



INTRODUCTION

# Collective Urgency

## *Networks of Girls and Young Women Taking Action*

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On September 26, 2022, a young woman in Iran was filmed with her back to the camera tying her bleached blonde hair into a ponytail, lifting her hand into the air, making a peace sign, and striding confidently toward the protests sparked by the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini. The focus on the ponytail is significant because Mahsa Amini died following her arrest and detainment for not properly covering her hair with a hijab; eyewitnesses say she was beaten by police following her arrest, leading to her death. In the days and months afterward, tens of thousands of Iranians from all corners of the country spilled into the streets in sustained protests that centered on the rights of girls and women in Iran. Youth—girls and young women in particular—played a key role in these protests, with many going bare-headed or cutting off their hair as part of their protest. The death toll arising from the protests was devastating, with 481 individuals, including sixty-eight children and teenagers, confirmed by the Human Rights Activist News Agency to have been killed in the first eighty-two days of the protests (HRANA 2022). The young woman with the blonde ponytail was believed to have been among them, mistakenly

identified as Hadis Najafi, a prominent social media figure on Instagram and TikTok, who died after being shot six times during a protest. The mistake came to light after the young woman in the video contacted BBC Persian asserting her identity, stating, “I’m not Hadis Najafi, but I will fight for the Mahsas and Hadis” (Dagres 2022). While Hadis Najafi and hundreds of others have died in the fight for the rights of girls and women in Iran, the young woman with the blonde ponytail lives. She remains anonymous but nonetheless represents the Iranian girls and women who continue to advocate for their rights and freedoms in the face of immense risk to their physical safety.

The repression of the rights of girls and women is evident not only in Iran but in a wide range of countries and cultural contexts around the world. At the outset of the twenty-first century, there was a common narrative that we—at least those in the Global North—lived in a “postfeminist” world, where feminism was considered no longer necessary because gender equality between men and women had been obtained. The past ten years clearly confirmed that this is not the case, with evident backlashes targeting gains made by girls and women around the world. This is evident in the 2016 election of former United States President Donald Trump *after* being caught on videotape bragging about sexually assaulting women, the repeal of girls’ ability to access education after the Taliban reclaimed power in Afghanistan in 2021, and widespread reports of sexual violence against girls as a weapon of war in conflicts around the world. The #MeToo movement, in which girls and women posted their experiences of sexual harassment and assault on social media, was considered a feminist success story, bringing down powerful men accused or convicted of sexual violence toward women and girls, including Harvey Weinstein, Jeffrey Epstein, Bill Cosby, and 199 prominent men in the United States alone (Carlsen et al. 2018). It has, however, also led to a backlash, with complaints that the movement was a “witch hunt” that has “gone too far” (Flood 2019), leading to the growth of the men’s rights movement (Maricourt and Burrell 2022) and a reluctance of professional men to mentor young women for fear of being accused of harassment (Soklaridis et al. 2018).

Substantial gains made by LGBTQ+ activists regarding the right to call themselves a girl or woman *or* resist these labels based on their own self-identification have also met with growing backlash, including from within some feminist circles that advance a return to essentialist and biological determinations of what constitutes girlhood and womanhood

(Armitage 2020; Simon 2021). Right-wing movements are pitting the rights of cisgender girls against the rights of trans girls, insinuating that trans girls' use of girls' washrooms represents a threat of sexual violence, resulting in laws that ban their use of girls' bathrooms despite no evidence supporting this risk (Maza and Brinker 2014) and substantive evidence showing that the *lack* of trans-inclusive bathrooms and locker rooms is correlated with sexual violence against trans students (Murchison et al. 2019). Similar groups have claimed that trans girls' participation in girls' sports teams undermines other girls' opportunities to thrive in those spaces, again despite evidence supporting this claim (Turban 2021). Yet many of the same groups who frame trans girls' use of washrooms as a threat also oppose programs known to enhance girls' safety and empowerment, such as comprehensive and anti-oppressive sex education (Bialystok et al. 2020). The efforts to suppress trans girls' rights seem not, therefore, genuinely about the advancement of cisgender girls' rights; they are a weaponization of girls' rights that disguises an attempt to divide and conquer feminist groups and ultimately suppress all types of girls.

Another dramatic attack on the rights of girls and women has been the repeal of sexual and reproductive health rights in the United States through the Supreme Court's overturning of the *Roe v. Wade* decision that guaranteed the right to access abortion, which the American Academy of Pediatrics warned will have grave consequences for girls (Ali 2022). Yet American girls are hardly the only ones denied the right to an abortion, as seen in a high-profile case in Argentina that denied an 11-year-old girl the right to an abortion after being raped by a 65-year-old man six months after Argentina's senate narrowly voted against legalizing abortion (Moloney 2019). More broadly, twelve million girls under eighteen are married every year (UNICEF 2023), affecting not only their reproductive rights but also their education and livelihoods and making them substantially more vulnerable to domestic violence (Girls Not Brides 2014). While there have been gains in terms of some girls' rights globally, for example in expanded access to education (UNESCO 2022), the myriad challenges affecting the rights of girls and young women remain high. In light of these challenges, it is important to analyze how girls and young women themselves are responding, protesting, and supporting each other. This edited collection describes a variety of ways in which girls and young women around the world are speaking up against injustice and what they have to say. It intentionally avoids defining terms including "girl," "young woman," or "youth feminist activist," in order

to be inclusive of all those who identify as such, regardless of age or sex assigned at birth.

This introduction provides an overview of the literature on girls' activism and agency, particularly examining the ways in which they are often positioned and manipulated by adult stakeholders, can be effectively supported, and the influence that they have had in a variety of contexts. The volume focuses not only on girls' activism but specifically on activism networks, reflecting the differentiation between individual activism and activism within a collective. While stories of individual activism often gain more traction, they overlook the broader network that the individual is supported by and/or situated within. The introduction then summarizes the chapters and organization of the book, describing the major contributions of each chapter and how they are connected with each other. The introduction concludes by bringing the collection and the broader work on activism networks by, for, and with girls and young women into conversation with the literature on transnational girlhood. It situates activism networks as fundamental to the existence of transnational girlhood and demonstrates that even activism focused within a national context often has a transnational scope.

