Constructing and Contesting Female Empowerment: A Discourse Analysis of She’s the First

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**Abstract**

 *International organizations often present female education programs as optimal solutions to the challenges facing developing states and as key methods of female empowerment. Existing literature from developmental, feminist, and educational scholars focuses on the justifications for empowering methods of international aid while poststructuralist and critical theories question the meaning of empowerment. My research extends the current scholarship by examining how college women who work with She’s the First, a non-profit that raises awareness and scholarship funds for first generation girls, make sense of empowerment. Specifically, I research the question: how does She’s the First construct female empowerment and to what extent is that understanding shared with the group’s chapter members? I compare the empowerment discourse of the organization’s promotional videos with interviews with college chapter participants. I argue that She’s the First’s construction of empowerment, through its emphasis on both internal and external dimensions, shares many characteristics with those of its members. However, She’s the First’s members’ emphasis on political empowerment through action shows a notable difference in focus. These different emphases in empowerment discourse challenge both organizations and participants in female education programs to look critically at westernized definitions of empowerment and success and to pursue programs with more inclusive cultural understanding.*

***Keywords****: female empowerment, international development, feminism, education*

**Introduction**

 As I stand in the middle of Times Square, a massive digital billboard catches my eye, promoting She’s the First, a nonprofit organization focused on international female education.

The faces of four girls flash across the screen, along with the labels “future lawyer, future engineer, future Olympian, and future president.” As stated on She’s the First’s website, its mission is to “provide scholarships to girls in low-income countries, fostering first-generation graduates and cultivating the next generation of global leaders.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The billboard speaks to my work with the organization. I am a proud member of one of its campus chapters that organizes fundraisers and creates awareness about the issue of educational equality for women. She’s the First is in fact the reason I am in New York; their annual summit draws hundreds of women from chapters across the country. We assemble to discuss barriers to gender equality and how we engage with our campus communities about this issue.

This year we get to meet two of the organization’s “scholars” – or scholarship recipients – from Peru and Guatemala, who discuss the impact of education on their lives. Despite this opportunity, and despite my benevolent intentions, which I am sure the other women here share, I feel an odd disconnect as I stare up at the bright lights of Broadway and the faces of girls from across the world.  I wonder about their personal stories, surely impacted by She’s the First, but to what degree I will probably never know.

 Following my week at the She’s the First summit, I revisit the websites of similar organizations, like the Malala Fund and Let Girls Learn.  I notice a pattern in their presentation of female empowerment programs and the transformative impact of education.  While each organization has slightly different regional focuses or goals, all create digital promotions accessible to people like myself. These include blog posts, photos, and videos, all embodying a consistent narrative: it is a normative good that girls empowered by education become heroines of hope despite their problematic circumstances, including gender discrimination, poverty, and other obstacles rooted in cultural traditions and social conflict.  However, few details emerge as to exactly how effective and culturally considerate the education systems are that these young women participate in, beyond the rhetoric of “partnering with local institutions.” While I continue to advocate for female education, I begin to wonder what assumptions lie underneath the way young women are consistently portrayed in promotional media; and why, in fact, they are so consistently portrayed.

 This research aims to understand how female education organizations construct empowerment in a way that appeals to the Western audience that funds them.  I aim to make sense of the implications of these constructions for the activists who construct local programs based on insights rooted in organization media.  More specifically I research the question of “how does She’s the First formally construct female empowerment, as expressed in its video promotions, and to what extent is that understanding shared with the group’s chapter members?” I believe it is important to answer this question because of the larger implications related to She’s the First’s marketing emphasis on personal transformation through empowerment, and its omission of an examination of surrounding political and social structures in low-income countries. Differences between She’s the First’s construction of female empowerment and the views of its members may suggest that the organization reexamine its public construction of empowerment in a broader way, less centered in the cultural assumptions typical of Western democracies.  Further, a detailed examination of female empowerment as seen from these two perspectives may create a useful synthesis for continued discussion among female empowerment theorists.

 My selection of discourse analysis within the interpretivist world allows me to analyze the ambiguous narrative of empowerment as an unquestionable good, and what characteristics define that empowerment. I research the context of She’s the First, an international female educational empowerment nonprofit, situated within the larger Western ‘girl movement.’ My research analyses two discourses within She’s the First, including the discourse of the organization itself through promotional videos posted online, and the discourse of its chapter members through interviews concerning their views on empowerment and the organization’s mission and programs. I question the ambiguity of the term empowerment in this type of international development discourse, and its depiction as an unquestionable and sufficiently inclusive good.  In reexamining a discourse at the intersection of development, feminist, and educational discourse, I hope to open a new conversation about the construction of female empowerment as it has emerged over the past decade. While academics have extensively explored female empowerment through ethnographies of programs, and by hypothesizing what factors affect empowerment, little scholarship addresses how empowerment is articulated in program media.  In examining both textual and social meaning making of empowerment, I gain more insight into the implications of the female empowerment movement, including its agendas and strategies.

 In the following paper, I include a review of how scholars from developmental, feminist, and educational schools of thought address empowerment. I find a particularly useful framework in Nelly Stromquist’s framework of female empowerment. I go on to outline my interpretivist methodology, a discourse analysis of the empowerment discourses of She’s the First’s organization and of She’s the First’s chapter members. I examine describe and discuss my findings and argue that the She’s the First organization and members share most of the values of empowerment, though they emphasize different aspects, particularly with respect to differing emphasis on political action. I find that these differences in emphasis have significant implications that the organization policymakers and members might discuss. Following my conclusions, I provide reflection on my choices, address the larger implications of my project, and identify points of departure for future research.

**Literature Review**

*Empowerment in International Development*

Scholars of international development view empowerment as both a means and an end of international development achieved at the individual and collective level. One of the fundamental concepts of development scholarship, dependency theory, states that the need for empowerment exists because the gap between rich and the poor states worsens due to globalization and modernization.[[2]](#footnote-2) Since traditionally “core” states exploit “periphery” states for resources, developing states remain dependent on developed states until structural transformations, whether bottom-up or top-down, change the status quo of power.[[3]](#footnote-3) Out of this tradition, states and international organizations develop initiatives of empowerment that aim to create conditions through which people can access resources to “empower themselves”.[[4]](#footnote-4) Development in itself has been criticized by poststructuralists and critical theorists for its continuation of colonialism, since many development models uncritically assume that developing states should follow the model of westernized “developed” states.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Much of developmental scholarship views empowerment as individualistic. Bottom-up, “grassroots” empowerment, as emphasized by Foucault, focuses on bettering society starting with the individual.[[6]](#footnote-6) While individual empowerment is sometimes identified with a neoliberal agenda (private sector decentralized capitalism), Foucault and his adherents criticize neoliberalism as “depoliticized” and thus depriving individuals of a sense of collective political action.[[7]](#footnote-7) But Foucault’s politically conscious, grassroots empowerment is itself open to criticism in that it encourages development organizations to put the responsibility of empowerment on the ‘underdeveloped’ individuals themselves, and, in the process, ignore oppressive structural realities that might be impossible to overcome individually.[[8]](#footnote-8) For example, a woman from a rural village may be individually empowered with education, but unable to partake in the workforce (a sign of development) if no jobs are available. Such discrepancies question the notion that empowerment and development, as variously conceived by outside agents, are incontestable goods. In terms of methodology, scholars favoring individual empowerment use ethnography to understand individual meaning making or conduct program analysis on educational programs to understand how aid recipients become individually empowered.[[9]](#footnote-9)

By contrast, other development scholars view empowerment as collective, through primarily economic criteria. Human capital theory emphasizes the importance of education as an investment in human productive capacity, intended to support a more economically productive workforce.[[10]](#footnote-10) Rather than emphasize individual improvement, proponents of human capital theory hold that empowerment emerges through economic participation as a population.[[11]](#footnote-11) These academics operationalize empowerment in terms of economic outcome; for example, workforce participation, GDP, or productive output.[[12]](#footnote-12) While it is reasonable to look to these quantitative indicators to examine what factors might affect empowerment, it is equally reasonable to examine qualitative factors, like those emphasized by feminist scholars.

