Girls as the 'New' Agents of Social Change? Exploring the 'Girl Effect' Through Sport, Gender and Development Programs in Uganda

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how girls in Eastern Uganda experienced a corporate-funded sport, gender and development (SGD) martial arts program. This study used 19 semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation and document analysis. Results revealed that while the martial arts program increased the young women's confidence, challenged gender norms, augmented their social networks, improved their physical fitness and was useful for providing them with employment opportunities, the program also attempted to 'govern' their sexuality and sexual relations with boys and men by promoting individual avoidance and encouraging the use of self-defense strategies against potential abusers. To conclude, I argue that girl-focused SGD programs such as the one studied here impel young women to be the agents of social change and to cope with the potential resistance (e.g., from some of their family and community members) to their participation in SGD programs by building their self-esteem, confidence and self-responsibility. Despite this – and as the 'new agents of social change' – these young women still must navigate the structural inequalities that tend to marginalize their lives in the first place.

Keywords: *agency, resistance, empowerment, sport for development, Girl Effect, gender and development*

Introduction

'Despite the growth of girl centered research internationally, non-white, non-Western girls remain vastly understudied' (Kearney 2009: 19).

1.1 The Girl Effect campaign – initiated by the Nike Foundation in 2005 – has grown into a global initiative that assumes girls are agents of development and catalysts capable of bringing about 'unparalleled social and economic change to their families, communities and countries' (Girl Effect 2011).^[1] Proponents of this campaign argue that investing in a girl's health and education will increase her family and her country's economic prosperity, and use commanding statistics to back up their claims. For example, the Nike Foundation (2011) argues, 'when an educated girl earns income she reinvests 90 percent in her family, compared to 35 percent for a boy.'

1.2 Coinciding with the focus on girls as the 'new' agents of social change are two other notable tendencies. The first is the emergence of a (new) social movement known as 'sport for development and peace' (SDP, Kidd 2008). This movement is substantiated by NGOs, sport federations, transnational corporations (TNCs), and UN agencies that advocate for sport, recreation and physical activity as tools to contribute to international development, education and health priorities, as outlined by the UN Millennium Development Goals, including the goal of 'promoting gender equality and empowering women' (UN 2009).^[2] The number of SDP NGOs continuing to do work across the globe continues to increase; yet, despite the growth of organizations and research in this area, there are few studies based on the perspectives of those targeted by these interventions, particularly girls.^[3] In turn, sport continues to be used to in efforts to address gender inequalities and improve the lives of girls and women around the world, despite the lack of research exploring its unintended effects. I refer to such programs throughout this paper as 'sport, gender and development' (or SGD) interventions.

1.3 The third related and prominent tendency in development is the increasing involvement of corporations in governing, funding and implementing development programs in the Two-Thirds World.^[4] Besides the growth in development programs that use sport and physical activity to promote girls' health

and development, an escalating number of development initiatives are being funded by TNCs. As Crouch (2011) explains, neoliberal political rationalities have necessitated – in part – a notable withdrawal and shift of the state and its functions in many parts of the world. Increasingly, non-state actors such as TNCs, NGOs and civil society organizations are taking on the social welfare agendas previously held by states. Alongside this, debates abound as to how development aid connects to notions of consumerism, celebrity diplomacy and development in the Two-Thirds World (see Ponte et al. 2009). In many ways, corporations are increasingly using development programs in the Two-Thirds World to demonstrate their 'socially responsible' platforms, enhance their corporate images, and reach 'untapped' markets.

1.4 I suggest that the confluence of these tendencies highlights the need to think critically about the implications that corporate-driven, girl-focused SGD interventions hold for the young women targeted – or the purported 'beneficiaries'. Thus, the central research question guiding this study was: what are the (un)intended consequences of corporate-funded, Girl Effect-focused SGD programs that target young women in the Two-Thirds World? Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory (McEwan 2009), cultural studies of girlhood (McRobbie 2009), and various tenets of Foucault's governmentality (in particular, biopedagogies and technologies of the self), I consider this question through empirical research conducted with a girl-focused SGD program that uses martial arts to 'empower' girls in rural Eastern Uganda.^[5] This SGD program is funded by two entities – an international NGO (INGO) and TNC. Both of these entities are proponents of the Girl Effect campaign.

1.5 In this paper, I make three central arguments pertaining to the unintended consequences of this girl-focused SGD program by considering theories of structure, agency and resistance. First, I contend the martial arts initiative was used as a 'technology of the self' where disciplinary modes and regularizing techniques of biopedagogies were positioning this SGD program as one of constant self-improvement (see Harwood 2009). Second, I argue that SGD programs such as the martial arts initiative often place the onus on its targets (in this case, the young women) to be the agents of social change and to cope with resistance (e.g., from some of their family and community members) to their participation in these types of programs by building their self-esteem, confidence and self-responsibility – but without addressing the structural inequalities that continue to exacerbate the marginalization of these young women in the first place. Third, I maintain that, through subversive and political forms of agency, and in spite of a lack of structural support, these young women take on the role of 'change agents' by both actively and subversively challenging the opposition of their families and community members who contest their participation in the martial arts program. Taken together, these arguments suggest that we must recognize the potential burdens placed on young women to be the instigators of social change – and realize the unanticipated array of factors embedded in SGD activities that may culminate to situate these young women in positions of further marginalization.