## Introducing Girls' Activism

At the advent of the twentieth century, the term "girl power" recognized the agency, empowerment, anger, and resistance of girls in a new way, albeit one that was often channeled more into marketing than social change (Gonick et al. 2009; Klein 2000). The literature on girls in the following years vacillated between emphasizing their vulnerability and their agency, often overlooking the co-existence of these forces amidst the dominance of patriarchal structural constraints that dictate expected behaviors, norms, and perspectives shaped by gender, sex, and sexuality as well as by class, race, ability, and countless other context-bound social influences (Jiwani, Steenbergen, and Mitchell 2006; Cann, Godfrey, and Warner 2018). In 1995, the Beijing Declaration emerging from the Fourth World Conference on Women recognized the "girl child" as a separate category facing discrimination and this was soon followed by a movement that concentrated on the untapped potential of girls. Instead of focusing on unleashing individual girls' choices and decisions, the subsequent pro-girl movement employed rhetoric that demonstrated how

their expanded health and education would contribute exponentially to the expanded health and well-being of their children and communities (Kirk, Mitchell, and Reid-Walsh 2010). Monkman and Hoffman (2013) observe that, “From a feminist perspective it is surprising to see the range and consistency of statements that equate educating girls to strengthening their traditional roles as women” (73). By positioning girls’ health and education as instrumental rather than as inherent rights, expanding their access to services seeks to improve their ability to fulfill traditional gender roles more effectively rather than expand their opportunities including through the subversion of those roles.

Narratives of a version of girls’ empowerment emerged that reinforced expectations of domesticity and heteronormativity as concentrated on racialized girls in the Global South, also known as “the Third World Girl” (et al. 2009; Sensoy and Marshall 2010). This iteration of girls’ empowerment was juxtaposed to the portrayal of girls’ empowerment in the Global North, particularly in the English-speaking Western world, where girlhood was conflated with the experiences of White, middle-class, heterosexual females living in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, or Australia (Jiwani, Steenbergen, and Mitchell 2006). Empowerment for girls in the Global North was largely characterized by capitalist and neo-liberal discourses; the First World Girl was characterized by punk and attitude (Gonick 2006), in direct contradiction to the framing of her sisters in the Global South as docile and subservient, yet opportunities for exercising agency in the Global North largely focused on consumption and consumerism (Koffman and Gill 2013). Within the Girl Power discourse, social inequalities in the Global North are non-existent (Taft 2004), thus girls were not positioned as needing political change, despite many ongoing structural inequalities that continue to affect them (Pomerantz, Raby, and Stefanik 2013). The voices of girls that became the most recognized were girls in the Global North advocating on behalf of girls in the Global South, whose realities they at best only superficially understood, fostering “missionary girlpower” that directed the voices of Global North girls toward the dominant gender discourses of the day, silencing the voices of Global South girls almost entirely (Switzer, Bent, and Endsley 2016). This framing fostered a dichotomous “oppositional girlhood” that depicted girls in the Global North and South as inherently juxtaposed to and different from each other (Bent and Switzer 2016).

In the subsequent decade, there was first a proclamation of a post-feminist era whereby girls and women were so empowered (at least in the

Global North) that feminism was no longer necessary (Genz and Brabon 2009; McRobbie 2007, 2009). Pomerantz, Raby, and Stefanik (2013) describe how girls were simultaneously confronted with “an idealized neoliberal girl subject who is told she ‘runs the world’ and the everyday realities of girls’ lives, which include experiences of inequality” (187). Girls became celebrated as individualized neoliberal subjects or “she-oes,” obscuring the collective organizations that girl activists most often operate within and the adults that often support them (Edell, Brown, and Montano 2016). Two individual girl activists have undoubtedly received the most attention and garnered the most influence globally: Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai. Both have been simultaneously heralded and criticized by Western and international media, their agency both applauded and critiqued (Hesford 2014; Ryder 2015; Walters 2016; Bergmann and Ossewaarde 2020; Jung et al. 2020). Taft (2020) speculates that individual girl activists, including but not limited to Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai, are so highly celebrated in large part because they enable people to point to their non-threatening exceptionalism, suggesting that these girls are unique in their capabilities and perspectives. Yet Thunberg and Yousafzai consistently point to the power of the collective movements that they operate within and call on adults in positions of power to join them. Taft (2020: 13) writes:

As Greta Thunberg told a New York Times reporter, “It’s sometimes annoying when people say, ‘Oh you children, you young people are the hope. You will save the world’... I think it would be helpful if you could help us just a little bit” (Sengupta 2019: n.p.). Girl activists do not want to be used as figures who symbolically resolve collective fears about living in a world of inequality, injustice, and climate catastrophe. They want others to act with them to transform this world into a better one.

During the 2010s, the feminist label became more widely embraced. In 2012, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie gave a viral Ted Talk entitled “We Should All Be Feminists,” subsequently adapted in an essay of the same name (Adichie 2015) and quoted in Beyoncé’s (2013) song “Flawless.” Celebrities and politicians proudly proclaimed their status as feminists and used the label and the concept of gender equity with political flourish. For example, when then-newly elected Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was asked why he made a point of establishing a gender-balanced cabinet, he famously replied, “Because it’s 2015.”