*Empowerment in Feminism*

 Feminist scholars view empowerment as a multidimensional concept involving psychological agency and freedom through capabilities. Feminist scholar Nelly Stromquist, defines women’s empowerment as “a set of knowledge, skills, and conditions that women must possess to understand their world and act on it”.[[13]](#footnote-13) Social emancipation might only come about through *collective* agency and action.[[14]](#footnote-14) Stromquist’s empowerment includes four dimensions: the economic, political, knowledge, and psychological.[[15]](#footnote-15) While development theorists consider the first three dimensions, feminists offer a new perspective with the inclusion of a psychological dimension.[[16]](#footnote-16) Psychological empowerment includes the acquisition of self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-assertiveness within individuals so they might partake in collective and transformative actions.[[17]](#footnote-17) This dimension remains separate from knowledge empowerment, even though both dimensions concern internal awareness, because the psychological dimension stresses awareness of self, rather than awareness of external factors. Self-regard, cannot be taught, but must be acquired through lived experience. One may think of psychological empowerment as the dimension of *self-empowerment*.[[18]](#footnote-18) With regard to method, most feminist thinkers use ethnography to examine how women make sense of their own empowerment or marginalization.[[19]](#footnote-19) Feminist scholars’ emphasis of the psychological internalization of empowerment, rather than external manifestations, differs significantly from development scholars.

Some feminist scholars do extend psychological empowerment to emphasize choice, which includes access to resources, agency, and achievement.[[20]](#footnote-20) However, access to resources such as schooling (as measured in enrollment rates) does not it itself guarantee empowerment. Instead resources are a “precondition” necessary for the “process” of empowerment, by which women can understand their circumstances and act to benefit themselves.[[21]](#footnote-21) For example, through schooling a woman might gain the knowledge and insight she needs to choose a career outside of domestic life. Feminist scholars research levels of agency within cultures through ethnographic surveys and interviews, and look to see how that choice brings about achievement in improved circumstances.[[22]](#footnote-22) Despite their differing focuses, feminist and developmental scholars intersect in their use of *capabilities theory* to discuss empowerment.

Amartya Sen addresses empowerment as freedom by combining feminist theory and development theory in a “capabilities approach,” which focuses on “combinations of functionings that are feasible for [women] to achieve”.[[23]](#footnote-23) Instead of looking primarily at “quality of life,” which is difficult to measure comparatively among different social contexts, this approach articulates empowerment through what people have the freedom or capability to do.[[24]](#footnote-24) The capabilities approach examines personal agency in individual development.[[25]](#footnote-25) It considers the shortcomings of measuring empowerment, for example, through literacy rates. In one case study of Nepal, English language programs did not improve employment opportunities within a village.[[26]](#footnote-26) However, the women in the study still gained the capability to converse in English. Sen emphasizes the intrinsic good that exists within schooling because it facilitates the acquisition of knowledge and self-awareness, perhaps even agency.[[27]](#footnote-27) However, skeptics criticize the “capabilities perspective” because it vaguely defines the ‘intrinsic good’ and the non-economic role of education.[[28]](#footnote-28) While feminist scholars emphasize psychology, agency, and freedom in their attempt to define empowerment, other scholars look to education as empowerment’s critical dimension.

*Empowerment in Education*

 Educational scholars view empowerment as a process negotiated through institutions where social meanings and realities are constructed and contested. In some instances, schooling might provide the supportive network needed for an individual to develop a sense of agency. However, it can also be an institution that replicates the current power structure. Much of the foundation of educational empowerment theory lies in Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* where he examines how the dominant pedagogy of institutions is both reproduced and resisted among participants of schooling.[[29]](#footnote-29) Education is a site where people take up dominant discourses but can also take transformative action based on contesting discourses that might lead to their own empowerment.[[30]](#footnote-30) Although much of his work addresses racial marginalization, Freire’s assertion that dialogue is necessary between the dominant and oppressed powers applies to gender empowerment.[[31]](#footnote-31) A marginalized population of women must voice their concerns and contribute to their own empowerment in order to bring about the most effective change. Necessary tenets of change include cooperation, unity for liberation, organization, and cultural synthesis of the disempowered population.[[32]](#footnote-32) This dialogical perspective in educational empowerment contrasts with the typical hierarchical or ‘top-down’ structure and favors a poststructuralist Foucauldian view.[[33]](#footnote-33) Its bottom-up “grassroots” approach calls for a system of “inclusion” brought about using rights-based logic.[[34]](#footnote-34) Other scholarship asserts that resistance to top-down empowerment is “a complex form of human communication” through which people can express their view of a social reality – one which empowers them.[[35]](#footnote-35) Scholars of education tend to explain empowerment through ethnographic program analysis, to understand how systems negotiate power between the agenda setters, teachers, and students.[[36]](#footnote-36)

 The examination of empowerment through the academic schools of thought of development, feminism, and education help me to identify a comprehensive definition of empowerment, through Stromquist’s dimensions, which I use to explain my data. I find that her dimensions (economic, political, knowledge, and psychological) not only touch on the external manifestation of empowerment, but also those internally rooted.[[37]](#footnote-37) Further these dimensions provide a comprehensive framework that integrates the approaches of all three groups of academics.

 While I was initially interested in understanding how women in educational programs made sense of their experiences, I decided to examine a less conventional perspective; women in She’s the First, an organization at American University and other campuses. Since international organizations promote, but do not necessarily explain, empowerment as a means of development and a way to integrate feminist social practices, these schools of thought help bring some clarity to the ambiguous concept of “female educational empowerment.” Specifically, in coding for discourse analysis, I use terminology embraced by these academics in their definitions. Though there is much scholarship about how women in educational programs make meaning of empowerment, there is little written about how college women understand and participate in international empowerment, and to what extent their understanding might suggest changes in approaches to development.

**Methodology**

 My research project uses interpretative discourse analysis to investigate how She’s the First constructs female empowerment and considers the comparative understanding of female empowerment by the group’s chapter members. My purpose is twofold: first, I explain how She’s the First constructs empowerment, and second I consider how chapter members accept or question this discourse as they make their own meaning of empowerment. To demonstrate some of the multidimensional definitions of empowerment, I examine two empowerment discourses previously overlooked by scholarship. Specifically, I first understand the situated meaning of empowerment constructed by the elite organization, She’s the First, and subsequently that of the college women who participate in chapters of She’s the First.[[38]](#footnote-38) In the following section I situate the empowerment discourses in historical context, outline my two-part method of data collection and analysis, and discuss my own cultural competence and reflexivity to the research, and justify my choice of interpretivist discourse analysis.

