Personal, Powerful, Political

Activist Networks by, for, and with Girls and Young Women

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“Today I met my role model,” tweeted climate change activist Greta Thunberg on 25 February 2020, captioning a picture of herself with girls’ education activist Malala Yousafzai, who also tweeted the picture, proclaiming that Greta was “the only friend I would skip school for.” The proclamations of mutual admiration illustrate a form of solidarity between the two most famous girl activists, who are often pointed to as examples of the power of the individual girl activist in spite of their intentionally collective approaches that connect young activists and civil society organizations around the world. These girl activists have garnered worldwide attention for their causes but have also been subject to problematic media representations that elevate voices of privilege and/or focus on girl activists as exceptional individuals (Gordon and Taft 2010; Hesford 2014), often obscuring the movements behind them. For this reason, this special issue explores activism networks by, for, and with girls and young women, examining and emphasizing girls’ activism¹ in collective and collaborative spaces.

Traditional media often recast girl activists according to the narrative of girls’ exceptionality while also subjecting them to the effects of patriarchy, racism, and other discriminatory structures (Bergmann and Ossewaarde 2020; Walters 2016). There remains a stubborn process of making girls—particularly girls of color and other socially marginalized girls—invisible in public discourse and in scholarship, so that even in well-known movements like #BlackLivesMatter, its young queer women founders are often sidelined, as Ilean Jiménez (2016) reminds us. At a World Economic Forum Annual Davos Meeting press conference in 2020, for example, five young climate change activists, Vanessa Nakate, Greta Thunberg, Loukina Tille, Luisa Neubauer, and Isabelle Axelsson, posed for a picture. When the pic-

ture was first published by the Associated Press, only the four white activists were included. Ugandan activist Vanessa Nakate had been cut out of the picture, was not on the list of participants, and none of her comments from the press conference were included in the article. She reflected, “It was like I wasn’t even there” (Evelyn 2020: n.p.). Following her tweet to the Associated Press and the ensuing online expressions of both solidarity and racism that followed, a picture that included her was published. Through this online activism we see how individual protest can be bolstered by the power of many voices to challenge established oppressive structures.

This special issue calls attention to girls’ activism networks, problematizing the idea that empowered girls will easily change the world by examining their efforts and the factors constraining them. It recognizes that girl activists often operate within girl-led and/or intergenerational activism networks that are characterized by complicated power dynamics (Brown 2016). While there is increasing recognition of girls as political figures, as Catherine Driscoll (2008) points out, girls’ engagement in activism, and even girl-led activism, is not new. Each generation of girls reinvigorates activist struggles with renewed energy and fresh perspectives. We are both long-time supporters of girls’ activism. The first author’s interest in gender analysis arose from her own activism as a girl and young woman—experiences that remain formative, in part because they initiated a lifelong process of reflexivity regarding the relationship between her advocacy for social justice issues and her positionality as a privileged white Western feminist. The second author’s lived experience as a woman of color first as a student, then as a teacher in girl-centered education in majority white spaces brought awareness of intersecting oppressions to light and engendered a lifelong commitment to gender equity and anti-racist activism.

Positioning Activism in Girlhood Studies

The notion of empowerment is pivotal to the study of activism, yet it can be used to monetize or de-politicize the power of girls’ activism (Fenton 2016; Koffman et al. 2015). Naila Kabeer (1999) defines empowerment as a process of change whereby an individual or group gains the ability to make choices based on three interrelated factors: resources that enhance the ability to exercise choice; agency or the ability to define one’s goals and to act upon them; and achievements or outcomes. The study of girls’ agency is complicated by the ways in which it has been manipulated by neoliberal

discourses that portray girls as entrepreneurial agents whose ability to influence economic development is inextricably linked to their sexuality and fertility (Gonick et al. 2009; Switzer et al. 2016) and neo-colonial descriptions of girl activists in the Global North as empowered saviors of victimized girls in the Global South (Khoja-Moolji 2018; Koffman and Gill 2013).

