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Abstract

Women and girls are currently positioned as highly visible subjects of global governance and development, from the agendas of the United Nations and the World Bank, to the corporate social responsibility campaigns of Nike, Goldman Sachs, and Coca Cola. This paper examines the representations of empowerment in visual (image and video) material from the Nike Foundation's 'Girl Effect' campaign. Drawing on the works of Angela McRobbie and Lilie Chouliaraki, I suggest that this campaign is reflective of a mode of 'post-feminist spectatorship' that is now common to corporatized development discourses; it is manifested both in terms of the conservative mode of neoliberal empowerment proposed for distant others, and the mode of ironic spectatorship imagined for the viewer. I conclude that the relations constructed in the 'Girl Effect' campaign between the (empowered) Western spectator and (yet-to-be-empowered) Third World Girl work to erode bonds of solidarity and entrench structural inequalities by positioning economically empowered girls as the key to global poverty eradication.

Keywords: The Girl Effect; Post-Humanitarianism; Corporate Social Responsibility; Feminism; Nike; Humanitarian Communication

Introduction

The linkage between gender equality and international development is well recognized today; women and girls are now the pre-eminent public faces of global development, heavily featured in policy literature and public-facing documents across a range of institutions. Girls are positioned as increasingly visible subjects of global governance and corporate-led development initiatives in particular, largely as a result of the contention that they represent an ‘untapped resource’ for growth. The visibility of girls in development discourses, however, tends to be overlaid with paternalistic tropes that stress the need to rescue ‘Third World girls’ and accompanied by a repackaging of gender equality and social justice concerns in terms of economic growth, corporate profits, and sustainable development outcomes.¹ Powerful and politically salient narratives of gender equality as ‘smart economic’ policy are dominant across global governance institutions, corporations, and NGOs. These modes of representation – and associated tropes about gender and economic growth – are most readily apparent in a recent spate of public-private partnerships between development institutions and corporations, which focus on the power of global girls as entrepreneurs, consumers, and economic agents.² Prominent among these is the Nike Foundations’ ‘Girl Effect’ campaign, which promotes public awareness of the potential economic impact of girls’ empowerment on international development. Adolescent girls are, the campaign asserts, “the world’s greatest untapped solution” to eradicate poverty.³

I identify the Girl Effect campaign as characteristic of an emergent media discourse, which I term ‘post-feminist spectatorship’. This approach synthesizes Angela McRobbie’s critique of “post-feminism” with Lilie Chouliaraki’s “post-humanitarian spectatorship”.⁴ Through visual analysis of the video appeals produced by the Girl Effect, I demonstrate the various tropes that constitute this discourse and the relationships of spectatorship it constructs between women in the global North and South. To this end, I employ a feminist political economy approach to communication studies, which interrogates media and cultural/ political communication to reveal “the gendered production, distribution, and consumption of goods and resources” and to theorize “how ideology is used to stabilise unequal social relations”.⁵ I understand communication as performative, in the sense that although texts are produced with particular audiences in mind, they also constitute and shape the audience to which they are directed.⁶ In this way, the discourses of post-feminist appeals shape the audience to which they speak and construct a particular relationship between the spectator and distant other, situated within a broader cultural ‘moment’ characterized by emergent forms of neoliberal and corporate feminism.⁷ The remainder of the article proceeds as such: first, it provides a more detailed introduction to the Girl Effect campaign and its media. Next it outlines the main components of post-feminist spectatorship with reference to works in feminist sociology and communications studies. The following three sections explore the core components of post-feminist spectatorship, each of which – the reflexivity of the spectator, the breakdown of feminist solidarity, and the marketizing of moral claims – is discussed with reference to a particular video produced by the Girl Effect campaign. I conclude by re-contextualizing these videos in the broader discourse of corporatized gender equality policy and neoliberal globalization.

The Girl Effect

The increase in the visibility of girls as subjects of global governance is due, in no small part, to the convergence of agendas between corporations and development institutions. Over the past decade, growing concern by businesses to develop Corporate Social

Responsibility (CSR) initiatives has coincided with the emergence of women and girls as the public ‘faces’ of international development. The result has been the proliferation⁸ of “transnational business initiatives” (TBIs) for women’s empowerment and gender equality, joining large corporations, international development institutions, and NGO groups together in myriad forms including hybrid governance networks, transnational networks, business partnerships, and transnational advocacy and knowledge networks.⁹ The Nike Foundation’s Girl Effect campaign is located within this broader political context and is archetypal of it, to the extent that it represents a highly successful and visible effort to generate publicity and popular support for TBIs in the area of gender and global governance.