1.6 The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, I outline the key theories and terms used to guide the study, including literature on gender and development that discusses issues of agency and resistance, postcolonial feminist approaches to studying girlhood, as well as the utility of Foucauldian concepts such as 'technologies of the self' and 'biopedagogies' for exploring SGD interventions. Next, I describe the background of the organizations examined in this research, as well as the methods used to carry out the study. The results of the study are then discussed. Finally, I conclude by summarizing the key findings of the research, and consider the complexities involved for stakeholders in girl-focused SGD initiatives, while also providing suggestions for future research.

Agency, resistance and empowerment in (sport) gender and development

2.1 In recent years, debates pertaining to issues of silence, voice, agency and girls' and women's empowerment have been widely discussed across literature on gender and development. Most notably, Parpart (2010) and Kabeer (2010) recently emphasized the continued misunderstandings and connotations pertaining to conceptualizing 'voice', 'silence' and 'agency' and the need to reconsider how empowerment 'works' in theory and practice. These discussions are not only entertained by academics, but also by practitioners who are struggling with the implementation and 'blurry boundaries' presented when executing these buzzwords 'on the ground' (e.g., see Rankin 2010a; Standing 2007). Others have pointed to concerns pertaining to the changing nature of these words in an era marked by neoliberal development practices and policies (see Sharma 2008).

2.2 For Kabeer, choice depends on resistance to domination and injustice, that is, 'the ability to dominate and control people, communities and events, as well as the capacity to resist such domination' (Parpart 2010: 21). Parpart counters that Kabeer (and many other scholars and practitioners in the development community), fail to recognize that agency needs to be contextualized in a development schema that prioritizes neo-liberal ideologies and practices, where specific postcolonial conditions and contexts result in decreased possibilities 'for interrogating and challenging local, national and global power structures and ideologies' (Parpart 2010: 21). This is of utmost importance in terms of recognizing agency, empowerment and choice in terms of processes that are 'nuanced, situated and multi-leveled' (Parpart 2010: 22). Ultimately, Parpart suggests that broader understandings of agency need to be taken up, where the focus is not on the end result, but rather on the often slippery, sporadic and inconsistent possibilities for growth in consciousness and actions.

2.3 The interplay of agency and structure is also of crucial importance for exploring both the micro relations – and the wider structural domains of power, particularly those that emphasize how large-scale, interlocking social institutions are organized to reproduce social inequalities (Collins 2009). The study explored in the paper here attempts to uphold the concern for more nuanced approaches to the agency/structure debate in theorizing empowerment, rather than exclusively understanding structure as a constraint to agency. As McKee (2009: 478) points out, the use of top-down strategies of empowerment often position the practitioners (e.g., NGO staff) as automatically adhering to 'top-down policy discourses', yet this presents a monolithic understanding that these staff are out to 'exert a negative effect on subjects' agency'. As Cooky (2009) underscores, structures are never fully severed from the influence of the agency of the participants and the ideologies shaping the ways that social actors interpret and understand their worlds.

2.4 In turn, other scholars such as Lairap-Fonderson (2002: 189) suggest that focusing on moments of resistance is fruitful for understanding the key tenets of agency and empowerment, as she asserts that: 'resistance is an essential part of the process through which oppression is transformed... We need to analyse how various strategies of resistance employed by women under certain conditions lead to different types of empowerment.' And yet, at the same time, Abu-Lughod (1990: 42) cautions that it is important for researchers not to romanticize resistance, arguing that all forms of resistance have the potential to be essentialized, where more subtle forms, nuances and questions about the 'workings of power' may be excluded.

2.5 Since this paper invokes embodied understandings of resistance – vis-à-vis a SGD program that uses martial arts – I also build on studies on gender-based and sexual violence that suggest self-defense training can actively shift gender stereotypes so that women are perceived by men (and other women) as independent, strong, and capable (Brecklin 2008; Cermele 2010). This research demonstrates that challenging gender stereotypes may effectively undermine violence against women (Hollander 2009). Other research describes how female-only self-defense classes are paramount in order to negate traditional gender-role socialization and to convince females that they have the capability and the right to defend themselves (Ullman 2007). Cermele (2010) emphasizes the importance of ensuring that scripts of successful agency and resistance through self-defense training are readily available, arguing that the narratives of such accounts are valuable for storytellers and audiences alike.

2.6 Taken together, what these literatures on self-defense, resistance and voice establish is that it is pertinent to consider the variety of forms that agency may take, particularly in the field of SGD, where it may appear in an embodied form through sport (e.g., martial arts). Thus, in this paper I invoke Shakya and Rankin's (2008: 1230–1231) use of 'subversive agency', which, they contend, 'lies in the ways in which people put dominant cultural productions into their own moral and social frame of reference and, in so doing, change their meaning'. I expand on subversive agency in the findings section of this paper; but for now, I suggest that this term is instructive for thinking through the governing strategies of the organizations that contribute to SGD, and the ways that the actors involved in this group aim to 'fund empowerment' for Ugandan girls through martial arts.

2.7 As various development scholars have argued, it is clear the relations that imbue governmental programs and infiltrate its 'targets' are never stable – but are contradictory, mutating and complex – resulting in multiple, unpredictable outcomes (Mosse 2004). For Foucault, 'governmentality', begins with the idea that 'power relations have been progressively governmentalized... elaborated, rationalized, and centralized in the form of, or under the auspices of, state institutions' (Foucault 2000: 220). One of the major critiques of governmentality is its 'lack of attention to the specific situations in which the activity of the governed is problematized' (McKee 2009: 478). With this critique in mind, the study discussed in this paper attempts to address the discursive elements of the Girl Effect with a more grounded, embodied and material focus on the actual experiences of organizational staff members and Ugandan girls as active agents in a SGD program who 'resist' and exert (subversive) forms of agency in multiple ways.