 The female empowerment discourse of She’s the First manifests itself as a form of modern international development. The examples of this discourse that I examine are part of the ‘girl movement’ supported by international organizations like the United Nations. This type of development emphasizes participatory models through human capital development and development as modernity.[[39]](#footnote-39) She’s the First itself was established in 2009 and is based in New York City.[[40]](#footnote-40)

*Methods*

 I employ a two-part discourse analysis to examine and analyze the empowerment discourses of She’s the First (organization) and the members of She’s the First’s college chapters. In part one, I chose four videos found on the She’s the First’s YouTube channel, all of which include interviews of recipient “scholars” from countries including India, Nepal, and Gambia.[[41]](#footnote-41) The girls interviewed are all women of color, ranging in age from middle school to high school, who discuss the conditions of their communities, the transformative impact of their education, and their hopes for the future. There are also visual presentations of their schools and homes and supplemental interviews of the girls’ educational mentors. The videos were published online on dates ranging from July 2016 through August 2016. I chose these four texts because their similarity to each other in format and content express a consistent intention, and thus validly represents the organization’s discursive purpose. She’s the First conducts the interviews, then edits and transmits the resulting videos for viewers to understand the impact of their work and be inspired to contribute money to facilitate that work. Other videos on the website feature speeches of the founders or panel discussions centered in the United States for awareness purposes.

 Using preliminary etic (observer perspective) codes, brought from a review of the literature, I analyze the videos following Nelly Stromquist’s four dimensions of empowerment.[[42]](#footnote-42) I then allow emic (subject perspective) codes to emerge from among themes in the videos that are not represented in the literature. Using a combination of these codes I identify and analyze the empowerment discourse of the members of She’s the First collegiate chapters.

 To analyze the empowerment discourse of She’s the First members, I interview twelve members of chapters from six universities. I conduct the interviews of women at American University in person and those from other colleges over online video. I solicit interviews through personal contacts, public Facebook posts, and emailing campus chapters. All the women interviewed hold leadership positions in their chapters. Ten of the women are white and two are Indian. After collecting demographic information, I proceed with open-ended questions regarding the respondents’ definition of, and experience engaging with, the mission of She’s the First.[[43]](#footnote-43) I transcribe the interviews from video/audio recordings and use the codes that emerge from literature and She’s the First’s YouTube videos to analyze the texts. The interview and video discourses create intertextual meanings of empowerment apart from this integrative coding scheme.[[44]](#footnote-44) Together, the discourses create overlapping yet contesting definitions of empowerment.

 Before unpacking the empowerment discourses, I consider my own cultural competence for this research. [[45]](#footnote-45) I draw from my knowledge female empowerment and the “girl movement” through my involvement with She’s the First. To understand the discourse, I incorporate, but do not rely heavily rely on, my understanding of the Western college culture of the United States. I understand the videos posted by She’s the First because they are promoted in English or with subtitles. As a student of communication, I understand some techniques that organizations use to persuade audiences toward views and thus can unpack some of the ways in which She’s the First sells empowerment to its viewers. While my own cultural competence helps me to pursue this research, I openly acknowledge my own reflexivity.

 In the execution and analysis of this project, I acknowledge my own characteristics as a privileged, college educated woman from the United States. I attended a private, all-female high school where elite ideas of female empowerment were often discussed. I currently hold a leadership position in American University’s chapter of She’s the First, and thus have a personal relationship with the texts. Though I have not directly shared the video texts that I analyze, I have taken part in sharing She’s the First’s social media posts like Facebook posts and tweets. In addition to online interaction with She’s the First, I attend weekly meetings and take part in creating the reality of female empowerment in this context. My interview sample includes women from my chapter of She’s the First, with whom I am personally familiar. I also interview members of chapters with whom I have no personal relationship. Taking my personal characteristics into consideration, it is still feasible for me to analyze the discourses critically, considering my studies in international relations and development.[[46]](#footnote-46)

 My research aims to unpack two discourses of empowerment through discourse analysis of She’s the First videos and interviews. This analysis is pertinent because the empowerment discourse of the She’s the First (organization) ultimately affects populations of “low income countries” participating in education programs. Countries concerned are concentrated in the global south in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.[[47]](#footnote-47) Since I limit my project to the Western discourses of the organization and members, I choose to leave out how girls in these programs make sense of their empowerment. It is not clear the extent to which the women assisted support or contest the agenda created by She’s the First beyond the limited video interviews. While I acknowledge this interesting point of departure, I focus on how elites conceptualize empowerment.

**Data Analysis**

*She’s the First (Organization): Video Discourse Analysis*

 In order to understand conceptualizations of empowerment I analyze two sets of texts, the first consisting of videos created and published by the She’s the First organization, highlighting their scholarship recipients’ personal stories, and the second consisting of interviews with members of She’s the First chapters on how they engage with the organization’s mission. I begin my analysis by transcribing the videos and employing Nelly Stromquist’s four dimensions of women’s empowerment - economic, knowledge, psychological, and political - as a code.[[48]](#footnote-48) I acknowledge that the She’s the First organization does not consciously adopt her framework, but rather assert that her dimensions usefully and comprehensively explain the meanings that the videos present. I select her theoretical model because it addresses the complexities of the intersection between feminist, development, and educational realities, as well as emphasizing the need for spaces where life skills and challenges to hegemony can be taught and discussed. Though the videos all emphasize dimensions of economic, knowledge, and psychological empowerment, I find that they remain mostly silent about political empowerment, except within the micro family structure, which is not to say they are free of political implications. I further find that She’s the First extends psychological empowerment toward the achievement of agency and capability, as emphasized by Amartya Sen.[[49]](#footnote-49) From these codes, I argue that She’s the First’s construction of empowerment is defined in terms of the acquisition of economic independence, knowledge of barriers to equality, and self-confidence and agency. The table in the appendix aims to synthesize the main points expressed in She’s the First’s videos and place those points within a meaningful structure.

 She’s the First portrays *economic empowerment* consistent with how Stromquist defines it: as the external acquisition of financial independence and material goods through obtaining stable careers, and through the expectation that students transform their community in material ways.[[50]](#footnote-50) The videos I view reinforce this definition in several ways. Of the five scholars interviewed in four videos, all of them mention that their education empowers them to acquire careers.[[51]](#footnote-51) In addition to their emphasis on professional benefit, She’s the First’s videos also stress economic empowerment through their depiction of economic disempowerment – a consequence of life without education.[[52]](#footnote-52) In the absence of education, the economic futures described in these videos range from limited to bleak. No life possibility without education is portrayed in a positive way. The She’s the First videos conversely highlight the positive nature of the acquisition of material resources.[[53]](#footnote-53) All of the student interviews accentuate economic empowerment most clearly by portraying the expectation that educated girls will transform the material conditions of their communities in the future.[[54]](#footnote-54) This goal of transformation from conditions of poverty to a more desirable standard of living, shows how She’s the First reinforces the importance of economic empowerment as an agent of external, societal change, and not merely as an internal desire to “better oneself.” She’s the First’s videos construct female empowerment not only in terms of concrete external factors, such as material improvement, but also in terms of internal dimensions, as expressed by the interviewees in language consistent with Stromquist’s dimensions of knowledge and psychological empowerment.

