

Making It Up

Intergenerational Activism and the Ethics of Empowering Girls

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ABSTRACT

In this article I consider the ethical boundaries of intergenerational activism for the feminist researcher conducting research in pre-existing activist networks. Drawing on a decade of involvement with girl-activists at the United Nations, I revisit key moments that challenged me to re-think the ethical, discursive, and relational conditions of girls' political empowerment. Intergenerational activism creates relational messiness between adults and girls since effectively partnering with girls requires disruptions of generational power with practitioner-scholars learning to make it up as they go along. This article illustrates the complex and contested ways in which girls and adults build activist partnerships in adult-centered and sometimes politically hostile settings. In exploring the environment within which North American girls experience political (dis)empowerment, I question the ethics of empowering girls under current spectacular discursive conditions.

KEYWORDS

feminist research, girl (dis)empowerment, spectacular girls, United Nations



I want to be a part of this; I want to be a part of the change. (15-year-old Divya)¹

On 8 March 2015, a cold winter's day in New York City, a seventeen-year-old girl with dark spiral curls and turquoise glasses, stepped onto the dais in the middle of Times Square. She looked confidently at the crowd, gave her name and stated, "I am seventeen years old ... and I am a girl." During the brief pause after this, thousands of human rights activists erupted in celebratory applause, whistling and cheering. It was International Women's Day and the start of the United Nations (UN) Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), an annual meeting of UN member states, agencies, and civil society working to prepare policy recommendations on issues related to global gender equality. Alisha, as this girl has chosen to be called, had been invited to speak as the voice of girls during UN Women's 2015 commemoration of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.



As a girl advocate with the Working Group on Girls (WGG), Alisha was well positioned for her role at the event, and for her responsibilities. Girl advocates and adult members of WGG partner throughout the year to “advocate on behalf of girls within the United Nations system” (WGG 2011: 1). She, along with nine other teenage girl-activists, received hands-on training, support, and mentorship from NGO activists engaged in the girls’ rights movement.

I discovered that Alisha had written a one-woman show on girls’ human rights, which she had performed at her suburban New Jersey school years prior to this event. This project, she explained, drew from

being involved in [girl-centered] organizations that really changed my life and made me feel so empowered ... I was kind of hooked... . So, I videotaped and interviewed different women and girls speaking [at the UN] to write a one-woman play about girls’ rights It pretty much highlights the stories of different women and girls around the world, and the central theme is that women’s issues affect all of us.²

Alisha’s passion for connecting girls’ global experiences of inequality led to additional high profile opportunities at the UN, including artistic performances at the International Day of the Girl (IDG), panel moderation during CSW, policy meetings with high-level delegates, and mentorship of fellow girl-activists in their advocacy efforts. About her engagement in this work, she commented,

You know, you just get passionate. It’s like someone lights the fire inside of you. There are so many things that I want to do... the fact that what I [do can] influence someone and spread – like... spread awareness and spread action is so validating. Everyone wants to know that what they do matters.

Consequently, when Alisha joined UN officials and global feminist actors including Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka,³ Amina Mohammed,⁴ and Lakshmi Puri⁵ for International Women’s Day, she delivered her comments with a passion that demonstrated her experience, demanding an end to early and forced child marriage, slut shaming, breast ironing,⁶ sexual assault and harassment on college campuses, female genital cutting, and sexism in sports and in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). In her speech, she imagined “a world where [girls’] opinions are valued, [their] feelings are acknowledged, and [their] voices are celebrated.” Moreover, she demanded increased partnership between women and girls, and accountability within the feminist movement to ensure that girls’ rights “mean something.”