Connecting postcolonial feminist theory to cultural studies of girls

3.1 There are few studies that use postcolonial feminist perspectives to consider 'girlhood,' particularly to critically explore development interventions that center on girls.^[6] A postcolonial lens aims to subvert the prevailing ethnocentric discourses of imperial Europe while also paying attention to 'shifting the unit of analysis from local, regional and national culture to relations and processes *across* cultures' (McEwan 2001: 106). Building on this theoretical framework, a postcolonial *feminist* orientation is concerned with unleashing a cross-cultural feminist politics that challenges the 'unacknowledged and unexamined assumptions at the heart of Western disciplines that are profoundly insensitive to the meanings, values and practices of other cultures' (McEwan 2001: 94). This approach also draws attention to the ways in which gender and race intersect to create oppressive conditions that are exacerbated by dominant discourses of representation, development and power relations which may be resisted through 'counter-narratives' (Chowdhry & Nair 2002: 27).

3.2 In returning to how postcolonial feminisms intersect with girl studies, it is useful to highlight recent literature on the 'politics of girlhood' that has been useful in explaining how girls in the twenty-first century are powerful, confident, 'can-do' individuals who participate in global society (Gonick et al. 2009; Harris 2004). For the most part, girl studies scholars have focused on how girls in One-Third World nations experience 'girlhood' (e.g. Jiwani et al. 2006). This research – though extremely useful for exploring cultural understandings of girlhood in the One-Third World – tends to ignore the experiences of Two-Thirds World girls (Kearney 2009). At the same time, other studies on girlhood usefully address interlocking categories of oppression (cf. Lee 2006; McRobbie 2000; Willis 2009). For example, although McRobbie (2000: 200–201) asserts that young women in Britain have 'replaced youth as a metaphor for social change', she simultaneously acknowledges that the 'category of young women' cannot be detached from social class, ethnicity, race, sexuality and ability. Similarly, though Harris (2004) considers the marginalization of the 'at-risk girl', she largely speaks of those residing within the One-Third World. Furthermore, the 'at-risk' category seems to presume particular homogenized girls along specific lines of race, class and sexuality. As Lee (2006: 90) cautions, 'claiming "girlhood" as an act of construction or deconstruction is not in itself a liberatory or emancipatory act because the question of liberation for *which* girls is never asked'.

3.3 If intersectional, postcolonial feminist-infused constructions of 'young women' are usefully engaged with, then essentialist frameworks such as the 'can-do' and 'at-risk girl' as deployed by Harris (2004) may be potentially useful for critically considering the Girl Effect campaign and its implications for girl-focused 'empowerment' projects in the Two-Thirds World. Indeed, it is global neoliberalism that plays a key role in Harris' (2004) 'can-do' and 'at-risk' discourses, as personal effort, self-regulation, competitiveness, material capital and cultural resources are required in order for the 'modern girl' to succeed under the current world order. In short, I contend that the Girl Effect's goal to transform and develop the 'at-risk, Two-Thirds World girl' into a 'can-do' success story is perilous – as Sensory and Marshall (2010: 299) warn

– because it 'relies on a missionary girl power discourse in which she must obtain all of the things that she is presented as lacking (mobility, education) to save herself from her "Third World girl" status'.

Governmentality, biopedagogies and technologies of the self

4.1 There are several studies that show how the current neo-liberal development era may be understood by various aspects of governmentality (e.g., Rutherford 2007), where non-state entities have become concerned with governing and deploying girl-focused development programs, particularly those focused on the Girl Effect campaign (see Hayhurst 2011a). To build on these studies, I engage with two specific tenets of governmentality in this paper to examine SGD interventions: biopedagogies and technologies of the self.

4.2 Biopedagogies are a form of biopower in which 'practices that impart knowledge writ large, occurring at multiple levels across countless domains and sites' (Harwood 2009: 21). Biopedagogies are 'the art and practice of teaching life' (Harwood 2009: 21). For example, Rich (2012) uses policies around obesity prevention tactics in UK schools to demonstrate how these strategies become particular techniques of surveillance, where biopedagogical flows travel vis-à-vis power relations among various stakeholders (e.g., schools, communities and families) to incite children and young people to think about their bodies in certain ways. Her use of biopedagogies thus helps to uncover the 'pedagogical practices in the biopolitical' and also offers a way to 'formulate an empirical analytic to interrogate the concealed pedagogical practices of biopower' (Harwood 2009: 21). Biopedagogies also connects well to Foucault's technologies of the self, and – I suggest – unleashes valuable understandings of the ways that the martial arts program examined in this paper was used in an attempt to encourage the girls to become 'better' subjects through the application of techniques for improvement (Foucault 1988). Technologies of the self explain how SGD interventions work as a technology of governance, where governmental strategies, forms and tactics position girls as subjects of agency, capacity and social change. Taken together, then, a biopedagogical perspective, coupled with technologies of the self, help to expose how disciplinary and regularizing techniques work through the martial arts program as effective strategies to ensure that 'living beings can indeed become objects to be worked on, to be pedagogized' (Harwood 2009: 24). These concepts are also imperative for interrogating SGD as a political project, the governing of girls as development subjects and understanding possibilities for their resistance. Overall, then, biopedagogies and technologies of the self may help us to recognize the body as a central site for the (concealed) workings of neo-liberal forms and practices of gender empowerment through the Girl Effect discourse such as individual empowerment, self-responsibility.