 She’s the First’s videos highlight *knowledge empowerment* by stressing the girls’ awareness of their conditions of poverty and the obstacles to equality through oppressive patriarchal structures. It is this kind of awareness that motivates the girls to seek economic improvement, as discussed above, through professional training, and come to recognize their schools as places where poverty and inequality can be acknowledged and challenged. Stromquist describes knowledge empowerment as not solely the acquisition of facts, but defines it as “one’s awareness of one’s reality” or “obstacles” to equality and “identifying the oppressive groups that prevent that empowerment.”[[55]](#footnote-55) In other words, knowledge empowerment involves recognizing and internalizing the realities of disempowerment. The scholars

 interviewed by She’s the First stress their knowledge of these realities most accurately by portraying awareness of how difficult and limited are the lives of their uneducated mothers. Three of the four videos include such testimonies.[[56]](#footnote-56) All of the girls identify education as the key to avoiding the same fate of poverty and dependency.[[57]](#footnote-57) She’s the First videos also stress knowledge empowerment as a recognition of social injustice. This aspect of knowledge empowerment is clearly depicted through two girls’ awareness that gender-based injustice presented obstacles to their ability to obtain education.[[58]](#footnote-58) The girls also express awareness that their school environment runs counter to patriarchal norms, and that this is among the reasons that education is valuable.[[59]](#footnote-59) Knowledge empowerment is presented in the She’s the First videos as an internal dimension of empowerment no less important than concrete, externally oriented concerns, like job preparedness. It is the necessary dimension of awareness that must exist in students even before they come to school. Knowledge empowerment is a requirement to spur their educational ambitions. These girls all recognize education as the means out of their current poverty and exhibit resolve in their efforts to pursue it. All girls express a desire to share their education with others and a determination to continue with higher education “no matter what.”[[60]](#footnote-60) They necessarily (according to Stromquist) held knowledge of poverty and injustice deeply within themselves before schooling, and choose to fight for their education, rather than accept current oppressive structures. It is likely that their willingness to fight in this way is tied to an awareness of self-worth that is held just as deeply. This psychological awareness is the next of Stromquist’s dimension of empowerment prevalent in She’s the First’s promotional videos.

 Stromquists’s dimension of *psychological empowerment* is embodied in how She’s the First connects female empowerment to the internalization of self-esteem, confidence, and self-worth.[[61]](#footnote-61) When the girls in the videos express how they feel about themselves as a consequence of education, they speak, for example, of feeling more respected within their families. Two scholars particularly emphasize this feeling in relation to their male family members.[[62]](#footnote-62) The same two girls show Sen’s notion of agency in their independent views on marriage, by asserting their *capability* to prioritize professional endeavors and then later make their own decisions on marriage.[[63]](#footnote-63) While the scholars featured in the other two videos remain silent on self-confidence in marriage, they do express confidence in their capability to spread female education to others.[[64]](#footnote-64) The inclusion of such goals and activities in their portrayal of successful scholars, shows that She’s the First values psychological empowerment as an important benefit of female education. Stromquist would point out that psychological empowerment may likely be enhanced by education, but may also exist as a sense of worth before an educational experience. It may, in fact, lead to that experience. In any case, it must be present for female empowerment to come to fruition through meaningful action – the true measure of empowerment, according to Stromquist.

 She’s the First’s videos remain noticeably free of rhetoric about *political empowerment* or “the ability… to represent oneself at various venues of decision making” at the state (macro) level.[[65]](#footnote-65) The student testimonies contain no discussion of political standing within government or becoming involved in voting processes. However, the organization touches on some dimensions of political representation at the family (micro) level. Two of the scholars point out that they have more power in their marriage choices, and one feels more empowered to voice her opinion regarding family decisions.[[66]](#footnote-66) While the mention of choice of husband only occurs in two of the videos, I classify these under psychological empowerment.[[67]](#footnote-67) Since the girls have not yet chosen a husband, this empowerment remains internal, as psychological confidence. Only when they *exercise* this type of representation will their empowerment become externally political.

 In summary, all four dimensions of empowerment identified by Stromquist – economic, knowledge, psychological, and political - are exemplified in She’s the First’s “personal story” promotional videos, though not to an equal degree. Keeping in mind these dimensions as a demonstrably useful framework for discourse, and consistent with the stated mission of She’s the First, I turn toward my own interview data with members of She’s the First chapters, and examine the place of their opinions and comments within the larger discourse.[[68]](#footnote-68)

*She’s the First (Chapter Members): Interview Discourse Analysis*

 Members of She’s the First chapters that I interview share the organization’s emphasis on economic empowerment (as shown in aid recipient media interviews analyzed above), but to a lesser degree. Further, members interviewed emphasize political empowerment to a far greater degree than appears in She’s the First media promotion. Psychological empowerment also figures prominently in She’s the First member responses. Knowledge empowerment is de-emphasized, because members have activated their internal awareness into the political sphere. My interviews with members generate replies concerning different aspects of empowerment, including their views on 1) the consequences of empowerment to scholarship recipients and 2) their own experiences of empowerment. The members talk predominantly about their own experiences, as opposed to the empowerment consequences of education on the students that they sponsor. This is not surprising, since the interview questions that I posed focused on the members personal understanding of empowerment, rather than its anticipated effect on scholarship students. Still, the emphasis on self is worth noting, and may have additional causes.

 She’s the First chapter members include *economic empowerment* as an important part of their empowerment discourse, but emphasize it less so than the organization itself. They discuss the tangible benefits of girls’ education for the program scholars, and the fundraising efforts they engage in on their campuses. Eight of the twelve members interviewed mention the economic consequences that female education has on the scholars they sponsor, however they do so in passing, as if it were on a list of talking points.[[69]](#footnote-69) Like the organization’s videos, they mention, again in passing, that educated girls invest in their communities, participate more in the economy, and can help break the cycle of poverty. [[70]](#footnote-70) All members mention that their chapter activities include fundraising, though they minimize the disempowering consequences inherent in outright international aid.[[71]](#footnote-71) When possible, members deemphasize the fact that they give money and frame it as a possibility for change.[[72]](#footnote-72) Despite their shared references to the economic dimension of empowerment, the members of She’s the First stress political empowerment, as the key dimension of transformative change.

 Interviewed members of She’s the First emphasize *political empowerment* as the most important dimension of empowerment, stressing the development of their own leadership skills, and the centrality to their work of raising awareness about educational inequality. The members describe in detail their efforts to engage their college communities in the issue of female inequality. Specifically, they describe their own sense of empowerment through their leadership positions in She’s the First, and their political activism, as expressed in events they organize, such as discussion panels.[[73]](#footnote-73) Whether She’s the First members who are not in positions of leadership might stress a different dimension of empowerment is a valid question beyond the scope of this research. More than half of the members describe their chapter as a “community” and emphasize cultivating such a group with friendship and female solidarity.[[74]](#footnote-74) This comports with Stromquist’s assertion that effective political empowerment must be “collective”.[[75]](#footnote-75) One in four chapter members interviewed mention that education is a means through which scholars in low income countries can become “the next generation of global leaders” within their own communities.[[76]](#footnote-76) This emphasis on political empowerment among members starkly contrasts with the organization’s relatively negligible emphasis. Specifically, the scholars presented in the videos rarely speak of taking active, public political roles, as part of their future aspirations.

