal postfeminist politics in which girls' human rights take a backseat to their economic potentiality. To counter this systemic practice, we argue for critical transnational feminist interventions that demand a transformative rights agenda for the just redistribution of life chances made real by the precarious and vulnerable complexities of girls' daily lives.

For us, meaningfully enshrining girls' human rights thus requires fundamental shifts in the girl effects logic of adolescent female exceptionalism. Recognizing all girls as political subjects embedded in collective, relational, and historically contingent realities could help bridge persistent gaps among "policy formations and actions of the state [that] often appear far removed from everyday lives" (Parkes and Heslop 2013, 3). As such, our research continues to grapple with several questions: What are the political consequences of the forms of subjectivity made available to girls through investment logics as the reduction of vulnerability and precarity? How do we disentangle the urgent need for girls' comprehensive rights in the absence of corresponding entitlements vis-à-vis their economic empowerment? How do girls themselves negotiate this paradox to secure their own needs and enable their own desires? It is not enough to celebrate girls' increasing global visibility; rather, "we must now examine the implications of [that] visibility and explore how different groups of girls are navigating the increased public attention to their political selves" (Taft 2014, 265). In the end, "We do not yet know what a precarious body can do" (Nyong'o 2013, 159); therefore if we are serious about "accelerating" transformative girl effects and realizing girls' human rights, then all girls' myriad intercontextual stories need to be at the forefront of our epistemological and political projects.

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4. Sasha, girl-delegate, CSW, 2010. All names in this paper are pseudonyms.

5. The CSW acts as the "principal global policy-making body" dedicated to the advancement of women's human rights (UN Women 2011a). The 2010 Commission considered the fifteen-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action.

6. In March 2010, I interviewed 11 CSW girl-delegates, ages 14 to 18, representing diverse racial, ethnic, and socio-economic communities in North America. To attend the CSW, girl-delegates were sponsored by UN-accredited organizations, including Girls Learn International, Girl Scouts of the USA, The Grail, Loretto Community, and Plan International.

7. Andi (girl-delegate, CSW 54), interview with author, February 27, 2010.

8. Sasha (girl-delegate, CSW 54), interview with author, February 27, 2010.

9. Jessica (girl-delegate, CSW 54), interview with author, March 2, 2010.

10. Marie (girl-delegate, CSW 54), interview with author, March 3, 2010.

11. Sasha (girl-delegate, CSW 54), interview with author, February 27, 2010.

12. Andi (girl-delegate, CSW 54), interview with author, February 27, 2010.

13. Elena (girl-delegate, CSW 54), interview with author, March 2, 2010.

14. Ann (girl-delegate, CSW 54), interview with author, February 28, 2010; emphasis added.

15. Hannah (girl-delegate, CSW 54), interview with author, March 5, 2010.

16. Marie (girl-delegate, CSW 54), interview with author, March 3, 2010.

17. Statement made by Nayanoi to Ruth. Ruth (Guidance and Counseling teacher, Loodariak Priimary School) shared her statement with the author in an interview, and the date is not specified to ensure the anonymity of the girls involved.

18. "Maasailand" generally refers to areas in Kenya and Tanzania demarcated as Maasai reserves during colonial occupation.

19. I conducted interviews with 127 girls (121 in primary, 6 in secondary), 30 mothers, and 30 teachers from August 2007–March 2008 and from June 1–August 1, 2011.

20. Ruth (Guidance and Counseling teacher, Loodariak Primary School), interview with author, date not specified to ensure the anonymity of the girls involved.

21. "Gender violence" acknowledges that "all violence is gendered" and "wider social relations have a powerful influence on institutions" such as schools (Dunne et al. 2006, 80).

22. In a longitudinal study of violence in schools in Kenya, Ghana, and Mozambique, researchers found 90 percent of the girls in Kenya reported experiencing some form of violence in the previous twelve months, including beating, grabbing, whipping, kneeling, peeping, touching, comments, forced sex, sex for goods, insults, threats, letters. In Kenya, 10 percent had been raped and 10 percent exchanged sex for goods (Parkes and Heslop 2013).

23. Jennifer (class 6, Innyonyorri Primary School), interview with author, February 20, 2008.

24. Sintaloe (class 7, Eremit Primary School), interview with author, October, 29 2007.

25. Naishipae (class 6, Olepolos Primary School), interview with author, February 27, 2008.

26. Alice (research assistant), conversation with author, February 2008.

27. *Emurata* for boys and girls transforms children into adults through a series of communal rituals. For girls, the physical procedure entails versions of excision. Female genital cutting is illegal in Kenya, yet it still persists. All but three of the girls in my study had been "circumcised" or would be soon.

28. Head teacher, conversation with author, 31 October 2007, school not identified to protect the identity of the head teacher.

29. Dana (LLTG participant), performance and interview with author, July 15, 2014.

30. In July 2014, I conducted arts and justice workshops with thirty girls ages 11–21 from Hawassa, Ethiopia and the surrounding rural areas. I draw on analyses of participant observation field notes, video recordings, and textual analysis of the artifacts they produced.

31. Adanech, performance and interview with author, July 15, 2014.

32. Ehthun, performance and interview with author, July 15, 2014.

33. Tesfanesh, performance and interview with author, July 15, 2014.

34. Tesfanesh, performance and interview with author, 15 July 2014.

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