The social discourse around feminism shifted from a fun label to an urgent movement later in the 2010s with the advent of the #MeToo

movement, which was initially launched by Tarana Burke in 2006 but went viral in 2017 (Just and Muhr 2019), revealing the high prevalence of women and girls' experiences of sexual and gender-based violence. The #MeToo movement and the subsequent election and popularity of Donald Trump firmly demonstrated that women and girls continued to be subjugated to disrespect, violence, and harassment by men and boys. Even while an unprecedented number of powerful men lost their positions due to sexual assault and harassment, Trump's election and popularity and the men's rights movements that grew in its wake (Maricourt and Burrell 2022) demonstrated that there remains a high degree of social tolerance for gender-based violence and discrimination. Following #MeToo, much of the subsequent feminist activism, including by girls and young women, is occurring in digital spaces, where girl activists have shown themselves to strategically navigate the opportunities and risks presented by different social media platforms (Keller 2019). Online forums also provide spaces for the magnification of place-based activism; for example, at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, an open letter released by the student society calling for an external investigation into complaints made against professors and the way they had been handled was signed by 102 student organizations and 2407 individual signatories, garnering national attention, uniting students at McGill and nearby Concordia University in public protest, and leading to a faculty support letter signed by 150 faculty (Rentschler 2018). For teenage girls, online spaces are not only where they are engaging in feminist activism, it is also where they are often learning about feminism for the first time (Keller 2019; Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller 2018). Kim and Ringrose (2018) encourage educators to see online learning as not only legitimate but critical sites for awakening of civic understanding and engagement. Digital activism on social media does garner significant levels of misogynistic backlash against activists, including personal threats of violence. Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller (2018) found that women and girls who faced these threats usually persisted with their digital activism because they found the online space to be so generative and productive.

## Evolving Understandings of Girlhood

The study of girlhood broadly, and girls' activism specifically, has undergone seismic shifts in recent years as the concept of *girl* has become more

multifaceted and complex. Driscoll (2008) asserts that the concept of girls' adolescence as a formative period distinct from childhood and womanhood was first strongly situated within Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) *The Second Sex*, which has a section on "The Formative Years" that describes adolescent girlhood as the period in which patriarchy and gender conformity become most firmly learned, embodied, and embedded. A major shift in understanding girlhood as a construct relating to the experiences and identities of female children and adolescents was to recognize the plurality of girlhoods and the vast differences between them (Currie 2015). The initial focus on White, Western, straight, cisgendered, and middle- or upper-middle-class girlhood led to an imposition of their narratives and experiences on all girls. This homogenization obscured the many groups of girls around the world whose experiences differed radically from those described in the girlhood literature, victimizing and reifying them as different and outside the desired embodiment of girl (Bae-Dimitriadis 2017; Jiwani, Steenbergen, and Mitchell 2006; Khoja-Moolji 2018).

Many girlhood scholars now seek to center girls' lived experiences of intersectionality, embodying the concept coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) to refer to the various ways that different social constructs (such as gender, race, and class) interact to create structures of oppression that uniquely affect people through the interaction of those multiple social constructs, as opposed to those affected by only one. In the decades since, scholars have applied intersectionality in many different contexts to understand the complexity of girls' lives. For example, Jiwani's (2006) study of fifty-two first- and second-generation Canadian girls and young women describes them as "walking the hyphen" (88) as they navigate the ways in which their experiences of gender, place, citizenship, and ethnicity make them feel like outsiders both within Canada and when visiting their cultural homelands. Ivashkevich (2017) describes a series of videos created by a nine-year-old Black girl named Kiara living in a homeless shelter in South Carolina, which demonstrate the complex intersections between her class, ethnicity, race, and gender. These videos thrust Kiara's experiences of poverty, violence, incarceration, hunger, and racism into the traditional tropes of fairy tales and news broadcasts, creating a sharp contradiction between her life and the typical narratives of White middle-class girlhood. Nguyen, Gonick, and Bui (2021) observe that, within the Global South, girls with disabilities have been marginalized and excluded at multiple levels: from Eurocentric lenses that globally utilize dominant perspectives of childhood from the Global North, then further through disabled girls' ex-



clusion from both feminist studies and disability studies that have, historically, used adult-centered lenses and methodologies. Natalie Clark (2016) pushes the field of intersectionality studies through the foregrounding of anti-colonialism and Indigenous sovereignty and nationhood, arguing that Indigenous feminists such as Zitkala-Sa (whose 1924 essay “Regardless of Sex or Age” is quoted in Nason 2010: 52) pointed to the interlinkages between gender, race, age, and linkages to the land long before Crenshaw developed the term intersectionality. Clark (2016) introduces the Red Intersectionality framework, “inherently activist, responsive to local and global colonization forces, and theorized for the emergent ‘multifarious, polyvocal’ (Grande 2004: 2) indigenous identity with the clear goal of sovereignty” (50). These works demonstrate that, beyond the pluralization of girlhoods, intersectionality has been pluralized within girlhood studies to show a vast range of interpretations being used and adopted to better describe and give voice to the lived experiences of girls.

The concept of “girl” is further disrupted by increasing recognition of the fluidity of gender identity and the importance of respecting trans and gender non-binary individuals’ self-identification (Airton 2018; Paechter 2021; Travers 2018). Travers (2018) observes that, increasingly, children challenge gender expectations placed on them in many unexpected ways, some identifying with a gender different than the one they were assigned at birth as young as two years old. Young people are often at the forefront of understanding gender as expansive and accepting that individuals have the right to identify their own sexual orientation and gender identity, that these identities do not have to fit clearly within any given category, and that their self-identification may evolve and change (Bragg et al. 2018). They are also often acting as leaders challenging cisnormativity and heteronormativity in their schools and communities (McGlashan and Fitzpatrick 2017; Reygan 2021). Yet, as long as people who identify as girls continue to face increased violence and discrimination because of their gender identity, and as long as some continue to gain a sense of strength and empowerment as a result of the ability to identify as such, the study of self-identifying girls and young women and efforts to understand their experiences and perspectives remains valuable. Increased gender inclusivity cannot obscure a focus on the existence and influence of patriarchal systems and a resulting gender hierarchy that negatively affects girls and women (Homan, Chandran, and Lo 2018), nor the ways in which girls and women mobilize to challenge these oppressive systems. Thus, this collection maintains a focus on activism by, for, and with girls and young

women, including trans girls and anyone who self-identifies as such, while recognizing the existence of gender non-binary people as well as self-identifying boys and men operating within and alongside those networks as they strive collectively toward shared goals.

