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Girl Branded: Nike, the UN and the Construction of the Entrepreneurial Adolescent Girl Subject

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and philanthro-capitalism since the early 2000s, transnational corporations (TNCs) have come to play a prominent role in international policy debates on sustainable development and human rights. A key feature of the growing corporate interest in poverty reduction is its faith in feminist ideas as tools for change. Spearheaded by the 'Girl Effect' campaign of athletic apparel giant Nike (since 2008), development institutions and aid agencies have largely embraced the idea that 'rebranding girls' in the Global South as untapped market potential and training them as self-confident, entrepreneurial market actors represents the key to solving poverty. In an attempt to gauge the growing influence of TNCs on development policy, this article analyzes the principles and the actual effects of the Girl Effect and compares it with Nike's own interests as a corporation built on women's labor. It argues that contrary to freeing girls' potential, the Girl Effect project capitalizes on patriarchy to depoliticize poverty and inequality. Far from empowering women or supporting the poor, Nike's rebranding project is an attempt to discipline girls, and the NGOs that represent them, into behaviors that support the status quo, distract from corporations' misbehavior and expand the power of the market.

KEYWORDS: *corporations, globalization, Girl Effect, sweatshops, poverty, development, feminism*

By deregulating and privatizing the global economy, globalization has greatly expanded the power of the private sector the past few decades, boosting the financial, economic and political position of transnational corporations (TNCs). With the rise of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and philanthro-capitalism since the early 2000s, TNCs have come to play a prominent role in international policy debates on sustainable development and human rights as well. When it comes to poverty eradication, public health or education in the Global South, business is, as the Global Policy Forum (2015:5) put it, “positioning itself as an alternative, operating on a model that pretends to be more flexible, efficient and un-bureaucratic than is the case with states.”

In the run up to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UN’s new development agenda that has now succeeded the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) since January 2016, the UN has released various documents and reports, in which they advocate for an even larger role of corporations to shape development policies in this new era of development (“Private Sector Investment and Sustainable Development” 4; “Building the Post-2015 Business Engagement Architecture” 4; “World Investment Report 2014” iii; “The road to dignity by 2030” 9). According to these documents, many responsible corporations have come to realize that reducing global wealth inequalities is in their own interest and, as a result, could play a vital role as partners in the creation and implementation of development policies and programs and lead their less responsible counterparts by example (“Private Sector Investment and Sustainable Development” 4; “Building the Post-2015 Business Engagement Architecture” 4; “World Investment Report 2014” iii; “The road to dignity by 2030” 9). The United National Global Compact (“Building the Post-2015 Business Engagement Architecture” 4) articulates the logic as follows: “Companies realize that their ability to prosper and grow depends on the existence of a prosperous and sustainable society, and that social deprivation and ecological destruction can have negative material impacts on supply chain, capital flows and employee productivity” (“Building the Post-2015 Business Engagement Architecture” 4). In December 2014, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon released a report in which he explicitly endorses the UNGC’s position on how to approach such partnerships (“The road to dignity by 2030” 9). With notable optimism, the report (9) reiterates that “companies are ready to change how they do business and to contribute by transforming markets from within and making production, consumption and the allocation of capital more inclusive and sustainable.”

A key feature of the corporate commitment to poverty reduction, as it has emerged in the past couple of years, is its faith in feminist ideas as tools for change. Nike, Goldman Sachs, JP Morgan, Walmart, Johnson & Johnson, Coca Cola and Avon are amongst the growing group of TNCs who argue that the most effective way to combat poverty is to unleash the repressed entrepreneurial potential of impoverished women to lift themselves and their countries out of poverty. TNCs such as Walmart, Nike and Goldman Sachs have been endorsed by people as influential as Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, two World Bank presidents and a host of senior United Nations (UN) representatives for their ‘game changing’ philanthropy. One of the reasons why TNCs attained such remarkable authority so quickly is that they fund and partner with some of the world's most influential development players, such as UN agencies, development industries and well-respected Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). For many NGOs, TNCs fill an important funding gap, as other sources of aid have drastically declined in the past decade (Dauvergne and LeBaron 2014).

One company with which the UN has developed partnership relations is the shoe and garment producer Nike. The United Nations Office for Partnerships, for example, lists Nike as its first partner on its Sports and Development section (“Sports for Development and Peace”), and the UN Foundation has developed close collaborations with the Nike Foundation since 2008. In the eyes of the UN, it seems, Nike represents a promising example of the potential of corporations to serve as meaningful partners to promote global justice and equality in the new development era. This faith in Nike, or its Foundation, as a credible development authority is not limited to the UN. On the contrary, Western aid agencies, women’s groups and development NGOs have widely embraced the Foundation as a global authority on the needs of girls in the Global South (“The Girl Effect and Martial Arts” 297; Hickel 2014; Murphy 2013; Koffman and Gill 2013). These past years, the Foundation’s Girl Effect and Girl Hub programs, which the following section of this paper will expand on, have influenced gender policies of the White House, Plan International, Save the Children, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and have sparked close collaborations with the World Bank, USAID and the British Department for International Development (DFID) (Hickel 2014; Koffman and Gill 2013; Moeller 2013). The Girl Effect, as its own theory on gender and development, has now grown into a global movement that is mostly led by Western corporate donors, the World Bank and the UN and has become largely hegemonic amongst development institutions, foundations and many human

rights organizations (Hickel 2014; Moeller 2013; Koffman and Gill 2013; Murphy 2013; Switzer 2013; Wilson 2011).