Context: girls in Uganda and background on SGD program

5.1 In recent years, Ugandan feminist scholars have emphasized the glaring lack of institutional support for young women in Uganda. For example, Muhanguzi (2011: 722) argues that institutions such as schools influence and help maintain a sexual landscape in Uganda that is characterized by 'homophobia, misogyny, male domination, female marginalization, lack of self-esteem, sexual abuse and harassment and control of female sexuality'. Until the development of the new Republic of Uganda Constitution in 1995, young women mostly married shortly following puberty; but presently, due to the new legal age of marriage, they now spend extended periods of time in their parents' house until age 18 (Nobelius et al. 2010). And yet, researchers suggest that the impact of this legislation has meant that unmarried adolescent girls have no social role and very few social outlets, hence placing them in somewhat of a 'social limbo' until they reach 18 years (Nobelius et al. 2010). In effect, then, adolescent girls in Uganda must contend with multiple sexual and health-related pressures from the moment they enter into puberty, as they are continually harassed for sex (Muhanguzi 2011). Muhanguzi (2011: 718) further argues that a 'double standard' exists: as male sexual desire is upheld and encouraged, girls are seemingly 'experimental zones for boys' sexual agency'. At the same time, girls' sexuality is constantly regulated and controlled by boys and they are relentlessly reminded that they lack any sexual capacity (Muhanguzi 2011).

5.2 These issues provide important contextual insights for considering the martial arts program under study here; an initiative that seeks to address girls' understandings and experiences with sexuality, health and gender-based and domestic violence. Without question, across Uganda – but particularly in impoverished, rural areas – girls are subjected to powerful and restraining sociocultural practices and beliefs that deeply weaken their autonomy and decision-making capabilities (Jones & Norton 2007: 299). Issues such as bride price also play a prominent role in the marginalization of young girls in Uganda, giving men rights over their wives and children – effectively suggesting that women are a commodity to be purchased. In effect, then, bride price payment, gender-based and domestic violence all pose significant hindrances for advancing reproductive health and gender equality agendas (Otte 2011).

5.3 The goal of the SGD program is to address these pressing inequalities faced by young women in Uganda. Specifically, the initiative aims to tackle the marginalization of girls in Uganda through karate and taekwondo in order to advance their health status and education levels, foster self-respect and improve gender relations in the communities in which they live. The project specifically focuses on developing girls' skills in the realms of conflict management, relationships and domestic violence issues (for further details on the program, see Hayhurst 2011a). Thus far, this initiative – funded by an INGO and TNC (both with headquarters in the One-Third World) – has reached over 2,000 girls and young women. The overall aim of the project (as of 2010) is to have at least 120 young women trained to become martial arts instructors, as well as leaders and mentors in their respective communities.

Methodology

6.1 This paper is derived from a larger research project focused on 'Girl Effect'-oriented donors and recipients involved in funding and delivering SGD programs (Hayhurst 2011b).^[7] The study used qualitative research methods, including document analysis, participant observation and 35 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with staff members from a sport transnational corporation (STNC, n=7), an INGO (n=7) – both entities which support the Girl Effect campaign while channelling funds to the martial

arts program – and a 'Southern' NGO (SNGO, n=19) based in Eastern Uganda in a rural district I refer to as Winita.^[8] The young martial arts trainers – or the 'girls' (n=8) – were interviewed as part of the SNGO staff (n=11), as these individuals were the leaders who assisted the two primary martial arts trainers with implementing the program. Interviews with each person lasted 35–120 minutes and took place at locations that were selected by the interviewees. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and entered into NVivo 8, a qualitative data analysis software program. Interview transcripts were transferred to the NVivo 8 software, and then coded using nodes, which function as a way to label text that is being analysed, or a system used by researchers to place meaning on different parts of the text. Due to issues around confidentiality and anonymity, the identities and names of participants and organizations have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Results and discussion

'Lexi's legend': self-defense and governing sexuality and health through sport

7.1 Many of the girls I interviewed spoke of fighting off boys' (and men's) sexual advances using self-defense skills learned through the martial arts program. The most celebrated story was the legend of Lexi, one of the participants and leaders in the martial arts program. The majority of SNGO staff suggested that Lexi's legend had partially inspired the program. As Matt (Director, SNGO) claimed:

[The martial arts program] started when a girl [Lexi] was attacked by about six boys that wanted to rape her, but she fought her way through it [...] We thought, well, if she could fight...without any skills, why don't we build the skills of these girls to also be able to cope in such situations? Of course, in the course of training, [we don't say] 'now because you can do martial arts you can walk out of home at 10pm'. No! We kind of say it has to be preventative [...] you have to be really capable of handling trouble when it comes and you can't avoid it.

When I spoke with Lexi, she observed how the boys were jealous of her confidence and karate skills. Lexi asserted her belief that since she had successfully 'defeated' multiple attackers once, she could do it again, and she actively taught other girls (and even some boys) throughout the community to do the same. In fact, all of the girls interviewed were teaching martial arts techniques to their sisters, friends – and, in many cases – brothers and other boys throughout the community (the latter being an unintended outcome of the program).^[9]

7.2 Five of the girls interviewed also frequently discussed how martial arts instilled the necessary confidence in them to refuse sexual relations and to voice their opinions on important decisions that would impact their lives, as reflected in Jennifer's (young martial arts trainer, SNGO, November 2009) contentions:

It [martial arts] has changed my life. I can now make my own decisions. Like, when they want to force me to go and get married, I can say no.

Author: Why do you think you can say 'no'?

Jennifer: Because I'm still young.

