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**Abstract:**

Girls are increasingly being publically celebrated as community leaders, models for ideal citizenship, and central to economic development. Contemporary girlhood is rich with political implications and significance. In this essay, I outline some of the scholarship on the [public discourses that idealize girls as model neoliberal citizens](#) and address important findings and contributions from empirical research on the political lives of girls: girls' political beliefs, [political socialization](#), political identities, and their practices of political and civic engagement. There is a growing body of scholarship that suggests that studying the political lives of girls enables and requires a re-thinking of some key concepts in political sociology, including the meaning of politics, of engagement, and of citizenship for different populations.

Girls are increasingly visible as political and civic actors. From Pakistani girls' education advocate Malala Yousafzai, to the star-studded documentary "Girl Rising," to the many girls who critique and spoof misogynist ads on the "Powered by Girl" blog, public narratives about female adolescents have clearly moved beyond the late 1990s image of the weak, body-image-obsessed, Ophelia with a self-esteem problem. Girls are no longer portrayed only as tragic victims of social and political forces beyond their control, but are also increasingly seen as active participants in public life. What are sociologists to make of this popular interest in girls' empowerment? What kinds of political and civic engagement practices are celebrated by such narratives and what kinds are excluded? How do girls like Malala and the activists involved in "Powered by Girl" understand their political identities? What is the relationship between the [widespread](#) celebration of girls as agents of social change and girls' actual experiences in the political sphere?

In this essay, I present some of the recent social science research on the political lives of girls in order to provide both theoretical frameworks and empirical data that can help us to better understand and analyze this public interest in girls' citizenship. I also suggest that research on the political lives and identities of girls offers opportunities to further develop and specify some key concepts in political sociology including the meaning of "politics" and of "engagement." I begin by addressing the importance of girlhood in contemporary [political discourse and how girls' studies scholars have analyzed and critiqued the invocation of girls as model citizens](#). Then I turn to a discussion of some of the important findings and contributions from the recent [empirical](#) scholarship on girls' political beliefs, identities, and practices [which further complicates the public celebration of the empowered girl citizen](#).

### **Girlhood in public debate:**

Numerous scholars of girlhood have argued that the figure of the girl is of particular discursive significance in contemporary political and social life (Aapola, Gonick, and Harris, 2005; Driscoll 2002; Harris, 2004a; Sensoy and Marshall, 2010; Taft, 2011). There are several dimensions to this claim. First, Australian youth studies scholar Anita Harris (2004a) has argued that girls and young women are often invoked by states, corporations, [and the media](#) as models for ideal neoliberal citizenship. She writes that "the appropriate ways to embrace and manage the political, economic, and social conditions of contemporary societies are demonstrated in the example of young women" (2). [The figure of the empowered girl](#) is not just an ideal for other girls to model themselves after, but is also a model for contemporary citizenship more broadly. [However, girlhood is not a singular category, so while many different girlhoods receive public](#)

acclaim for being “empowered,” the shape and meaning given to this empowerment varies by race, class, and national context. In Harris’ work, she goes on to describe how, in a knitting together of neoliberalism and feminism, what she refers to as the “can-do girl” is defined by her capacities to become successful, unique, autonomous, and responsible for her own well-being. The widespread invocation of “can-do” girlhood thus emphasizes and celebrates the value of a distinctly neoliberal approach to citizenship and public life. In another text, Harris also writes, “it is primarily as consumer citizens that youth are offered a place in contemporary social life, and it is girls above all who are held up as the exemplars of this new citizenship” (2004b: 163). Given its emphasis on consumption and self-reliance, “can-do” girlhood is, of course, only accessible to certain girls, but it is held up as what all girls should aspire to be.

In addition to reaffirming the position that girls are held up as idealized consumer citizens, Aapola et al. (2005) argue that girlhood also has an important role in discourses on multiculturalism and multicultural citizenship. Migrant young women and girls are “charged with the responsibility to effectively blend ‘old’ and ‘new’ cultures.... They are constructed as symbols of ‘acculturation’” (180). Unlike immigrant boys and young men who are frequently presented as dangerous, immigrant girls and young women are more often “reworked as a de-politicized and entertaining Other” (182). Girlhood, the authors argue, does not come with the discursive association to rebellion and revolt, which means that girls are assumed to be a “safer” more “manageable” immigrant population. Further, while women have often been tasked with the role of maintaining and representing tradition in new cultural contexts, the girl is presented here as the cultural ambassador, more able to change and adapt than her older counterparts. In assigning this particular role to immigrant girls, these images effectively de-politicize her

experiences, encouraging her to take on a citizenship based on cultural hybridity rather than an engagement with issues of power, policy, structures, etc.

