Guiding Girls

Neoliberal Governance and Government Educational Resource Manuals in Canada

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Abstract: Nova Scotia's *Guide for Girls* and Manitoba's *4 Girls Only!* represent recent shifts in policy that aim to include and empower young women vis-a-vis public policy. In this article, we analyze these manuals, illuminating the ways in which young women are configured as subjects in late modern capitalist societies such as Canada. We show that, as neoliberal subjects, young women are increasingly expected to be autonomous and self-governing yet appear to require guidance to follow the right path towards future ideal neoliberal citizenship. Thus, despite their notable intentions, the manuals identify and target certain forms of conduct as problematic, eschewing a broader discussion of the structural causes of a variety of social problems such as poverty, unemployment, poor health, sexual violence, and stress, thus raising important questions regarding policy by, for, and about young women.

Keywords: educational resources, feminist policy studies, gender and youth, governmentality, public policy, subjectivity

Girl Power! The power of being a girl is discovering, expressing and pursuing who you are! (Manitoba Status of Women (hereafter MSW) 2014: 7)

Girls are taking charge of their lives, telling their stories, working for change for themselves and for others. (Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women (hereafter NSACSW) 2006: 3)

Over the past fifty years, in Canada and internationally, there has been a significant shift in the way in which young women are represented in public policy. Rather than passive agents, girls are increasingly represented as active and empowered. For example, the women's policy agencies in two Canadian provincial governments, Manitoba and Nova Scotia, have produced *4 Girls Only!* and *Guide for Girls*, government educational resource manuals for young women. The most recent versions were launched in October 2014 to celebrate the second International Day of the Girl; the manuals are

intended to act as “a tool to help [girls] prepare for all kinds of challenges” (NSACSW 2006: 4). They offer readers resources and advice on a variety of issues such as health, employment, managing finances, relationships, contraception, political involvement, and sexuality.

We situate the manuals at the nexus of girlhood studies and public policy, demonstrating that they contribute to a broader discourse of neoliberal girl subjectivity that is ultimately limited and narrow. We suggest that the manuals are part of a broader shift; girls are celebrated and encouraged but, equally, are the object of scrutiny, regulation, and the productive work of government agencies. In this context, the manuals represent a type of capacity tool; subjects are offered “information, training, education, and resources to enable [them] to make decisions or carry out activities ... that will contribute to policy goals” (Schneider and Ingram 1990: 517). Taking this further, we draw on Bacchi’s (1999, 2009, 2010) work on post-structural policy analysis (PSPA) to interrogate the ways in which the manuals problematize girls, leaving broader socio-political contexts unchallenged. We illuminate three key themes: neoliberal girls; the path to empowerment; and problematic paths that depict a competing possibility—powerful citizen or failed dropout—for a young woman. Ultimately, in these manuals, a young woman is a problem requiring work, and her development is a site of public concern.

Girls and Public Policy

[NSACSW] was created to educate the public and advise the provincial government on issues of interest and concern to women. (Government of Nova Scotia 2012: n.p.)

[MSW] work[s] to ... bring the concerns and aspirations of women to the provincial government and ensure they are integrated into government programs, policies and legislations. (Government of Manitoba 2015: n.p.)

The manuals can be better understood as part of a broader move towards the inclusion of women’s issues in policy and government. Women’s policy agencies at both federal and provincial levels began to emerge in the early 1970s (Paterson et al. 2016). NSACSW and MSW were established in 1977 and 1982 respectively. While early gender equality interventions focused on adult women, recent initiatives have resulted in policies and programs that are targeted at young women and girls. As Catherine Driscoll (2002) and Angela McRobbie (2000, 2001) observe, there has been an unprecedented

celebration of girls and their potential, compared to fifty years ago, that has led to considerable advances in the status of young women.