While Nike and other TNCs claim that their growing enthusiasm for development and the empowerment of women and girls stems from their realization that sustainable development and equality is in their own interest, a political economic perspective on global inequalities recognizes that in reality, the goals and interests of corporations and NGOs are quite different. As research by scholars, such as Chang (2002), Harvey (2005) and many others has shown, the power and wealth of rich nations and MNCs stem, to a large extent, from the same global capitalist system and free-market regime that have undermined the economic development of poor countries in the Global South for decades. As Eisenstein (2009:x) observed, the global capitalist system that turned TNCs into such powerful and wealthy actors in the past three decades is “founded on inequality and exploitation,” perhaps most pronounced in the industry that, largely dependent on cheap women's labor, has turned Nike into the economic giant that it is today, the global apparel industry.

Quite evidently, then, the UN's optimistic assumption that the interests of such corporations indeed overlap with development goals obscures the fact that the core mission of corporations is to generate profit and that, without new forms of regulatory oversight and structural changes in the international political economy, we cannot reasonably expect the philanthropic engagements of TNCs to produce truly progressive development outcomes and end economic and environmental exploitation. As such, in order to assess the UN's optimism and faith in corporations' willingness to ‘do the right thing’ and serve as partners for global justice in the new development era, it is critical that we take the contradictions and tensions between development goals and corporate profits seriously and critically unpack the dynamics and impacts that such partnerships may have in the field of international development. For if the potential of corporations to reduce global inequalities and promote gender equality is found in turning ‘the best corporate behavior’ into the mainstream model for their less responsible counterparts, it is vital that we understand the motives, techniques and interests of the companies that are lauded for their dedication to the poor and marginalized. By critically unpacking Nike's Girl Effect journey, this paper is an attempt to do just that. Testing the UN's optimistic assumptions about the motivations and potential of corporations as partners for social progress, this paper analyzes the philanthropic campaigns of Nike and its Foundation. By interrogating the

ideological underpinnings of Nike's Girl Effect project and its Girl Declaration campaign, and contrasting the interests of Nike Inc. with those it claims to empower, this paper argues that far from representing a neutral poverty alleviation or girl empowerment strategy, Nike's girl power work should be seen as a corporate campaign that 'brands' girls as instruments to consolidate the power of the market and capitalizes on patriarchy to depoliticize poverty. It seeks to demonstrate that Nike's success in branding 'the entrepreneurial girl subject' into a widely accepted poverty alleviation strategy should be understood as a manifestation of the rising power of corporations to shape development in a pro-business manner.

Since 2008, the Girl Effect has influenced policy agendas and programs across a wide range of development actors. Through the Girl Effect, the Nike Foundation has developed close partnerships with organizations such as the UN Foundation, the World Bank, the British Department for International Development (DFID) and USAID (Hickel 2014; Koffman and Gill 2013; Moeller 2013). In fiscal years 2011 and 2012 alone, the Nike Foundation paid more than 11 million US dollars in grants to NGOs such as Plan International, the Global Fund for Children, the European Parliamentary Forum, the Population Council, CARE and Save the Children, the World Bank, Vital Voices, BRAC and many others.

So what exactly is the Girl Effect about? As Koffman and Gill (2013:84) describe the campaign, "[a]t its heart is the idea that 'girl power' is the best way to lift the developing world out of poverty." The Girl Effect promises to accomplish this goal by tapping into the untapped potential of adolescent girls living in poverty and, by doing so, tackle both poverty and gender inequality at the same time. The Girl Effect website ("Why Girls") explains that "[b]y investing in their economic potential through education and by delaying child marriage and teen pregnancy, issues such as HIV and AIDS can be resolved and the cycle of poverty can be broken." According to the program's logic, the effect that girls, rather than boys, are capable of 'unleashing' resides in women's habit of investing large shares of their incomes back into their families. According to the World Bank ("Gender and the Private Sector") and the Girl Effect, this is as high as 90 percent. Leveraging the currently "unexploited" and "untapped" potential of girls, then, goes a long way. Certainly longer than, say, empowering their brothers or older

sisters. Boys, the argument goes, are more reckless in their spending and invest only 35 percent back into their families. The problem that holds global economic growth back, the Girl Effect argues, is that girls are undervalued by their parents, communities, cultures and governments, which negatively affects their self-esteem, their decision making power, their awareness of having “control over their future” and their chance to be recognized as and “emerge as successful economic citizens.” What girls need for their economic empowerment, the theory explains, are “behavioral competencies that include communication skills, financial literacy and confidence building” because “[t]hese give a girl options to generate income and develop saving behaviours, and equip her with the necessary skills to change her life and make an impact on her country’s development.” Once she then has access to “good jobs,” financial capital and services, such as credit and bank accounts, “she will invest in her community” and “stop poverty before it starts” (“Why Girls”). “Closing the joblessness gap between girls and their male counterparts would yield an increase in GDP of up to 1,2 percent in a single year,” simply because “[i]ncome under female control gives far greater return on human capital than under male control” (“What Girls Need”).