Matt (Director, SNGO, November 2009) suggested that partaking in martial arts programs was only meant to be 'preventative', and therefore was not meant to encourage the girls to think they were 'invincible'. However, the interviews with the girls revealed that they had no misgivings about venturing out at night, assured that their self-defense skills would offer protection. All of the girls noticed their increased physical fitness since practising martial arts, and relayed how pleased they were to be (seemingly) stronger than the boys, to the point that it made the boys 'jealous' (Lexi). When I probed Lexi further as to why she thought the boys were jealous, she offered, 'because they think we can train and we get confidence. When they try to fight us we now defend ourselves...Before I feared. But now, I have trained, they can't tell me anything.' Indeed, strength and feelings of being indomitable were always equated with fending off abusers – and even future husbands. As Jessica suggested, 'I like to have a strong body, it's because when I marry in future, when my husband also tries to beat me. I may also have to know the way [how to fight back]!'

7.3 I argue that such practices – of building confidence and resilience through martial arts – connect well with contemporary cultural productions of girlhood as described by McRobbie (2009), where there is now an unending flow of incentives that propel girls into specific practices that are challenging gender norms, yet somehow remain feminine.^[10] Though the SNGO partially selected martial arts because of its 'masculine features' (Trisha, Martial Arts Trainer, SNGO), it was still 'feminine' in the sense that it involved these young women defending and nurturing their virginity, sexuality and health. Moreover, the young women were disciplined through the program to restrain their sexuality, but this was framed vis-à-vis a sense of empowerment in that they now held the physical power to support their efforts and to fight back. In these ways, the martial arts program may be understood as a technology used to transform Harris' (2004) 'at-risk girls' into 'can-do' sensations.

7.4 The actions and responses of young women participating in the SGD intervention discussed above indicate that they were deeply influenced by the martial arts program's 'can do' model. I suggest, though, that the martial arts program was not simply about promoting confidence, leadership, respect, health and protecting the girls from sexual predators. Using biopedagogy as a framework, the girls' participation in the program might also be interpreted as a clear economic imperative, a way to train the girls of Winita to become successful, 'global girl citizens' capable of 'working on themselves in the name of their own life... or indeed in the name of the life and health of the population' (Rabinow & Rose 2006: 197). Though the martial arts program was intended to infuse the girls with the confidence to 'say no' and self-defense skills to protect themselves from potential abusers, it was also used as a mechanism to prevent girls from engaging in sexual relations, and as such, might also be considered a technology of the self, and an example of disciplinary modes and regularizing techniques of biopedagogies – or in other words, a form

7.5 For example, one of the martial arts trainers relayed a story that a teacher confided to her about the reputation of the 'taekwondo girls' at school. According to the teacher, taekwondo girls need not subject themselves to the immediate financial compensation via prostitution since they were disciplined and 'valued education' that would eventually lead to economic prosperity:

At a school where we are training, unfortunately there are some six girls who are HIV positive and they pregnant at the same time... But I asked the head teacher whether my girls [the martial arts girls] are among them and she said 'no, those girls would never!' Because there are some guys who come in from Kenya who are playing around with them but the girls stand firm, with their two legs and talking out to them. They don't need their money. They are after an education, which is very good. And that is taekwondo which is helping them to be like that (Elisa, martial arts trainer, SNGO, November 2009).

This particular school was exceptionally close to the Kenyan border, where truck drivers often rested for the night en route to delivering or receiving goods in Uganda. These men frequented hotels close to the border, where the girls were warned not to go out at night for fear of being attacked, beaten and raped. Upon entering the school, I noticed a sign turned on its side on the floor of the main entrance that read 'Moving at Night is Risky', perhaps at one time, a prominent reminder alerting the girls to the potential dangers that lurked at night. Juxtaposed above this fallen sign, a large poster for the martial arts program was (possibly strategically) positioned or even conceivably replacing the spot where the sign once hung. The poster featured a photograph of two girls dressed in white karate uniforms striking a karate pose, with the words 'it's all about confidence, self-motivation and determination' typed above their heads. Below the photo of the girls, the poster displayed concise facts to convey the program's success: 'the [martial arts program] has changed the lives of over 1920 girls in the [Winita] District with the karate discipline. Karate builds confidence, self-esteem, self-discipline, respect, concentration and courtesy.'

7.6 The young women of Winita celebrated the success of the program as exhibited in the poster. They also actively consumed Lexi's legend, as her story was well documented, circulated and disseminated by SNGO staff and the girls. In fact, SNGO's public relations department prominently displayed Lexi's story on their website – while also disseminating it to several news agencies and radio stations across Uganda – and to international media outlets in the UK. As Allie (Public Relations Officer, SNGO) observed, 'we stopped looking at stories in such a way so that you're always portraying the bad things'. Instead, the goal was to deliver stories of the martial arts girls' resistance, success and achievement to the media, and through their website. This strategy fits well with Cermele's (2010: 1170) argument that, 'if rape becomes a non-event, *it is because women resist*. Telling resistance stories makes women's resistance visible'.

7.7 Yet, Sarah Forde, founder of the SGD NGO 'Moving the Goalposts', stresses the importance of troubling the assumption that 'girls have to learn to protect themselves from boys, to say no' (Forde 2008: 119). In her in-depth ethnography of nine teenage girls in a SGD program in Kenya over a two-year period, Forde notices that there is an inherent assumption in her community that 'it is the girls' responsibility to make sure they don't get involved with the boys, that they ward off the sexual advances coming from men and boys' (Forde 2008: 119). From this perspective, it is useful to situate and contemplate the martial arts programming for the girls of Winita as a biopedagogical imperative, a mode of subjectification whereby the body is both disciplined and regulated based on gendered assumptions that disciplined girls as being 'ethical' and 'good', particularly if they manage to retain control over their sexuality in a patriarchal environment.^[11]

7.8 While this is not to deny the value of promoting confidence, self-esteem and self-respect for these young women, it is important to acknowledge the ways that the martial arts program, as an 'empowerment project', also used sport as a strategy that framed empowerment within the neoliberal development order, where it is the responsibility of the girls to take on the welfare of their families and communities were considered absolutely fundamental.