Privileged (predominately white) girls in the Global North are thus invoked as symbols of empowered neoliberal consumer citizenship, immigrant girls (and, occasionally, other girls of color) are held up as models of multicultural integration, and, according to Emily Bent (2013a) girls in the Third World are increasingly being presented as simultaneously tragic victims *and* as the solution to global poverty. Through a critical analysis of the immensely popular Girl Effect viral video (2013a) and the video's invocation within human rights organizations and institutions (2013b), Bent highlights the growth of a new discourse on the Third World girl, what she refers to as "the Girl Effect paradigm." The Girl Effect and related campaigns such as Plan International's "Because I am a Girl" and the United Nation's Foundation's "Girl Up," "suggest that girls are key to breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and advancing the modernity of Third World nations" (Bent, 2013a: 4). According to Bent, this paradigm invokes a colonialist logic that positions Third World girls as inevitably and always oppressed by an assumed local patriarchy and yet as also the only ones who will be able to lift these communities out of poverty. The discursive homogenization of the Third World girl in this paradigm simultaneously erases local variation *and* avoids addressing the global economic and political structures of imperialism and colonialism that produce and reinforce poverty. In the context of the Girl Effect paradigm, the solution to this abstracted and universalized poverty and oppression is to invest in girls' education and economic empowerment. Bent critiques this approach as a deeply neoliberal and individualized solution. She writes, "the Girl Effect invokes ideals of hard work, autonomous agency, and making the right decisions in a free market economy as producing personal success, upward mobility, and, above all, the modernity of Third World nations" (2013a: 10). Through

hard work and personal responsibility, Third World girl is now expected to be the solution to global poverty. Alternately, these girls are also sometimes invoked as the rationale for Western interventions, including military intervention (Sensoy and Marshall 2010).

These various discourses on girlhood in different locations indicate that the figure of the girl is politically and economically important in contemporary social life and work in combination to produce a hierarchical relationship between girlhoods that, according to several scholars, limits the possibilities for the real political empowerment of girls around the world (Bent, 2013b; Sensoy and Marshall 2010; Taft, 2011). Sensoy and Marshall analyze how popular adolescent (and adult) books portray Muslim women and girls as being in need of saving by their empowered Western “sisters” who already supposedly live in conditions of full gender equality. Referring to this as “missionary girl power,” they argue that these texts uphold colonial and orientalist perspectives yet repackage these perspectives as girl empowerment narratives:

The girl power discourse runs along two registers: on one, the girl in the West reads about and learns about her ‘sisters’ who require saving (positioning the Western girl – here constructed as White, non-Muslim, and ‘modern’ – back into a traditional, caring, mothering relationship. In a sense, pushing back any gains made by progressive or radical feminisms to problematize traditional roles of women and girls as caretakers and nurturers). On the other is the oppressed ‘Third World girl’ who looks to her civilized sisters in the West and as educational aide flows in to her community via a pre-packaged empowerment project. (302)

In the context of missionary girl power, both of these groups of girls are thus only offered minimal (and managed) options for engaging with the world as empowered political subjects.

[The scholarship presented here suggests that while girls are indeed being publically celebrated as](#)

empowered political actors and citizens, such discourses tend to offer girls only a limited model for engagement – one that is individualized, de-politicized, and rooted in neoliberal notions of personal responsibility. Further, these public celebrations of girls’ empowerment not only produce a constrained set of possibilities for girls’ citizenship, but they are also often quite divorced from systematic research on the political lives of girls and from how girls actually think about and engage in political life.