## Agency and Empowerment

Naila Kabeer's (1999) foundational essay on women's empowerment defines power as the ability to exercise choice and empowerment as the process of change by which one moves from an inability to make choices to an ability to do so. She breaks down the ability to choose into three inter-related and indivisible dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements. She further notes that these factors are culturally situated, thus the kind of choices a woman can make must be considered and the structural inequalities that constrain available choices can rarely be addressed by individual women alone. The change in consciousness that indicates women's empowerment therefore requires a sense of agency that includes self-worth and social identity, the capacity to exercise strategic control over one's own life and relationships with others, and the ability to participate alongside men in reshaping society to involve a more democratic distribution of power and possibility (Gammage, Kabeer, and Rodgers 2016). Taking action to initiate change, whether done by an individual or collective, is considered by many to be the final step in the process of critical consciousness (Watts, Diemer, and Voight 2011). Critical consciousness is a concept developed by Paulo Freire (1970, 1973) through which oppressed people learn how to analyze their social conditions and then act to liberate themselves and others from oppression. This process of critical social action or critical reflection involves recognizing the existence of social inequalities and that these inequalities are created by unjust systems of sociopolitical power (Watts and Hipolito-Delgado 2015). This is necessary because, as Freire asserts, "to surmount the situation of oppression, one must first understand its root causes..." (1970: 31). It is followed by political efficacy (the perceived capacity to effect change) and finally critical action occurring through individual or collective activism to change aspects of society perceived to be unjust (Watts, Diemer, and Voight 2011). Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015) propose that there are three levels of action: personal action, group action, and the mass action of social movements; the latter two categories constitute forms of activism

networks. They note that a process of collective identification in which one's social identity is redefined with a more positive self-regard for one's social group and their membership occurs between critical reflection and political self-efficacy, demonstrating how positioning oneself within a network or collective can develop one's belief in the ability to effect change. While they observe that, in the literature on critical consciousness, critical action is often under-emphasized, Diemer et al. (2020) attempt to recenter action in critical consciousness, noting that Freire himself derisively referred to critical reflection without action as merely "verbalism" (13).

Critical action, when relating to gender equality, seeks to shift the structural regulations that govern the lives of girls and women. Structures are defined by Giddens (1984) as the rules and resources of a society which govern the distribution of power and agency among individuals and groups, while Folbre (1994) observes that the structures that use rules, norms, assets, and preferences to position individuals within a social hierarchy are determined by intersecting identities that determine the scope of agency available to them. Yet the relationship between agency and structure is not only one of constraint; structures are social systems and thus constantly adapting and evolving, including in response to exercises of agency. As Gammage, Kabeer, and Rodgers (2016) state, "Structures shape the agency of individuals and groups, but the agency exercised by individuals and groups in turn shape structures, reproducing, modifying, or transforming them" (1). In order for agency to influence entrenched structural constraints, collective solidarity as well as individual assertiveness is necessary (Kabeer 1999), pointing to the necessity of activism networks in achieving social change. Collective action strategically advances gender equality by amplifying women's voices and increasing the likelihood of influencing change, as well as providing a space in which women and girls can support and protect each other from cultural backlash that may arise from efforts to defy patriarchal structures (Gammage, Kabeer, and Rodgers 2016). This volume focuses on activism networks because they are inherently collective, uniting girls and young women across time and space as they mobilize toward a common goal.

Conceptualizations of agency become even more complex when talking about the agency of children and youth. Youth around the world are at once described and positioned as "at risk" and also "the future" of a given society (DeJaeghere, McCleary, and Josić 2016). Like women's agency and empowerment, scholars of youth agency identify the importance of cultural context in understanding agency and identify its often

contradictory nature while operating within and against established structures and norms (*ibid.*). Agency is not inherently positive; it can be used to achieve either positive or negative outcomes for both the self and others (Hart, Biggeri, and Babic 2014). Sen (1992) argues for the need for agency to be linked to larger moral and ethical stances for the improvement of well-being and reduction of inequalities, but many moral and ethical stances may be seen as controversial, enhancing well-being from one person or group's perspective but reducing it from another. Hart, Biggeri, and Babic (2014) also distinguish between the exercise of agency *by* individuals or groups and agency *for* individual or social benefits, noting that some agentic actions on the part of either individuals or groups have greater impact because the sum of social benefits are greater, pointing to a difference in the value of agency depending on how it is exercised and for what purpose. Bajaj (2009) operationalizes the concept of *transformative* agency as "belief in one's present or future ability to improve individual social mobility and transform elements of one's society" (554) in her study of secondary school students' agency in Zambia, while Josić (2016) uses the term *citizen* agency to describe "a practice of citizenship encompassing one's belonging to a community" (48).

The distinctions between these concepts of agency emphasize the nuances in the term's application. In this collection, concepts of collective agency, community, and transformation are imperative for understanding how young people are operating to challenge structures of gender inequality as well as how the achievements and outcomes should be received. Girl activists are not only engaged in addressing issues of gender inequality directly, but in using feminist and gendered perspectives to tackle other issues including climate change (O'Brien, Selboe, and Hayward 2018), nuclear proliferation (Carson 2018), racial injustice (Rombalski 2020), and peacebuilding (Luttrell-Rowland, Engebretson, and Segalo 2021) at global and local levels.