Taken together, Alisha’s comments resist the normative us-and-them boundaries between girls and women while simultaneously solidifying col-

lective action and intergenerational partnership as essential to girls' empowerment. Despite this transformative perspective of feminist solidarity, Alisha's designation as *the* singular voice for/of girls illustrates a problematic set of exclusionary practices reified by discourses of "adolescent female exceptionalism" (Switzer 2013: 350) or the category to which Sarah Projansky refers, in the title of her book, as "spectacular girls" (2014) within girl-activist communities. Spectacular girls succeed because they embrace neoliberal narratives of individual choice and agency that ignore community partnerships, solidarity, and support from adults and girls alike (Bent 2013a; Bent and Switzer 2016; Brown 2016; Projansky 2014; Switzer et al. 2016). As the mediated stories of Malala Yousafzai, Marley Dias, Julia Bluhm, Madison Kimrey, and Rachel Parent, among others,⁷ show, spectacular girls appear to change the world all on their own. Girl-activists and girl-centered organizations struggle in this environment to make intergenerational partnerships visible. Indeed, it is often easier to embrace popular narratives of individual girl power than it is to trace the complicated relationships among girl-activists and their adult partners. Spectacular girlhoods regulate the terms of empowerment in the twenty-first century, thus authorizing the continued surveillance of girls as either ideal or failed postfeminist subjects (Bent 2013a; Gonick 2003; Harris 2004; Ringrose 2007; Switzer 2013).

In this article, I consider both the relational messiness associated with intergenerational partnerships and the ethical implications of "our obsession with the exceptional girl" (Brown 2016: 6). Drawing on a decade of involvement with girl-activists and colleagues at the UN, I explore the spectacular environment under which North American girls experience (dis)empowerment and ask what it means to empower girls under such conditions. What are the ethical tensions for feminist activist-scholars and the organizations with which we work? How do we, as scholars and activists, resolve competing interests in our respective partnerships with girls? To what extent can feminist practitioner-scholars and girl-centered organizations resist the "spectacularization of girls" (Projansky 2014: 5)?

Conducting research on girls in activist networks challenges us to rethink the discursive and relational boundaries of our work. In this article, I revisit several key moments with girl-activists to illustrate the complex and often contested ways in which girls and adults build activist partnerships. Moreover, I consider, in each instance, the ethical dilemmas associated with empowering spectacular girls so as to suggest that intergenerational activism affords a preliminary blueprint with which to consider research on, with, and for girls.

Difficult Dialogues, Negotiated Encounters: Girls' Spectacular (Dis)empowerment

Intergenerational partnership means bringing girls into our political lives, intentionally disrupting generational power dynamics between adults and girls, and sharing our stories and experiences as feminist-activists (Brown 2016; Edell et al. 2013, 2016; Taft 2007). Activist communities require sustained trust, respect, partnership, transparency, and dialogue among members; intergenerational activism, in this way, contributes to the ethical empowerment of girls as political subjects in their own right (Best 2007; Brown 2009; Taft 2014). Feminist scholar Nancy Fraser notably argues that an ethical approach to social justice foregrounds participatory parity rather than socio-cultural identity as being essential to democratic politics. Justice, she asserts, “requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers” (Fraser 2001: 29). However, as Benhabib (1992), Bergoffen (2003), Croll (2006), Held (2006), and Price Cohen (1997) suggest, extending this model of participatory parity to include girls exposes our shared vulnerabilities and dependencies upon one another. Vulnerability, Butler proposes, intersects with individual agency as “a mode of relationality” (2014: 103) that not only exposes institutional injustice but also sustains political resistance. Within intergenerational activist networks, an ethical empowerment of girls thus involves shared recognition of women and girls as “concrete embodied beings” (Benhabib 1992: 189) with limited access to political “intelligibility” (Butler 2009: xi) and power.