The Girl Effect’s videos and online media tools encourage girls from the Western world to save their poor subaltern peers by “giving them” access to credit and by joining the “movement” that champions the unique potential of poor adolescent girls. Indeed, the Girl Effect (“The Girl Effect in Action”) imagines girls’ future economic lives strictly in the private domain. The public sector, by contrast, as a space for empowerment and employment, is largely rendered invisible in this regard. This is no accident. Various Girl Effect’s promotional and fundraising materials expose what little faith the campaign has in the potential of the state, or politics more broadly, to fix economic ills. The Girl Effect website and the foundation’s recent call for grant proposals (“NIKE Foundation Requests for Proposals” no page) repeatedly stress that governments and politics are simply too complicated to make a chance, stressing that “[t]he clock is ticking and the political environment is complex.” The message of one of the Girl Effect’s most popular videos (“The Girl Effect Video 24.05.08”) is even less subtle in its distrust of the state:

The world is a mess. Poverty. AIDS. Hunger. War. So what else is new?
What if there was an unexpected solution that could turn this sinking ship around? Would you even know it if you saw it? It’s not the internet. It’s not science. It’s not the government. It’s not money. It’s (dramatic pause) a girl.

It then tells a story of a girl, who is hungry, has a baby and also happens to be infected with HIV. The viewer is asked to “pretend you can fix this picture” by putting the girl in a school uniform, help her get a loan to buy a cow, make profits to help her family and grow into a business owner who brings clean water to the village and persuades the village council how valuable girls are. This progression of events, we are told, “means the economy of the entire country improves and the whole world is better off. Multiply that by 600 million girls in the developing world and you’ve just changed the course of history. It’s called the Girl Effect” (“The Girl Effect Video 24.05.08”). Certainly, from this perspective, market strategies and a radical rebranding of girls’ value and potential, appear more fruitful than politics. It is no surprise, then, that according to The Foundation Center (“Grant Maker Profile”), a global grant database that many NGOs use to identify potential funders, Nike’s strategies for transforming girls’ lives rely on “communication tools, brand leverage, innovative investments, inspirational messaging, and effective calls to action.” In a recent proposal from Girl Hub Ethiopia we see the extent to which Nike’s business strategies influence this vision. The proposal, titled “Business Case and Intervention Summary” (15) points out that “the Nike experience in creating successful brands suggests that brands thrive by creating cultural relevance, and that individuals adopt brands as symbols of aspiration.” For that reason, the Business Case and Intervention Summary (23) proposes to allocate 50 percent of the 9,8 million pounds budget (of which 86 percent was paid for by British tax payers through the DFID) to brand communications and outreach.

In 2013, Nike’s credibility as a global girl expert culminated in an online document, called “The Girl Declaration”, which seeks to incorporate girl-focused priorities into the SDGs. According to the Declaration (“The Girl Declaration” 1-2), the Nike Foundation partnered with 25 development and human rights partners and interviewed 508 girls in 14 different countries in an effort to find out what adolescent girls need the UN’s post-2015 agenda to focus on. The Declaration captured these desires and turned them into a “how to document on ending global poverty within a generation” (“The Girl Declaration, One Year in One Year To Go”). According to Kathy Calvin, CEO of the UN Foundation, the declaration does, indeed, represent the voices of 250 million girls living in poverty today. She told The Guardian (“Global Development Leaders Unite”) that “[g]irls are the most potent weapon against poverty.” According to Calvin, “a healthy educated, empowered adolescent girl has the unique potential to break the cycle of

poverty for herself, her family and her country.” She added that “[t]he world needs to listen to them and act now to end poverty.”

The Declaration has been endorsed by a wide variety of organizations, from Amnesty International, Save The Children and Women Deliver to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and the International Center for Research on Women (“The Girl Effect in Action”). The Girl Declaration is infused with Girl Effect objectives, and in spite of the Declaration’s claim that it is owned by no one, Nike’s role in the production of the Declaration is evident. Not only is the Girl Effect website the homepage of the Declaration, tempting any reader of the Girl Declaration to familiarize him or herself with the other videos, slogans, ‘truths’ and tags on the website, but the Declaration repeats and incorporates most of the Girl Effect’s already-established priorities and principles, but now backed with mostly anonymous quotes from girls. Indeed, without Nike the Girl Declaration would not exist in its current form, a clear testament to the power that corporations, as partners, can gain in the construction and implementation of development norms and policies, and a call to critically interrogate the soundness of these outcomes.

Rampant poverty as a product of a patriarchal divide in individual loan and business opportunities: if only the problem was this simple and the solution as objective as the Girl Effect envisions it to be. Yet as a recent study from the International Labour Organization (“World of Work Report”) demonstrates, work in and of itself neither liberates, nor alleviates poverty. Noting that more than a half of workers in the developing world work in vulnerable employment sectors, such as family businesses and own account work, the report explains that these workers are twice as likely to “be trapped in a vicious circle of low-productivity employment, poor remuneration and limited ability to invest in their families’ health and education, which, in turn reduces the likelihood that current and subsequent generations will be able to do move up the productivity and income ladders” (9). In Sub-Saharan Africa, where vulnerable employment is highest, no less than 85 percent of women, 15 percent more than men, find themselves in vulnerable employment (9). As long as the campaign does not address decent remuneration levels and income security, the Girl Effect’s assumption that branding girls into micro-

entrepreneurs or workers will magically elevate the socio-economic status of their families, it remains incomplete, at best.