The Nike Foundation, founded in 2004 by Nike’s corporate responsibility wing, originally set its focus on ending intergenerational poverty; in pursuit of this goal, it identified adolescent girls as the most effective “point of leverage” and best investment.¹⁰ Although it constitutes a charitable project by the Nike Foundation and an element of Nike Inc.’s corporate social responsibility platform, the Nike Foundation calls the Girl Effect a “movement” rather than a campaign or corporate citizenship initiative. The Girl Effect provides small grants to organisations that work with adolescent girls but is largely a media-oriented campaign focused on branding and publicity, as its online presence is primarily focused on raising awareness and encouraging individuals to use their social networks to “make the case for girls.”¹¹ Furthermore, the Nike Foundation suggests that its involvement in the campaign is less about brand awareness than a desire to bring Nike’s fundraising and marketing expertise to bear on this issue; by its own estimation, it serves as a “catalyst to drive demand action.”¹²

The Girl Effect is a visually arresting and glossy corporate campaign with multiple online platforms including a website, YouTube channel, and Twitter feed. In this paper, I focus my analysis specifically on three short video appeals¹³ for the Girl Effect. These videos have been the centrepiece of the Girl Effect campaign, winning awards and acclaim in the advertising and marketing worlds¹⁴ and are featured heavily across the campaign’s various social media platforms. The first video appeared at the 2008 launch of the Girl Effect at the World Economics forum; subsequently, other videos have been shown at the 2009 Clinton Global Initiative meeting and in mainstream media outlets including the Oprah Winfrey Show.¹⁵ As of May 2014, they have logged a combined three million views on YouTube. The Girl Effect therefore presents an ideal entry point for the study of corporatized gender equality initiatives because of the resources behind the campaign and its mission to reach audiences in the private sector, governments, and the public.

The corporatization of development governance has been accordingly accompanied by the proliferation of CSR initiatives which translate the philosophy of ‘doing well by doing good’ into the realm of international development.¹⁶ Within the multiple and overlapping categories of CSR in development, the Girl Effect initiative is reflective of what Ponte et. al. term “distant, disengaged CSR”: distant CSR takes place outside of the corporation’s own labour force or supply chain and disengaged CSR resembles corporate philanthropy without direct impact on the company’s operations. Distant, disengaged CSR therefore involves corporate philanthropy and cause-related marketing campaigns for distant beneficiaries.¹⁷ The notable turn in Corporate Social Responsibility discourses towards a focus on the promotion of gender equality – or the ‘girl powering’ of corporate governance – is a trend situated in the broader context of privatized governance and the normalization of norms of corporate self-regulation, privatization of public service, and belief in the superiority of market rationality.¹⁸

Post-Feminist Spectatorship

The Girl Effect videos demonstrate the emergence of a new development discourse that centres around “global girl power” and positions adolescent girls in the global South as an as-yet-untapped resource to eradicate global poverty.¹⁹ The Girl Effect campaign is characteristic of a particular discursive construction of poverty, gender relations, and global inequalities: I suggest that it reflects a new mode of ‘post-feminist spectatorship’, incorporating the gender politics of post-feminism into a post-humanitarian mode of communication.

Post-feminism

Angela McRobbie identifies the current cultural moment as one characterized by post-feminism, generated by a complex anti-feminist backlash. In post-feminism, McRobbie sees an insidious “double movement” whereby gender retrenchment (re-traditionalization) occurs through a range of discourses which invite female freedom and equality while simultaneously rejecting feminist political action: “feminism is taken into account in order that it can be understood as having passed away.”²⁰ The perennial media commentary on the “irrelevance” of feminism or feminism “gone too far” attests to this complex backlash which accepts some core feminist principles while rejecting its call to political engagement.²¹ Post-feminism positions itself as a well-intentioned response to feminism, while in fact it constitutes a rejection of feminism and instead prompts a move towards a highly conservative notion of empowerment and a new sexual contract.²²

Beyond the UK context, McRobbie suggests that post-feminist political discourses shape global relations between girls and women, as well as the policy narratives through which gender is represented. On the one hand, girls have gained recognition as “subjects worthy of governmental attention” and this visibility has been granted as a result of the discovery of girls’ economic agency, to the extent that girls now emerge across a range of discourses as worthy targets for investment.²³ The conception of girls’ agency as dormant or inactive allows for the ascription of potential agency and productivity to girls, conditioned by the intervention of appropriate Western institutions and individuals. However, on the other hand, post-feminist discourses work to break down alliances or affiliations that contribute to a sense of feminist solidarity. Young women in the West are offered a highly conservative, and narrowly circumscribed, mode of empowerment characterized by sexual and economic freedoms; they are therefore positioned *against* gender arrangements in other cultures, disarticulating feminist relations of solidarity and substituting neo-colonial sentiments of pity or scorn by supposedly empowered Western women for victimized, non-Western women.²⁴ The global relationship constructed is therefore inimical to feminist solidarity and instead promotes the idea that emancipated women can help to modernize – and thereby ‘save’ – their disempowered counterparts in the global South by supporting interventions to capitalize on their economic agency.

