

# The ‘girl effect’: liberalism, empowerment and the contradictions of development

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The ‘girl effect’ – the idea that investment in the skills and labour of young women is the key to stimulating economic growth and reducing poverty in the global South – has recently become a key development strategy of the World Bank, the IMF, USAID and DFID, in partnership with corporations such as Nike and Goldman Sachs. This paper examines the logic of this discourse and its stance towards kinship in the global South, situating it within the broader rise of ‘gender equality’ and ‘women’s empowerment’ as development objectives over the past two decades. Empowerment discourse, and the ‘capability’ approach on which it is based, has become popular because it taps into ideals of individual freedom that are central to the Western liberal tradition. But this project shifts attention away from more substantive drivers of poverty – structural adjustment, debt, tax evasion, labour exploitation, financial crisis, etc – as it casts blame for underdevelopment on local forms of personhood and kinship. As a result, women and girls are made to bear the responsibility for bootstrapping themselves out of poverty that is caused by external institutions – and often the very ones that purport to save them.

**Keywords:** development; women’s empowerment; gender equality; girl effect; neoliberalism

## Introduction

The 2009 meeting of the World Economic Forum included, for the first time ever, a plenary session on adolescent girls. The panel was led by some interesting figures, most notably Mark Parker, the CEO of Nike, and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the Managing Director of the World Bank. They were there to announce their new, jointly established Adolescent Girls Initiative, which has put up \$20 million to ‘empower’ young women in eight low-income countries by helping them ‘build skills that match market demand’ and eventually ‘find job placements’, a project that requires challenging the restrictive ‘social

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norms' that prevent girls from 'becoming independent' and 'improving their lives'.<sup>1</sup> The session, entitled 'The Girl Effect on Development', argued that 'investing in girls is smart economics': 'tapping' the labour potential of girls not only stimulates economic growth, it also contributes to family health and slows the growth of the population. Nike and the World Bank are not the only ones touting the virtues of the so-called girl effect. Goldman Sachs, the IMF, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and even the White House are also building interventions along these same lines – an effort that has been brought into public view by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's popular Half the Sky project.

The paper makes two basic moves. First, it examines the logic of the girl effect and its stance toward kinship in the global South, situating it within the broader rise of 'gender equality' and 'women's empowerment' as key objectives in international development over the past two decades. I argue that empowerment interventions rely on assumptions about 'freedom' that are particular to the Western liberal tradition, which focuses on achieving individual authenticity and self-mastery. According to this tradition, liberation is a process of prying the individual free from the stifling constraints of 'traditional' social norms, which in the girl effect discourse are conceptually condensed in the spectre of 'pre-modern' kinship and gender relations. Because this project – which has been advanced under the rubric of the 'capability' approach to development – carries such high moral value in the minds of Westerners, it has become a vital narrative around which messianic interventions can be organised. The story is apolitical enough to be safe for corporations and international banks to promote without undermining their own interests, and compelling enough for them to use as a PR campaign that effectively disguises the extractive relationships they have with the global South.

The paper's second move is to illuminate some of the contradictions of the girl effect project. I suggest that, in a context of neoliberal globalisation, policies justified on the basis of women's empowerment – such as expanding access to the labour market and to credit – often end up placing women in new forms of subservience as workers, consumers and debtors. On a more abstract level I argue that, while the girl effect project purports to reduce poverty and hunger through empowerment programmes that supposedly increase GDP, incomes and food security, it ignores the most substantive drivers of poverty and hunger: structural adjustment, debt, tax evasion, labour exploitation, financial crisis and corruption in the global governance system. All of these contribute to a net flow of wealth from global periphery to core, which has a much more significant negative impact on income and food insecurity than local kinship and gender relations do. In sum, the girl effect project shifts attention away from global structural violence as it casts blame for underdevelopment on local forms of personhood and kinship, which it judges from the standpoint of Western ontology. Women and girls are made to bear the responsibility for bootstrapping themselves out of poverty that is caused in part by the very institutions that purport to save them.

### From reforming markets to reforming kinship

Let me begin by offering some historical perspective on recent trends in development. In the aftermath of World War II the World Bank and IMF operated on Keynesian principles that, at least ostensibly, promoted economic regulation with a view to creating employment, stimulating demand and cultivating social stability. Then in the late 1970s and early 1980s these international financial institutions (IFIS) broke from this tradition in favour of what we now call neoliberal approaches. In response to the Third World debt crisis, which threatened the stability of Wall Street banks, the IMF offered to roll over the debts of developing countries on the condition that they implement a series of internal economic reforms known as Structural Adjustment Programmes. These programmes required governments to cut subsidies and price controls, reduce spending on social services, privatise public assets, remove import tariffs and use monetary policy to target low inflation. This policy package – which was also pushed by the World Bank through loans linked to economic conditions – became known as the Washington Consensus, and quickly achieved hegemonic status in the field of development economics.