## Feminist Activism Networks

Ideally, feminist scholarship, activism, and service delivery are intertwined, reflecting the feminist movement's embodiment of the concept of praxis, which means moving between theory and action so that each informs the other while working for social change locally, nationally, and globally (Allen 2022). Feminist activism has conventionally been conceived of as

occurring in waves, although scholars have critiqued this framing (Evans and Chamberlain 2015; Zhao and Silberstein 2003). Allen (2022), while recognizing these critiques, outlines the four waves of feminism as summarized in the following: first-wave feminism which advanced women's liberation and political rights in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, also known as the women's suffrage movement. This wave is strongly associated with White feminists in North America and Europe, reflecting a racial schism and avoidance that Sojourner Truth challenged in her famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech in 1851. Second-wave feminism is characterized by scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan, who challenged the framing of women as inherently and biologically inferior and subordinate to men, arguing that this dominance resulted from a political and social structure now known as patriarchy.

The universality of second-wave feminist rhetoric as associated with the issues faced by middle-class, heterosexual, White women prompted a backlash by feminists representing the many identities excluded from second-wave feminism's universalizing lens (Mann and Huffman 2005). Out of these critiques developed the critical feminism that characterized the third wave, which began critiquing gender oppression in relation to other forms of systemic oppression, including class and race. The idea that frameworks of capitalism and systemic racism interacted with gender in ways that oppressed some women and advantaged others was firmly established in the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Intersectionality became such a prominent concept within feminism that it now characterizes much of contemporary feminist theory (Ferguson 2017; Risman 2004), although there are also critiques that the concept has been appropriated by White Western feminists (Bilge 2013). Homan, Chandran, and Lo (2018) also identify the way intersectionality is being co-opted and de-politicized by international multilateral and non-governmental organizations to refer to difference and categories of identity, without proper emphasis on it as a tool to critique power, privilege, and oppression, describing their experiences as young feminist activists being asked to "dial down the feminism" (500) while simultaneously foregrounding their intersectionality.

The fourth wave of feminism marks our current context, which Allen (2022) identifies as characterized by online connectivity, heightened recognition of ongoing White privilege, global feminisms, and attention to gender identity and expression. While feminism has always utilized networks to mobilize for social change, the operation of these networks

looks radically different following the advent of social media. This is most obvious in the advent of the #MeToo movement that rocked the world by bringing the widespread prevalence of sexual violence to the forefront of public conversations in an unprecedented way. “Hashtag activism” is defined as the “act of fighting for or supporting a cause with the use of hashtags as the primary channel to raise awareness of an issue and encourage debate via social media” (Tomblason and Wolf 2017: 15). In their analysis of hashtag activism within the #MeToo movement, Xiong, Cho, and Boatwright (2019) observe that social media presents a platform whereby feminist organizations can co-create meaning with individuals and facilitate social change in ways not realized by previously existing platforms. Social media also presents unprecedented opportunities for individuals to leverage their own advocacy, as demonstrated in Jean-Pierre’s (2022) article describing the social media campaign of Reverend June Dolley-Major in South Africa, whose #Sayhisname Facebook campaign to bring her rapist to justice went viral and led to his tribunal and, in 2022, the delivery of a memorandum calling for the investigation into sexual violence in all religious institutions to South African President Cyril Ramaphosa. These outcomes were realized after decades of fruitless offline efforts to draw attention to her case, demonstrating the remarkable potential of social media.

While many feminists have long proclaimed to be part of a “global sisterhood,” substantive critiques of White Western feminism, such as those by Chandra Mohanty (1988, 2002) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), argue that many Western feminist scholars’ work has simplified, silenced, othered, and colonized the Global South women that they wrote about. Feminists in the Global South have gained increasing recognition and representation, demonstrating the plurality of global feminisms that resist the dominant narratives and perspectives of feminists in the Global North (e.g., Lugones, Espinosa-Miñoso, and Maldonado-Torres 2022; Mathonsi and Tallis 2022). One iteration that brings together multiple global feminist perspectives is “decolonial feminism,” which Lao-Montes (2022) describes as a “creolized outcome of a variety of positions from the Global South (including the south in the north), such as Black feminisms, women of color/third-world women’s feminism, and Indigenous feminisms, and a process of creolization that changes over time” (592). Another form of global feminism is transnational feminism, which involves cross-border analyses of women’s localized experiences—particularly those in the Global South—to illuminate global structures, necessarily includ-

ing the nation-state (Alexander and Mohanty 2010; Mohanty 2013). My (2019) article on defining transnational girlhood shows how transnational feminism applies to girls, describing the characteristics of transnational girlhood as including: cross-border connections that build on girls' localized lived experiences; intersectional analysis that prioritizes the perspectives of girls who have traditionally not been given equal opportunities to speak; recognition of girls' potential agency as local, national, and global activists; their operation within patriarchal and neocolonial constraints; and a counter-hegemonic agenda.

A major shift and current tension in contemporary feminism is the ways in which gender identity is being addressed in feminist circles, as demonstrated through the integration of trans women in some iterations of feminism even while other women use the mantle of feminism and women's rights to insist upon the biological nature of sex (Armitage 2020; Tudor 2023; Smithson Swain 2022). Mel Michelle Lewis (2021) argues against the siloing of feminist, queer, and ethnic studies, and that bringing various justice-oriented perspectives together, using intersectionality as a crucial bridging element, reveals how studying the convergence of these fields reveals hidden knowledges and the intra-community vulnerability for individuals at the nexus of minoritized gender, sexual, and racial identities. Patriarchy, cisnormativity, and heteronormativity are all rooted in gender hierarchies, beliefs, and structures that position cisgender heterosexual men as dominant and superior and all those who reject that narrative as transgressive and wrong. There are growing efforts to align advocacy, for example in Chile where activists have been using a combination of human rights and feminist discourses to simultaneously advocate for LGBTQ+ inclusion and against gender-based violence (Hiner et al. 2022), and to make feminism a more inclusive space for trans women, as Currans (2023) describes at trans-inclusive women's festivals. Currans observes that, while feminism has always emphasized collective activism as a means of advancing a common good, it has a long history in which it has reproduced racialized and colonial power structures, among other forms of exclusion, of which trans exclusion is the latest iteration. She asserts that solidarity across difference is not an end point but a process that "requires those with privilege to witness the experiences of those who endure oppression and to be willing to learn that we are among the sources of that oppression" (177). This building of solidarity is underway in feminist activist circles, including—and perhaps most—among younger generations of feminist activists.

