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Good Girls Play Sports: International inspiration and the construction of girlhood

Megan Chawansky, University of Iowa

In their bid to host the 2012 Summer Olympic Games, the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) stated that, if selected, the committee would embrace an ambitious legacy project which endeavoured to, according to LOCOG Chairman and former Olympic athlete, Sebastian Coe, “reach young people all around the world and connect them to the inspirational power of the Games so they are inspired to choose sport … improving their lives as a result” (London 2012c, p. 3). Though the extensive programming plan involves coordinating with youth and schools in the UK, its primary focus is on reaching youth outside of the UK, and to date, the programme claims to have reached twelve million young people in nineteen countries including: Azerbaijan, Brazil, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Ghana, Jordan, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palau, South Africa, Tanzania, Trinidad & Tobago, Turkey, Uganda and Zambia (London 2012d). While the plan within each country is specific to the context, it is of interest that several initiatives aim to reach girls and young women. For example, the International Inspiration programming in Azerbaijan aspires to reach “marginalised young people—particularly girls, displaced children, children living in institutions and children with a disability” (London 2012a). In Ethiopia, a similar claim is made with the programme seeking to use, “sport to promote inclusion by reaching girls and marginalised children, including those with disabilities” (London 2012b). In what follows, I aim to offer critical contextual insights which frame this dimension of the International Inspiration programme through a feminist (new) media lens in an era of “girl power media culture” (Emily Zaslow 2009). In particular, I suggest that considering the feminist insights on reading sport, girlhood, and new media offers a nuanced understanding of how this highly-touted legacy project of the 2012 Olympic Games promotes the spirit of Olympicism and constructs a certain kind of appropriate girlhood through the use of sport.

The International Inspiration project is governed by an independent charitable foundation and receives support from—among other entities—UK Sport, the British Council, and UNICEF (London 2012c, p. 3). Moreover, it fits well within the loose parameters of what some call the most promising social moment in sport in some time: the “Sport for Development and Peace” (SDP) movement. While the origins of the SDP movement are nearly impossible to ascertain, it gained momentum through the last decade and benefitted greatly from the United Nations’ (UN) support in the early 2000s. Bruce Kidd (2008) suggests that the current SDP movement reflects a long-standing interest in the use of sport for social change, but differs from other one-off endeavours because of “the rapid explosion of the agencies and organization that are involved … the financial support it enjoys from the powerful international sports federations, and the extent to which it has been championed by the United Nations, its agencies and significant partners” (p. 371). The
International Olympics Committee has been active in the promotion of SDP and hosted a forum on the topic in May 2009.

The burgeoning SDP field includes not just action on the ground but also an ever-growing body of critical literature. This literature explores the complex transnational power relations embedded in the seemingly simple games and sports which mark SDP initiatives as slightly different from other international development interventions. Some of this research involves important work on themes of gender, girls and women, and many utilize a feminist lens to explore the field (see Jayne Caudwell 2007; Sarah Forde 2008; Tess Kay 2009; Marianne Meier & Martha Saavedra 2009; Martha Saavedra 2008). I seek to add to this body of knowledge by incorporating theoretical insights from the realm of girls’ studies or girlhood studies into the work in the realm of SDP research. Though feminist studies of sport regularly offer critiques of the gendered nature of sport, theoretical insights from the realm of girls’ studies provide opportunities to foreground the intersections of gender with age as it manifests in the lives of girls. Yet, with the notable exceptions of Lyndsay M. C. Hayhurst’s (2011) work on the girl effect in SDP work and Laura Azzarito (2010), Dorie Geissler (2001), and Leslie Heywood’s (2007) on sport more generally, few scholars of gender and sport theorize through the lens of girls’ studies. I suggest that using this lens is especially important in the context of International Inspiration as it offers up a better understanding of the role of sport in the production of transnational “future girls” of the present moment (Anita Harris 2004).

The recurring narrative of what Harris (2004) calls the “future girl,” is quite visible in the brief stories that appear on the website and annual report which serves to promote International Inspiration. A future girl is the kind of young woman who is celebrated for her determination and confidence and who is “self-making, resilient, and flexible” (Harris 2004, p. 6). The International Inspiration features one such girl with their story of Haneen, a young woman from Jordan.

Haneen, a sixteen-year-old girl from the north of Jordan, trained as a sports coach through the sport hubs project. Haneen’s training inspired her to start organizing the first regular sports activities for adolescent girls in her community, giving new confidence to her and other girls: “After participating in this project, my self-confidence has risen considerably” (London 2012c, p. 15).

Versions of this narrative appear in other promotional materials and reflect what some argue is the increased “girling” of development” (Hayhurst 2011, p. 532). The presentation of a cohesive story about girls’ lives proves important to donors and potential supporters, and it provides a useful anchor and point of reference for girl-centred programming. That said, they also seem to supply easy solutions to complex problems and position girls as the solutions to problems for which they are not (ultimately) responsible. Girls who can be transformed to healthy, knowledgeable, “can do” citizens within the current neoliberal moment are also expected to usher in larger social change as well, typically in the form of helping other girls change their lives as well (Harris 2004). Per Leslie Heywood (2007), these girls in turn become the “ideal subjects of Empire, part of the new global economy that relies on individuals with flexibility who are trained to blame their inevitable ‘failures’ on themselves rather than the system their lives are structured within” (2007, p. 104). While new media outlets do not provide the only space wherein these narratives occur, the role of new media in the promotion and sustainability of SDP programming must be acknowledged.
Brian Wilson and Lyndsay M. C. Hayhurst’s (2009) findings from research on the use of the Internet within four sport-themed NGOs suggest that the use of new media not only sets these sport-focused development initiatives apart from comparable initiatives of the past, but more importantly, the Internet actually enabled some SDP NGOs to come into existence. While it is important to note that many SDP NGOs were in existence prior to the existence of the Internet, most have found the introduction of new media useful for sharing best practices with other organizations and for identifying opportunities for collaboration (Lyndsay M. C. Hayhurst, Brian Wilson & Wendy Frisby 2010). Moreover, the Internet allows SDP initiatives such as International Inspiration to effectively manage their own reputations and representations as they seek to connect with potential (transnational) donors and sponsors and inform and shape the public’s perception of their work. In their use of new media technologies, SDP projects have substantial “control over both how they are represented, as well as in deciding what information gets presented” (Jimmy Sanderson & Jeffrey W. Kassing 2011, p. 117, italics in original). It is this last point that deserves to be repeated. The ever-growing SDP movement—which includes the work done by International Inspiration—requires that scholars continually expand their disciplinary, methodological, and theoretical parameters to examine not just the games on the ground, but also media contexts which help to shape the perceptions and understandings of what occurs in the name of development. The commentary illustrates the necessity of this flexibility as it attempts to highlight how the International Inspiration programme attempts to engage—and simultaneously construct—girls and notions of appropriate girlhood through the use of sport and in the spirit of international cooperation and Olympicism.

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