Girls' agency is also complicated by the fact that activism networks are often intergenerational and thus may be characterized by age-based power dynamics. Adult mentors can be highly influential for girls involved in activism, stimulating their sociopolitical development and countering other power structures that construct girls as socially invisible (Gordon 2008), but they can also be involved in editing girls' voices to be politically strategic (Bent 2016; Edell et al. 2013). In other cases, adult organizers can dominate conversations and revert to hegemonic adult/child relationships despite stated commitments to leveraging young people's voices, as Jessica Taft (2015) observes. Given their use of digital technology, young people are often more tech- or social media-savvy than their adult counterparts, providing the opportunity to engage in activism online without needing direction (Mendes et al. 2019; Rentschler 2014). However, another function of intergenerational activism is the protection of young activists, and digital spaces are rife with risks to girls who advocate publicly in online spaces (Mendes et al. 2019). The articles here take up these conversations, developing arguments about diverse approaches to activism, representation by the media and other stakeholders, the impact of activism experiences, and how adults can better support girls' work without overtaking it.

Contributions to Understanding Girls' Activism Networks

This special issue opens with an article by Jessica Taft, "Hopeful, Harmless, and Heroic: Figuring the Girl Activist as Global Savior," in which she analyzes media coverage and public discourse of the girl activist, showing that widespread positive coverage of girl activists can undermine their work by representing them as hopeful, harmless, and heroic. Taft calls for a re-configuring of girl activists that leverages their advocacy efforts in relation to collective power and mobilization. Sadiyya Haffeejee, Astrid Treffry-Goatley, Lisa Wiebesiek, and Nkonzo Mkhize, in "Negotiating Girl-led Advocacy: Addressing Early and Forced Marriage in South Africa," respond to this call as they describe the Social Ills Fighters, a group of adolescent girl activists in Loksop, South Africa, who challenge the prevalence of early and

forced marriage in their communities with guidance from adult researchers. These researchers describe the participatory process driven by the priorities of girls, while acknowledging the delicate balance between protecting and promoting girl activists towards which adults must work. The conversation about adult support for girls' activism is further explored by Emily Bent, who reflects critically on her experience organizing *Girls Speak Out*, an event that facilitates girls' communication with high-level delegates at the United Nations, in "Reflections on Expanding Girls' Political Capital at the United Nations." She illustrates how the same systems that celebrate girls' activism can be used to diminish the perspectives of girl activists and calls on adult feminists to push back against concern for optics in order to magnify girls' genuine opportunities for political voice.

Recognizing the intersectionality of forms of marginalization and oppression based on age, gender, and race, Courtney Cook, in "Towards a Fairer Future: An Activist Model of Black Girl Leadership," highlights the specific support needed to foster Black girls' activism, which she identifies as including mentorship, self-actualization, and organizational support. Cook points out the problematic situation in the nonprofit field in which Black women leaders remain under-represented and shows how this leads to a lack of role models and leadership for Black girls. Next, Carolina Silva, in "'Because There Are Young Women Behind Me': Learning from the *Testimonios* of Young Undocumented Women Advocates," describes the *testimonios* of undocumented Latina activists she encountered through her role in leading a university support and advocacy group for undocumented students. Despite criticism and discouragement of their activism by some educators, the young women, in their *testimonios*, illustrate the role that a university can play in providing a space for the mobilization and empowerment of young undocumented women, thus positioning activism as a potential tool for social justice in higher education. Then, Supriya Baily, Gloria Wang, and Betsy Scotto-Lavino's multi-generational, multi-ethnic research team, in "The Inheritance of Activism: Does Social Capital Shape Women's Lives?" analyzes the formative experiences of girl activists in the United States by reflecting on interviews that span three age brackets to describe how girl activism experiences influenced identity development and social engagement at different stages of the participants' lives. The authors reflect on social capital as a deep and personal asset that remains consistently influential in shaping how women see themselves and the world throughout their lives. The legacy of girl activism becomes even more apparent in Barbara Hartley's historical description of the role of 18-year-old Japanese activist Sakai Magara in the

Sekirankai (the Red Wave Society), an organization dedicated to advancing socialist and anti-capitalist worker issues. Hartley's article, "Sakai Magara: Activist Girl of Early Twentieth Century Japan," challenges constructions of girl activism as a new or Western phenomenon by demonstrating Magara's groundbreaking activism and creation of opportunities for Japanese girls and women to fight against multiple forms of subordination.