Building Partnerships with Girls

UN member states, delegations, and agencies increasingly celebrate the power of teenage girls to change the world. Their visibility as spectacular political subjects has meant that “some girls are fabulous, others are not; some girls' stories are worth telling over and over again; others warrant telling only in passing or not at all” (Projansky 2014: 1). “Rooted in the logic of exceptionality” (Hesford 2014: 142), spectacular discourses celebrate the promise of girl empowerment while almost instantaneously erasing the socio-cultural and geopolitical support systems that make girls' exceptionality possible. Girl-activists require mentorship and support from adults, fellow activists, and other young people, as well as communities and organizations driven by similar visions of transformation. Yet intergenerational activism also remains limited by “constitutive forces and regulative

norms of discourse” (Gonick 2003: 10) that constrain girls’ political selves. As a result, girls’ visibility as empowered spectacular subjects may lead to increased opportunities for their political engagement but it does not necessarily mean that girls experience empowerment.

Over the last ten years I have served as an active leader of WGG, an intergenerational UN-based activist organization dedicated to advancing the rights of girls. This role includes training girls and other young people in UN politics as well as facilitating dialogue between girl-activists and member states in WGG’s Girls Advocacy Roundtable, at the Women’s Ambassador Breakfast on International Human Rights Day, and in mission visits organized by WGG members. Girl-activists and colleagues from the Coalition for Adolescent Girls, Girls Learn International, Girl Scouts of the USA, Loretto Community, Plan International, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), UN Women, and WGG regularly collaborate to develop girl-centered programming during important international meetings and events. As intergenerational partners, girl-activists and adults strategize new ways to involve girls in international political processes. Similarly, we confront the dilemmas and challenges associated with engaging girls in the bureaucracy of the UN itself. This work proves difficult, skilled, and time-consuming but partnering with girls in this way, as Best (2007), Kirsch (2005), Swartz (2011), and Raby (2007) have noted, also strengthens intergenerational bonds and activist relationships and resists hierarchy in adult-youth relationships.

Girl-activists spend significant amounts of time with me, some for a period of nine months or more, to organize girl-centered events at the UN, and to plan, manage, and advocate for girls’ rights during the CSW or in celebration of IDG. As an activist and scholar conducting research on intergenerational activism, I develop meaningful relationships, grounded in our shared political vulnerabilities and possibilities as well as in critiques of privilege and inequality, structural injustice, and institutionalized power, with girls. As Kirsch (2005), Swartz (2011) and Taylor (2011) have observed in their own work, girl-activists play a powerful role in shaping what I come to know about their lives and experiences. Engaging with girl-activists for extended periods of time and across different settings brings me more fully into their political lives. It also builds relational rapport and shared understanding in fieldwork blurring the boundaries between adults and girls, researcher and researched. To date, I have interviewed over sixty girl-activists to the UN as part of a larger project on North American girls’ political experiences and human rights activism. Additionally, I have met weekly with six to ten girls throughout the months of September to May for the last five

years. Each March I co-lead a girls' delegation to the CSW that sees an average of forty girl-activists attending the first week of meetings. Likewise, colleagues and I partner with ten girl-activists each year to plan IDG's Girls Speak Out event hosted at UN headquarters in October.

Intergenerational Politics and Hostile Territories: Girls' Visibility at the United Nations

In 2005, I started accompanying girls to the UN during select meetings; their involvement was fairly limited and often staged for strategic purposes. Girl-activists, for instance, might be invited to attend international meetings and sessions as audience members, but their participation rarely extended beyond silent observation. Colleagues and I engaged regularly in direct negotiations with UN agencies, NGOs, and member states to secure girl-only seats for meetings but we were made to promise that girls would not disrupt official proceedings and that, to quote their requirements, "adults would be present" at all times. Girl-activists, upon entering the UN building, were similarly told to stay in sight of their adult "chaperones" (not activist partners). These moments reinforced the characterization of girl-activists as "subjects-in-the-making but [not] as subjects in their own right" (Best 2007: 11). I worried about encouraging girls to engage in such hostile political spaces.