Furthermore, while the Declaration presents open markets and entrepreneurship as inevitable, logical, neutral, tested and commonsense avenues for poverty reduction, there is no evidence that this actually works. On the contrary, pro-market policies have dismally failed to reduce inequality the past couple of decades (Harvey 181-184; Hickel 2014; Streeck 2011; Kelly 2006). Unlike what its website suggests, the Girl Effect's optimistic claim that the answer to war, poverty and HIV should not be sought in politics, laws or science, but instead in the economic rebranding of girls is not a neutral idea, built on evidence and best practices. Far from it, the belief that access to private sector work will set women free is profoundly political. Both the "entrepreneurial self" as well as the notion that open markets and deep connections with financial institutions will reduce poverty are rooted in the ideology of neo-liberalism, which Peck and Tickell (2007:28) aptly define as "a distinctive political-economic philosophy, dedicated to the extension of market and market-like forms of governance, rule, and control across—tangentially at least—all spheres of life." The neoliberal ideology contends that market forces drive economic growth and that the role of the state should be minimized to providing a climate for businesses to thrive and stimulate economic growth (Harvey 181). Entrenched in the belief that market forces lead to the best economic outcomes, neoliberal economics expands the power of the market by reducing the role of the state. Minimum wages or labor protections violate neoliberal ideals, which declare these standards should be outcomes of supply and demand. Neoliberalism postulates citizens as consumers who are responsible for securing their own economic wellbeing by making smart financial choices that make the market work *for* them (Streeck 2011). The Girl Effect's insistence that girls are equipped to solve economic problems, if given the chance to develop their market potential, instructs them to do exactly that: to embrace neoliberal economics as a natural, the only, economic system and seek liberation in the market, not the state; to view themselves as consumers and traders, not as citizens.

The trust Nike's coalition places in market solutions obfuscates the now well-documented history of the suffering and hunger the free market recipe has inflicted on the Global South the past decades (Harvey 197; Bond 2006). Since the early 80s, the U.S. and the U.K. have forced countries in the Global South to adopt neoliberal policies (Harvey 157-167; Hickel 2014; Bond 2006; Chang 2002). At their behest, the World Bank (WB) and the IMF made neoliberal

reforms, known as Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), a condition for loans, thereby unleashing the power of the market onto the world stage. According to Harvey, the high interest rates that developing countries were required to pay under structural adjustment greatly benefited Wall Street, U.S. corporations and the U.S. Treasury, while they further impoverished the local populations they were supposed to help (157-167). That is why Harvey (72) has labeled the neoliberal global trade order, as it further evolved during the Clinton administration, as the “Wall Street, Treasury IMF” complex.

The resulting spending cuts in health and other public services, joined by agricultural export reforms, had a devastating effect on the well-being of citizens across the Global South, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where many farmers lost their livelihoods to corporate agricultural enterprises (Bond 2006). The number of Africans who lived in poverty on the continent nearly doubled during the decades that followed (Hickel 2014). Women and children carried the brunt of this destruction, as their access to health care and other social services steeply declined (Bergeron 2003). Austerity a more popular term for “structural adjustment,” thereby hits women hardest. In addition to limiting people’s access to basic services, structural adjustment and free market globalization simultaneously diminished labor protections and employment rights in favor of “good business climates” and flexible workforces (Harvey 129-134; Hickel 2014). As the research of Harvey (163) exposes, the World Bank and the IMF, known to be hostile to trade unions and labor rights, facilitated the commodification of human resources by “drawing (sometimes forcibly) populations into the proletariat in short order only to cast them off as redundant labour.” Driven by the needs of TNCs and supported by development organizations such as USAID, these international institutions played a pivotal role in driving down wages in developing countries, flexibilizing employment and destabilizing labor power in fragmented supply chains (Hickel 2014), giving rise to the sweatshops that Nike itself is built on.

Rather than unleashing a permanent rain of ‘down-trickling’ dollars, the consequences of these policies made the poor poorer, while enriching private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations and the financial industry (Harvey 129-140). Contrary to the notion that neoliberal policies advance “freedom” and fair competition, the global marketplace has largely turned into a vehicle to consolidate monopoly power (Harvey 130). While the World Bank acknowledged in the 1990s that these structural adjustment programs have had devastating effects, it continues to prescribe neoliberal principles in its poverty reduction strategies

(Bergeron 2003). Furthermore, both the IMF and the WTO still require countries to open up their capital markets as a condition of membership (Harvey 129), disregarding the wealth inequalities and exploitative trade dynamics this has produced. The World Bank, as observed by Bergeron (2003), also continues to identify the roots of poverty in accordance with neoliberal ideology. According to Bergeron (2003:409), the Bank tends to direct its “outrage [over poverty at] so-called traditional arrangements, and only rarely at forces such as the transnational apparel industry.” Global trade relations—driven by the neoliberal ideologies of the World Bank, the World Trade Organization (WTO), the IMF, the U.S. and the U.K.—continue to serve the needs of TNCs over the needs of poor countries by enabling corporations to evade taxes, using labor as cheap resources and extracting natural resources across poor communities (Harvey 147; Hickel 2014).