'I Try to Change their Minds': Practicing Subversive Agency and Resistance

7.9 Throughout my discussions with interviewees, it was clear that the wider Winita communities, local politicians and girls' families held misconceptions regarding the mandate of the program and its ultimate purpose. For example, when I asked Matt (Director, IT & Enterprise Development, SNGO, November 2009) about the challenges involved in launching and implementing the martial arts program, he hesitated before replying.

Well, there was a little misunderstanding when we just begun this whole [martial arts program] thing. We were met with quite a bit of resistance [...] The District Education Officer made the remark that, 'oh, you want to turn girls into fighters', and 'the Ministry of Education cannot approve this kind of thing'.

In line with the resistance with which Matt was met, fifteen interviewees (all eight girls, and seven of the eleven SNGO staff members) cited community resistance as an extremely taxing aspect of the martial arts program's implementation. As Matt conceded, the 'misunderstandings' between the SNGO and the girls' families and wider community resulted in the girls' initial subjection to verbal abuse, taunting and ridicule – especially from men and boys.

7.10 It seemed that the main stimulant for the derisions directed to the girls related to the martial arts uniforms and trousers they wore. Karate and taekwondo movements involve high kicks, punches and jumping, and as such it was almost impossible and very discomfiting for the girls to take part in such activities wearing skirts and traditional clothing that was culturally appropriate. However, as Jessica (participant and leader, martial arts program, November 2009) noted, the SNGO did not have enough

tracksuits for all the girls, and those without trousers felt that they were unable to participate. SNGO held public demonstrations throughout the Winita district where the girls would perform their martial arts techniques in authentic karate uniforms. According to Matt, this made the young women trainers look professional and unified. During interviews, the young women (Ariel, Jessica) conveyed that they were enthusiastic about performing in this unique attire.

7.11 Other girls noticed how wearing trousers blatantly challenged gendered norms and hierarchies. For example, Ariel (young martial arts trainer, SNGO, November 2009) described how 'people out there' told her that 'we cannot put on the trouser and at the same time your Dad is also putting on the trouser'. The negative connotations associated with 'dressing like one's father' sheds light on the ways that 'cultural practices are inscribed onto women's [and girls'] bodies, and their consciousness is moulded by patriarchal culture' (Azzarito 2010: 264). The young women were all too well aware of the derogatory opinions and perspectives of the community and family members, particularly regarding their uniforms. At times, the young women described their concerns and fears about wearing their uniforms, though they continued to resist and challenge the community members who tried to prevent their involvement in the program. For example, Ashley (young martial arts trainer, SNGO, November 2009) described how she confronted community members:

The community out there tells us that, if we train taekwondo in future, we won't be able to give birth. They say if you train taekwondo, we lose our virginity.

Author: And what do you say to that?

Ashley: I try to change their minds...I tell them an example of my [taekwondo trainer], [Elisa]. That she's still training, and she has two kids.

The martial arts girls were constantly delving into success stories where they defended themselves against an impressive array of attackers: boys, sexual predators, Uncles and truck drivers, with some girls describing extraordinary situations (e.g., fending off six attackers at once). However, these young women did not hesitate to reveal and describe the challenges involved in their participation: the anger, hesitation and apprehension from the community and families who tried to prevent them from becoming involved. For example, Vani (participant and leader, martial arts program) described how her stepmother often made her do most of the domestic work, and gave her little food to eat. Vani felt that these actions prevented her from partaking in the program, and she felt that her stepmother purposefully increased her household duties and withheld food in order to thwart Vani's participation in karate. In spite of such barriers, Vani still attended the training sessions – for example, by practicing while hungry – and knowing that her stepmother would punish her when she returned home for not having completed her chores.

7.12 I suggest that these examples and others illustrate multiple forms of subversive agency and resistance through young women's participation in the martial arts program. For example, the girls continued to wear their uniforms in spite of the fact that doing so provoked verbal (and sometimes physical) abuse from community and family members. The girls actively took part in public demonstrations to showcase their martial arts skills, and they taught other girls (and even boys) various martial arts techniques that were disseminated throughout their communities. Such forms of resistance divulge important and intricate implications about political agency and suggest that we should not only focus on the 'end products' of agency (such as empowerment, enlightenment, or – perhaps in this case – increased instances of girls using self-defense skills and successfully warding off perpetrators). Rather, for Parpart (2010: 22), the key is to focus on the 'often hesitant, fitful and unpredictable possibilities for growth in consciousness and actions'.^[12] By wearing the martial arts uniform – and the trousers in particular – the girls remind us that voice is not the only form of agency, and that silent performances of opposition offer an important interpolation for thinking about the possibility of more subtle but still powerful practices of resistance – or what Shakya and Rankin refer to as 'subversive agency'.

7.13 Public demonstrations also played an important role in building the girls' agency in the context of the martial arts program, not only by educating the community about the promise and benefits of martial arts, but also by deliberately and intentionally opposing traditional gender roles and norms. For these reasons, the SNGO continued to seek out and leverage community-based public events that would provide useful instances for the girls to perform martial arts. For instance, Matt and Brett (Directors, SNGO, November 2009) used shock tactics to facilitate and build community understanding. The goal was for opponents of the program to see its magnitude and inherent value in terms of defending girls against the rampant violence in Winita. Matt explained one of the SNGO's most reputed PR strategies involved six muscular boda-boda (male bicycle taxi drivers) attacking the martial arts girls as they left their primary school one day.