At the same time, WGG members believed it critical to have girls present during UN proceedings as experts in their own lives; their visibility drew attention to the overwhelming absence of other girls and young people in UN meetings. Girls positioned themselves as vital "social actors" with the right to participate in UN politics and "with important things to tell us about their lives" (Raby 2007: 39). As a result, WGG gained prominence at the UN, becoming known as an organization that worked with actual girls. On some occasions, UN agency representatives would request girls' participation in a high-level panel or delegate session. But it was not uncommon for these requests to include specifications regarding the speakers' racial, ethnic, national, and socio-economic background since the agency's vision required girl-speakers to look the part. Some requests even included pre-drafted speeches for girls to read verbatim; this suggested that agency representatives did not trust girls to develop statements of their own. Despite the expectation of exceptionality, UN engagement practices silenced girl-activists while co-opting their voices and stories; as Edell et al. and Tolman (2013), and Kirk et al. (2010) have observed elsewhere, their participation as passive objects further reinforced girls' subordinate status in politics.

Intergenerational activism offers girls and adults the chance to change the conditions of their environment together but this process remains fraught with conditions of structural power that are “impossible, fragmentary, and imperfect” (Loutzenheiser 2007: 119) and which render girls’ everyday lives unintelligible to political power (Butler 2009; Croll 2006; Taft 2010). Because of girls’ troubling experiences at the UN, WGG members sought to support girls more fully in the processes of their political engagement. We learned to speak openly with one another about the barriers and resistances to girls’ political participation; at times, we shared UN agency requests for a specific *type* of girl-activist to facilitate discussion among girls and adults about power, politics, voice, and intersectionality. Girl-activists and adults bonded in shared moments of frustration and anger at infantilizing requests for token girl speakers; the dialogue created space for us to acknowledge the powerful systems within which we operated but also our inability to substantially change them. To what extent can members of intergenerational activist communities “hold people accountable for the oppressive effects” (Bodwitch 2014: 3) of girls’ political marginalization? Can I, as a researcher or activist, talk back to powerful international actors about their problematic practices? Indeed, as Strzepek (2015) and I (Bent 2013b) make clear, while we might applaud the UN for including girls in their advocacy efforts, we must also trouble the approach to girls’ political engagement and empowerment.

Girls as Decoration: The Ethics of Voice and Empowerment

Girls’ visibility as spectacular subjects legitimizes their political engagement at the UN as the celebrated voice of empowerment. However as Marie, a sixteen-year-old aspiring chemist and first-generation Chinese Canadian, recalls,

I was doing the panel session in the morning and I just thought, you know, they made me speak but at times it was kind of patronizing. It was kind of like, ‘Oh, let the little girl speak for a little bit’ and then, they just left me to the side until the last minute so that I can end it... [and then] no one asked me any questions afterwards! They clapped and that was it! No one said anything.

Prior to this experience, Marie had expressed excitement at, and pride in her being selected to join fellow feminist activists at the UN. She looked forward to sharing her perspectives on girls’ rights in the Canadian context and hoped to make connections with political leaders. Notwithstanding Marie’s enthusiasm for the opportunity, her experience clashes with the discursive production and political regulation of her exceptional story. Thus, in reflecting on her involvement with the UN, she pushes against the idea

that her voice and involvement matters and in doing so, acknowledges the failure of this spectacular moment to empower her.

As members of organizations that support girls and scaffold their involvement, UN girl-activists understand the value of intergenerational partnerships in facilitating their political participation; adults can more easily negotiate access to adult-centered political spaces as well as “use [their] authority and power to make it easier for girls to speak and be heard” (Brown 2016: 32). Conversely, in formal UN proceedings, adult-activists can also use generational power and political authority to silence girls’ voices and critiques. For instance, fifteen-year-old Jessica, a Native American artist from a small mid-western town in the United States, recalls that during an open discussion about girls’ human rights,

[UN delegates] were going on and on about how we are the people who are going to change the world, and then when we tried to say something that wasn’t strictly to [the theme], we were silenced and they took the microphone away.

Marie similarly remarks,

I can tell a lot of women here at the UN don’t really care about what girls have to say... they put on this false front to make it look like they care, but okay, come on we are not that stupid. We can tell when you are listening to us and when you are not.