Alarming, the past decades of neoliberal globalization has exacerbated global inequality to such an extent that early in 2015, Oxfam International warned that if the rising trend of inequality continues, the combined wealth of the richest one percent is set to overtake that of the other 99 percent of global citizens in 2016 (“Richest One Percent Will”). Global economic resources are largely controlled by a minority of wealthy people, many of whom occupy top positions at American corporations and play a dramatic role in increasing inequality. According to *Forbes Magazine* (“Full List of the 500 Richest People in The World”) most of the world’s 50 wealthiest billionaires on the planet hail from the U.S. and amassed their fortunes largely through real estate, entertainment, investments, apparel, hedge funds, casinos, pharmaceutical products, candy, beer and online services, including transnational corporations such as Zara, Nike, Microsoft, Wal-Mart, L’Oreal, Amazon.com, Facebook and H&M. The wealth of these TNCs is a direct product of the neoliberal architecture that governs the international market. The absence of international mechanisms that enforce living wages, labor protections and tax compliance—issues that others, such as Hickel (2014), Harvey (76) and McIntyre et al. (2008) rightly identify as root causes for economic inequality—are the exact reason why TNCs such as Nike are as wealthy as they are today. What this tells us is that, while the Girl Declaration paints the wealth of the global North as unconnected with the poverty in the South, they are in fact intimately connected and interlinked. International development, from this perspective, compels us to confront the political dimension of poverty and acknowledge that, as Arthur (2012:ix) puts it, “we are not all in this together.” It requires an acknowledgement of the

fact that, within the system that governs the economic distribution of resources and shapes norms around justice and human dignity, as Arthur (2012:ix) insists, “some are profiting at the expense of others.” Needless to say, he was not referring to the patriarchal divide.

The sweatshop scandals of the 1990s, and the strikes and demands for decent wages that continue to rage in Nike’s factories in South East Asia (“Made in Vietnam” 20; Ballinger 2011; Barenberg 2008; Siu and Chan 2015), shine a devastating light on how Nike perpetuates and profits from, rather than rails against, the exploitation of poor women. As Cynthia Enloe (2004) pointed out, a little over a decade ago, in her “Global Sneakers” article, the outsourcing countries that appeal most to Nike are those where women are most economically disempowered. That’s one of the reasons why Nike, in its earliest outsourcing days, chose South Korea, a country that was ruled by a military government that was all too keen to suppress workers’ unions, and where gender norms allegedly measured women’s morality by her willingness to work hard for her family. When women successfully organized themselves and pushed up their wages, Nike abandoned them. “In response to South Korean women workers’ newfound activist self-confidence,” writes Enloe (48), “the sneaker company and its subcontractors began shutting down a number of their South Korean factories in the late eighties and nineties.” Nike’s search for the cheapest laborers and its refusal to commit itself to paying a living wage or supporting women workers in their efforts to organize themselves and form unions, continues to this day (“Made in Vietnam” 20; Ballinger 2011; Barenberg 2008). This race to the bottom, enabled by weak enforcement of labor standards and the resulting competition amongst governments to attract foreign investment, explains why, as predicted by a recent McKinsey report (“East Africa: The Next Hub for Apparel Sourcing?”), the garment industry seems slated to move large chunks of their operations to East Africa, where minimum wages are either absent or lower than in South East Asia.

Another central aspect of the race of the bottom are tax breaks, as incentivizing TNCs with not only weak labor laws but also tax holidays has become common amongst governments in the Global South (Mazzucato 2011; McIntyre 2008; “Broken at the Top”). “Governments in developing countries give away an estimated \$138 billion each year in statutory corporate tax exemptions” a recent study by Oxfam International (“Broken at the Top” 11) reveals, noting that tax dodging and tax evasion practices of the 50 largest American TNCs costs the developing world an estimated US \$100 billion annually, funds that could be used for education, healthcare,

infrastructure and social protection. “Taxes paid, or unpaid, by multinational companies in poor countries can be the difference between life and death, poverty or opportunity” (“Broken at the Top” 11). Rather than representing a policy disconnect or unintended error Oxfam (“Broken at the Top” 3) argues that “[e]xploiting tax loopholes and engaging in large-scale tax avoidance are integral components of the profit-making strategies of many multinational corporations.” As Matt Gardner (2013) from the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy explains in a recent online article, the shoe giant is no exception. This illuminates that, contrary to the Girl Effect’s claim that the solution for poverty is expansion of the market and a smaller role for governments, the poor would be better served by the exact opposite. Arguably worse, the report also exposes that, when it comes to their own bottom line, TNCs do not shy away from asking for government favors and public support. “Their lobbying appears to have offered an incredible return on investment,” Oxfam reports. “For every \$1 spent on lobbying, these 50 companies collectively received \$130 in tax breaks and more than \$4,000 in federal loans, loan guarantees and bailouts.”