## Girls' Activism as Collective

Agentic acts should be considered in light of the structural context and constraints that they occur within, demonstrating how agency operates in or is constrained in these structures. Gender expectations in the form of normative femininity and masculinity are among social norms that operate to constrain agency. For girls and young women, activists are also affected by normative expectations related to age, casting young activists as less capable and in need of adults to support or even take over when conversations “get serious” (Josefsson and Wall 2020). Gendered and age-related expectations are intertwined for activists who identify as girls, affecting them differently than boy activists based on differentiated expectations of girls' obedience, passivity, and victimization (Bay-Cheng and Lewis 2006; Gordon 2008). While young people are often listed as one of many groups that should be “consulted” in decision-making, they are increasingly demanding more: not just consultation but influence with a voice, vote, and seat at the table equal to adult decision- and policymakers (Burnett et al., this volume; Carson 2018). Brown (2008) observes that girls and the power of their desire to effect change is too often underestimated.

Even within feminist activist networks, younger activists are often overlooked, silenced, or tokenized and manipulated (Bay-Cheng et al. 2006; Bent 2016; Gordon and Taft 2011). Taft's (2017) study of seventy-five girl activists aged thirteen to nineteen in North and South America demonstrated that many young activists absorbed ageist narratives surrounding activism, positioning themselves as *becoming* activists but describing the activist identity as a special status they had not yet achieved. Yet girls and young women often bring specific skill sets to the activism process, positioning them as valuable additions to a movement rather than “activists-in-training.” Some of the activists in Taft's study described above and in a related study of urban youth activists in the United States (Gordon and Taft 2011) identified young people as better situated to communicate advocacy messages to other young people, while others argued that they organized better educational events than adults because they saw themselves as teaching and learning from each other simultaneously. In their study of ten girls' and women's organizations in Africa classified as either girl-led or operating in ways that are truly intergenerational (rather than just involving girls), Luttrell-Rowland, Engebretson, and Segalo (2021) identify the following assets that the younger leaders and activists bring to the organizations: adaptive and iterative approaches that expand



notions of conventional policymaking and extended networks of advocacy and care that reach more and different types of people. They note that, while elders hold honored and respected roles in guiding peace and justice-building, girls are central to outreach and organizing efforts that magnify the elders' impact, demonstrating how the different generations bring complementary skill sets. In Rombalski's (2020) critical ethnography describing youth activism among American secondary school students of color who were ideologically grounded in Black feminism to address racial injustice, she observes how the activists organized using distributed leadership models that operated as a collective, intentionally avoiding what they saw as authoritarian and hierarchical leadership models that were modeled by their (almost all White) teachers. Finally, Coe's (2015) study of youth gender justice activists in Ecuador and Peru describes them as more likely to connect their public gender justice activism to challenging gender norms and inequalities in their personal lives as compared to their adult activist counterparts. As Carla, one of her study participants, stated when comparing herself to some of the adult activists in the professional feminist organization she worked in: "I am not just a feminist eight hours a day but rather twenty-four hours a day" (902).

The literature simultaneously demonstrates, however, that there is an important role for adult activists in supporting and training younger generations of activists and using their positions of greater power to support girls and young women. Brown (2008) describes the need for adult activists to seek out girl activists and girl activist organizations, collaborate with them, reconfigure their work to center girls' voices, and, most importantly, mobilize financially to support their work. More specifically, Carson (2018) calls on established organizations to create positions (not only social media roles) for youth activists and initiate inclusive decision-making, pathways to attend/contribute to events, mentorship, and opportunities to lead. Luttrell-Rowland, Engebretson, and Segalo's (2021) distinction between feminist organizations that involve girls and those that are "truly" intergenerational involves creating distinct but complementary and equal roles for younger and more experienced activists. For Bent (2016), intergenerational partnerships require the intentional disruption of generational partnerships, including through the exposure of shared vulnerabilities and dependencies that mobilize agency in relational, ethical, and embodied ways.

There are numerous examples of existing feminist organizations or initiatives whereby girls are being meaningfully supported by adult stake-

holders. The intergenerational feminist organization Sexualization Protest: Action, Resistance, Knowledge (SPARK), which challenges the sexualization of girls, describes their activism as “girl-driven” because girls are the ones identifying the issues, while adults assume a supporting role (Edell, Brown, and Montano 2016). They note that their intergenerational partnership depends on “a discourse of participation, equality and respect, including an understanding that girls are experts on their own experience and not only full participants in, but co-leaders of SPARK” (Edell, Brown, and Tolman 2013: 279). They explore differences of approach and opinion when they arise and part of the adults’ role is to employ a problem-posing approach to work through contradictions, problems, and possibilities (Edell, Brown, and Tolman 2013). In Moletsane’s (2018) description of intergenerational engagement in support of a girl-led march to protest gender-based violence in South Africa, she identifies adult feminist activist and researchers’ support in helping the girl leaders to prepare for the march as instrumental in navigating logistical barriers and accessing media outlets that enabled them to reach up to twelve million radio listeners and 234,000 newspaper readers. She speculates that the adults’ involvement may have shielded the girls from negative repercussions, possibly including violence, noting that the association with feminist activists, sometimes labeled as “unAfrican,” could potentially have exposed the younger activists to greater negative attention. In addition to adult activists within the same organizations or movements, child and youth activists can also be supported by other stakeholders including law enforcement, teachers, journalists, local religious, community, or political leaders (Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra 2020).