The logic behind structural adjustment holds that market deregulation enhances economic efficiency and increases economic growth, with the upshot being that target countries have a greater capacity to repay outstanding debts. But instead of helping poor countries develop, in most cases structural adjustment has done the opposite. Before the 1980s developing countries enjoyed a per capita income growth rate of more than 3%. During the structural adjustment era, by contrast, growth rates were cut in half, plunging to 1.7%.<sup>2</sup> Sub-Saharan Africa illustrates this downward trend well. During the 1960s and 1970s per capita income on the subcontinent grew at a modest rate of 1.6%. But when structural adjustment was forcibly applied to the continent, per capita income began to fall at a rate of 0.7% per year. In total the GNP of the average African country shrank by around 10% during this period.<sup>3</sup> Economist Robert Pollin estimates that poor countries lost \$480 billion per year in GDP as a consequence of being forced to abandon the protectionist policies that they used to relatively good effect in the first decades following decolonisation.<sup>4</sup> The upshot was that poverty deepened in much of the global South; in Africa, for example, the number of people living in poverty nearly doubled during the decades after 1980.<sup>5</sup>

As it became clear that structural adjustment was failing to promote economic growth and reduce poverty, development agencies began to formulate what Joseph Stiglitz has called ‘second generation reforms’ or ‘the Washington Consensus Plus’.<sup>6</sup> They continued to promote the same free-market policies but added an additional layer of interventions – attached once again as conditions to aid packages – that focus specifically on things like ‘good governance’, ‘transparency’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘gender equality’. This new approach is embodied in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers that have technically replaced Structural Adjustment Programmes since 1999.<sup>7</sup> While the economic prescriptions remain the same, the language has shifted from previous decades. As James Ferguson has pointed out, the *Berg Report* and similar policy documents in the 1980s and early 1990s trafficked in the amoral, technocratic language of

free-market econometrics and scientific management.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, today's policy agenda seeks to interfere with the intimate realities of human relatedness.

These changes have dovetailed with the rise of the 'capability' approach popularised by Amartya Sen's work, particularly *Development as Freedom*.<sup>9</sup> Sen (and others, notably Mahbub-ul-Haq and Martha Nussbaum) sought to shift attention away from purely economic measures of development such as GDP, arguing that the more important question has to do with whether people have the basic freedoms to realise their own conceptions of the good. This approach gave rise to the widespread use of the Human Development Index in the 1990s. It has also corresponded with the growth of the 'gender and development' (GAD) movement, which seeks to actively transform gender relations in the global South through an explicit project of feminist social reform. GAD represents a break from the previously dominant 'women in development' (WID) paradigm, which sought simply to better incorporate women into development initiatives. Initially the GAD approach gained very little traction in international development organisations, but today it has been thoroughly mainstreamed. Indeed, gender equality has become a development objective in its own right, featuring as the third Millennium Development Goal.

While the capability approach was initially designed to provide non-economic measures of development, it is justified in mainstream development discourse according to economic outcomes, on the basis that focusing on social and political reforms makes development more 'efficient'.<sup>10</sup> The rationale has come to be that structural adjustment failed to spur development and growth not because the economic policies were wrong, but because certain social structures in the global South prevented the policies from working. In other words, if we can manage to straighten out people's ideas about kinship, public institutions will operate as they should, the labour market will expand, and neoliberal shock therapy will work just fine. This twist of logic has allowed institutions like the World Bank and the IMF to avoid responsibility for the human devastation that their economic policies have caused over the past three decades. Instead, they place the blame for failure onto the shoulders of the poor – this time accusing as inadequate not only their markets, but also their ideas about personhood and relationship.

### **Liberalism and the problem of kinship**

Why does the problem of kinship so capture the imagination of the development community? One answer is that the utopic vision of private liberal markets hinges on a very specific conception of the private liberal individual. As thinkers like Ayn Rand and Friedrich von Hayek have asserted, both have to do with the idea of 'freedom'. Indeed, in mainstream development discourse today the market and the individual are viewed as interdependent, even to the point of being circular. On the one hand, we have long been told that individuals cannot be properly free without free markets; so the process of imposing neoliberalism around the world has been carried out under the rubric of liberating individuals. But now we are also being told the inverse, namely that free markets require free individuals as a *precondition* for their operation; so the free markets that development institutions have forcibly imposed around the world will not work

properly until the people who inhabit them are liberated from 'pre-modern' kinship norms and 'empowered'. The slippage between these two notions of freedom allows for the constant back-and-forth that we see between the old idea of development as economic growth and the new idea of development as personal empowerment. The disembedded economy and the disembedded person are two sides of the same ideological coin.

We can see this logic operating in US interventions in the Middle East. Take, for instance, an article by John Tierney in the *New York Times*, entitled 'Iraq's Family Bonds Complicate US Efforts' (September 28, 2003). Tierney attacks Iraq's prevailing kinship structure of patriarchal extended families and cousin marriage, which he claims encourages cronyism, nepotism, feuding and general political corruption. According to Tierney, a proper free-market economy – and, indeed, a proper democracy – will only be possible if Iraqis adopt 'modern' kinship forms, by which he means the nuclear family, gender equality and autonomous individualism that supposedly characterise the USA.<sup>11</sup> These ideas hinge on a social-evolutionary trajectory rooted in 19th century anthropology, specifically Henry Maine's theory of 'the movement of progressive societies' from status to contract, from patriarchy to egalitarianism and from group to individual.<sup>12</sup> As Susan McKinnon has put it, Maine's framework remains the 'essential blueprint for narratives of modernity'.<sup>13</sup>

At play here is a culturally particular conception of freedom – one that has its roots in longstanding traditions of liberal thought. By 'liberalism' I do not mean the ideology that stands as the opposite of 'conservatism' in US party politics. Rather, I mean the deeper set of ideas about personhood and freedom that are shared by people on both ends of this political spectrum and which ultimately underpin what we might refer to as modern Euro-American culture. As Charles Taylor and Webb Keane have pointed out, Euro-American ideas about human liberation hinge on the notions of authenticity and self-mastery.<sup>14</sup> These ideas appear in the writing of thinkers as diverse as Voltaire, Emerson, Nietzsche and Hegel, all of whom considered emancipation – and, indeed, reason – to inhere in the ability of the individual self to achieve distance from the external social world. To be free, they tell us, is to stand apart from the arbitrary authority of others and to recognise and act on one's own authentic agency.