Post-humanitarianism

Concurrently, a “crisis of pity” in the field of humanitarian communication²⁵ has given rise to a new mode of communication which reflects significant shifts in the aesthetic style, political grammar, and spectator relationship of humanitarian appeals; Lilie Chouliaraki identifies this new form as “post-humanitarianism” and positions it along a broader trajectory of humanitarian communication.²⁶ Past styles of humanitarian appeal fall into two categories: ‘shock’ appeals employ visceral images of suffering to elicit feelings of guilt and shame as

catalysts for action, while ‘positive’ appeals instead employ images of sufferers with a focus on their individual agency, dignity, and gratitude towards benefactors. Negative and positive appeal styles have been the subjects of extensive critique for the ways in which they, respectively, employ images of death and destruction to fetishize sufferers under a neo-colonial gaze and misrecognize unequal power relations through images of ‘poor but happy’ others.²⁷

As such, a new mode of appeals – which Chouliaraki terms “post-humanitarian” – is emergent. It responds to, and directly acknowledges, the contradictions of humanitarian communication and relies on the spectator’s own reflexivity instead of appealing to grand emotions. Post-humanitarian appeals break with the past negative and positive appeals in two ways: first, post-humanitarianism dispenses with photorealism by employing new aesthetic tactics to trigger reflexivity in the spectator and second, it abandons attempts to situate appeals in traditional moral registers of pity, shame, empathy, or gratitude.²⁸ Instead of attempting to elicit grand emotions in the spectator, post-humanitarian appeals ask her to reflect on her own life and to rely on personal judgment about the worthiness of the cause or the need for action.

Post-feminist spectatorship

I suggest that contemporary development discourses connected to the promotion of ‘global girl power’, particularly those that abound in transnational business initiatives, employ a mode of post-feminist spectatorship to construct relations between the self (empowered Western woman) and the distant other (disempowered ‘Third World Girl’). Post-feminism and post-humanitarianism are co-emergent political and communicative assemblages which are concurrently manifested in contemporary discourses of ‘girl powered’ development and CSR. McRobbie’s concept of post-feminism illuminates the political context in which corporatized and neoliberal narratives of gender equality as ‘smart economics’ gain traction. Chouliaraki’s post-humanitarian spectatorship articulates the new mode of spectatorship these discourses perform and the relationships they construct. Together, these analytical lenses illuminate the powerful and politically salient narratives of gender equality as economic growth that animate corporatized development discourse. Post-feminist spectatorship, I will demonstrate, is comprised of three main components: 1) an *anti-politics* approach to suffering and the abandonment of grand emotional narratives which acknowledges the spectator’s fatigue; 2) the breakdown of solidarity replaced by reflexive consideration on the part of the individual spectator; and 3) the embrace of an instrumentalized, marketized rationale for action in place of concern with gender justice. In the following sections, I will elaborate each of these themes with reference to the Girl Effect videos, using each of its video appeals to demonstrate a different component of post-feminist spectatorship.

Theme 1. The Reflexive Spectator

Post-feminist spectatorship is characterized by an *anti-politics* approach where the problem of gender inequality is acknowledged but strategies for addressing and eradicating inequality are fully disarticulated from a feminist political movement. On the premise that gender inequalities are now taken seriously by governments, the notion of an “autonomous feminist politics” is displaced and represented as irrelevant.²⁹ Post-feminist spectatorship disengages with narratives of emotion or moral urgency, opting instead to articulate gender inequality issues in a way that allows the spectator to inspect herself and consider her own

agency. It dispenses with grand narratives of emotion that justify public action on the basis of universal ideals – gender justice – and instead appeals to individual judgments about empowerment, success, and global gender relations. Furthermore, this manner of reflexive spectatorship is signalled with explicit acknowledgement of the spectator’s position, her fatigue with appeals, and her unconscious assumptions about gender and poverty. This narrative approach is evident in the Girl Effect video titled “I Dare You”. “I Dare You” features a female narrator, with an African-inflected accent,³⁰ speaking over close-up photographs of women’s faces. The narrator speaks:

“I dare you to look at me and see only a statistic, someone you’ll never meet, a tragedy, a commodity, a child bride. I dare you to look at me with pity, fatigue, dismissal. I dare you to look at me as more than a poster for your cause, a promise you want to keep. I dare you to look at me and see I am the answer. I dare you to rethink what it means to look at a girl: not a burden, not an object, but the answer.”³¹

Text subsequently appears on screen, explaining the impact of investment in girls – lower HIV rates, decreased malnutrition, economic growth, improved family welfare – and the video ends by challenging the viewer: “Dare to see this girl. Count her. Invest in her. Advocate for her. Nike Foundation.”

This video addresses the post-feminist spectator by consciously playing on the assumption that she feels fatigued with charity appeals. It reflects the post-humanitarian notion that emotions operate in an “economy of scarcity” in which emotional connection to distant others comes at the expense of other emotions.³² The video directly engages with the viewer’s fatigue and challenges her to overcome it; it eschews narratives of solidarity and positions public exhaustion with charity appeals as the main obstacle to the spectator’s engagement. Furthermore, the language of “daring to see” employed here reflects the post-feminist sentiment that the empowered Western woman will primarily conceive of her counterpart in the global South as oppressed, victimized, and fully disempowered.