 I note a lack of *knowledge empowerment* discussion in the empowerment discourse of She’s the First members that I interview. This is not to say that they lack awareness of external empowerment issues related to female education. In fact, the awareness events that these members execute on campus dealing with structural inequalities, like discussion panels and documentary screenings, show that they understand the importance of knowledge empowerment. However, following Stromquist’s distinction between awareness and action, the fact that members interviewed translate this knowledge into action, classifies their speech (and related behavior) as political empowerment.[[77]](#footnote-77) It is impossible to precisely know what awareness of external inequalities precede the political action of these women. However, the culture of the United States is saturated with awareness of gender inequality issues, and the rightness of efforts to fix them is taken for granted by many women.[[78]](#footnote-78) These circumstances contrast with the comments of young female scholars in the She’s the First videos, who do not take such realities for granted, and so speak passionately about their awakening awareness of inequality.

 With regard to *psychological empowerment*, the interviewees hold very similar views of those expressed by She’s the First promotional videos, with most of their pertinent comments relating to empowerment opportunities occurring in their own lives. Nine out of twelve of the women express their own internal transformation through education, including increased decision making ability, increased self-confidence, and increased self-determination.[[79]](#footnote-79) One- third of members express the sentiment that education empowers them, as well as other women, to actualize their dreams, whatever they may be, after graduation.[[80]](#footnote-80) These expressions of psychological empowerment conform to Stromquist’s psychological dimension in much the same way as the statements of scholars in the organization’s promotional videos; similar terminology is used to describe how empowerment feels. However, members tend to speak abstractly about “bright futures” as a consequence of self-awareness, rather than relating psychological empowerment to specific choices, like marriage or respect within the family, as do the scholars in the videos tend to do. Clearly, different cultures present different challenges to women seeking empowerment.

 In summary, unlike the She’s the First promotional videos, chapter members stress political empowerment, specifically by addressing it with more frequent, lengthier and more detailed comments. They certainly touch on the dimensions of economic and psychological empowerment, but more abstractly and in less detail. Knowledge empowerment does not predominate because internal awareness has been converted to activism (political empowerment), resisting the realities of inequality. The differences in emphasis between chapter members and formal organization with respect to empowerment reveal tensions in discourse, with possible consequences regarding power structures and organizational strategies. This tension in discourse occurs at the intersection of international development, feminism, and education knowledge, and deserves exploration as to its meaning.

*Discussion*

 While the empowerment discourses revealed in She’s the First’s organization videos overlap with the discourses revealed in interviews with its members, the emphasis differs significantly. The organization presents female empowerment in entirely positive and mostly personal terms (through scholar’s “stories”), with little attention to transformative political possibilities. On the other hand, chapter members interviewed embrace political, transformative action as the key to societal change, and offer some criticisms of organizational initiatives. The uniformity of the videos, in their presentation of female poverty being overcome by the education of resilient, optimistic young girls, is presumably intentional since She’s the First edits and transmits its messages. Since the videos are fundraising tools aimed at an affluent Western audience, the stories are crafted to persuade viewers of something. In this case, that recipient scholars in low-income nations substantially embrace the meanings of empowerment that fall within the current hegemonic paradigm of international development, and more generally, Western notions of progress. This is not to say that the girls in the videos have been misrepresented, but they have been deliberately chosen and similarly presented. In contrast, the emphasis of She’s the First members on collective, transformative, political action, challenges current power structures and looks beyond personal improvement to effect change.[[81]](#footnote-81)

 To further understand this difference in emphasis it is useful to note that She’s the First members live in a society where political freedom is taken for granted. In providing aid the organization must work with agencies in countries where political freedom and transformative assertions are more problematic, and where to express political views may involve repercussions. This reality may explain why She’s the First videos remain relatively silent on political matters. It is also possible that the young women in the videos have not developed significant political consciousness. In any case, Stromquist’s theory suggests that without political empowerment, with its emphasis on collective action, true empowerment is impossible. She’s the First members seem to understand this, in contrast to the organizations’ public messaging. This tension suggests a hierarchical disconnect, and a need for dialogue.

 Moving to specific dimensions of empowerment, Stromquist maintains that *knowledge empowerment* provides the starting point for true, active empowerment, by allowing populations to recognize the inequalities and oppressions that surround them.[[82]](#footnote-82) Indeed, She’s the First recipient scholars relate their awareness of gender inequalities in personal terms, by describing gender-based conflicts within their families.[[83]](#footnote-83) She’s the First members also acknowledge gender inequality and the value of education to remedy it, though not in personal terms. Instead they mention it abstractly on their way to describing the external political actions they are taking.[[84]](#footnote-84) She’s the First scholars consistently express a personal experience of gender discrimination, and a contrasting personal school experience where discrimination does not exist. Meanwhile, She’s the First members simply do not mention being discriminated against.[[85]](#footnote-85) All of the scholars appear to uniformly value education before they pursue it, and experience education as a solution to discrimination. On the other hand, members of She’s the First are virtually silent on their personal stake in gender equality, taking it up rather as a cause on behalf of others. This disparity in personal experience raises empathy issues: Is fund-raising by members being done for an abstract cause and personal satisfaction, and does this hamper sensitivity to how aid is given? Open discussions of such issues within organizations like She’s the First will hopefully reveal unquestioned assumptions, and lessen such tendencies as “the white savior complex.”

 With respect to *psychological empowerment*, both scholars and organization members use similar language. However, while the scholars relate concrete examples of their experiences with psychological empowerment, such as feeling more respected in the family or more capable of choosing their own husband, the members express psychological empowerment using more general terminology, such as “following your dream.”[[86]](#footnote-86) It is notable that students in low income countries use some of the same buzzwords, like “agency,” as those employed by the members, despite their different cultural contexts. This language is most likely another example of how She’s the First videos are created for connecting with western audiences to promote their work, as well as providing aid recipients with a modern way of thinking. Post structuralists examining this type of development might argue that this sameness indicates domination within the work of She’s the First, at a level even deeper than economic, through language as a determinant of ideology.[[87]](#footnote-87) This critique poses an interesting conflict: if true empowerment requires awareness of internal convictions and external realities, where is the language going to come from that describes such convictions and realities? If the language of empowerment is not part of the cultural reality of young women in developing countries, how is empowerment to occur without new and “foreign” ways of thinking? According to the girls interviewed in the videos, education programs teach them as much about “agency” and “self-confidence” (psychological empowerment) as about concrete skills and knowledge that lead to material improvement. Both the program and the scholars appear to value these insights about self as much or more than economic goods, because they bring about transformative positive feelings. Whether or not the scholars are being influenced by language into acceptance of Western hegemony cannot be established by this research. What is clear is that She’s the First, the chapter members I interviewed, and the female scholars in the videos, all value psychological empowerment, however they come to it.