According to this line of thinking, the individual and society are understood as fundamentally at odds: the individual is considered to be natural and *a priori*, while society is understood as contrived. The process of liberation involves either excavating the autonomous agency of the individual, as in the Romantic and Transcendentalist traditions, or allowing individuals to invent themselves, as in Nietzsche's celebrated figure of the 'strong poet'.<sup>15</sup> In light of this it becomes clear why 'traditional' kinship poses a problem for the liberal conception of freedom: because it represents an arrangement wherein persons are embedded in relations of dependence that appear to override their authentic desires and hamper their prospects for self-mastery. True liberation requires abstracting the self from social entanglements to achieve the disembedded, objectified personhood that lies at the root of Western conceptions of the rights-bearing individual, the critical political subject, and the disinterested participant of the public sphere.<sup>16</sup> Individual autonomy along these lines is crucial to the process of self-realisation

that liberalism celebrates, whereby individuals come to act upon their ‘true’ desires, interests and will.

The centrality of this ontology to Western culture – the fact that it operates as such a taken-for granted conception of the good – helps account for the fact that the empowerment and capability approaches have managed to claim so much space in the field of development.

### **Women’s empowerment and the girl effect**

We can see this logic at work in discourse on gender equality and women’s empowerment among international development agencies. USAID’s most recent core policy framework, published in 2012, offers a clear example. Despite being focused on women, its language is often gender neutral. It underscores the importance of ensuring that individuals – both male and female – can ‘shape their own lives’, ‘determine their own life outcomes’ and ‘fulfil their potential’ by breaking through the ‘social norms’ and the ‘constraints’ of the ‘cultures, societies, and institutions’ that ‘hold them back’. The document proclaims that USAID remains committed to ‘empowering’ individuals – and particularly women – along these lines, working to loosen the constraints of kinship and culture so that they can ‘live fulfilling lives’. These objectives – known as ‘gender equality and female empowerment objectives’ – have been mainstreamed throughout USAID’s programming. USAID measures the success of its initiatives on this front in part by the ‘proportion of females who report *increased self-efficacy* at the conclusion of United States Government supported programming’.<sup>17</sup>

USAID regards itself as ‘a catalytic force for gender equality and women’s empowerment worldwide’. For USAID achieving gender equality involves cultural change: ‘working with men and boys, women and girls to bring about changes in attitudes, behaviors, roles, and responsibilities at home, in the workplace, and in the community’.<sup>18</sup> This process involves pushing the transformation of kinship and family structure along an evolutionary trajectory (explicitly identified as such) from ‘pre-modern’ to ‘modern’. A USAID report from the 1990s characterises pre-modern families as patriarchal and polygynous, with women’s roles limited to food preparation and domestic maintenance, while noting that modern families, by contrast, emphasise emotional bonds between husband and wife, maternal love and caring instincts, and ‘heightened regard for the infant as a person’. According to this report, ‘the modern nuclear family, with its two parents and two or three children, is the ideal end result of progress in the evolution of family forms’: ‘the modern family’s vital statistics are far better than those of...all previous family forms’.<sup>19</sup>

Why should USAID be interested in promoting certain kinds of kinship? Because, according to the report, there are ‘positive links between socioeconomic development and the modern family’. The logic behind this claim is that the ‘modernization of the family’ produces ‘children who are more cognitively advanced and better nourished, and hence better prepared to *participate in the modern work force*’.<sup>20</sup> Ideas such as these furnish the theoretical basis for which USAID considers interventions in kinship – through gender equality and women’s empowerment programmes – to be ‘essential for achieving [its] development goals’.<sup>21</sup>



In other words, gender equality and women's empowerment are thought to lubricate the proper functioning of the free market and ultimately facilitate economic growth. USAID is not the only US government institution that has gender equality and women's empowerment at the forefront of its foreign policy agenda. The White House does as well. And the reasons are similar: the White House regards these objectives as critical to 'growing vibrant market economies'.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly the White House also regards these objectives as critical to national defence and security, believing that gender equality will reduce the likelihood of 'terrorism' and 'violent extremism' in places like Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup>

One can find the same ideas coming out of the World Bank and the IMF, which use similar language about prying women and children free from supposedly traditional kinship norms and expanding individual choice, all towards the goal of improving economic growth. The World Bank tops its list of key messages about gender by noting that 'gender equality is smart economics – [it] can raise productivity [and] improve other development outcomes'.<sup>24</sup> The IMF, for its part, claims that:

greater gender equality [helps] reduce poverty and promote growth – directly by boosting *women's participation in the labour force* and increasing both productivity and earnings, and indirectly through the beneficial effects of women's empowerment on children's *human capital* and well-being. The empirical evidence on these benefits is compelling. Whether self-employed or earning wages, working women help their households escape poverty.<sup>25</sup>

The IMF also insists that 'reducing gender inequality and improving the status of women may contribute to higher rates of economic growth and greater macroeconomic stability. Women's relative lack of opportunities in developing countries inhibits economic growth.'<sup>26</sup>

The connection that these institutions draw between empowerment and economic development presupposes a very specific kind of empowerment, namely, enhancing women's access to wage labour and credit. According to USAID, achieving this kind of empowerment would improve GDP growth in poor countries by up to 2% and agricultural output by anywhere from 2.5% to 4%. USAID claims that this would help reduce hunger, which the organisation cites as an ultimate goal.<sup>27</sup>