Reflecting this, the first *Guide for Girls* was published in 2006 by NSACSW after consultation with young women, educators, and community members. Inspired by what was happening in Nova Scotia, MSW adapted the Nova Scotia publication to create their own version, *4 Girls Only!* in 2008. The manuals were updated in Nova Scotia in 2008 and in Manitoba in 2011. All editions of NSACSW's *Guide for Girls* function as both information resources and journals, whereas only the third edition of MSW's *4 Girls Only!* follows a journal format. The third editions of the manuals, both published in 2014, were extensively revised and redesigned. For example, Nova Scotia's *Guide 4 Girls* updated quotations and removed the section on cash. Manitoba's *4 Girls Only!* deleted a discussion on feminism, placed more emphasis on Aboriginal girls, and switched to the style of an interactive journal. *4 Girls Only!* also makes considerable efforts to acknowledge the experiences of young Indigenous women. The manuals also try hard to explore differences in class, sexualities, and gender expression.

The manuals are unique in Canada but are, at the same time, part of wider changes at the national and international policy level directed towards the recognition and inclusion of young women who may have been, as Angela McRobbie (2001) has pointed out, previously ignored, regulated, and/or excluded. For example, various initiatives of the United Nations, including the Millennium Development Goals, established in 2002, and the Conventions on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly 1979) and on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (United Nations General Assembly 1989), as well as human rights legislation at both domestic and international levels have provided political and legal frameworks in which girls' lives are discussed, addressed, and made increasingly visible. These initiatives culminated in the 2011 resolution by the United Nations to establish 11 October as the International Day of the Girl Child and have informed and shaped the work of advocacy groups such as Girls Inc. that developed a Girls' Bill of Rights in 1992, the World Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), and the Girls Action Foundation. The manuals also represent the proliferation of feminist inspired policies¹ that aim to include and empower girls. The inclusion of young people, as well as the emphasis on interaction, reflect key changes in the ways in which governments approach policy for children and youth who are increasingly being included in the policy-making process as active subjects as Meg Luxton (2002) and Daiva Stasiulus (2002) remind us. From a

policy perspective, the manuals reflect this broadening of state interventions as well as demonstrating a transformation from purely regulatory mechanisms toward capacity building tools that are consistent with neoliberal subjectivity. At the same time, however, they reflect the neoliberal tendency to individualize and responsibilize citizens rather than address structural and systemic inequality as Alexandra Dobrowolsky (2009) has noted.

While the bodies of young women have long been a site for intervention and regulation on behalf of the state, we follow other scholars of girlhood to argue that the manuals reflect a significant change in how regulation is imagined, and regulatory mechanisms are produced. In the past, young women were governed through policies that problematized their passive and immature nature (Gorham 1982; Sangster 2001). Within this context, Canadian and American governments have long sought to control the reproductive bodies of girls (Blake 1995; Nathanson 1991). As Valerie Walkerdine et al. (2001) argue, girls make an important contribution to the modern economy and therefore need to remain unfettered by children so that they are free to work. However, the experience of regulation remains subject to difference on the basis of class, sexual orientation, ability, and race. Indigenous, LGBTQ+, disabled, poor, and working-class young women have been most vulnerable and subject to the violence and control of the state. The move away from regulation and towards celebration of girlhood remains nuanced by intersecting forms of inequality and occurs within an ongoing tendency to represent girls and girlhood as universal (Gonick 2006b).

This universalizing tendency is perhaps best captured in the popularization of girl power. Here, feminist demands for equality blend with neoliberal governmental rationalities and consumer driven popular culture to create a curious hybrid unique to contemporary times. Neoliberalism refers to the move towards governmental rationalities wherein individuality, autonomous action, and preventative measures in relation to health, well-being, and overall lifestyle are both valued and encouraged (Lupton 1995; Rose 1990). Thus, girl power is part of a more general move towards the cultivation of subjects who, according to Michel Foucault (1991), internalize surveillance and govern themselves without the need for state intervention. Foucault's (1994) notion of biopower illuminates the ways in which modern governance involves the monitoring, documenting, and directing of the health and wellness of the population as a whole through a variety of social policies and practices that aim to shape conduct. Girlhood scholars like McRobbie have observed that among discourses of empowerment, girls'

“bodies, their labour power and their social behaviour ... remain the subject of governmentality to an unprecedented degree” (2001: 1).