Sophie, a sixteen-year-old Portuguese activist, suggests that generational power and privilege determine the parameters of girls’ political empowerment. She asserts that

the difference between women’s rights and girls’ rights is the woman has more maturity and is more respected... the things that she could say or advise on, is more weighted and given more authority than a girl. [A woman] can express more confidence than a girl and in turn, be taken seriously as a political actor.

Despite the promise of girls’ exceptionality, girl-activists struggle against the normative limits of age, generation, and power. For some, like Sasha, an eighteen-year-old white New York City high school senior, the end result is profoundly disempowering and depoliticizing. She comments,

[T]here is also the reality of what [UN delegates] are going to do and how they are going to be moved by our statement, no matter what we say... I mean I don’t know how much there is that we could say that they haven’t heard before.

Sasha believes that “it is also really important to hear from girls and respect their voice” but the extent to which girls’ voices matter at the UN, beyond spectacular moments of celebration, lead her to question the value of her activism. In these tenuous moments, girl-activists experience “a collision

between the need to hear the authentic voice [of girls] and an equally pressing need to tease out... the power of institutions” (Hastings 2010: 313). While their participation in sessions and meetings brings girls to the so-called political table, it does not guarantee access to power or their political empowerment. Instead, girl-activists’ experiences illuminate the paradoxical limits of their exceptional (dis)empowerment.

“Calling You Out” or Learning to Play the Game

Sierra, a sixteen-year-old first-generation South Korean American from the Bronx, joined the WGG to advocate for girls’ rights in the global context. In the hallways of the UN, she earned a reputation for agitating power, speaking her mind, asking challenging and sometimes dangerous questions, and calling UN leaders to task on their promises to and for girls. Sierra’s radical feminist spirit attracted like-minded WGG adults to her; her refreshingly bold ability to speak to power inspired adults and girl-activists to do the same. In describing her activism at the UN, she recalls:

I mean as a girl-advocate you get to actually talk about what’s important to you, which is actually really, really liberating and exciting. I think what is really fun and I don’t know if this is a bad thing but I tend to be really blunt... I’ve said things that I might regret later, but it’s so fun at the moment to be saying. At [this one event], the representative from the mission told me at the beginning ‘don’t say anything controversial’ or whatever and I called him out on it. This man just told me not to say anything controversial, but then why are we here if not to be bold and say that! So, when people say things like that and they are expecting that I’m just going to ignore it because they are adults and they can do whatever they want, I’m sorry but I was paying attention and that’s not okay with me, so I am going to call you out.

Sierra’s bluntness empowers her to claim voice inside the UN; as Taft (2014) puts it, she rejects generational power dynamics as the inevitable practice of intergenerational politics while concurrently using them to her advantage. The ability to “call someone out” requires that she pay attention to unspoken dynamics of power. While she acknowledges the sociocultural constraints produced by age, generation, and power, Sierra also re-negotiates the terms of her political participation to advance a more politicized girl-centered vision of girl empowerment.

Girl-activists’ involvement in UN sessions and meetings also depended in part on their ability to do what is known as playing the game. I was sometimes tasked with helping Sierra tone down her critiques in order to ensure that she did not offend anyone. I remain deeply conflicted by this role and responsibility because at some point helping girls learn to play

the game becomes an act of silencing. For instance, shortly after the 2014 CSW, Sierra, colleagues, and I decided to draft a short list of recommendations documenting best practices for the engagement of girls in panels, sessions, and meetings. The list reflected a series of concerns with the ways in which girls were treated during high-level events. The distribution of the list, we hoped, would encourage others to be more thoughtful about girl engagement. Sierra authored the first draft of the list, which included the following recommendations:

Check your Ph.D. at the door. Your Ph.D., your job title, even your 50 years of experience working with girls' mean nothing here. Don't even bother telling us your qualifications unless we ask, because sometimes that can intimidate us and make us feel like you're the expert of our situation. Also, no academic or policy-based jargon—some girls and young women have this background, and some of us don't, but that doesn't mean that those of us who do, are better than those who don't. Meet us where we are... let us share what we have to share.