This theory has been brought to mainstream public attention by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, whose popular 2009 book *Half the Sky* launched the husband and wife team as leaders in the gender and development movement. The book's dust jacket highlights the text's main premise: 'Throughout much of the world, *the greatest unexploited resource* is the female half of the population'. Kristof and WuDunn go on to point out that:

Economists who scrutinized East Asia's success noted a common pattern. These countries took young women who previously had contributed negligibly to gross national product (GNP) and injected them into the formal economy...The basic formula was to...*give the girls the freedom to move to the cities and take factory jobs*, and then benefit from a demographic dividend as they delayed marriage and reduced childbearing. The women meanwhile financed the education of younger

relatives, and saved enough of their pay to boost the national savings rate. This pattern has been called ‘the girl effect’.<sup>28</sup>

In October 2012 the book was turned into a US PBS television documentary that follows Kristof, WuDunn and six female celebrity advocates through various low-income countries to expose the difficult circumstances that women face in the form of sex trafficking, forced prostitution, maternal mortality and gender-based violence. On the back of this media event Kristof and WuDunn launched the Half the Sky Movement, with the support of big-name donors such as USAID, the Coca-Cola Company, the Goldman Sachs Foundation and the Nike Foundation. In addition to promoting the book and the film, the ‘movement’ includes a number of games – designed for Facebook and mobile phone platforms – that teach facts, encourage players to participate in micro-credit schemes, and promote gender-progressive ideas such as delaying pregnancy and sending girls to school.

The participation of multinational corporations in women’s empowerment initiatives in the global South in this instance is not anomalous. In 2011 DFID launched a new core gender policy – the Strategic Vision for Girls and Women – that involves partnership with the Nike Foundation in a venture known as the Girl Hub, which seeks to ‘empower’ adolescent girls living in poverty. The venture focuses, once again, on the so-called girl effect, linking girls’ opportunities to economic indicators with statistics such as: ‘In India, adolescent pregnancy results in nearly \$10 billion in lost potential income per year’, or ‘In Uganda, 85 per cent of girls leave school early, resulting in \$10 billion in lost potential earnings’.<sup>29</sup> The promotional material states: ‘The girl effect...is about leveraging the unique potential of adolescent girls to end poverty for themselves, their families, their communities, their countries and the world’. The venture recognises ‘the untapped potential of adolescent girls living in poverty’, seeing it as ‘an investment we cannot afford to overlook’.<sup>30</sup> The language of ‘investment’ is used liberally by Kristof and WuDunn, who cite Lawrence Summers, former chief economist of the World Bank, as saying ‘Investment in girls’ education may well be the highest-return investment available in the developing world’.<sup>31</sup>

### **Labour as liberatory?**

It is clear that these development agencies, IFIs and corporations have converged around a campaign for women’s empowerment on the basis that it opens up investment opportunities and stimulates economic growth. A number of concerns need to be raised about this. First, a philosophical issue: it is striking that in this discourse basic rights and human dignity for poor women in the global South are never considered worthwhile goals in and of themselves – they must always be justified according to corporate interest and economic outcomes (or, for the US Departments of State and Defense, according to the efficacy of counter-terrorism strategies). Uma Narayan has called this logic ‘insane utilitarianism’.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, it is interesting that the idea of women’s empowerment – which has long been a radical, countercultural and often anti-capitalist idea – has been so thoroughly appropriated by establishment institutions such as the US military, international banks and multinational firms. These institutions make heavy use of Marxist and feminist language, critiquing the fact that



women lack access to means of production (like land and capital), critiquing culture as ideology wielded by males to control and subordinate females,<sup>33</sup> and adopting the language of liberatory 'social movements'. This move recalls what Thomas Frank and Jim McGuigan have identified as capitalism's paradoxical ability to co-opt leftist language and imagery for its own ends.<sup>34</sup>

Of course, one might argue that women's empowerment is always a positive outcome regardless of who promotes it; even if capitalism has co-opted feminism, at least the ends of feminism are being served. But this logic becomes dubious when we look at the more troubling dimensions of the girl effect approach. It is not difficult to pick up on the connection between Kristof and WuDunn's desire to 'give girls the freedom to take factory jobs' and Nike's involvement in the Girl Hub campaign as a notorious user of sweatshops. Nike, like Goldman Sachs and Coca-Cola, make very little effort to disguise their interest in expanding the size of the under-waged labour pool in developing countries by drawing in adolescent girls. They are eager to take advantage of the 'untapped potential' of women – what Kristof and WuDunn have dubbed, if I may quote them again, 'the greatest unexploited resource'. This dovetails with the couple's longstanding support for sweatshops in poor countries, which they famously outlined in a *New York Times Magazine* article disturbingly called 'Two Cheers for Sweatshops' (September 24, 2000). They are not alone: Leslie Chang continues to be a popular proponent of girls' participation in sweatshop labour in China on the grounds that it carries liberatory potential.<sup>35</sup> These perspectives mesh well with the enthusiasm of transnational capitalists for the substantial profits that stand to be gained from the feminisation of the labour force.<sup>36</sup>