Nike’s own supply chain thus exposes how limited the pursuit of gender equality and the vision of work as intrinsically liberating is, if not embedded in a larger political project of curbing corporate hegemony through stronger regulations. In that light, whereas the Girl Effect and the Girl Declaration are right in pointing out that girls and women encounter particular challenges as a result of their sex and gender, the solution for poverty and fair capital sharing will obviously not be understood if we pretend that our world’s primary wealth divergence centers around patriarchy. As Halley (2013:36) points out, “many things are not about gender or sex, and affect men in similar ways.” What that means is that, in practice, equalizing the labor standards, market access and wages of women in Nike’s factories with their male counterparts will hardly be emancipatory or liberating if male workers are not protected by decent job protections, collective bargaining rights and living wages. The Girl Effect’s silence on these issues lays bare the neoliberal backbone of the project. For all its talk about women and work, and its impatience with patriarchy, it is perhaps even more ironic that the ideology it promotes has been proven to exacerbate patriarchy. As Elson (1995) has detailed in depth, when the state cuts social spending, it is women and girls who, through patriarchal norms, end up with extra burdens of unpaid care work. In summary, while the Girl Effect’s videos claim that the answer to war, poverty and HIV should not be sought in politics, laws or science, the history of neoliberal policies suggests that this is exactly where justice should be sought, and that these tools ought to

be used to curb the power of the market and corporations, such as Nike, rather than enhance it. It suggests that the responsibility of the U.S. and its multinational corporations for the Global South is not one of philanthropic saving, but one of political accountability and a transformation of the international economic order.

In its “Why Girls” Section, the Girl Declaration explains that empowering girls is “a matter of Human Rights” (8). It identifies legal reform and enforcement as vital means to protect girls’ rights and singles out a few legal arrangements as ripe for change. For example, it notes that “[a]bout 14 million girls are married as children each year despite international agreements that condemn the practice” (The Girl Declaration 8). What needs to be done, the logic goes, is that international human rights laws should be enforced and governments who fail to protect their girls from such marriages should be pressured. The campaign singles out traditional practices and non-modern customs as women’s prime oppressors, while ignoring other forms of violence, a process that Abu-Lughod (2010:22) refers to as the culturalization violence. By juxtaposing cultural hazards against the inherently liberating safety of modern capitalist saving spaces, while overlooking the structural or ‘slow’ violence that capitalist economic policies and exploitative labor arrangements inflict on women, The Girl Declaration “culturalizes” violence in a way that renders “modern” forms of violence invisible.

If adolescent girls’ career tracks are indeed “a matter of Human Rights”, then legal reform should focus at least as much on government accountability and protection mechanisms, such as the enforcement of labor conventions and rights. Furthermore, for a document that packages the empowerment of girls in the language of human rights, the Girl Declaration pays surprisingly little attention to the promotion of a human rights culture. Human rights awareness has the potential to equip citizens with the tools to demand justice and accountability and to “empower” themselves, including in the workplace. One study that analyzes the dynamics of recent strike waves in global brand factories in Vietnam, for example, notes that workers who demanded decent wages possess high levels of human rights awareness, which enables them to effectively organize and demand fair wages (Tran 2007). If the Declaration is about human

rights, we may wonder, why are there no “accountability clubs”, “social justice workshops” or curricula that teach girls about labor rights and the duties of the UN and their governments?

Whereas a human rights culture is supposed to make citizens aware of their rights and encourage government accountability, the Girl Effect and the Girl Declaration show an undisputed preference for “enterprise culture” that does the exact opposite. Rather than teaching them about their rights, or the reasons why they are poor in the first place, the Girl Declaration seeks to discipline and educate girls on their duties and instructs them to “Just Do It” themselves. Consistent with neoliberal agendas, it leaves them in the dark about their rights and trains them to expect nothing from the state. “The entrepreneurial self,” writes Kelly (2006:17), has “come to dominate the horizons of identity in western democracies,” thereby “shaping many people's sense of what successful personhood means.” The problem with the glorification of entrepreneurship, financial literacy, resilience and skill-building in tough economic times is that it conditions people to view themselves as consumers, rather than citizens (Arthur 2012), and to understand their economic position as the product of merit, rather than a product of a political economy. The type of education and training the Girl Effect advocates and provides does exactly this: rather than teaching girls how their economies work and what their governments owe them, it instructs them to expect nothing of the state and “Just Do It” themselves. The Girl Declaration copies the Girl Effect’s flaws, presenting the world with a highly depoliticized picture of poverty.

With Nike’s own bottom line in mind, it would be naive to conceive as accidental the Girl Effect’s tendency to, in the words of Sweis (2012:28), “inscribe poverty less as a political economic concern for governments than a manageable pragmatic problem that can be dealt with by a concerned public and by educating girls one at the time.” To advocate for the elimination of exploitative cultural, patriarchal and familial practices as a key development intervention, while glossing over the structural violence that the “free” market inflicts on the Global South and the courageous self-empowerment struggles of women workers in corporate supply chains, paints a deeply flawed picture of poverty. As such, the Girl Effect is guilty not only of erasing the systemic factors that reproduce economic power, inequality and hunger, summed up by Hickel (2014:1356) as “structural adjustment, debt, tax evasion, labour exploitation, financial crises and corruption in the global governance system,” it also obfuscates the complexity and variety in girls’ lives, experiences and priorities (Hayhurst 2014; Hickel 2014; Sweis 2012; Moeller 2013).