The video promotes a narrative of girls and women as worthy investments and “privileged subjects of social change”, albeit in a wholly depoliticized context, where empowered girlhood is foregrounded as the solution to global poverty.³³ It thus explicitly links the demands to re-imagine the woman in question as “the answer, not a burden” and with calls to invest in and advocate for this woman. In doing so, it first serves to displace development agency away from the narrator and instead onto the spectator while secondly, it works to individualize the obligations of development by conveying the notion that the challenge of women’s subordination could be solved, if only the Western spectator could be convinced to overcome her fatigue and re-think the role of women in development. In this way, consumer-driven philanthropy campaigns that propose to ‘raise awareness’ among a wealthy, Western public perpetuate “the myth that there is no real linkage between rich and poor” or between consumption and exploitation.³⁴ The Girl Effect campaign’s message is therefore consistent with the shift in humanitarian discourse that places greater focus on the social identity of the donor as it relates to her involvement in glamorous development campaigns.³⁵

As such, the video positions itself with and against the legacy of humanitarian appeals on which it builds. The Girl Effect campaign repeatedly and explicitly appeals to the emotional economy of scarcity, playing on the assumption that the viewer has been previously and continually bombarded with humanitarian imagery and appeals and will therefore be unmoved by the standard images of deprivation or statistics about poverty. Another clip, titled “The Girl Effect” (video) opens by admitting that “the world is a mess”, listing numerous global problems (“Poverty. AIDS. Hunger. War. So what else is new?”).³⁶ It then colloquially goads the viewer to overcome her reluctance to engage with its message:

“Imagine a girl living in poverty. No, go ahead, really imagine her”. It repeatedly positions the viewer, as a member of the post-feminist public, in the role of reluctant passer-by who would otherwise choose not to engage with questions of global politics, poverty, and women’s subordination.

Theme 2. Breakdown of Solidarity

Post-humanitarian spectatorship is premised on an “ironic solidarity” which avoids political commitments and is instead re-oriented toward the self.³⁷ In the post-feminist context, this orientation towards self-reflexivity revolves around the relationship articulated between empowered self and disempowered other. In the wealthy liberal states of the West, “our” young women are encouraged to understand themselves as “grateful subjects of modern states and cultures”, in opposition to distant others who lack access to Western freedoms; this discourse constructs a specific mode of engaging with distant others in which solidarity is displaced and civilizational hierarchies re-instated.³⁸ In the context of appeals, this discourse asks the spectator to examine her life through the lens of the disempowered life of a distant other and, by playing with multiple and contradictory conceptions of girlhood, challenges the spectator to act in order to improve the life of the disempowered Third World Girl. This mode of ironic, reflexive solidarity is manifested in the “Clock is Ticking” video from the Girl Effect campaign. Using bold colours and animated figures, the video begins as such:

“Hey there, it’s us again. We have a situation on our hands and the clock is ticking. When a girl turns 12 and lives in poverty, her future is out of her control. In the eyes of many, she’s a woman now. No, really, she is. She faces the reality of being married by the age of 14. Pregnant by the time she’s 15. And if she survives childbirth, she might have to sell her body to support her family which puts her at risk for contracting and spreading HIV. Not the life you imagined for a 12 year old, right? But, the good news is there’s a solution...”³⁹

It goes on to suggest that, if we can “rewind her” to age twelve and set out a different life trajectory, the girl can get an education and become economically successful. It concludes by considering the global impact of girls’ empowerment: “50 million girls in poverty equals 50 million solutions. This is the power of the Girl Effect.”⁴⁰ In this video, the opposing notions of development and underdevelopment are given corporeal form in the body of an adolescent girl whose life is pre-determined to follow one of two trajectories: either “autonomy, productivity and promise” or “tradition, confinement, reproductivity, and peril”.⁴¹ This narrative represents the adolescent girl as both uniquely powerful and vulnerable, but entirely reliant on benevolent intervention by the Western spectator. A similar message of divergent girlhoods appeared on the Girl Effect’s website in 2011, where visitors to the site could contemplate the fate of “the girl”.

“A. SHE GETS A CHANCE: she gets educated; she stays healthy; marries when she chooses; raises a family. As a result, she has the opportunity to raise the standard of living for herself and her family.