In general discourse, the term girl is often used to refer to an age group, ranging from 5 to 18 but, as Driscoll has observed, girl can refer equally to a stage in a woman's life when she is “immature and malleable” (2002: 4) and in the process of becoming an adult. In this sense, girl is not a concrete category but is, rather, a particular form of subjectivity that is constituted over time and space by various discourses that are produced about young women; there is no universal understanding of what girl subjectivity is. These manuals constitute one of many competing discourses that seek to create truths about young women as girl subjects.

From this perspective, the manuals are part of a broader discursive field that is best exemplified in the contrast between girls with power and girls seen to be at risk (Gonick 2006a; Harris 2004). While the term girl power signifies a young woman as a potentially strong and powerful feminine subject, a girl who is seen to be at risk is characterized by disordered development. Because young women are represented as teetering on the edge of instability, they are seen to need guidance, intervention, and regulation as Sharon Mazzarella and Norma Pecora (2007) have noted. The manuals are an iteration of this discursive continuum; in this instance, government policy is designed to encourage young women to take up neoliberal citizenship in the broadest sense including political involvement, responsible financial management, optimal health, delayed reproduction, and gainful employment. In line with neoliberalism, emphasis is placed on individual solutions to problems, as opposed to wider social and political transformation.

Method

Following Dawn Currie (1997) and Dorothy Smith (1990), who highlight the value of acknowledging the disciplining of the bodies of women in everyday life, we understand the manuals as important sites in which various forms of power, knowledge, and truth are disseminated about and for young women. In line, necessarily for this project, with a governmentality approach we are interested in processes of surveillance, regulation, and normalization, as well as the intersection of truth, knowledge, and power through the production of discourses, in this case mobilized by the state and its agencies in conjunction with the wider community. Ultimately, such an analysis allows us to consider some of the effects particular to these manuals and also to

better understand similar policies of which girls are the intended subject and empowerment is the goal. To illuminate and interrogate these effects, we turn to post-structural policy analysis.

Although public policy is often defined as “whatever governments choose to do or not to do” (Dye 1972: 2), critical policy scholars argue that this definition reduces policy to its instrumental form, a response (or non-response) to a perceived problem. In so doing, such an approach obscures the creative and productive dimensions of policy that intervene in and shape lived experience (Bacchi 2010). Thus, they argue that public policy is both *text*—responses to perceived problems—and *discourse*—the shaping of what can be said and thought and, in so doing, constituting policy problems and populations (Ball 1993). In these terms, public policies are central to what Foucault calls governmentality since they involve the organization of the population through managing “personal conduct” (1991: 87) and they constitute certain subjects as problematic or in need of regulation.

For Herbert Gottweis (2003), PSPA allows us to unpack the discursive and material effects of policies and enables us to examine critically historically contingent meanings, subject positions, and power relations. Feminist approaches to PSPA, most notably Bacchi’s *What’s the problem represented to be* (WPR), illuminate the importance of interrogating how policies contribute to (in)equality, social organization, and subjectivities at material and discursive levels (Bacchi 1999, 2009, 2010). Specifically, WPR emphasizes the role of public policy in producing and sustaining power relations and its creative role in producing the very problems it seeks to solve, as well as the so-called target populations it seeks to govern.

As a method, the WPR approach directs our attention to problem representations. For Bacchi, this approach to policy analysis is key to understanding “how governing takes place, and with what implications for those so governed” (2009: ix). She encourages us to look beyond the ways in which policies address social problems to the ways in which they involve a process of problematization. The WPR approach rests on six questions that aim to expose how the problem is represented, the underlying assumptions and presuppositions, the genealogy of the representation, what/who is left unproblematized, discursive subjectification and lived effects, and how/where the representation has been “produced, disseminated and defended.” Moreover, analysts are invited to consider how the representation can be “questioned, disrupted and replaced” (Bacchi 2010: 63). The goal is not only to illuminate the productive role of policies and the ways in which they sustain or transform social relations, but also to trouble the taken-for-

grantedness of problematizations and move towards an “inventive imagining of other forms of problematization” (70) “that come *as close as possible* to desired political objectives” (63, emphasis in original).