 The *economic empowerment* discourse is present in both the video and interview testimonies, but while the organization emphasizes this as a goal of the program, the members mention it more as just another aspect of their program, and attempt to minimize the dependent structures at play. She’s the First’s videos show that education can bring about economic independence for the individual and make clear the expectation that educated girls return and invest in their communities for improvement.[[88]](#footnote-88) While She’s the First presents “investing in your community” as an unquestionable good, this position faces the criticism that it expresses not only hope for educated girls’ futures, but also places the responsibility on them to alleviate poverty, without placing an equal burden on existing economic structures.[[89]](#footnote-89) In other words, it becomes the job of the girls, by their own efforts, to overcome their oppressed positions in society, and then work to economically improve the communities that oppress them. While the members that I interview mention benefits of economic empowerment similar to those mentioned in the videos, such as career building and breaking cycles of poverty, they rarely expand on the meaning of those benefits in practice. Obviously, the She’s the First members interviewed are not impoverished, so cultural context is important here. In some instances, the members deemphasize the economic dimension of their work – fundraising for scholarships – recognizing aid as potentially disempowering the low-income students in a system of economic dependency.[[90]](#footnote-90) This difference in the way that economic empowerment is stressed highlights how different theories of empowerment, as explained in my literature review, will interpret what constitutes the success or failure of educational aid initiatives. A purely economic (quantitative) evaluation, based on such factors as rising incomes, will devalue internal factors such as a rising self-esteem, and favor an educational system limiting itself to teaching practical skills. According to Stromquist’s holistic model, this approach would prevent true empowerment.

 As previously stated, the clearest difference in empowerment discourse appears in the dimension of *political empowerment*. While She’s the First’s videos appear apolitical, with limited references to increased representation within the family structure, She’s the First’s members express political empowerment as the key to their work in the organization. Stromquist stresses the political dimension because it is here that collective action happens, and without collective action transformation is impossible.[[91]](#footnote-91) Understandably, the members, given that they are chapter leaders, explain their own empowerment in terms of leadership, and its power to leverage change. Further, members project their own political context onto the scholars, hoping that they too will become “global leaders” and expand the support for a political model scholars can do “whatever they want” because of their education.[[92]](#footnote-92) While “whatever they want” is clearly an exaggeration, I point to the fact that the young women in the videos find community in the schools they attend. Even if they do not express overtly political thoughts, these female scholars experience collective solidarity with their classmates, and begin to understand collective power. This can perhaps be thought of as the kind of knowledge empowerment that specifically leads to political empowerment. I suspect that both members and scholars, despite their differing political emphasis, are not that different in their respect for collective strength.

 One difference between members and scholars that emerges when considering their views in the political dimension is the extent each group is willing to express criticism. She’s the First’s video interviewees did not offer any criticism of their educational program, and painted female education as an unquestionably good solution to economic and social problems, much in line with She’s the First’s hegemonic viewpoint.[[93]](#footnote-93) While members didn’t generally acknowledge problems specifically with She’s the First, or its mission, half of the members did acknowledge the issue of the “white savior complex,” in which Western white populations take part in development projects to “save” poorer populations in the global south.[[94]](#footnote-94) In acknowledging this general criticism, one embraced by many poststructuralists, members exclude She’s the First from this criticism, because of their personal connection with students through letter writing, and the fact that girls pursue their education on their own terms.[[95]](#footnote-95) Further, some members go so far as to celebrate their political involvement with She’s the First, and describe it as crucial to fight for global gender equality and female solidarity.[[96]](#footnote-96) Such sweeping proclamations of saving or even fighting for others, however well-intended, elicits another question: by engaging in this political work, do the members of She’s the First marginalize the voices of the students that they sponsor by speaking on their behalf? It is difficult to answer such a question in a world of different cultural contexts, competing theoretical approaches to empowerment, and the complications of policymaking. In light of this complexity, organizations like She’s the First, and their members, must continually consider the cultures where aid is given, and continually question their own definition of empowerment, as well as asking themselves whose agenda is served by their definition.

**Conclusion**

 My research aims to understand the ambiguous concept of female empowerment within the context of She’s the First, an international education organization based in the United States. I analyze how the organization, She’s the First, constructs empowerment and the extent to which the organization’s chapter members share or diverge from the organization’s public expression of that construction. I look to the literature of international development, feminist, and education scholars to understand how others conceptualize empowerment. I borrow from the empowerment framework of feminist scholar, Nelly Stromquist to make sense of my data. I articulate my interpretivist methodology, a discourse analysis of She’s the First videos and interviews. I present the findings if my data and argue that She’s the First’s construction of empowerment, through its emphasis on both internal and external dimensions, shares many characteristics with its member’s construction of empowerment. However, the She’s the First’s members’ emphasis on political empowerment through transformative political action shows a notable difference in focus. These distinctions of empowerment identified between the organization and its members reveal possibilities for critical discussion of Westernized definitions of development.

 It is important to acknowledge the limitations and points of departure of my research. I acknowledge that my project does not extensively include the perspectives of the scholars in question. While I integrate some of the scholars’ perspectives in my data, I use these testimonies to understand how She’s the First constructs empowerment because I view them as promotional material. Future projects might explore girls’ conceptualization of empowerment through ethnography or interview in the countries of She’s the First scholars. Their perspective should be brought to light so that they are not further marginalized with respect to policy decisions that directly affect them. In the present case, I focus on the meaning making of an organization and its privileged members whom I could access in person or online. Future exploration of meaning making of the ambiguous concept of empowerment, specifically examining how women in education programs make sense of their own empowerment, will further complicate the empowerment conversation but also shed more light on complex internal and external dimensions at play.

**Appendix**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Video Title* Student Name(s)
* Country
 | Economic  | Political | Knowledge | Psychological  |
| “Meet STF Scholar Roshni”* Roshni
* Nepal
 | -Because of education, girls the country are becoming scientists, climbing to the moon, climbing Mount Everest-Wants to be a doctor and help poor people-Wants to do something great for her country to move it forward | x | -Attributes mother’s poor conditions to her lack of education-Asserts the uneducated are “voiceless and abused”-Asserts that education prevents abuse  | -Recognizes her father treats her as equal to her brothers after her education-Will only get married after she becomes a doctor and opens a hospital  |
| “Magho (Daughter)”* Maheshwari
* India
 | -Goal of education: professional success of student to transform their communities/families-Material goods are provided at school like food and bedding-Without school work would be cooking and looking after children (domestic labor)-Students will be successful and bring family with them | x | -Describes conditions of poverty and the strife of her mother as a widow without education-Boys and girls eat, walk, and sit together (equality) vs. brother’s male dominance at home-Her mother did not choose her husband | -Recognizes alternative to school: marriage and children-Going to pick her own husband-Feels that she can oppose family decisions if they are wrong -Desires achievement to please mother-Willing to persist despite obstacles to pursue education |
| “Focused”* Fatou
* Gambia
 | -Uses photography as a business to become financially independent (4)-Education inspires women to transform and serve their communities -Learn skills: gardening, beekeeping, photography  | x | -Girls in the school are struggling and show signs of resilience that they can overcome struggles  | -Wants to promote girls’ education and build a school |
| “The Race for Equality”* Jharana and Sirjana
* Nepal
 | -Inequality is a problem because women cannot get the same jobs-Uneducated women break stones, wash dishes, or do “bad work” (sex work) -Teaches her mother to read and write so that she can maintain accounts and sign her name (conduct business) | x | -Recognize that it is hard for women to get jobs because of illiteracy -Parents ignorance of the importance of education is the reason for their hard times-Study so that they will not be discriminated against or dishonored | -Feels bad that mother is uneducated -Wants to spread awareness through organizing the race (internalized that this is an important issue)  |