In this discourse wage work gets taken for granted as liberating, and as a positive means of cultivating the autonomous self – an assumption that Marxist and feminist scholars critique.<sup>37</sup> But is it labour itself that is supposed to be liberating, or the money that women receive from it? If the latter, we might instead promote a basic income guarantee<sup>38</sup> – although it seems unlikely that companies like Nike would be interested in this. If the former, we still need to consider the *conditions* in which poor women have to work. Ensuring that women have access to wage work is one thing, but ensuring that they receive a living wage, that they receive equal pay to their male counterparts and that they are not exploited by patriarchal overseers,<sup>39</sup> is quite another. That would require a form of progressive politics that the World Bank, USAID, Nike, etc show no indication of supporting – indeed, historically they have gone to great lengths to *reduce* wages and labour regulations in global South countries. And even if the women who are drawn into the labour market did receive fair pay for their work, this kind of employment is often too unstable to substantially improve their livelihoods. For example, ever since the global textile trade – long a repository for female labour – was liberalised by the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2005, the industry has been characterised by volatility, impermanence and employment insecurity as producers scramble across the globe in search of the cheapest labour.<sup>40</sup> The point here is that increasing women's participation in the global labour force is not necessarily empowering in the context of a labour market that exerts steady downward pressure on wages and conditions.

### Misidentifying the causes of underdevelopment

From the liberal perspective that dominates the development industry interventions in kinship and gender appear to be unimpeachably good, even self-evident. Not only do they liberate individuals to act on their own agency and desire, they supposedly have the added benefit of stimulating economic growth and reducing poverty. Even if we choose to accept these claims, the idea that social engineering gender relations in poor countries is the best way to improve incomes and reduce poverty seems a bit absurd. This logic systematically ignores the broader global economic and political forces that impoverish women (and men) in the global South in the first place. It leaves fundamental causes unaddressed and encourages an apolitical view of women's problems that refuses to question the global allocation of power and resources. This apolitical stance helps explain why USAID, DFID and the Half the Sky Movement can regard Facebook games as meaningful interventions in women's empowerment.

Structural adjustment is one of the major blind spots of the empowerment approach. I mentioned above how much harm structural adjustment has caused in the global South – how it has actually *reduced* per capita incomes. If this is the case, why do official development institutions continue to promote it? The answer proposed by political economists such as Robert Pollin, Ha-Joon Chang and David Harvey is that these institutions – and the Western countries that run them – stand to gain so much from it. First, structural adjustment requires debtors to keep inflation low so that the value of their debt (read: the IMF's and World Bank's investment) does not diminish, even though this denies poor countries an important method for stimulating growth.<sup>41</sup> A second reason is that structural adjustment creates an easy way for the IMF and World Bank to recover their loans, by forcing debtors to sell off public assets and cut expenditures so that these resources can be channelled into debt repayment – what Harvey calls 'accumulation by dispossession'.<sup>42</sup> A third reason is that structural adjustment helps relieve crises of over-accumulation in the West by prying open foreign markets and creating new investment opportunities for Western companies to exploit when domestic demand stagnates.

The idea behind this last objective is to help forestall the falling rate of profit, at least temporarily. And it has worked: US investments abroad have grown rapidly, and the rate of return on those investments has increased at a similarly impressive pace.<sup>43</sup> In this sense structural adjustment has been a resounding success for Western capital, even if it has destroyed many global South economies in the process. As a consequence of these policies, the income gap between the richest and poorest countries has widened significantly, moving from 44:1 in 1980 to 74:1 in 1997,<sup>44</sup> what Lant Pritchett has aptly described as 'divergence, big time'.<sup>45</sup> The richest 85 people on earth now have more wealth than the poorest 3.5 billion people, or half the world's population.<sup>46</sup> Even more shocking, the richest three billionaires have more wealth than the combined GDP of the poorest 45 countries. These statistics flag a massive net transfer of wealth and resources from poor to rich.

We can see this transfer happening in real time. In 2010 developing countries lost up to \$1.138 trillion through illicit capital flows, mostly (about 80%) through trade mis-invoicing, a form of corporate tax evasion.<sup>47</sup> In addition, the same year a further \$910 billion was lost through abusive transfer pricing,

another common form of tax evasion.<sup>48</sup> According to Global Financial Integrity, these outflows are increasing at a rate of 8.6% per year.<sup>49</sup> On top of this, developing countries pay around \$600 billion each year in debt service to rich-country creditors, much of it on illegitimate loans accumulated by dictators long since deposed.<sup>50</sup> Economist Charles Abugre calculates that debt payments so vastly outstrip aid disbursements that the net flow of aid from the West to the global South over the period 2002 to 2007 was minus \$2.8 trillion.<sup>51</sup> Then there are the tax holidays (different from tax evasion and avoidance) that multinational corporations extract from developing countries – about \$138 billion each year.<sup>52</sup> Finally, there is the \$60 billion per year that developing countries pay in new patent licensing fees required by the Trade-Related Aspects of International Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement under the WTO.<sup>53</sup> Together these examples alone amount to a regressive flow of wealth that is more than 20 times the size of the total official aid budget.<sup>54</sup>

And these figures do not include other big wealth transfers like land grabs: Fred Pearce estimates that land exceeding the size of Western Europe has been grabbed from developing countries by multinational companies in the past decade alone.<sup>55</sup> Then there is the wealth that multinationals have accumulated by buying up public assets; the World Bank alone has privatised more than \$2 trillion worth of public assets in developing countries since 1980.<sup>56</sup> There are a number of additional losses that we need to consider as well, such as brain drain, illegal logging and fishing, and costs associated with climate change. A recent report by Health Poverty Action shows that, in Africa, losses in these three categories amount to more than \$60 billion each year – more than twice what the continent receives in official aid.<sup>57</sup> We also need to take into account the effects of the ‘race to the bottom’ that corporate globalisation has set off, whereby poor countries compete with one another to attract foreign direct investment by offering labour, pollution rights, resources, and so on for far less than their real value.