We waited when schoolgirls were coming out of this school here [...] We got some boda-boda [...] These are usually, you know, relatively built [muscular] guys [...] So, we got some of these bicycle [taxi] riders, the men, there were about six. And we told them to try and attack, you know, these girls. Of course it was all organized and we said 'yeah, the girls will be expecting you to attack them' and they will have to defend themselves, they will not hurt you, you know? And somehow we will reach a compromise. But you could see these girls in action and it was amazing. They really flexed up those guys. And the girls who were walking home from school were so happy. So, the very young ones also started practicing martial arts and all that. In other words, you can very easily come across such a situation in real life. And then you have to unleash your skills in order to get out of such a situation, you know?

As Parpart (2010: 22) contends, 'silent performances seem to have a particular impact and power. They shame their critics. The symbols and performances are not distracted by words, intensifying their impact.' That is, the very act of these young girls defending themselves against the boda-boda men provided a crucial display of resistance to patriarchal values. At the same time, the persistent and bold challenge posed by such transgressive public actions may only have further enraged those individuals who remained unconvinced and troubled by the inappropriateness of the girls' actions in this particular cultural context.^[13] As Shakya and Rankin (2008: 1231) explain:

Subversions have no necessary capacity to challenge the foundation of dominant ideologies; they may even end up reproducing it. Nor are they inherently progressive; *they may exacerbate existing social hierarchies* or operate in a top-down manner, with dominant orders subverting the cultural frameworks of dispossessed groups (italics added for emphasis).

The performances, wearing of trousers and network of girls involved in the martial arts program were undoubtedly altering the ways that girls were perceived and viewed by others across Winita. Whether their martial arts practices and public demonstrations were challenging dominant ideologies about their roles as young women in Winita, or merely reproducing them, is difficult to identify without interviewing community and family members – a possible caveat to which future research might attend.

Conclusion

8.1 As Angela McRobbie notably asks, 'what is at stake in [the] process of endowing the new female subject with capacity?' She further questions whether the 'post-feminist masquerade' (largely in the One-Third World) implies that feminism has been taken into account and that equality is in the process of being achieved. In the study presented here – contextualized in a rural community in Eastern Uganda – girls involved in SGD programs were called upon by a range of governmental forms of attention to come forward as new 'subjects of capacity'. As McRobbie (2009: 77) observes, 'where once she was simply known for her nimble fingers, the global girl now emerges as a subject of micro-credit worthiness, gender training, enterprise culture as well as an active practitioner of birth control.' At the same time, this research here demonstrates that the martial arts initiative provided some beneficial experiences for these young women. Indeed, the success of this program shows that these young women are strong, powerful and complex human beings who *resist*.

8.2 Despite the general lack of support from social institutions, and from their families and communities – the young martial arts women were able to contest and confront the hegemonic views that constantly questioned the implications of their participation in the program. Though the young women and staff members described how 'myths' continued to circulate throughout their community pertaining to their participation, these young women – and the other staff from SNGO responsible for the program – actively and decisively negotiated the material and discursive terrain of SGD. By using Foucauldian notions of governmentality, technologies of the self and biopedagogies, this paper exposed how the young women's practices of resistance disclosed much about the dynamics of patriarchy, such as how power works through restrictions on the girls' martial arts practices, or systems of sexual morality, or beliefs about sexual difference (cf., Shakya & Rankin 2008: 1215). At the same time – and as Tania Li (2007: 25) has revealed – it is important to consider how Gramscian notions of human agency complement Foucault's understandings of productive power by enabling us to identify 'how and why particular, situated subjects mobilize to contest their oppression'.

8.3 Though this paper has largely critiqued the Girl Effect, and the challenges and complexities involved in delivering a girl empowerment-focused SGD program, I am not arguing against the benefits pertaining to the improved health and education of these young women. The evidence presented in this research suggests that the young women of Winita certainly reaped some benefits from participating in the martial arts program.^[14] For every staff member or young woman interviewed, there seemed to be some type of positive message to be delivered relative to their experience in the program: in many ways, this initiative successfully encouraged the girls to be flourishing, educated, employable and confident young leaders ready to take on responsibility for their own 'development' and health.

8.4 However, the findings of this paper also suggest that the young martial arts women, as calculative 'targets' of Girl Effect-focused SGD programs, must actively work within the constraints of neo-liberal development systems and alter such systems for their own benefit in order to gain increased autonomy: *the onus is on them to resist*. And in response, the question then becomes: what can practitioners, policy-makers and donors do? Alongside Rankin (2010b), who, when commenting on Tania Li's (2007) insightful research on development programs in Indonesia documented in *The Will to Improve*: we must not assume that it is up to programmers and 'targeted beneficiaries' to foster some political practice, in isolation. In fact – and as Rankin (2010b: 228) persuasively argues,

A progressive political practice would not just offer critical insight but would also attempt to redress unequal relations of production and other sources of poverty and violence; in so doing it would require changing the conduct of development practitioners, state officials [...] not just that of peasants and villagers [or in the paper discussed here– the young women of Winita].

That is, for these young women, becoming self-reliant agents of change is problematic when they are not supported structurally in their quest to challenge gender norms and to shift gender relations. The emphasis, then, on promoting girl-infused SGD programs through the Girl Effect occurs amidst the hegemony of neo-liberal development, and thus the young women's capacity as agents of social change in the context of SGD might be considered as strategies for survival within oppressive structures and declining gender relations – perhaps more so than evidence of structural change (also see Hayhurst, in press).