Messages of Empowerment sorted into External and Internal categories (Videos)

Messages of Empowerment sorted into External and Internal categories (Interviews)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Interview  | Economic | Political | Knowledge | Psychological | Other Findings  |
| 1  | -Organize fundraising events to raise money for scholarships (5)-Investment in families and communities (2) | -Leadership skills for chapter members-Raising our voices on campus | -Awareness events to spread the importance of the cause (3)-Rectifying inequalities  | -Helping girls to help themselves | -STF has “inclusive message” -“inoffensive cause”-Don’t want to seem too “white savior” -Never personally discriminated against  |
| 2  | -The mission is raising money to send girls to school (7) | -STF sends girls to school to be leaders in their own communities  |   | -Education creates environment where women feel they can take charge/decision making (scholars and members) | -No challenges to mission/goals |
| 3  | -STF fundraising provides economic resources (4)-Education provides skills | -Members can make a tangible change in the lives of scholars (2)-STF scholars engage in the community (3) | -Importance of members being aware of issues of inequality and privilege  | -Education helped her become more of a confident leader (3)-STF programs can spark confidence in classes with boys | -Global awareness makes connection more wholesome |
| 4  | -STF provides financial support through scholarships and supplies (tools) -The community receives the benefits-Education is not the ends of development but the means  | -Cultivate the “next generation of global leaders”-Cultivate a chapter community (5) | -Girls’ education is “the most powerful force for change we have” |  | -“Nobody loses when you educate a girl”-Relate to scholars with a peer to peer relationship instead of doing things for others -Does not see problems when engaging with the mission |
| 5  | -Sponsor girls education/fundraising (3)-Girls reinvest back into their communities (2) | -People engage with activism (2)-We are not women saviors-Take part in shared struggle “I’m not free until all women are free”-“I’m obligated as a woman to advocate for… the struggles of other women” | -Educating members about issues that girls face  |  | -Thinks that we could do better with connecting to scholars-Not blindly giving money -Cultivating a campus community -We are not white saviors |
| 6  | -STF fundraises (2)-Educated women bring “energy to the workforce” | -STF creates leaders on college campuses (2)-Supportive community of members (4) | -STF wants to provide awareness and “purposeful engagement” (2) | -Important to take agency over life -Students forge their own futures  | -Importance of emotion behind the funding (2)-We are not white saviors  |
| 7  | -Give financial support (3) to girls to attend school | -Members spread why education is important on campuses-Community is passionate about the same mission -Need to recognize privilege before critiquing  | -STF selects girls passionate about their education -Women deserve equal opportunity to pursue education and dreams (2) | -Distinguished between helping and saving girls-Helping is supporting, not making them seem destitute, vulnerable with no options-Girls should actualize their dreams | -Important to be aware of language (2)-Detachment from scholars-Does not want to sound like Western savior-Feels part of a social organization  |
| 8  | -Fundraise to support/sponsor girls (3) | -Gala (event) was inspiring because it felt like progressive action | -Raise awareness (2) | -Members want to give choice, and the power to have agency and mobility in their lives -Whatever they want to do after (dreams) | -Cultivate chapter community -Avoid the “white feminist savior complex” -Complications like putting pressure on girls do not outweigh the impact  |
| 9  | -Fundraise to support/sponsor girls -Girls’ education will break cycles of poverty -Women help the community (2) | -Education is a long-term sustainable effort, not like material goods  | -Women should be concerned about education as a human right (systematic problem), solidarity -Some want to only give money and not learn about ideas  | -Each girl creates their own “narrative” and education preserves agency | -Aware of westernization, neocolonial, postcolonial critiques-No one thinks it’s a bad organization  |
| 10  | -Fundraise to support/sponsor girls (2)-STF provides education and material goods (supplies, healthcare) | -Help women get basic rights that they need | -Enhance the education of members/college students about education disparities-Share knowledge about global issues |  | -Noble cause because it is voluntary -Create comradery in chapter |
| 11  | -Girls’ education has an economic impact (4)-It will break the cycle of poverty -Women will get careers and support themselves  | -Women become more involved in communities-Women get politically involved  | -Focus on global awareness and educating others on issue | -Power of choice (4)-Confidence in yourself-Having courage to break down barriers  |  |
| 12  | -STF fundraises to send girls to school (2) | -Gives members the change to make a difference (2) | -Awareness is important (2) | -Chance to make decisions (3)-Independence -You can do whatever you want with education (autonomy) (2) |  |

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34. Ibid., 314-315. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Fernandes, J. V. "From the Theories of Social and Cultural Reproduction to the Theory of Resistance." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 9, no. 2 (1988): 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Khurshid, 622.

Takayanagi, 677. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Stromquist, 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. The world of interpretivism better supports projects aimed at meaning making in specific situated contexts.

Abbot, Andrew. *Methods of Discovery: Heuristics for the Social Sciences*. First ed., edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2004, 43.

Boesenecker, Dr. Aaron P. "Interpretivist Analysis". 2016. Accessed Sept 18, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Girleffect. “The girl effect: The clock is ticking”. Youtube video, 3:04. Posted [Sept 2010]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1e8xgF0JtVg [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. "About Us." She's the First. Accessed March 02, 2017. https://shesthefirst.org/about-us/. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. She’s the First. “Focused”. Filmed [2016]. Youtube video, 4:10. Posted [Aug 2016]. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MguoOLSqnz8&list=PLvERHYMoqF0fU1oUgafSINr3xjHovMxn4& ndex=2](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MguoOLSqnz8&list=PLvERHYMoqF0fU1oUgafSINr3xjHovMxn4&index=2)

She’s the First. “The Race for Equality”. Filmed [2016]. Youtube video, 5:05. Posted [Aug 2016]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnI9zB5SOPI&list=LLxMFY-_AyQrQ7weBPNBDheQ&index=2>

She’s the First. “Magho (Daughter).” Filmed [2016]. Youtube video, 11:30. Posted [July 2016]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aCpcWCm6dc.

She’s the First. “Meet STF Scholar Roshni from Nepal.” Filmed [2016]. Youtube video, 4:21. Posted [July 2016].https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JkY7jAjYmDY&t=177s. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Stromquist, 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Some questions include “how would you define the mission of She’s the First?”, “how do you engage with this mission?”, “why do you engage with this organization’s work?” If members use the word “empowerment” I ask them for clarification, though I do not introduce this term without prompt. Overall follow up questions emerge based on members’ answers to the initial questions. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. The views of empowerment included in interviews make sense in relation to the support provided by She’s the First scholars abroad. The testimonies of scholars of She’s the First make in sense in context work of college chapters of the organization (intertextuality).

Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow, *Interpretivist Research Design: Concepts and Processes*, New York: Routledge, 2012: Ch. 6: “Designing for Trustworthiness”, 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Iver B. Neumann, “Discourse Analysis,” in *Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide*, ed. Audie Klotz & Deepa Prakash, Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. To address trustworthiness, I provide citations so that other can follow my trail and understand my logic. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. "Our Focus." [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Stromquist, 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Sen, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Stromquist, 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Two of the videos feature girls that want to be doctors and serve their communities, not strictly speaking an economic motive but also their wishes for external empowerment through service. A Gambian student, Fatou, focuses almost exclusively on the economic empowerment that she achieves through her photography business, made possible through skills learned at school. At least four times she mentions that selling photographs makes her “an independent woman” who does not need to ask for money and can depend on herself.