We employed the WPR approach to analyse each version of the guides. We conducted a team-based analysis during which we each analyzed the text and images individually and then met to generate thematic categories such as health, sexuality, and well-being. We considered how the manuals sought to regulate and organize the conduct of young women with a view to constituting particular kinds of citizens. We examined how advice was presented in ways to represent or speak to young women as girl subjects as in, for example, the use of gendered and age specific language and cultural references, and the use of particular colors and images. Our analysis considered how problems were represented and solutions were proposed. We present the main findings of our analysis through a discussion of three themes: neoliberal girls; the path to empowerment; and problematic paths.

Neoliberal Girls

Changing the status quo starts with you. Stand up for yourself. Take the lead. (NSACSW 2006: 57)

You are wonderful in so many ways, both inside and out. Celebrate being a girl! (MSW 2014: 10)

All editions of the manuals express the notion that girls are unique and special. The 2006 edition of *Guide for Girls* displays bright bold and curly playful fonts in fluorescent pinks and purples with flourishes that aim to capture the exuberance of youth and femininity, and with cartoon hands of different skin colours that acknowledge and recognize diversity. The tone is non-threatening, fun-filled, and inviting with quotes from celebrities such as Alanis Morissette, Avril Lavigne, and Sarah McLachlan. In all editions, the reader is reminded that the manual is intended for young women “just like YOU!” Even though the manuals are meant to provide a unique space for young women, the aim is also to identify potentially problematic traits to correct them and allow for what is called normal development. Regarding girlhood and citizenship, Caroline Caron observes that

young people are thought to be citizens in the making. The idea that young people are the citizens of tomorrow, not of the present, functions much like colonialism: it operates through regulatory practices aimed at civilizing the primitive through a process of enlightenment. (2011: 79)

Thus, *4 Girls Only* reminds the reader that Manitoba needs girls to make the province a better place.

As Nikolas Rose (1990) observes, a central characteristic of neoliberal subjectivity is individual responsibility for one's life. The guides stress the need for personal responsibility in a variety of areas, including health, sexuality, financial management, and career planning, implying that success in these areas leads to increased well-being and happiness. For example, the second edition of *4 Girls Only* advises:

Remember: you are not responsible for anyone else's behaviour. But you are responsible for your own! Blaming other people, especially your friends or family, for choices you make doesn't help you become a strong adult. Strong, powerful women take responsibility for their decisions. (MSW 2011: 30)

Similarly, both second editions of the guides suggest that girls "erase from [their] vocabulary: 'They made me do it'" (MSW 2011: 30; NSACSW 2008: 32). This is echoed in the third editions along with advice on making healthy choices. In the Nova Scotia guide, girls are encouraged to adopt personal responsibility for their lives. "It is important that you are informed and free to decide for yourself" (NSACSW 2014: 34).

A similar sentiment expressing the importance of personal responsibility is extended to discussions surrounding body image. For example, the most recent editions of both guides state that

body image involves attitude and feelings—how we think about and feel about our bodies. Some people are satisfied with the way they look, while some may think they are too "something"—too thin, too fat, too tall, too short. But remember, just like everyone else, we have good days and bad days ... and our mood can affect how we see ourselves. One way we become unhappy about ourselves is by playing the comparison game. Any time you're tempted to compare yourself to others, **STOP** and consider who you are. (MSW 2014: 32; NSACSW 2014: 28, emphasis in original)

Here, emphasis is placed on personal responsibility for changing and overcoming negative body image rather than on deconstructing the broader forces that discipline girls' bodies.