This architecture of wealth extraction is underpinned by a global governance system that has long been controlled in the interests of rich countries. In the World Bank and the IMF voting power is apportioned according to a ‘one dollar one vote’ system, with the USA controlling more than 15% of the votes and therefore wielding *de facto* veto power. By contrast, developing countries together hold less than 50% of the votes, despite having the vast majority of the world’s population. In the WTO, while voting is technically democratic, bargaining power is ultimately determined by GDP, and crucial decisions are made in Green Room meetings from which representatives from developing countries are excluded.

The girl effect project – and the capability approach more broadly – ignores and obscures these structural and institutional drivers of underdevelopment while placing blame on kinship and gender.<sup>58</sup> I submit that the project’s persistent misidentification of causes in the face of obvious evidence is only possible because the narrative of individual freedom that lies at its heart carries such power.

### The duplicity of development

Building on the points above, it is important to recognise that the logic of the girl effect obscures the role that development institutions themselves play in the production of poverty, particularly among women. A number of reports have shown that structural adjustment has caused specific harm to women and girls in poor countries.<sup>59</sup> If the World Bank and the IMF are concerned to see females educated and healthy, one might ask why they have done so much to cut public funding for education and healthcare in developing countries. The IMF statements that I cited above (claiming that reducing gender inequality improves macroeconomic stability) seem particularly duplicitous in light of the direct causal relation that William Easterly has demonstrated between IMF structural adjustment loans and economic collapse.<sup>60</sup> Then there is Goldman Sachs. The widespread unemployment caused by the 2008 financial crisis – of which Goldman Sachs was a primary driver – continues to negatively affect women’s livelihoods in the global South, causing much more harm than its Half the Sky campaign can ever hope to compensate for.<sup>61</sup>

In light of the economic destruction and human devastation that these institutions have caused, it appears strange that they repeatedly call for women and adolescent girls to bootstrap themselves out of poverty – a sentiment that appears explicitly in the statements of the IMF, Girl Hub and Half the Sky Movement I have cited above. Consider, for example, the Girl Hub statement that celebrates ‘the potential of adolescent girls to end poverty for themselves, their families, their communities, their countries and the world’. The onus of responsibility has been shifted from the institutions that have caused underdevelopment to its victims. A similar critique can be applied to the self-help and micro-credit fads so popular among development institutions today. These approaches seek to empower women to participate in the market and thus lift themselves out of poverty, but they ignore the fact that this kind of self-help is impossible on a large scale without market regulations and state subsidies that favour small enterprises, and without welfare arrangements to support people when they fail. Yet both these arrangements are being rolled back, through structural adjustment, by the same organisations that promote micro-credit.

This is not to say that gender equality in poor countries is not a worthwhile goal in and of itself (though we might ask why Western institutions – and particularly banks and the governments of global superpowers backed by military force – should consider it their business to promote it, especially when meaningful gender equality remains an unfulfilled promise in the USA and the UK), but simply that the standard justification for pursuing gender equality in development is riddled with contradictions. We can see very clear examples of this in USAID. I pointed out above that USAID specifically seeks to reduce hunger by improving agricultural output in developing countries through women’s empowerment. Yet USAID hides the fact that hunger has been systematically *produced* by land and trade policies that it has helped implement, which favour the interests of corporate agribusiness over those of small local farmers. One need look no further than Egypt, where the 2011 uprising was sparked by a food-price crisis that USAID created by bribing policy makers to turn food crops for local consumption into cash crops (strawberries and cotton) for export to the USA, and by pushing small farmers off the land to make room for big ones.<sup>62</sup> In light

of this, USAID's new development discourse – which saddles women with the burden of reducing their own hunger – begins to appear contradictory, and even disingenuous.

We can see a similar contradiction at play in standard measures of empowerment and participation. Consider the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), for example, which tracks the extent to which women and men can 'actively participate in economic and political life and take part in decision-making'. Such measures probably do encourage positive changes in women's lives. But by focusing solely on empowerment and participation *within* target countries, they ignore the issue of empowerment and participation in the global governance system – the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO – where the most vital economic and political decisions are made with much more significant consequences for the well-being of the poor. GEM promotes a kind of empowerment that is devoid of meaningful political power; a commitment to real empowerment would have to begin by democratising global governance.

### A critique of empowerment

To take this analysis further, we need to open up yet another line of inquiry. Even if we accept that development institutions should promote gender equality, why should they do so according to the very particular logic of 'empowerment'? A closer look at the idea of empowerment reveals that it is not just about expanding access to credit and opportunities for labour, but is also about excavating and nourishing desire. As I pointed out earlier, the process of liberation works – according to the liberal tradition – to restore the authentic desires of the person, who should be free to maximise her own ends without the constraints of social norms, or to encourage the individual to invent herself against the grain of the mainstream. The crucial question becomes: what does the individual truly want – as an *individual*, rather than as part of a broader collective with a predetermined vision of the good? The logic of empowerment assumes that if we rid the land of restrictive social norms then authentic desire will flourish, as if it were pent up inside the kernel self waiting to be let out, and people will rush to invent themselves anew.