Don't momsplain. Don't put words into our mouths... I am not your daughter. I don't want your general, unsolicited advice on life, or false promises that things will get better as I get older. I want you to see me as a human being, and recognize that even if my status as a minor is not permanent, these issues will be unless we act.

Learn to listen. I've facilitated panels with both adults and younger activists, and it's always the older "experts" who like to go on and on, even sometimes ignoring cues to stop. Notice if you're talking too much, and stop.

WGG members struggled with Sierra's list and after several weeks of negotiation and revision, the edited recommendation list looked like this:

Avoid academic or policy-based jargon when asking girls about their experiences.

Use simple everyday language when conveying your thoughts and questions; do not reference specific policies or theories because this makes girls feel like they cannot answer the question.

Do not give advice or guidance to girls on panels, or explain "the reality" of their situation.

Listen! Don't talk over girls when they answer a question or try to answer it for them. Listen to what girls have to say and ask for clarification questions if you need more information.⁸

Partnering with girls "requires us to step fully into the contradictions" (Edell et al. 2013: 276) of our work, including the ways we might purposefully silence, edit, and soften girls' voices and perspectives for strategic purposes. The exercise of softening Sierra's list illustrates the constraints and problematic practices of intergenerational activism in certain settings. As a feminist activist, I celebrate Sierra's clear articulation of discrimination, power, and

unfair treatment. Moreover, I agree with her assessment of the generational conflicts and power struggles evident during panel sessions with girl-speakers. I sometimes fantasize about sharing the unedited version with member states and international leaders. However, my role as a leader in the WGG requires me to think more broadly about the organization's reputation and partnership with other NGOs, UN agencies, and member states. In fact, several WGG members took offense at the tone of the text itself. Although editing the text proved an important educational moment, giving Sierra experience in building bridges and alliances with international partners, the process also felt antithetical to my role as her feminist mentor and activist-partner. Softening girls' voices reflects problematic models of girl empowerment that minimize their contributions in favor of less radical politics. To reduce Sierra's critique to a simple checklist flattens her experience and depoliticizes her voice. In this process, Sierra comments, "[A]dult feminists working with younger activists genuinely do come from a place of love, care, and responsibility, and they do want the best for girls... but all too often that means that you're not hearing our voices properly."

Blurring the Boundaries: Intergenerational Activism as Feminist Research

Analysis of key moments with girl-activists and colleagues demonstrates how discursive paradigms of exceptionality and generational power affect intergenerational partnerships at the UN. Sharing the struggles and dilemmas associated with intergenerational activism adds to as well as complicates the methods and tools for studying girlhood (Downes et al. 2013; Huisman 2008; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2013). Whereas we, as girls' studies scholars seek to actively disrupt and blur relational patterns of power in order to improve the lives of the girls we study (Ackerly and True 2008; Allen and Baber 1992; Brown 2016; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2013; Raby 2007), intergenerational activism underscores the "messy and tangled aspects" (Huisman 2008: 374) of doing qualitative feminist research in the first place. Feminist ethnographers propose that establishing empathetic relationships with research participants fosters communication and the exchange of information that leads to the creation of more equitable research dynamics through collaborative processes (Best 2007; Brydon-Miller 2001; Friesen 2013; Huisman 2008; Kirsch 2005; McCall 2005; Naples 2003; Putnam and Dempsey 2015; Rubin and Rubin 2005; Taft 2007). Yet, research on girl-activists with whom

I also partner produces a unique set of relational and ethical challenges precisely because boundaries between activism and research are blurred.