B. NONE OF THIS HAPPENS: she is illiterate; married off; is isolated; is pregnant; vulnerable to HIV. As a result she and her family are stuck in a cycle of poverty.”⁴²

The “Clock is Ticking” video uses a clock face and a figure running back and forwards around it to represent the maturation process of an adolescent girl, whose progress from girl

child to woman embodies tropes of promise and peril that stand in for the development process writ large. The video asks spectators to reflect on the lives of disempowered Third World girls through the prism of their own lives and childhoods (“not the life you imagined for a 12 year old, right?”); in doing so, it encourages the spectator to imagine the possible trajectories of empowerment and disempowerment that await Third World girls who, absent intervention, will be lost to development.⁴³ The visual tropes that juxtapose multiple and conflicting girlhoods, characterized either by victimhood or empowerment, not only trigger reflexivity in the spectator but work to construct the spectator’s own identity: as Chandra Mohanty famously wrote, the image of the oppressed Third World woman “enables and sustains” the self-presentation of the liberated Western woman.⁴⁴

The Girl Effect videos employ visual tropes to telegraph disempowerment and ‘otherness’ without relying on photorealism or images of suffering with specific geographic or racial markers; much of this is done through creative textual representation. For instance, in “The Clock is Ticking” video, the girl figure flees from (disembodied) hands that represent forces pulling her into sex work; in “The Girl Effect” video, images characteristic of negative appeals are textually rendered to depict a stereotypical scene of globally homogenous disempowerment where ‘flies’ buzz around a ‘girl’ and her ‘baby’. Its representational mode therefore aims to move away from photorealism and, in doing so, to de-racialize and de-politicize the narrative of disempowerment. Nonetheless, the videos draw on deeply entrenched representational regimes common to ‘shock’ humanitarian appeals, where the iconic image of flies buzzing around babies and children is representative of the broader “pornography of poverty” style of humanitarian communication.⁴⁵ The Girl Effect videos, situated within this visual legacy, fuse these resonant images of poverty with tropes about the agential feminine entrepreneur and innocent child subject.⁴⁶

This video reflects the process of post-feminist disarticulation in that it endorses a “logic of affiliation” with non-Western girls premised on their victimhood and lack of access to the freedoms of empowered, Western women; furthermore, absent any reference to feminist politics, collective action, or global structural inequalities, it makes solidarity impossible and unthinkable by discursively rendering political action unnecessary.⁴⁷ Solidarity is impossible, in this context, because the visual representations of adolescent girls depend on the stark opposition of empowered Western lives and disempowered, non-Western ones. Political action is also far removed from the Girl Effect campaign, whose videos do not articulate specific actions for the spectator to take, like donating money to the campaign or petitioning political officials; they instead promote a vague sense of awareness or belief in the power of adolescent girls. This typifies the strange marriage of corporate social responsibility and global development institutions through multimedia advertising campaigns, in which we are not always sure of what is being sold or to whom.

Theme 3. Marketizing Morality

In the post-feminist mode of appeals, the notion of solidarity shifts away from solidarity as salvation of others or revolutionary collective action, towards an instrumentalization of solidarity on the basis of economic calculation.⁴⁸ The Girl Effect appeals dispense with moral claims or grand emotional narratives and instead employ economic logic to persuade the viewer that the empowerment of girls is important primarily because of the potential for empowered girls to eradicate poverty in their families and communities and, by extension, produce global economic growth. In the prevailing context of neoliberal “business ontology”, where it is “simply obvious” that everything in society should function according to business principles,⁴⁹ it follows that the most widespread and

influential discursive formulations of gender equality will be those that originate in market logic and work for the achievement of market goals. That is to say, not only do post-feminist discourses promote the understanding of gender equality as having been (mostly) achieved, but they do so in ways that foreground narratives of efficiency, productivity, and profit as by-products of equality.

The dominant discourses of ‘Gender Equality as Smart Economics’ and the ‘Business Case for Gender Equality’ deploy a post-feminist logic of solidarity as rational economic calculation, promoting a resolutely anti-political case for gender equality as economic growth.⁵⁰ “The Girl Effect” (video) typifies this trope. It begins by explaining that the solution to global poverty, disease, and conflict is “not the internet... It’s not science... It’s not the government... It’s not money... It’s a girl.” It continues:

“Imagine a girl living in poverty. No, go ahead, really imagine her... [Figures of ‘GIRL’ and ‘BABY’, surrounded by ‘FLIES’, are crushed by figures of a ‘HUSBAND’, ‘HUNGER’, and ‘HIV’]. Now pretend you can fix this picture... Let’s put her in a school uniform. And see her get a loan to buy a cow and use the profits from the milk to help her family. Pretty soon, her cow becomes a herd. And she becomes the business owner who brings clean water to the village, which makes men respect her good sense and invite her to the village council. Where she convinces everyone that all girls are valuable. Soon, more girls have a chance and the village is thriving...Which means the economy of the entire country improves and the whole world is better off. Are you following what’s happening here?...”⁵¹

The video unceremoniously (and with a ‘wink’) abandons any recourse to moral claims about justice and equality, instead reverting to the ‘business case’ logic of efficiency and value for money.⁵² The post-feminist spectator is not the target of universal claims about the power of global sisterhood, the moral urgency of gender justice, or the power of feminist solidarity to affect political transformation; she is instead appealed to on the basis of market rationality, where women’s empowerment is desirable to the extent that it generates overall economic growth. “The Girl Effect” (video) encapsulates this marketization of gender equality, as it visualizes the transformation of disempowered Third World girls into “economically active citizens” whose entrepreneurial skills and credit-worthiness contribute to their position as prominent subjects of global governance.⁵³