The demand for personal responsibility is extended even to bodily processes that seem to be beyond the limit of individual decision making. An entire section is devoted to the various changes related to puberty such as problematic skin, body odour, and menstruation. *4 Girls Only* offers the following encouraging advice: "Try not to worry. Just remember: EVERY GIRL GOES THROUGH THIS!" (MSW 2011: 8) It continues thus:

Body odour ... It's not a pretty part of puberty, but everyone will have it, to varying degrees. It is usually caused by hormones, or even the things you eat. Remember, keeping clean is a good way to help deal with body odour. Take a bath or shower regularly and use a deodorant or an antiperspirant. (MSW 2011: 9)

Personal habits of hygiene and cleanliness are seen as steps to cultivating a form of responsibility particular to girls.

The mobilization of girl power discourses reflects the particularities of girl subjectivity under neoliberalism. All versions of *Guide for Girls* and *4 Girls Only* have designated sections in which girl power is discussed. Using Bacchi's framework, we see that this discourse actually problematizes girls' agency. Underlying the manuals is an assumption that girls' agency is both absent and present echoing Marion Doull and Christabelle Sethna's (2011) characterization of girls as both subject and object. Young women are passive but have the potential to become active. While girls' choices in the regulation of these transitions are privileged, they are at the same time problematized and work is needed for a young woman to get onto the right path.

The Path to Empowerment

When you're healthy, you feel well and look well. You achieve it by actively taking care of yourself. Know about how to care for your body, and how to prevent the health problems that affect women ... (NSACSW 2008: 21)

You can make a difference. Women worked hard in the past to change policy and legislation so that we could all be recognized as full persons. Now it's YOUR turn to make some changes! (MSW 2008: 70)

As discussed above, the manuals cover a range of topics and include advice on health, finances, employment, relationships (sexual, friendship, and family), puberty, and politics. What unites these diverse themes is the emphasis on cultivating empowerment over time through making the right choices. According to the manuals, staying healthy and preventing illness requires careful choices and leads to the capacity to realize self-determination in terms of life outcomes. The same tone is implied in discussing subjects as far apart as health and political empowerment.

The manuals reflect the tendency in late modern capitalist societies to promote positive self-formation (de Courville-Nicol 2013); as Deborah Lupton (1995) reminds us, citizens are increasingly encouraged to cultivate and develop tools and techniques of internal control to manage a variety of ills, dilemmas, and problems. For example, the manuals link self-confidence

with taking control of one's health. *Guide for Girls* asks, "Did you know? Girls who exercise have more than strong bodies: they have strong self-confidence. You don't have to work out two hours a day or join the soccer league to enjoy feeling strong. There are lots of fun options" (NSACSW 2008: 33). Similarly, *4 Girls Only!* suggests, "Build your self-confidence the healthy way. Did you know? Girls who eat healthy foods and exercise have more than strong bodies: they have strong self-confidence" (MSW 2011: 14). Here, the conduct of young women is linked to a general state of confidence and well-being that will lay the groundwork for future success.

The manuals also cast fiscal responsibility, career planning, and political engagement as leading to a general state of empowerment. The second and third editions of the Manitoba guide note, "You can start planning for your future right now! ... Be true to you! Find something that really motivates you, something you are passionate about. It will make working all the more fun for you!" (MSW 2011: 51–52; 2014: 66–67). Further, girls are encouraged to become active in their community.

Getting involved in your community can make a difference to others. It can also help you fight stress, open up a world of new friends and look great on the résumé. Changing the status quo starts with you. Stand up for yourself. Take the lead. Become involved. You do have what it takes, and what others need. (MSW 2008: 45; 2014: 79; NSACSW 2008: 51)

Like Anita Harris (2004), we observe that girls are positioned as key political actors, but they need to be encouraged and activated as leaders. While this discussion no doubt has feminist undertones, few explicit references are made to feminism. The second edition of *4 Girls Only!* does include a section on feminism, noting, "It's not a bad word!!! Feminism is about understanding the challenges that girls and women face in today's world" (MSW 2008: 65). However, this discussion was deleted from the third edition. While reference is made to gender equality as a collective battle, feminist ideas are couched within a discussion of girl power more generally, situating inequality as an issue of personal empowerment.