### **Empirical Research on Girls’ Politics:**

Despite the visibility of the girl in contemporary political discourse, research on girls’ political identities and practices has been, until recently, fairly infrequent. Within much early political socialization research (a subfield that certainly links political science and political sociology), it was argued that gender role socialization in childhood helped to explain differences in the political interest and engagement of boys and girls *and* in adult men and women (Hess and Torney, 1967; Jennings and Niemi, 1974; Owen and Dennis, 1988). This work tended to conclude that girls and boys both see politics as “a man’s game” and that girls are socialized away from formal political activity (Alozie, Simon, and Merrill, 2003; Mayer and Schmidt, 2004). Girls were primarily understood as absent from political life and therefore were largely left out of research on political engagement and citizenship. Another feature of much political socialization research that helps explain the lack of research on girls’ political identities and practices is the focus on the future political lives of young people, rather than their present-day political selves (see, for example, Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2006), a model that has since been critiqued by what is often referred to as “the new sociology of childhood,” which asks scholars to

consider the worlds of children on their own terms, rather than always as adults-to-be and future citizens (James, Jenks, and Prout, 1998).

While more recent political socialization scholars have returned to the question of gender in childhood politics, the results of this research are fairly mixed and unclear. [With regard to political ideology, a few studies have also found minor gender differences in childhood and adolescence \(Fridkin and Kenney, 2007; Sotelo, 1999\), with girls being more inclined toward social spending and having more tolerant attitudes toward marginalized groups than their male peers.](#) In a study of junior high school students in four countries, Mayer and Schmidt (2004) find that there is a widespread perception that politics is a male sphere, but that gender differences in regard to political interest were generally small and subtle. Using U.S. survey data, Alozie et al. (2003) find that “girls surpass boys in political interest and activity, and that this persists without a significant drop in teen years” (1). On the other hand, Cicognani et al. (2012) use data from Italy and Belgium to conclude that boys have both higher political interest and higher internet political participation than girls. Hooghe and Stolle (2004) suggest a possible explanation for some of the variations in findings by demonstrating that girls and boys are interested in different kinds of political activities – girls are more interested in activities that the authors’ classify as social movement related, including volunteering, while boys favor more radical and confrontational actions and those actions that involve more leadership and authority (i.e. running for office). Therefore, surveys that ask about different types of political activity and interest are likely to lead to different results.

There is a growing body of feminist scholarship that suggests that the study of girls as political actors requires and engenders a re-theorization of some key concepts and categories in political sociology. More specifically, these works argue that research on the political lives of



girls requires us to re-consider our understanding of the meaning of politics, of engagement, and of citizenship. The study of girls' political lives, then, can encourage the elaboration and critical development these concepts. Further, these studies on girls' political lives also provide an alternative current of information to the neoliberal discourses of individualized and depoliticized girl citizenship outlined above. Girls' citizenship practices include far more than consumption, cultural assimilation, and self-development via education and their relation to "politics" is often quite complex.

According to several studies, girls often have a very narrow definition of politics, seeing it primarily as an activity done by politicians and those with more power than themselves. Given this narrow definition, it is important to note that when they say that they are not interested in politics, they are explicitly referring only to this kind of formal politics. Lisa Garcia Bedolla (2000) found Latina girls in Los Angeles associate politics primarily with "high politics" and not their own lives. They were highly invested in their communities and interested in solving community problems, but expressed a distance from "politics." Jacqueline Briggs (2008) also argues that young women express disinterest in "politics," which they associate entirely with political parties and politicians, but are still willing and able to comment on what they see as "interesting" issues such as abortion rights, the war in Iraq, and other policy concerns. While young women may not consider themselves political, their personal commitments to the idea of "social change" can still draw them to participate in the political sphere (Booth-Tobin and Han, 2010). Jessica Taft's (2006) work makes clear that even girls who are involved in numerous collective projects to influence political decision-makers will claim not to be "a politics person." She argues that this is partly based on their political disagreements with politicians: "many U.S. teenage girls' active refusals of politics are a rejection only of the hegemonic practices and