Building on the intersectional expectations of gender and age, girl activists are also influenced by norms and expectations surrounding other identity-based social constructs including race, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, socio-economic status, and location. Girl activists of color operate within ongoing structures of racism and colonization, at both global and local levels. For Indigenous girl activists, their activism occurs within historical and ongoing contexts where they are often exposed to structural violence and state parties that look the other way while their bodies are targeted by violence (Altenberg et al. 2018; de Finney 2014, 2017; Palacios 2016). De Finney (2014) describes Indigenous girls’ “presencing strategies” as active, politicized, and decolonizing processes, drawing on Simpson’s (2011) notion of presence as situated within Indigenous practices of collective advocacy and mobilization that

are rooted in spiritual and cultural resurgence. Building upon a long legacy of Black women's activism, Black girl activists operate within a context where both entertainment and news media often depict them in ways that are subtractive and/or dehumanizing (Evans-Winters 2017; McArthur 2016), and where, even within Black activist movements, the roles of Black girls and women are often made invisible (Troutman and Jiménez 2016).

Drawing on bell hooks (2000), Jessica, a Black feminist blogger, public speaker, and high school student in New York City, reiterates the importance of Black girls mobilizing their agency collectively: "How can we help Black girls around the country harness the pain of oppression and turn it into a source of power? 'We cannot move from pain to power in isolation,' hooks says. We need to work together to make sure that black girls matter" (Troutman and Jiménez 2016: 20). Evans-Winters (2017) calls on adults working with Black girls to acknowledge them as "already possessing aspects of power (and not in need of empowerment), and then we must accept that our advocacy role is to support and help them create and engage in activities that bring forth their power" (422). Similarly, Nguyen, Gonick, and Bui (2021) argue for the use of specialized approaches, such as art-based and participatory visual methods, to support girls with disabilities to speak back to dominant narratives. They identify the need not only to involve creative approaches that respond to the strengths of disabled girl activists, but also to utilize strong community engagement throughout the process to ensure they are sufficiently supported.

A group of girl activists that face particular challenges are trans activists, whose right to even be recognized as a girl or young woman is itself often challenged. McBride and Neary's (2021) study of trans youth aged fifteen to twenty-four in Ireland shows how their everyday resistance of dominant cisnormativity in schools constitutes an act of resistance, often exposing them to personal risk, particularly when trying to establish school-based collectives (Iskander and Shabtay 2018). While the internet is a place filled with intense hatred and vitriol directed toward trans bodies, Tortajada and colleagues (2021) note that trans identities and activism can flourish and connect in online spaces and activities, such as vlogging. Gender identity can be particularly contentious in the Global South, where gender binaries that were imposed as colonial constructs are now often considered authentically African, as observed by Kolanyane-Kesupile and McAllister (2021) in their study of African trans activists. The complex intersections between girls' and young women's

collective agency and constraints in relation to gender, age, ability, sexuality, race, and other social constructs are discussed further in the chapters in this book.

## Book Structure

This collection explores different facets of activism networks by, for, and with girls and young women. The volume builds upon a special issue of the journal *Girlhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, that I guest edited with Anuradha Dugal. Eight chapters were previously published in the special issue, one was previously published in a different issue of *Girlhood Studies*, and there are five new chapters being published here for the first time. The new chapters address some of the gaps that we identified in the special issue (Vanner and Dugal 2020), documenting the perspectives of disabled girls and trans girls and including three chapters written by or with young activists. The collection includes perspectives from around the world, including descriptions of activism networks based in South Africa, Spain, the United States, Canada, Nigeria, and Japan, and four that analyze activism operating internationally. Several chapters demonstrate girls' activism using social media platforms including Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, reflecting ways in which girls and young women are at the forefront of the innovative use of social media within activism. Chapters are divided into three sections, based on the organization of the activism network being described and the role of girls or young women and supporting adults in those networks. The first section describes activism networks that are led *by* girls and young women, in which girls and young women are the primary decision-makers in the network, followed by a section in which chapters describe activism networks that are organized primarily by adults *for* girls and young women to build their agency as current and future leaders, although girls may still have some influence over programming choices. The final section describes networks that are organized collaboratively *with* girls and young women, where adult organizers and girls and young women continuously share decision-making responsibilities regarding how the network or program operates. The distinction is made not because one approach is better than another but to emphasize that there are multiple ways that girls and young women organize and multiple ways that older feminist activists can support them.

## *Activism Networks Led By Girls and Young Women*

The first section of the book includes chapters describing girl and young women activists who will not wait for adults' support to begin their activism. It opens with a remarkable visual essay by Natasha Harris-Harb and Sophie Sandberg entitled, "Chalk Back: The Girl and Youth-Led Street Art Movement to #StopStreetHarassment." This Instagram-style chapter documents the spread of the Chalk Back movement that challenges street harassment by writing out cat calls in chalk in public places and posting photos of the chalk on Instagram. With photos, Harris-Harb and Sandberg show how the movement, led by girls and young women, has adapted to different cultural contexts, revealing both the universality of girls' and young women's experiences of sexual harassment and the way that their activism, ingenuity, and resistance transcends borders. The movement mobilizes a new tool to expose and dismantle oppression and bridges physical and virtual spaces. The next chapter, "Hopeful, Harmless, and Heroic: Figuring the Girl Activist as Global Savior" by Jessica K. Taft analyzes the way that prominent girl activists are represented in the media and received by the public, showing how they are inspiring global figures precisely because they are perceived as non-threatening and their radical views are thus neutralized. This provides a useful framework to understand the way many girl activists are popularly positioned and the reasons that many associate girls' activism with individuals instead of networks.