It is possible to see hints of the New Left in this thinking: it recalls the logic of social revolution that gained traction in 1968, which can be glossed as a battle for freedom of expression against the repressive constraints of mass society. The freedom to express, broadly construed, was ultimately about the freedom to desire – a notion that was informed by Freud's model of personhood and became particularly evident in the sexual liberation movement at the time. The irony of the revolution of the 1960s was that people woke up afterwards to a culture dominated by a superego injunction to enjoy.<sup>63</sup> In the 1970s capitalists quickly learned that they could channel this revolutionary urge into the impulse to consume, particularly in niche or lifestyle markets that supposedly allowed individuals to express their unique identities.<sup>64</sup>

And here we find the seeds of what might be another reason why development institutions, IFIs and corporations are so committed to the idea of empowerment. If we accept the argument of David Harvey and others that they are more interested in creating new markets for Western capital than in reducing



poverty,<sup>65</sup> then we might hypothesise that the recent focus on empowerment is geared towards the final stage of that process, namely, to expand consumer desire. There is little point in opening new markets if people do not consume enough; the concomitant of creating new markets is the imperative to create the conditions for consumption. This is not a conspiracy; it is straightforward logic that proceeds from Western understandings of what constitutes freedom. Indeed, in the development industry one of the key indicators of female empowerment is consumption. For further evidence of this, consider how Nike justifies its participation in the Girl Hub venture by promising to unlock the consumer: 'Nike Foundation brings its expertise in adolescent girl programming, coupled with creative development excellence in brand marketing, social communications, design innovation and consumer insights'.<sup>66</sup> The important point here is that in today's development discourse the desire for freedom – assumed to be a human universal – is reworked as a project designed to promote the freedom to desire.

There is a growing body of feminist post-development scholarship that pushes back against this project, accusing it of seeking to remake female subjectivities in the global South according to Eurocentric visions.<sup>67</sup> Some in this school point out that Westerners' messianic passion for 'saving' brown women from the stereotyped figure of the 'barbaric' brown man serves as a powerful justification for socio-political interventions by foreign powers – a logic that once underpinned European colonialism and now underwrites US military campaigns and the project of neoliberal globalisation.<sup>68</sup> They also point out that the form of 'global feminism' promoted by development agencies attempts to empower women according to Western notions of agency, dismissing local desires and aspirations and ignoring local conceptions of freedom.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the ethnographic record demonstrates that not all women *want* to be liberated in the manner that Western feminists imagine.<sup>70</sup>

I noted above that the theory of personhood at the centre of development discourse sees the individual as the locus of authentic desire and will, and sees society as a series of repressive constraints and inhibitions. This theory assumes that the subject somehow precedes power relations, and that those power relations are somehow external to it. But the subject does not precede power relations (or society, or social norms); it is, in fact, formed through those relations. Foucault and Butler are often credited with pointing this out, but it is an observation that is nearly as old as anthropology itself: persons do not exist outside of culture. The same can be said of desire. Desire is always the product of discipline and socialisation. If this is the case, then the idea of agency becomes more complicated. The subject's capacity for agency does not inhere in some authentic inner self or a prior substratum of personhood, as development discourse would have it. To paraphrase Clifford Geertz, there is no 'backstage' to which a person can retreat to cast off the constraints of social norms and act according to the wishes of their 'real' self.<sup>71</sup> Rather, the subject's capacity for agency is a product of the processes – such as the disciplinary power of social norms – that produce the subject in the first place.

This means we need to relativise our understanding of agency, and broaden our definition to encompass all the capacities and skills sedimented in persons through specific disciplines that enable them to undertake particular kinds of moral actions.<sup>72</sup> Human agency is what is possible within a specific orientation



towards the good, rather than (as we typically imagine) absolute freedom from all orientations.<sup>73</sup> The abstract individual that the development industry seeks to produce – the individual liberated from social norms – cannot exist.

## Conclusion

My goal in this paper has been to illuminate some of the contradictions of development interventions in kinship and gender. These contradictions can be summarised in eight main points.

First, initiatives designed to empower girls by encouraging their participation in the labour market often end up placing them in new forms of subservience as workers in a context wherein wages are unfair and conditions unsafe.

Second, by demonising certain kinds of kinship, development agencies ignore much more significant causes of the problems they seek to address, such as structural adjustment, wealth flows from poor to rich and lack of democracy in the global governance system. The capability approach has done well to highlight the importance of rights and freedoms in achieving human well-being but this analysis tends to obscure relationships of inequality and extraction in the global economy.

Third, empowerment interventions provide development organisations with a compelling claim to moral legitimacy that hides the role they play in creating the very problems of poverty and underdevelopment that they seek to solve. In some cases it also appears that the champions of women's empowerment are less concerned about gender justice than about expanding the cheap labour force and stimulating consumption.

Fourth, while liberal morality seeks to enhance people's control over their own lives, it fails to address the broader geopolitical forces that generate such widespread instability and insecurity in the global South. The destabilising effects of structural adjustment, trade liberalisation, labour market flexibility, austerity policies, debt, climate change, financial crisis, and IFIs that manipulate sovereign economies do not feature in the liberal analysis of people's lack of control over their own lives.

Fifth, the capability approach is designed to dethrone purely economic indicators in favour of enabling people to realise their own particular visions of well-being – a sort of relativist project, as I pointed out in my discussion of Sen's work. But it does so according to a formula that is deeply Western. The preoccupation with liberating individuals from certain kinship forms presupposes a conception of freedom and agency that is far from universal. In this sense the approach violates its own claim to relativism.

Sixth, attempts to promote empowerment are applied only *within* target countries, not to the global governance system, where voting power remains disproportionately in the hands of rich countries. If we are to be serious about improving human capabilities, we need to begin by building mechanisms for meaningful global democracy.