policies of the U.S. government and, for some, are part of an oppositional political stance... Some U.S. teenage girls deployed the rejection of politics as a tool for political intervention” (329). [Girls’ rejection of the term “political” for themselves is sometimes based in their critique of politicians and public policy.](#) Ruth Nicole Brown (2007) also suggests that political socialization scholarship needs to look not only at “system support” but also at how “formal exclusion from politics inspires non-traditional resources, participation, and socialization” (125). She draws on research with young African-American girls to suggest that dissent, counter-socialization, and the expression of critical beliefs about political and social issues must all be taken more seriously in the study of the political lives of girls. In sum, by engaging in discussions with girls about their understandings of politics, these researchers have found that scholars need to be careful in their use of this term with this population. Girls themselves may have a quite narrow definition of what counts as “politics,” and therefore their claims that they are “not political” must not be taken to indicate an overarching disengagement from or disinterest in the diversity of forms of politicized thought or action. Feminist scholars who see politics as a more expansive term that encompasses an awareness of power relations, or the idea that “the personal is political,” should be careful not to assume that girls also see politics in this way. Indeed, as the above research suggests, even girls with critical perspectives on many deeply political issues and girls who are involved in a variety of projects for community improvement and social change may state that they are “not political.”

In addition to illuminating the confounding potential of divergent interpretations of the concept of “politics,” scholars of girls’ political identities have criticized the pervasive claims that today’s young people are apathetic and disengaged. Aapola et al. (2005) suggest that such claims are often based on assumptions, rather than systematic or conclusive research. Further,

Bulbeck and Harris (2008) argue that “the generation debate may well have run its course” (238), and that scholars should not generalize about the level of engagement or apathy amongst a generation as there are substantial differences in this area amongst young people (as there are amongst adults). Critiques of such widespread generalizations about girls’ supposed disinterest in politics have also been supported by substantial empirical research that seeks to illuminate the often hidden ways in which some girls are in fact civically and politically engaged. On-line blogging that challenges the sexualization of girls (Brown, 2011), resisting and confronting a domineering boyfriend, father or brother (Aapola et al., 2005), everyday practices of interaction across difference in a public park (Cele, 2013), mentoring other girls (Brown, 2007), media-making (Caron, 2011; Kearney, 2006), participation in human rights organizations (Bent, 2013b), and social movement activism (Gordon, 2010; Taft, 2011) have all been studied and analyzed as methods of girls’ political engagement. Taken together, this body of work suggests that at least some girls are politically involved and that their involvement sometimes takes forms that might not be immediately recognized as engagement because they are “acted out through everyday practices rather than in the formal structures of adult political systems” (Cele, 2013: 78).

Political engagement, according to these authors, must [be re-defined to](#) include more than just participation in state-based politics or community organizations – it should also be assessed and explored in more informal and diffuse locations as well. [Re-defining political engagement to include a variety of challenges to power relations outside of formal institutions can draw attention to a greater range of citizenship practices. And, whether it be in formal or informal spaces, it is important to note here that girls’ actual citizenship practices include a far greater range of engagements than those presented in the public celebrations of empowered girlhood.](#)

One reason that girls sometimes practice their politics outside of the formal structures for civic and political engagement is that they [do not believe that they will be able to make the kinds of changes they want from](#) within these spaces (Taft and Gordon, 2013; Valaitis, 2002). There are numerous barriers to girls' effective and full participation in such spaces, including their own sense of disempowerment and exclusion (Taft, 2006), their belief that adults do not trust them and will not listen to them (Valaitis, 2002), narratives that position them primarily as future political actors rather than individuals who can contribute to decision-making in the present (Gordon, 2010), and institutionalized structures that either fail to fully include them or that treat them as tokens (Bent, 2013b). These challenges may help explain girls' claims that they are not political and their tendency to turn to less formal types of political engagement. However, Bent (2013b) argues that girls' studies scholars should not celebrate the informal, underground, and everyday political practices of girls at the expense of analyzing girls' relationships to, and potential participation in, more powerful political institutions and organizations.

In the face of these impediments to girls' participation in politics, adult support can play a crucial role in facilitating civic engagement (Gordon, 2008; Sears, 2010). Based on extensive research with teenage activists, Hava Gordon (2008) illuminates the vital role of adult allies. While these allies were important to both boys and girls, they were especially helpful to girls who likely face more substantial parental concern about their activism. In addition to helping sustain girls' participation in one of the organizations in Gordon's study, adult allies also regularly interrupted patterns of male dominance that emerged in the teens' meetings. Cicognani et al. (2012) also found that parental political participation has a greater impact on girls than on their male peers. The participation of mothers and fathers in political activities both have a stronger relationship to girls' likelihood of participation in political activities than they do to

boys' participation. Taken together, these studies make clear that adults have a significant role to play in shaping girls' political and civic engagement.