She’s the First. “Magho (Daughter).”

Shes the First. “Meet STF Scholar Roshni from Nepal.”

She’s the First. “Focused.”

She’s the First. “The Race for Equality.” [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Three of the videos mention that economic alternatives without education are limited to such jobs as breaking stones, domestic labor like cooking and cleaning (which are shown visually), and an ambiguous alternative pursued by “some women who go to foreign lands and involve themselves in bad work” (presumably sex work).

Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. All of the videos feature shots of girls’ communities, typically with dirt roads and primitive huts, that highlight poverty and backwardness. In contrast, the schools the girls attend are shown to be relatively clean, modern, and orderly. The students in all the videos wear uniforms, a material resource that contributes to a sense of order, belonging, equality and solidarity.

Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Two of the videos include testimonies of school founders who expect their girls to “transform” their communities by way of economic contribution. Roshni reports that she “will do something great for [her] country” to move it forward.

Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Stromquist, 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. For example, Maheshwari mentions that her mother had to break stones and “move from place to place trying to get income.” Each girl has gained awareness that poverty, as a consequence of no schooling, is an obvious barrier to empowerment and that jobs in domestic labor offer little or no mobility.

Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. For example, Sirjana asserts that her “parents were ignorant about the importance of education and never went to school. This is the reason for the hard times” of her mother. Two other students mention the hard labor that their mothers had to endure (breaking stones) and the remarks are coupled with footage showing mothers engaged in domestic labor, cooking on the dirt floor of their huts.

Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Before Roshni’s schooling, her father asserted that “girls shouldn’t study because they will eventually go to another house.” These statements demonstrate that the girls are aware of the patriarchal structures that surround them.

Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. For example, the two videos show boys and girls sitting in desks and talking together. Maheshwari even states that “boys and girls - we eat together, we talk together, we sit together. There’s that brother sister relationship that’s really really strong here.”

Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Stromquist, 316. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Roshi mentions that since she has been educated, her father now treats her the same as her brothers. Maheshwari feels confident that she can “go against [her] family’s decisions… and question them when they’re wrong,” because of her education. Both of these scholars mention male siblings and note similar positive change in how they are respected in the patriarchal society.

Shes the First. “Meet STF Scholar Roshni from Nepal.”

She’s the First. “Magho (Daughter).”

She’s the First. “Focused.”

She’s the First. “The Race for Equality.” [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Roshi asserts that her “plan is to open a big hospital and only then get married.”

Ibid.

Sen, 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Fatou dreams of opening a school for girls when she is older, while Jharana and Sirjana organize an “awareness run” for female education equality in their neighborhood in Nepal.

She’s the First. “Focused.”

She’s the First. “The Race for Equality.” [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Stromquist, 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Maheshwari asserts that she is “definitely” going to pick her husband and that she will not allow her mother to choose, unlike previous generations of arranged marriages. This statement shows how an educated girl gains the political ability to represent herself in her choice of husband.

Shes the First. “Meet STF Scholar Roshni from Nepal.”

She’s the First. “Magho (Daughter).” [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. "Our Focus." [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Member 1. Interview by Anna Roebuck. Personal Interview, Washington D.C., March 26, 2017.

Member 2. Interview by Anna Roebuck. Personal Interview, Washington D.C., March 24, 2017.

Member 3. Interview by Anna Roebuck. Personal Interview, Washington D.C., March 27, 2017.

Member 4. Interview by Anna Roebuck. Personal Interview, Washington D.C., March 27, 2017.

Member 5. Interview by Anna Roebuck. Personal Interview, Washington D.C., March 26, 2017.

Member 6. Interview by Anna Roebuck. Personal Interview, Washington D.C., March 24, 2017.

Member 7. Interview by Anna Roebuck. Personal Interview, Washington D.C., March 27, 2017.

Member 8. Interview by Anna Roebuck. Personal Interview, Washington D.C., March 23, 2017.

Member 9. Interview by Anna Roebuck. Personal Interview, Washington D.C., March 30, 2017.

Member 10. Interview by Anna Roebuck. Personal Interview, Washington D.C., March 24, 2017.

Member 11. Interview by Anna Roebuck. Personal Interview, Washington D.C., March 26, 2017.

Member 12. Interview by Anna Roebuck. Personal Interview, Washington D.C., March 24, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. For example, Member 9 and 11 specifically mention that girls’ education will help “break the cycle of poverty.” Members 1, 4, and 5 mention that the girls who complete schooling reinvest into their own communities.

Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. It is important to note that the word charity is never used to describe their work. Member 1 describes the She’s the First scholarships as “not a handout.”

Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Many members depict the organizations’ educational approach as a means of skill and career building rather as handouts of material goods. Two of the members note that the scholarships include other tangible benefits, including school supplies and healthcare.

Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Four members (1,2,4,6) mention the opportunity for leadership development in She’s the First chapter and five of the members (1,3,5,8,12) describe their work as “activism” or creating tangible change.

Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Members (2,4,5,7,8,10,11).

Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Stromquist, 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Members (2,3,4).

For the most part the role of this leadership is kept ambiguous but is related to involvement in the community. Only one member mentions that She’s the First aid might spark scholars to become more involved in “politics” directly.

Member 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Stromquist, 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. In the United States importance and justice of educating women is basically beyond debate. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Members 2 and 11 mention that educated women (including She’s the First scholars and themselves) feel that they can take part in decision making. Members 3 and 11 similarly use confidence to define empowerment. Member 6 explicitly mentions that it is important for women to take “agency” over their lives.

Member 1.

Member 2.

Member 3.

Member 4.

Member 5.

Member 6.

Member 7.

Member 8.

Member 9.

Member 10.

Member 11.

Member 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Members (7,8,9,12).

Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Scholars like Mok address collective empowerment, through primarily through economic criteria like human capitol theory.

Mok, 503. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Stromquist, 313. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. For example, scholars discuss how their family members show them more respect after they acquire education and allow them more of a say in family decisions like marriage.

She’s the First. “Magho (Daughter).”

She’s the First. “Meet STF Scholar Roshni from Nepal.” [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. For example, Member 1 discusses how her work with She’s the First helps to raise awareness and rectify systematic inequalities.

Member 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. In fact, Members (1,3,5,6,12) mention that they did not encounter educational discrimination and that their privilege motivates them in their work for equality with She’s the First.

Member 1.

Member 3.

Member 5.

Member 6.

Member 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Member 7.

Member 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Poststructuralists like Foucault view international power structures like development programs as systems of domination and ideological power. Critics in this line of thinking would likely point to the underlying power within the implementation of Western development language in shaping realities. In this case, She’s the First’s power of language shows a way in which it exercises its influence on the realities of its scholars.

Cho, 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. She’s the First. “Magho (Daughter).”

She’s the First. “Focused.” [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Critics of the girl movement bring up this concern in the literature.

Cho, 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Shen, 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Stromquist, 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Member 5.

Member 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. It is not surprising that She’s the First doesn’t self-criticize to compel viewers to accept their programs. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Members (1,5,6,7,8,9) all bring up the concept of “white” or “western savior complex” when asked about facing challenges when engaging with the mission of She’s the First.

Member 1.

Member 5.

Member 6.

Member 7.

Member 8.

Member 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)