8.5 At the same time, there is certainly only so much that SGD programs are able to change, and altering the structural constraints that uphold power inequities responsible for limiting girls' choices is perhaps above and beyond SNGO's capabilities, or those of any one stakeholder in the web of actors involved in funding and implementing SGD programs. And yet, simply assuming that structural forces constrain agency may be unreasonable, particularly as agency can also reproduce social structures. Thus, exploring structure and agency in isolation from one another presents a challenge. Sport in itself is a social structure, imbued with social relations and processes that mediate girls' participation in SGD interventions. As scholars such as Cooky (2010) have pointed out, structures of opportunity, and the

ways that sport and gender are institutionalized across certain locales (in this case – throughout Winita and Uganda more broadly) through political and social systems, inevitably influence the ways the girls take up the program. Still, the Girl Effect – and SGD programs that take up and build on its key tenets – tend to ignore, or are unable to tackle, the myriad structural constraints that operate in the lives of the Winita girls that prevent them from fully benefiting from its intentions. The general (neoliberal) assumption remains that girls have the *option* to participate in the program: they simply need to make the '*right*' *choice* to take part – and the benefits will follow (see Wilson 2008).

8.6 While research on SGD is still in its infancy, there seems to be a lack of understanding as to how the intentions of these programs (i.e., 'empower girls through sport') are actually *translated in practice* – particularly into their wider communities and through their interactions with family members.^[15] Certainly, SGD programs do not 'work' in isolation from families, cultural context, communities, socio-political and economic terrains and the global economic system – an assumption that (at times) continues to pervade much of the research in this area (see Darnell & Hayhurst 2012). We must also better understand the potential burdens placed on young women who are asked to be the new agents of social change vis-à-vis the Girl Effect – and uncover how the unforeseen range of elements involved in SGD activities (as discussed in this paper) possibly situate these young women in positions of further marginalization. With these issues in mind, I conclude this paper with the voice of Jessica (young martial arts trainer, SNGO), who continually spoke of her dream to practice taekwondo regardless of the boys' teasing, opposition and jealousy:

Jessica: Some brothers, they just say, 'you can't manage anything!' But for me, I told them 'you come and see us there when we are training. Then you will know that taekwondo is good!'

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Notes

¹Throughout this paper, I use the word 'girl' while recognizing it may reflect multiple truths to multiple audiences (see Pomerantz 2009). Jones (1993: 159) suggests that, 'girls become "girls" by participating within those available sets of social meanings and practices – discourses – which define them as girls.' Therefore, I try to avoid using this language when referring to the participants in this research, in an effort to evade demeaning language associated with 'the girl'. Instead, I make every effort to refer to them as 'young women' or the 'young martial arts trainers' – although at times I do use 'girls' as this was the language often used by interviewees. I make similar arguments about using the term 'girl' in a forthcoming paper (Hayhurst, in press).

²In 2000, eight Millennium Development Goals were devised with the intention of fighting poverty, and supporting a framework for designing and development programs in nations throughout the Global South (referred to as the 'Two-Thirds World' throughout this paper – see note four below). One hundred and eighty-nine world leaders committed to realizing the MDGs by 2015.

³Some exceptions of studies that do include the voices/perspectives of girls involved in SGD programming include research by Kay (2009) and Forde (2008).

⁴Throughout this paper, and in related research, I employ the terms 'One-Third World' (to refer to the Global North) and 'Two-Thirds World' (to refer to the Global South). I do so in solidarity with Esteva and Prakash (1998), who suggest that terms represent the social minorities and majorities in both the North and South while attempting to remove ideological and geographical binaries as found in other terms (e.g., North/ South).

⁵This paper is based on the author's doctoral research (see Hayhurst 2011a).

⁶Some exceptions include Lee (2006), McRobbie (2009) and a Special Issue of *Girlhood Studies* (2009) that includes exciting papers that engage with postcolonial feminist approaches to girlhood (see Gonick et al. 2009).

⁷I arrived at this study through a complicated web of circumstances that made my position as a white, educated, middle-class, Canadian woman who was informally connected to INGO through my graduate research exchange to a university in Western Europe particularly interesting and worth reflecting on. See Hayhurst (2011a) for a more reflexive, embodied discussion of my positionality and role as a researcher in this study.

⁸Winita is a fictional name I've given to the region to protect identity of the NGO and research participants.

⁹Note that 'Lexi' is a pseudonym.

¹⁰These incentives include sexual and social recognition of young women and girls in various areas – from education to civil society – as long as they 'choose' to embody acceptable hetero-femininities (see McRobbie 2009).

¹¹Of course, at the same time, there are assumptions in this sense of boys as being unable to control their sexuality.

¹²For example, Parpart uses the example of the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET), and their ability to mobilize thousands of women to protest the Liberian civil war through 'silent protest, symbolic dress as well as media campaigns' (Parpart 2010: 7). Forms of dress, then, may immediately symbolize cohesiveness, solidarity, and identification with particular values. That is, silence and subversive forms of agency are imperative to consider as potentially powerful vehicles for social change.

¹³Community and family members were not interviewed for this research. Therefore, any discussion of their reactions to the girls' participation in the martial arts program is derived directly from participant observation, the author's immersion in the community, and discussions with those who participated in this research (i.e., SNGO staff, including the young martial arts trainers).

¹⁴See Hayhurst (2011a) for further discussion of the program benefits.

¹⁵An exception to this is a recent piece on the role of families in sport for development programming by Kay and Spaaj (2011).

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