It is therefore reflective of the ‘Gender Equality as Smart Economics’ policy agenda more broadly, which similarly foregrounds an efficiency rationale over moral claims. The alignment of feminist language and neoliberal economic policy has produced a strategically salient narrative that is now widespread throughout global governance institutions and corporate citizenship initiatives.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, the drawbacks of a reliance on this efficiency rationale are apparent: gender justice requires engagement with global structural inequalities and an intersectional analysis of the everyday, lived experience of the global economy. The Girl Effect campaign is wholly devoid of these discussions and instead reproduces a grammar of gender equality-as-growth that is little more than “cheap talk”: its rhetoric and imagery can be embraced by a diverse (and sometimes contradictory) range of audiences without constituting a commitment to any particular policy or idea.⁵⁵

Public-private partnerships in development are pioneers of this discourse, imbuing the current spate of high profile corporate social responsibility initiatives with a strong gender focus and thereby associating brands with the rhetoric of gender equality. The Girl Effect campaign also serves this function, constructing implicit relationships between spectator and Nike Inc. by cultivating an “aura” around the brand associated with women’s empowerment in order to appeal to the post-feminist spectator as consumer.⁵⁶ Corporate citizenship initiatives are increasingly popular mechanisms for branding because, while they often do not

directly aim to improve practices of producers, they promote the notion that consumers can remedy social ills through their purchase of certain brands.⁵⁷ Nike Inc. and the Nike Foundation capitalize on this link in their publicity material, asserting a relationship between the corporation and women all over the world who are “underserved and underrated - whether as consumers of sports apparel or as people who could help break the cycle of poverty in poor nations.”⁵⁸ The Girl Effect campaign does not prominently feature Nike’s logo or name but employs other visual strategies to this end. Of the three Girl Effect videos, two videos are animated and rendered entirely in Nike Inc. corporate colours – orange, black, and white – thereby visually communicating the brand and its association with social responsibility discourses, even without the words ‘Nike Inc.’ appearing on screen.⁵⁹

Furthermore, the feminist observer of the Girl Effect campaign must note the deep irony of a company who has in the past been implicated in exploitative labour practices, including the use of child labour, developing a corporate citizenship campaign premised on the need to make adolescent girls more economically productive.⁶⁰ The Girl Effect campaign promotes a glossy and inspirational narrative of empowered adolescents generating income for their communities through entrepreneurship in a world wholly detached from Nike’s own workers and practices.⁶¹ It is therefore a notable closure that the narrative of “The Girl Effect” (video) positions adolescent empowerment in terms of small-income generating entrepreneurship and community-based commerce. In the scenario of adolescent empowerment presented here, the empowered girl buys a cow, develops a herd, and opens a small business: she does not take a job at a Nike factory or similar manufacturing plant. In fact, despite marketing strategies which purport to promote a singular image of the empowered ‘global girl’, companies like Nike depend on heterogeneous constructions of femininity and the persistence of particular constructions of femininity – docile, ‘respectable’ women – which make female labour *cheaper*.⁶²

Conclusions

In this paper I have argued that the Nike Foundation’s Girl Effect campaign is archetypal of a powerful discourse of gender equality that has gained influence through its association with transnational business initiatives. Partnerships between public governance institutions and corporations are increasingly widespread in the area of gender and Nike Inc.’s Nike Foundation is a leader in this area. The most visible manifestation of this trend, the Girl Effect campaign, reflects the political salience of instrumental, ‘business case’ tropes around gender equality and the increasing role corporations play in setting the development agenda. Furthermore, I have argued that the Girl Effect typifies a post-feminist political discourse manifested through post-humanitarian styles of communication.

Post-feminist spectatorship is an emergent mode of communication in development and global governance discourses and typified by the range of media that promotes public awareness of global girl power. It invites engagement with the distant other through a new political grammar that combines tropes of neo-colonial ‘saving’ with the business ontology of neoliberalism; post-feminism eschews solidarity in favour of a (purportedly) rational economic approach to empowering girls and women and thereby unlocking the most efficient resources for growth. Post-feminist discourses position spectator and subject in a hierarchical relationship structured by oppositions between modern and traditional, empowered and disempowered, and agent and victim; as such, post-feminist spectatorship adopts a ‘maternalistic’ gaze⁶³ towards the distant other and invites the spectator to save her by investing in her economic potential. Moreover, this discourse reinstates a cultural binary whereby the identities of empowered, Western woman and disempowered Third World

woman are constructed in opposition to, but are simultaneously constitutive of, each other. This relationship is antithetical to feminist solidarity because it closes off consideration of global structural inequalities that perpetuate women's subordination and instead celebrates a narrow, economistic notion of economic empowerment and modernization-as-Westernization. Lastly, the Girl Effect campaign and initiatives like it serve to increase corporate power in development and global governance institutions, wherein gender justice is re-written as a 'smart business' strategy that should be sold to the private sector and corporations are represented as the actors best able to empower women.