Justifying their capacity-based intervention, these manuals suggest that the unique characteristics of girl subjects include an active capacity to be empowered and, equally, a passive incapacity with the tendency to make decisions based on emotions; the manuals are an attempt to ensure that girls acknowledge and counter these conditions. As Patrice DiQuinzio and Sharon Meagher have observed, the rhetoric in policy often "proposes to 'put women and children first,' and some claim to do so in the name of feminism." However, "women and children often pay very dearly for being 'put

first” (2005: 6). Similarly, while there are many positive elements to the manuals, they serve equally to reinforce the notion that the state is the protector of young girls who are in need of protection and guidance, all while emphasizing that individual conduct is the key to a variety of social problems and structural inequalities.

Problematic Paths

There are disordered ways of managing stress – drugs, friends that are negative, decrease negative self talk. (MSW 2008: 16)

Fewer young Nova Scotians are smoking. ... People who don't smoke take control of their lives. (NSACSW 2006: 27)

Not all girls are successful at living up to the ideal set out by the manuals and there are certain cases of young women being chastised or directly advised to avoid particular behaviours. Problematic choices and behaviours need to be identified and corrected to allow for normal development. The manuals also provide tools for surveying and monitoring the conduct of close female friends and family. They identify the dangers of deviating from expectations regarding healthy and responsible lifestyle choices such as the pitfalls of poor money management and drug and alcohol use and stress the importance of good nutrition. Girls who engage in deviant conduct, like smoking, have failed to take control of their lives.

The second and third editions of the Manitoba guide discuss eating disorders as problematic behaviours that need to be managed.

Eating disorders are complicated illnesses that are not just about food. They can be a way for girls to cope with feelings that they find too hard to deal with. They can also begin because of pressure, real or imagined, to look a certain way. *Eating disorders are a serious threat to your mental and physical wellness.* (MSW 2014: 36, emphasis in original)

The origin of the illness is situated within the disordered mindset of the individual and emphasis is on the threat that eating disorders pose to the well-being of individual girls. To manage an eating disorder a young woman needs to take steps to manage her emotions and conduct. There appears to be no understanding of Susan Bordo's (1993) suggestion that eating disorders have a social origin that is rooted in patriarchy and the submission of the female body. This kind of discourse emphasizes individual responsibility for body size and serves to reproduce gendered inequalities and subsequent power dynamics.

In addition, all the guides point to the potential dangers of smoking and of the use of drugs and alcohol. The second edition of the Nova Scotia guide notes, “Drinking and drugs are really lousy coping tools” (NSACSW 2008: 25). The third edition extends this by providing a quiz for girls to complete concerning drug and alcohol use. As with eating disorders, rather than discussing wider social circumstances that can lead to drug and alcohol use, the guides place emphasis on the poor choices of some girls. The quiz is followed by the advice:

IF you’ve answered YES to any of these questions, it may be worth it to talk to a safe and trusted adult like a parent or guardian, guidance counselor, youth health center worker, or health professional. For issues around drugs, alcohol, and smoking, you can talk to an addictions counselor. (NSACSW 2014: 33)

Young women are encouraged to employ available government resources to manage the various risks they face.

The guides also point to the many dangers that circulate in daily life and provide advice on mediating or avoiding threats. Consider, for example, how girls are advised in the second edition of the Manitoba manual of the dangers lurking online and how they can protect themselves.

The Internet isn’t as safe or anonymous as you might think. In fact, it can be dangerous (19). ... If the person you’re dating is constantly texting, calling or messaging you to see where you are or who you’re hanging out with, and it is making you uncomfortable, that is cyber stalking. You need to tell them to stop.