Indeed, it essentializes impoverished girls into “a type.” Moreover, as critics such as Sweis (2012) and Murphy (2013) pertinently pointed out, by insisting that local oppressions and social norms inhibit girls from solving poverty, the Girl Effect in effect postulates girls’ families, brothers and communities as being to blame for the world’s greatest problems, an implication that not only further derails understandings around inequality and invisibilizes the wider economic system, but also misrepresents boys and men as categorically unworthy aid recipients. Far from ‘empowering’ women or driving progressive change for the poor, Nike’s success in propelling these principles into global advocacy campaigns and policy agendas may thus be more accurately understood as a setback. A campaign that, for all its faith in ‘rebranding’ girls and market solutions, serves business interests and the Nike brand more than anything else, and funnels NGOs, desperate for grant funding, toward pro-market strategies and away from more meaningful and radical solutions. As Eisenstein (2009) has noted, it limits our understanding of how the global market works. The endorsement of NGOs and UN organizations, in this light, lend undue legitimacy to these corporate strategies, derail more effective interventions and provide Nike with a “social license to operate” (Moeller 2013:80), which protects the company from criticism and impedes corporate accountability (Dauvergne and LeBaron 2014; Elder and Dauvergne 2015; Hickel 2014). Normalizing the idea that girls are worthy of saving not as citizens, but as consuming entrepreneurial subjects whose equality can only be justified if it “pays off” the Girl Effect, empowers individualized Western free market ideologies and businesses, particularly Nike, more than the poor. Far from a neutral strategy or well-intended attempt to make the market work for young women, the Girl Effect pursues the opposite: it uses social justice language to hijack the feminist cause to entrench business logic and corporate hegemony.

In another recent Girl Effect video (“The Girl Effect Accelerator Video”), which was shot during its Accelerator program with entrepreneurs in central Africa, a male participant illustrated the Girl Effect’s ideals vividly:

I came in here thinking what can we do to help girls but that thinking has completely refined and turned on its head [by the program]. The question shouldn’t be what should we do to help girls but instead, if girls were a target market for business, how do you unlock that. I think that’s really going to help our businesses and bring the girl effect to life (“The Girl Effect Accelerator Video”).

Do not save her, we are thus told, but brand her. Not because she is worth it, or because equality and human rights are ends in themselves, but because it pays off for you. The danger in this corporate rhetoric is, of course, that it creates, reinforces and normalizes the idea that equality must be justified with economic growth, that one is worthy of equality only if it drives market growth. Perhaps this explains why the Girl Declaration, in spite of being backed by some of the most notable women's rights advocates, fails to recognize the fact that not all girls are heterosexual. As a global blueprint for gender justice empowerment, the silence on issues around heteronormativity and gender identity is striking, and it raises a curious question: could it be that the evidence base is not yet strong enough? Will investments in the equality of gender non-conforming women and girls in the Global South have to wait until corporate America has calculated what returns this may yield?

While it may hardly be surprising that a corporation such as Nike errs on true inclusivity, the human rights and development organizations that partner with the Foundation, and lend their name and credibility to the legitimization of Nike's programs, should be expected to push the program towards an inclusive approach. However, the current state of the Girl Declaration suggests that the currency of Nike's so-called "expertise" overrides the more nuanced and inclusive positions of many of its partners, further legitimizing neoliberal empowerment logics. Though the document's silence on these issues is shocking, the Girl Declaration's most perplexing paradox on patriarchy is that it claims to challenge oppressive gender norms, while it simultaneously portrays girls' supposed tendency to "give more back" than boys as a prime incentive to invest in her. Despite its apparent condemnation of governments, parents and men who exploit harmful gender norms, the Girl Declaration mimics the Girl Effect's paradoxical idea that girls' tendency to "give more back than boys" should be celebrated. Not once does the Girl Effect express wonder at *why*, exactly, girls and women tend to give more back. Since this assumed behavior is beneficial to the market, it goes unquestioned, a clear manifestation of how deeply entrenched neoliberal logic has become in the development field. It suggests that one is worthy of equality only if this empowerment will drive market growth.

Undoubtedly, some girls will have benefited from the business training, confidence classes, financial literacy or other services Nike has set up for them. And yet these girls deserve so much more. Contrary to truly empowering them, micro-credit, loans, entrepreneurship and financial literacy put the onus on them, girls and women, to solve poverty, making them

responsible for a problem they did not create and by no means are capable of solving. As Hickel noted, “micro credit approaches and small businesses need some state subsidies and welfare arrangements to support people when they fail,” support mechanisms on which the Girl Effect is silent (2014:1366). Put another way, by pushing individualized market initiatives onto girls and expecting them to fix global socio-economic ills, without educating them on their labor rights or the state’s responsibility to provide them with social protection, will not make the market work for them. Quite the contrary, it places girls in the service of the market. By imagining girls’ disadvantage in comparison to boys as the central axis upon which successful economic development hinges, the Girl Effect is, in effect, capitalizing on patriarchy to depoliticize poverty. As Hickel (2014:1356) has suggested, “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.” When we situate an economic Girl Effect program in, say, Uganda, in the broader political economic context of the continent, and its relation with the Global North, it becomes undeniable that the Girl Effect’s optimistic promise simply does not hold. Rampant tax evasion and weak labor laws cannot be entrepreneured away with splintered individual businesses, no matter how capable the girls are. Meaningful economic development and poverty reduction requires what the Girl Effect sees as irrelevant: governance, tax collection and radical reforms in the global trade system.