The academic articles in this special issue are complemented by a powerful visual essay that is, in itself, a remarkable example of girl-led activism. The photo-essay, "Chalk Back: The Girl and Youth-Led Street Art Movement to #StopStreetHarassment" by Sophie Sandberg and Natasha Harris-Harb employs an Instagram style to display pictures of catcalls chalked onto public spaces. The chalks, as they are called, were sent to them by girls and young women who had been catcalled on the street. Founded by Sandberg, the chalk back movement now has accounts around the world and serves as an example of transnational girls' activism that uses the urban and the digital to speak back to lived experiences of sexual harassment. The issue closes with two reviews of books that provide testimony of girls' activism networks in action. Jennifer Bethune's review, "Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship," of Aimee Meredith Cox's (2015) *Can Citizenship Care? Black Girls Reimagining Citizenship* describes Cox's contribution that resulted from eight years of field research with a social service organization for homeless girls in Detroit. Bethune observes how Cox expertly depicts the Black girls who participate in the programming as uniquely situated within racialized and gendered constructions of youth activism, pointing to the enactment of citizenship where it is often assumed to be absent. Finally, Tammy Williams's review, "Passing the Talking Stick: Resilience-Making Through Storytelling," of *Young Indigenous Women's Utopia* (2019), self-published by a girls' group of the same name, discusses girls' testimonies that describe their experiences of mentorship in Treaty 6 Traditional Homeland of the Métis People, otherwise known as Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. The stories narrate experiences of self-love, ceremonial teachings, and strong Indigenous female role models. Williams observes that, through their collection, the girls embody a new generation of storytellers whose stories become living entities.

This special issue draws together research, stories, and analyses of girls' activism from around the world, spanning more than a century. The articles provide telling observations of the complexities of intergenerational work and mentorship that respond to the needs of girls marginalized by intersecting constructions of gender, race, and class, among other factors. They

observe the value of networked activism in increasing influence and social capital to maximize the power of girl activists within diverse approaches to civic engagement. That said, there are perspectives missing from this collection. Disability justice movements are often led by girls and women, in part because some disabilities disproportionately affect them and they are more likely to experience intersecting oppressions, as Patricia Berne and colleagues (2018) and Tony Emmett and Erna Alant (2006) point out, yet we received no proposal submissions on this subject. This gap in this special issue could be targeted actively in future to avoid omitting the contributions of disability activists. Similarly, trans and non-binary people, including those who identify as girls, have in recent years been tremendously active in challenging assumptions about the social, political, cultural, and historical construction of the gender binary (Case et al. 2012; McGlasahan and Fitzpatrick 2017) but we did not receive proposals addressing these movements. Nonetheless, we believe this contribution of the specific analyses of girls' activism highlights the resilience of their networks in rising against patriarchy and intersecting oppressions with fervor and urgency, particularly when exercised communally and collaboratively. The articles also repeatedly point to the delicate role of adults in providing specific types of support that respond to varying needs of girl activists. At times, this involves protection, guidance, and mentorship but, at others, it is about genuinely listening or sometimes just getting out of the way.

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Note

1. We use the term girls' activism as inclusive of activism done by, for, and with girls and young women. Here we include articles that describe the activism work of girls and young women ranging in age from adolescence to early adulthood. Although none of the articles specifically addresses these groups, we note that the terms girl and young woman can also apply to non-binary individuals or anyone who identifies as such.

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