In conclusion, the mainstreaming of post-feminist narratives of gender equality in corporatized development discourses has significant consequences for feminist analysis and action. The main implication is the way in which the success and influence of discourses like the Girl Effect and its narrative of de-politicized, post-feminist empowerment-as-efficiency legitimize and entrench the expectation that feminist claims must be articulated in terms of market logic and business ontology. In doing so, the language of gender equality is decoupled from the feminist politics of collective action for gender justice. Feel-good narratives that reveal adolescent girls to be the hidden 'solution' to global poverty may serve to raise awareness among the public and policy makers of the benefits of gender equality, but they do so in a way that closes off space for trenchant critique of widening inequalities and intersectional oppression in the context of neoliberal globalization and restructuring.

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¹ Elias, "Davos Woman"; Bexell, "Global Governance"; Sensoy and Marshall, "Missionary Girl Power".

² See Hayhurst, "Corporatising Sport, Gender and Development"; Koffman and Gill, "The revolution will be led"; Bent, "A Different Girl Effect."

³ Girl Effect, *The Girl Effect*, 1; Girl Effect, *Smarter Economics*.

⁴ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*; Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator*; Chouliaraki, "Post-humanitarianism".

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- ⁵ Lee, “Feminist Political Economy of Communication”, 83.
- ⁶ Chouliaraki, “Post-humanitarianism”.
- ⁷ McRobbie, “Feminism, the Family, and the New ‘Mediated’ Maternalism”.
- ⁸ Recent TBIs in the area of gender equality and empowerment include the Nike Foundation’s partnerships with the UK Department for International Development (the Girl Hub, 2009) and World Bank (the Adolescent Girl Initiative, 2008), UN Women’s partnership with Coca Cola (the 5by20 Strategic Partnership, 2011), the United Nations Foundation’s partnership with Exxon Mobile (the Roadmap for Women’s Empowerment, 2013), the United Nations’ corporate code of principles (the UN Global Compact and added Women’s Empowerment Principles, 2010), USAID and the Ford Foundation (Women and Girls Lead Global, 2013) and a variety of partnerships between corporations and non-profits for empowerment including Goldman Sachs (10,000 Women, 2008), Intel (Girl Rising, 2013) and Hindustan Unilever (the Shakti Amma program, 2008), among others.
- ⁹ Prügl and True, “Equality Means Business?”, 5-6; see also Roberts, “The Political Economy of ‘Transnational Business Feminism’”; Rai, “Gendering Global Governance”.
- ¹⁰ CEO Maria Eitel quoted in Kanani, “The Nike Foundation”.
- ¹¹ Girl Effect, “About”.
- ¹² Kylander, “The Girl Effect Brand”, 2.
- ¹³ The three videos are titled “I Dare You” (2008a), “The Clock Is Ticking” (2010), and “The Girl Effect” (2008b). To avoid confusion between the Girl Effect campaign broadly and the particular video clip called “The Girl Effect”, I will refer to it as “The Girl Effect” (video).
- ¹⁴ Kylander, “The Girl Effect Brand”, 4.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ¹⁶ Richey and Ponte, “Better (Red)TM than Dead?”; Ponte, Richey and Baab, “Bono’s Product (RED) Initiative”; and Cameron and Haanstra, “Making Development Sexy”.
- ¹⁷ Ponte, Richey and Baab, “Bono’s Product (RED) Initiative”, 302-4.
- ¹⁸ Soederberg, “Taming Corporations”, 507-8; Rai, “Gendering Global Governance”, 502.
- ¹⁹ Koffman and Gill, “The revolution will be led”.
- ²⁰ McRobbie, “Reflections on Feminism”, 180.
- ²¹ Redfern and Aune, *Reclaiming the F Word*.
- ²² McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*; McRobbie, “Reflections on Feminism”. Interestingly, in the wake of high profile (neo)liberal feminist publications like Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* manifesto, McRobbie has tempered her assessment of the state of feminism. Post-feminism, McRobbie previously argued, was premised on a fierce cultural repudiation – “almost hatred” – of feminism; see McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 12. Today, she suggests, feminism is no longer despised but has achieved new life through its articulation with neoliberal values; see McRobbie, “Feminism, the Family and the New ‘Mediated’ Maternalism”, 121.
- ²³ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 57; Wilson, “‘Race’, Gender and Neoliberalism”; Wilson, “Agency as ‘Smart Economics’”.
- ²⁴ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 26.
- ²⁵ Chouliaraki understands humanitarian communication to extend beyond institutional appeals made by international organizations and to include popular practices like celebrity appeals, concerts, and news (2012: 3).
- ²⁶ Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator*; Chouliaraki, “Post-humanitarianism”.
- ²⁷ Chouliaraki, “Post-humanitarianism”, 110-114; see also Dogra, “‘Reading NGOs Visually’”.
- ²⁸ Chouliaraki, “Post-humanitarianism”, 114.
- ²⁹ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 15.
- ³⁰ The narrator’s identity is not revealed and she does not appear on screen but Wilson (“‘Race’, Gender and Neoliberalism”) and Switzer (“(Post) Feminist Development Fables”) both identify her accent as of African origin.
- ³¹ The Girl Effect, “I Dare You”.
- ³² Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator*, 75; Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*.
- ³³ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 15.
- ³⁴ Richey, “Brand Aid?”, 507.
- ³⁵ Cameron and Haanstra, “Development Made Sexy”.