Given the gendered dimensions of rhetorics of care, many girls talk about their political engagement as a responsibility, as something that they are driven to do. Jessica Taft (2011) finds that girl activists explain their numerical dominance of high school activist organizations by claiming that they are socialized to be more concerned for their communities than their male peers. While the rhetoric of care for others can inspire girls' engagement, it can also be felt as a burden. Jacqueline Kennelly (2011) discusses how young women activists express substantial feelings of guilt; they feel responsible for fixing all of the social problems that they see and therefore also that they are not doing enough. Young women, she notes, feel pressure to be martyrs and to sacrifice themselves for the cause. In this way, activism and political engagement can become another task to be taken up by responsible, caring young women citizens (Queniert and Jacques, 2004; Harris, 2004a).

Youth citizenship is increasingly “constituted around responsibilities rather than rights” (Harris, 2004a: 63). In placing responsibility for economic and social well-being on the shoulders of individuals and “civil society,” the state requires people to provide for themselves and their community members in a more active fashion. One of the ways that neoliberalism has significantly impacted women and girls is in the additional work of social welfare and care that they are expected to provide when the state ceases to offer social services. The widespread calls for increasing youth community service and participation in civil society can thus be seen as another way to mitigate the decline of the social and economic provisions of the welfare state. As initiatives for youth engagement encourage youth to become responsible contributors to civil society, they also facilitate the shifting of the many burdens of social and community care from

the state onto a gendered public. As Aapola et al. (2005) note, “active citizenship for young women frequently means taking responsibility for themselves economically and at the same time taking care of others” (176). Girls’ and young women’s political engagement can thus be seen as an extension of the gendered expectation of community care work, and also as part of the shift from a citizenship model that emphasizes individuals as rights-bearing subjects to a more neoliberal approach that focuses on the responsibility of each individual subject to provide for herself and for others. Calls for active citizenship thus can have both gender and age-specific meanings and implications.

### **Conclusions and Implications:**

Invocations of girls as saviors of the nation via education, as ambassadors of an assimilationist multiculturalism, as responsible and caring volunteers, and as engaged community leaders all position girls as important actors within contemporary political and social life. Such invocations may indeed give girls more opportunities and encouragement to become empowered and active citizens, but they also imply greater responsibilities and greater burdens. In analyzing the celebration of girls’ increased political and civic engagement, we should ask if this is evidence of greater gender equality in the realm of politics or simply a shifting of more responsibilities onto girls’ shoulders? Further, we must ask in what ways does the increased attention to girls’ political selves operate as a kind of regulating governmentality, and in what ways does it enable the formation of new and creative political identities? What kinds of engagement and what kinds of citizenship are being promoted and what kinds of engagement and citizenship are excluded or marginalized?

The feminist scholarship on girls' political identities and political engagement provides an important counterpoint to the popular discourses that celebrate girls primarily as privatized neoliberal citizens who pursue their own upward mobility. This research introduces girls who think critically about politics and politicians, who care about social change and social justice, and who act collectively and individually in a variety of contexts and institutional spaces. It also highlights the ways that girls continue to feel marginalized and excluded from formal politics. Finally, this research also suggests important concerns about how active citizenship can become yet another gendered obligation of care and responsibility for girls. By conducting research with actual girls about their political lives, we can see how their experiences, desires, and political commitments are far more complex than what is put forth in the public praise of empowered girlhood.

Girls are clearly no longer entirely invisible within the realm of public politics nor within scholarship on political socialization and political engagement. However, much of the research on girls' politics continues to emphasize the intellectual tasks of interrupting discourses on generational apathy and challenging the marginalization of girls in related fields of study. This review suggests that it may in fact be time for scholars of girls' politics move beyond critiquing how various theories and conceptual definitions have marginalized girls ways of doing politics and instead begin building new theories, seeking empirical patterns and exploring how various processes of political identification and engagement work for girls. Critiques of old models are certainly a necessary step in the intellectual development of a subfield but research should not stop at this stage. Instead of writing in order to make girls visible or arguing for the relevance of the study of girlhood, we must now examine the implications of girls' visibility and explore how different groups of girls are navigating the increased public attention to their political selves.

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