... If you are feeling down or depressed, it can help to chat with your friends, but remember, an online ‘friend’ you are sharing these feelings with is still a stranger

... So keep your guard up!!! (MSW 2011: 21)

The behavior of girls is scrutinized and problematized rather than the predatory behaviour of men. Beyond the dangers of online activities, a number of other instances of girls constituted to be at risk of losing control can be seen. For example, *Guide for Girls* explains that

credit is as easy to find today as the pimple on your nose before you’re going out. But although buying on credit is easy, it means you owe money, or you’re in debt. And once you’re there, it’s really hard to dig out. (NSACSW 2008: 48)

This is followed by a number of tips on how to manage money and credit, such as save 10% of earnings, pay bills on time, and keep only one credit card, and so on.

With respect to relationships, the Nova Scotia guide asks the reader to answer the following questions to determine if she is in a problematic relationship:

Do I think I have to be a pleaser?

Am I experiencing abuse and too shy/embarrassed/afraid to talk about it?

Am I losing my self-respect?

If the answer is “Yes” [in bright pink] to any of these questions visit this Nova Scotia web site and find out where you can get help ... ” (NSACSW 2008: 43)

These discussions, concerning completely different areas, displace the focus on the structural causes and consequences of a variety of supposed dangers, problematizing and responsabilizing, instead, the individual girl. Further, the reader is repeatedly encouraged to employ and consult available government resources, implying that solutions to these problems are within reach. A young woman just needs to take action, reach out, and grab hold of available solutions to avoid going down a problematic path. Young women who fail to navigate the path to success effectively are thus characterized as underdeveloped, irresponsible, weak, or lazy.

Guiding the Future

DREAM! AND GET REAL. It can be done. Match your potential with your dreams; your abilities with your opportunities. (NSACSW 2008: 6)

This is a great time in your life. There are endless possibilities for what you can become and what you can achieve, NEVER let anyone try to tell you that you can't do something. Set your eyes on a goal and go for it! The sky's the limit!” (MSW 2014: 81)

Both *Guide for Girls* and *4 Girls Only!* place a great deal of emphasis on the future of a young woman. Nevertheless, we argue that there are implications for girl subjects today. In particular, the manuals reflect significant changes in the ways in which girl subjects are governed under neoliberalism and raise important questions regarding the wider effects of public policies by, for, and about young women. The manuals mobilize a discourse of girl power with the aim of producing future-oriented, autonomous, and responsabilized girl citizens who are contributing and who are what Harris calls “unencumbered consumers and workers” (2005: 41). We are sympathetic to the desire to create safe spaces for the circulation of resources and knowledge that might be useful to young women in light of ongoing instances of sexual violence, and economic and social inequality both at the national and international level. Indeed, there are notable attempts in the manuals to honor and represent diversity, include the voices of young women, and provide space for individual expression and exploration. Yet, as government policy that

aims to instruct, the voices of girls are elicited and disseminated within the boundaries of the state and its officials. This means that the manuals have a limited capacity to promote self-expression and creative subjectivity outside of mainstream expectations for success. Failure is in many ways reduced to individual choice-making. In this sense, the manuals seem to have more in common with the past in continuing to infantilize girls by implying that they are in need of guidance, while placing responsibility for outcomes on the individual. Moreover, in problematizing the choices of young women, the manuals (however inadvertently) consolidate existing power relations.

How might we disrupt and replace such a construction of girlhood? Here we might turn to critical feminist discussions on the public sphere and state engagement that illuminate the importance of creating opportunities for groups, following Nancy Fraser (1989), to identify and voice their individual and collective interests. While the implications of such thinking are well beyond what can be stated here, the key point is to provide opportunities for young women in all their diversity to determine, on their own, their needs and to establish a basis from which they can speak up and challenge power. Empowering girls is a noble initiative, but policymakers must step back and ask themselves by whose authority they may do what they do. The answer to this question can be provided only by young women themselves.

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Note

1. Two examples in Canada are YWCA Canada's "Commitment to Young Women" and the undertaking by Status of Women Canada to involve young women in discussions of violence on post-secondary campuses. Two international examples are Plan International's policy on gender inequality focusing on girls and USAID's policy on gender equality and women's empowerment.

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