Relationships formed with girl-activists generate contested sites of meaning throughout the research process (Gonick 2003; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2013). As girl-activists struggle with the parameters of their political (dis)empowerment at the UN, I, in turn, grapple with the transformative and conflicting possibilities of being “doubly located” (DeLyser 2001: 3) in this project. Studying girl-activists means choosing to see interactions with girls and colleagues, as well as my role in the negotiation of political space for girls, as an integral part of the research project. “Intimate insider research” (Taylor 2011: 9) disrupts generational power and the relational boundaries between adults and girls, researcher and researched, bringing girls’ voices and perspectives into partnership with my own.

The disruption of power, however, does not necessarily guarantee that an ethical or mutually beneficial research relationship is formed. The potential for research-based and intergenerational activist relationships to end with participants feeling misunderstood or betrayed may only become heightened when “the researched and the researcher become entwined” (Taylor 2011: 9). The more involved I become in the political lives of girl-activists, the greater the risk of misinterpretation, manipulation, and exploitation as I gain intimate, immediate access to girls’ experiences, “making objectivity incredibly difficult and leav[ing] little room for analytic distance” (Taylor 2011: 15). Ethical fieldwork and research in girls’ studies necessitates building trust, empathy, and solidarity with girls, and, similar to intergenerational activism, it requires recognition of our shared vulnerabilities as illegible subjects. Blurred research relationships shape data collection methods, ethical protocols, and research analysis but they also hold scholars accountable to the networks and communities with which we partner and that we serve.

In the “relative absence of an overall girl-focused agenda on ethical considerations” (Moletsane et al. 2008: 105) in fieldwork, intergenerational activism offers researchers a preliminary and radical blueprint for thinking about how we conduct research on, with, and for girls. As Lyn Mikel Brown writes in her field guide to girls’ activism, adult-partners learn to “identify with girls without living through them; offer support without taking over; enable girls’ agency and guide them in hostile situations; be fully present and relinquish control” (2016: 61). What might it look like to employ these same relational practices to fieldwork in girls’ studies? What would it mean to bring girls into the complicated and often contradictory elements of feminist research practice? To what extent can we give up control in order to

effect change in the lives of girls? Partnering with girls means “letting go of our need to know more or know better” (Brown 2016: 121). Intergenerational activism as feminist research practice facilitates both the building of ethical relationships and the establishment of effective partnerships between women and girls; it ensures, as Alisha demanded in her speech at International Women’s Day, that girl empowerment “means something.”

Conclusion

Conducting intimate insider research with girl-activists is personally and professionally challenging; “it is sometimes difficult to give the full story” (Mitchell 2015: 142) but nevertheless essential to creating “a more critical, politicized, inclusive girlhood studies” (de Finney 2014: 21). Telling the stories of our work with girls counters the normative valence of spectacular girlhoods, making visible the communities, partners, and support systems central to girls’ exceptional success. While our methods cannot fully capture the complexity of girls’ lives and data does not always reflect the relational intricacies, ethical dilemmas, or challenges faced during the research process, research on girls about their political lives moves us “beyond the public praise of empowered girlhood” (Taft 2014: 265). Analysis of girls’ (dis)empowering experiences at the UN indeed illuminates the relational and ethical complexities associated with girl empowerment. In this article I suggest that intergenerational activism as feminist research practice blurs relational boundaries and dynamics of power in order to scaffold the presentation and the representation of the voices and perspectives of girls and adults working together, because it is only through intergenerational partnership, as Sierra asserts, that “we walk... towards our mutual liberation.”



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Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms chosen by the girl-activists.
2. My fieldnotes date from March 2010 through August 2015; data from one-on-one interviews with girl-activists dates from March 2010, March 2014, and March 2015.
3. Executive Director of UN Women
4. Special Advisor to UN Secretary-General
5. Deputy Executive Director of UN Women
6. Breast ironing, also known as breast flattening, is the practice of massaging and pounding pubescent girls' breasts with large heated stones and hammers to prevent the growth of breast tissue (Sykes 2015).
7. See Brown 2016 for a discussion on how mainstream media distorts girl-activist stories.
8. Working Group on Girls. Internal Document. Girls Engagement at the UN: Do's and Don'ts. New York, NY.

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