Against this backdrop, it is hardly a surprise that researchers, independent from Nike's own evaluation partners, who have studied the implementation of the Girl Effect and comparable corporate empowerment programs share grave concerns about the programs’ soundness. In 2012, for example, the United Kingdom’s Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI), raised an “Amber Red” alert about the Girl Hub partnership, stressing that it was not performing well, failed to “reflect the complex social context” in which girls live and placed “undue pressure on vulnerable girls” (“Girl Hub A DFID and Nike Foundation Initiative” 5). Ethnographic research on comparable programs in Egypt (Sweis 2012), South Africa (Dolan and Johnstone-Louis 2011), Uganda (Hayhurst 2014) and Brazil (Moeller 2013) found that the programs are out-of-sync with local needs, obscure the root causes of poverty, use biased evaluation methods and valorize entrepreneurship, individual agency and self-reliance as universally desirable and worthy values. As Hayhurst (2014) observed at a Girl Effect inspired program in Uganda, it

encourages girls to become self-reliant entrepreneurs.

As Mani (1987) and Abu-Lughod (2002:788-790) have argued before, many campaigns that focus on women's rights and liberties are, in actuality, about other struggles and merely use women's bodies as subjects and as sites for their conflicts and agendas, and "reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged." It is through this lens that we should understand the Girl Effect and the Girl Declaration. Contrary to freeing girls' potential, the project seeks to discipline and educate girls (and the NGOs that represent them) in a way that supports the status quo, distracts from corporations' misbehavior and expands the power of the market. This is why, rather than promoting progressive development outcomes, the Girl Effect is better understood as a "post-feminist fable" (Switzer 2013:345) that "financializes" girls and women into market tools (Murphy 2013:1) to reproduce neoliberal power relations (Hickel 2014) and further entrench the "power of corporations to create 'expert' knowledges about both 'gender' and 'development'" (Roberts 2015:209).

It is important to note that these concerns are not limited to academic outsiders. The Association for Women in Development (AWID), which surveyed more than 1000 women's groups from around the world about their funding needs (Arutyunova and Clark 2013:40-45) found that contrary to blindly or enthusiastically embracing TNCs' interests in women and development, many women's NGOs are deeply uncomfortable with the neoliberal imperatives that undergird their alliances and that some groups even fear that the Girl Power discourse is presenting a "real risk that investing in women and girls will soon be deemed a failed strategy and consigned to history" (Arutyunova and Clark 2013:45).

What neoliberalism as a system needs, along with the global elites, wealthy nations and corporations who benefit from it, appears fundamentally opposed to the needs of the poor, regardless of how they are sexed or gendered. As this essay hopes to have shown, the latter would benefit more from policies and laws that curb the power of the market and protect labor, welfare and progressive taxing methods. The promotion of the entrepreneurial girl subject, then, as a tool to alleviate poverty is not likely to effectively promote a more just international economic order. On the contrary, it further entrenches and normalizes the global neoliberal

capitalist project. Neither the assumption of girls as quintessential private sector actors nor the inspirational branding messages, which celebrate their potential as ‘the world’s most potent weapon against poverty’, offer girls real choices and freedoms. Instead, girls and their wider communities, are likely to benefit more from a type of education that promotes human rights, educates them on global trade relations, trade unions and labor rights, and offers them the opportunity to develop themselves and their lives in accordance with their own desires and talents. As the Girl Effect points out, the clock may be “ticking” indeed. The poor majority, especially the young, may soon no longer accept the status quo and strengthen their demands for a radically different international economic order. The Girl Declaration, the wider Girl Effect project and the entrepreneurial adolescent girl subjects they promote should therefore be understood as a manifestation of the rising power of corporations to shape development in a pro-business manner, a trend that Dauvergne and LeBaron (2014:6) recognize as key aspects of a larger process of “the corporatization” of global activism and development.

Against all evidence, Nike has actively used the media, partnerships, human rights vocabularies as well as girls’ voices on “what they need” to make its development tale sound credible, to produce a “common sense” understanding of who the universal adolescent girl subject is and what it is that she needs and thereby legitimize market domination and impede more radical development agendas. In other words, by hijacking human rights vocabularies and feminist concepts, Nike sells oppression as empowerment. Far from combating gender inequality or reducing poverty, Nike’s Girl Effect project is a corporate campaign to consolidate and legitimize capitalism at the expense of human rights, gender equality, worker’s rights and the environment. As an outgrowth of the Girl Effect, the Girl Declaration sets a dangerous precedent to the power of corporations to use the UN’s confidence in their good intentions for their own interest.

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