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- ³⁶ Girl Effect, “The Girl Effect (video)”.
- ³⁷ Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator*, 15.
- ³⁸ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 27-8.
- ³⁹ The Girl Effect, “The Clock is Ticking”.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Switzer, “(Post) Feminist Development Fables”, 347; Shain, “The Girl Effect”.
- ⁴² Girl Effect website, 2011, quoted in Shain, “The Girl Effect”.
- ⁴³ Switzer, “(Post) Feminist Development Fables”, 352.
- ⁴⁴ Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes”, 82.
- ⁴⁵ Cameron and Haanstra, “Development Made Sexy”, 1476.
- ⁴⁶ Manzo, “Imagining Humanitarianism”; Wilson, “‘Race’, Gender and Neoliberalism”.
- ⁴⁷ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 26.
- ⁴⁸ Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator*, 4.
- ⁴⁹ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 17.
- ⁵⁰ Roberts and Soederberg, “Gender Equality as Smart Economics?”; Chant, “The Disappearing of ‘Smart Economics’?”; Chant and Sweetman, “Fixing Women or Fixing the World?”.
- ⁵¹ The Girl Effect, “Girl Effect (video)”.
- ⁵² In a notable example of the persistence of imperialist discourses of ‘saving’ the Other and the rejuvenation of this discourse in corporatized CSR terms, the clip described here provides a literal visualization of Spivak’s famous critique, with one notable difference. Rather than imagining white men “saving the brown women from brown men”, the Girl Effect videos (and discourse of global girl power more generally) envision a role for white women in saving “brown women from brown men”; see Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”.
- ⁵³ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 77.
- ⁵⁴ See Chant and Sweetman, “Fixing Women or Fixing the World?”; Elias, “Davos Woman”; Bexell, “Global Governance”.
- ⁵⁵ Moore, “Empowerment At Last?”.
- ⁵⁶ Arvidsson, *Brands: Meaning and Value*, Chapter 4.
- ⁵⁷ Dauvergne and Lebaron, *Protest Inc.*, 52; Ponte, Richey and Baab, “Bono’s Product (RED) Initiative”.
- ⁵⁸ Global Private Sector Leaders Forum, *Promoting Women’s Economics Empowerment*, 18.
- ⁵⁹ The Girl Effect, “I Dare You”, “Girl Effect (video)”, and “The Clock is Ticking”. ‘The Girl Effect’ (video) and ‘The Clock is Ticking’ are animated in Nike Inc. brand colors although they do not feature the brand name or logo. They do, however, end with the Girl Effect logo which is also rendered in Nike corporate colors. The ‘I Dare You’ video uses photographs and ends with a title card reading: ‘Nike Foundation’.
- ⁶⁰ Boje and Khan, “Story-branding by Empire Entrepreneurs”; Spar and Burns, “Hitting the Wall”.
- ⁶¹ See Enloe, *The Curious Feminist*, Chapters 3-4. Cynthia Enloe provides a lively and concise feminist political economy account of the ‘globetrotting sneaker’. The practices of Nike and manufacturers like it are deeply gendered, Enloe demonstrates, not least because of the way that *cheapened* female labour is exploited to produce these products. This labour is underpinned by violence and militarism, and continually moved between south Asian countries in search of cheaper labour and repressive political conditions. Moreover, Ruth Pearson suggests, the wages paid to women are low not only because the gendered nature of the labour market that undervalues women’s labour, but because of the way that social reproduction is organized therein. In its limited conception of the ‘social’, CSR fails to account for the essential role of social reproductive labour; see Pearson, “Beyond Women Workers”, 738-9.
- ⁶² Enloe, *The Curious Feminist*, 68.
- ⁶³ I use the term “maternalistic” here to evoke the idea of paternalism with feminist characteristics. Anne Ferguson introduces the idea of “maternalism” with reference to aid frameworks developed by white women in the global North and implemented on (without the consultation of) non-white women in the global South; see Ferguson, “Resisting the Veil of Privilege.” Alternately, Spivak uses the term “sororalism” to invoke the idea of a feminist civilizing mission in the mode of racist paternalism; see Spivak, *A Critique of Post-colonial Reason*, 373.