The following chapters, however, show that girl activists can have powerful influence, both with and without the support of established policy- and decision-makers. The chapter, "Young Feminists Leading Change: Gender Transformative Education in Action" by Ashlee Burnett, Dennis Glasgow, and Maryjacob Okwuosa describes the current moment in youth feminist activism for gender transformative education. Written by three activists, it describes the progress and experiences of youth feminist activists from across the Global South participating in the Transform Education network. They describe what intergenerational feminism can look like in practice, as well as the colonial, patriarchal, and heteronormative structures that feminist activists, particularly in the Global South, continue to struggle against. The next chapter "'Because There are Young Women Behind Me': Learning from the Testimonios of Young Undocumented Women Advocates" by Carolina Silva recounts the experiences of five Latina university students engaged in a support and advocacy group for undocumented students in the United States. This chapter illustrates

how these young women bravely make their own stories known and chart a path that other undocumented students may follow. Barbara Hartley's chapter "Sakai Magara: Activist Girl of Early Twentieth Century Japan" demonstrates that girl-led activism is a phenomenon that is neither new nor Western in her profile of eighteen-year-old activist Sakai Magara's role in the *Sekirankai* (Red Wave Society) socialist movement in 1921.

### *Activism Networks Led For Girls and Young Women*

The first chapter in the second section is "Unsilencing the Girls: Fostering a Practice of Schoolgirls' Agentic Roles and Participation in Decision-Making in Education in Oyo State, Nigeria" by Edem Dorothy Ossai, Oluwadamilola Adedayo, Ewaoluwa Raufu, and Busayo Adebayo. This chapter describes the experiences of three girl participants (and chapter co-authors) from the "Girls in Dialogue" project initiated by the Nigerian-based non-profit, Mentoring Assistance for Youth and Entrepreneurs Initiative (MAYEIN), which works in partnership with girls and community members to create space for girls to be heard within the family, school, and community. It shows the complexity of work to enhance girls' agency, in which strengthening girls' capacities can be empowering but also frustrating when their growth is not recognized by other adults in their lives. Amanda L. Miller and Jennifer A. Kurth's chapter "Photovoice and Cartography as Activist Tools: Mining for Solutions with Disabled Girls of Color in One U.S. High School," describes a research project using art-based methods to document the experiences of five disabled girls of color in an American high school, showing the many ways that they experience exclusion within the school space. Also in the United States, Courtney Cook's chapter "Towards a Fairer Future: An Activist Model of Black Girl Leadership" examines the complex dynamics surrounding adults supporting girls' leadership, focusing on the barriers that prevent Black women from assuming leadership roles, the consequences for activism programs designed to support Black girls, and the necessity of activist models that foster professional leadership trajectories specifically for Black girls.

### *Activism Networks Led With Girls and Young Women*

The final section gathers chapters that portray collective action with girls and young women. Julia Ussak, Hailey May Ussak, Jennica Alhda Barcial, and Marnina Gonick's chapter, "Be Well and Stay Safe: Facebook, Community Activism, and Inuit Girls in the Time of COVID" recounts

the ways in which a group of Inuit girls, coordinated by Ussak and Ussak, applied art-based methods to mobilize community activism for public health using Facebook. Their planned interventions had to be quickly adapted during the Covid-19 pandemic, shifting their focus to respond to the most pressing needs of their community in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut in Canada. In “Negotiating Girl-Led Advocacy: Addressing Early and Forced Marriage in South Africa” by Sadiyya Haffejee, Astrid Trefry-Goatley, Lisa Wiebesiek, and Nkonzo Mkhize, the authors describe a participatory visual research project in which an adult research team and girl participants challenge practices of early and forced marriage in rural South Africa. They highlight the challenges and opportunities surrounding girls’ desire to exercise agency when adult collaborators are responsible to both support and protect them.

Emily Bent’s chapter on girls’ activism at the United Nations, entitled “Reflections on Expanding Girls’ Political Capital at the United Nations,” continues the discussion surrounding intergenerational collaboration and the representation of girls, reflecting on her participation in organizing *Girls Speak Out* events at the United Nations. She highlights tensions surrounding the process of supporting girl activists in becoming visible on an international stage, at times inadvertently putting them in positions whereby they are tokenized, patronized, or ignored by other adult stakeholders. The next chapter, “Trans Girls’ Activism on YouTube and Instagram: A Radical Media Engagement of Mothers and Daughters,” by Lucas R. Platero, Iolanda Tortajada, and Cilia Willem analyzes the YouTube account “Cloe y Mama,” run by Cloe Aicart and her mother, Carolina Marza. Cloe is a trans girl and, with her parents, has become a prominent transgender activist in Spain, largely through their shared social media accounts. Platero, Tortajada, and Willem analyze how Cloe and Carolina represent Cloe’s journey as a trans girl and a trans girl activist, while also posing questions about intergenerational collaboration, ownership, and representation, particularly in the intimacy of a parent–child relationship. Next, ““Speak with Girls, Not for Them”: Supporting Girls’ Action Against Rape Culture,” by Alexe Bernier and Sarah Winstanley, describes work with girls aged ten to fifteen to challenge rape culture in Calgary, Canada. Bernier and Winstanley show how adult-initiated conversations can be overtaken by girl leaders to address the topics they prioritize, creating a structured environment that also develops and utilizes girls’ leadership capacity. The final chapter in this section is entitled “The Inheritance of Activism: Does Social Capital Shape Women’s Lives?” by Supriya Baily,

Gloria Wang, and Elisabeth Scotto-Lavino. This chapter describes the results of interviews with feminists at various points in their lives and careers as activists, all reflecting on what it was like to become a feminist activist as a girl. The chapter demonstrates how girls and young women grow in the feminist activist space, becoming seen as activists to others and, ultimately, to themselves in ways that can last long past their girlhood. Together, the chapters in this volume advance conversations surrounding the possibility of activism networks led by girls and young women and the responsibilities of adults mobilizing and supporting young feminist activists in advancing gender justice across the world.

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