Seventh, in the attempt to enhance individual agency, empowerment interventions often end up putting people in positions of precarity and risk. Apparently 'backward' forms of kinship often provide poor people with protective buffers against economic instability.<sup>74</sup> In the absence of state welfare

dismantling these relationships and atomising individuals leaves the poor at the mercy of the market. In other words, moving from kinship/patriarchy to individualism/markets simply replaces one type of crisis with another.

Finally, the very logic of the project to save people in the global South from relationships of domination and inequality in the realm of kinship relies on a geopolitical hierarchy between the powerful Western core and the subordinate periphery it seeks to manage. The development industry fails to question this much more formidable relationship of domination and inequality,<sup>75</sup> leaving intact the geopolitical order that continues to produce underdevelopment.

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### Notes on Contributor

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### Notes

1. World Bank, "Adolescent Girls in Focus."
2. Chang, *Bad Samaritans*, 27.
3. *Ibid.*, 28.
4. Pollin, *Contours of Descent*, 166.
5. World Bank, *World Development Indicators*.
6. Stiglitz, *The Post Washington Consensus Consensus*.
7. Anders, "The Normativity of Numbers"; and Dijkstra, "The PRSP Approach."
8. Ferguson, *Global Shadows*, 78.
9. Sen, *Development as Freedom*.
10. For example, Derbyshire, *Gender Manual*, 8.
11. In reality nuclear families in the USA are often deeply hierarchical, and 'gender equality' in the USA does not extend to equal wages or reproductive freedom.
12. Maine, *Ancient Law*.
13. McKinnon, "Kinship," 41. See William Joseph Goode's book, *World Revolution and Family Patterns*, for a good example of this kind of thinking.
14. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*; and Keane, *Christian Moderns*.
15. See also Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?"
16. Keane, *Christian Moderns*.
17. USAID, *Gender Equality and Female Empowerment*, 14 (emphasis added).
18. USAID, *United States Strategy*, 6.
19. Zeitlin et al., *Strengthening the Family*, 10–13.
20. *Ibid.*, 13–14 (emphasis added). This flies in the face of the fact that in the USA education and nutrition levels remain poor among much of the population, despite the prevalence of so-called modern families.
21. USAID, *Gender Equality and Female Empowerment*.

22. USAID, *United States Strategy*.
23. White House, *National Security Strategy*; and USAID, *United States Strategy*.
24. World Bank, *Implications of World Development*, i.
25. Buvinic and King, "Smart Economics," (emphasis added).
26. Stotsky, *Gender and its Relevance*, 1.
27. USAID, *Gender Equality and Female Empowerment*.
28. Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, xix (emphasis added).
29. The Girl Effect, "About."
30. Ibid.
31. Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, xx.
32. Narayan, "Women."
33. See Reeves and Baden, *Gender and Development*.
34. Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*; and McGuigan, *Cool Capitalism*. See also Hickel and Khan, "The Culture of Capitalism."
35. Chang, *Factory Girls*.
36. Fluentes and Ehrenreich, *Women in the Global Factory*; and Salzinger, *Genders in Production*.
37. For example, Weeks, *The Problem with Work*.
38. Hanlon et al., *Just Give Money to the Poor*.
39. For example, Ong, *Spirits of Resistance*.
40. See Hickel, "Neoliberal Plague."
41. Chang, *Kicking Away the Ladder*.
42. Harvey, *The New Imperialism*.
43. Duménil and Lévy, "The Economics of US Imperialism."
44. United Nations University, *2008 Annual Report*.
45. Pritchett, "Divergence, Big Time."
46. Oxfam, *Working for the Few*.
47. Kar and Freitas, *Illicit Financial Flows*. See also Shaxson, *Treasure Islands*.
48. The extent of abusive transfer pricing is difficult to calculate, but Raymond Baker, *Capitalism's Achilles Heel*, estimates that it roughly equals that of trade mis-invoicing (in 2010, 80% of up to \$1.138 trillion).
49. Kar and Freitas, *Illicit Financial Flows*.
50. I calculated this figure using the World Bank's International Debt Statistics database.
51. Abugre, "Development Aid."
52. ActionAid, *Give Us a Break*.
53. Raman, "WIPO Seminar."
54. The global aid budget was \$134 billion as of 2013, according to the OECD Aid Statistics report.
55. Pearce, *The Land Grabbers*. See also Collier, *The Plundered Planet*; and Moyo, *Winner Take All*.
56. I calculated this figure using the World Bank's datasets on privatisation available at <http://ppi.worldbank.org/>.
57. Health Poverty Action, *Honest Accounts*.
58. Cf. Pogge, "A Critique."
59. For example, Bretton Woods Project, "Gender and the IFIs"; and Dennis and Zuckerman, *Gender Guide*.
60. Easterly, *The White Man's Burden*.
61. Seguino, "The Global Economic Crisis."
62. See Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*.
63. See Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*.
64. See Hickel and Khan, "The Culture of Capitalism."
65. Harvey, *A Brief History*.
66. The Girl Effect, "About."
67. See Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes"; and Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women*.
68. For example, Ahmed, *Women and Gender*; and Spivak, *In Other Worlds*.
69. Alvarez, "Translating the Global."
70. Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?"; and Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.
71. Geertz, "The Impact of the Concept of Culture," 35.
72. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 29.
73. See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 33.
74. Ferguson, "Declarations of Dependence."
75. See Mosse, "A Relational Approach."

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