Empowerment by Whom, for Whom?

Power, Erasure, and Iconization in *She’s the First*

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**Abstract**

*With the recent mainstreaming of gendered issues, many international organizations and government institutions are discussing and constructing gender inequity in new ways particularly in regards to the education of women and girls under the rubric of ‘empowerment.’ Global discourse surrounding issues of gender could provide a much-needed foundation for transnational feminism and gender justice in educational spaces, but instead it functions to revitalize racialized, colonial power structures within a neoliberal paradigm. While there is significant scholarship analyzing the gender empowerment discourse embedded in policy, there is virtually no work done in the literature exploring how privileged women in the North understand with these constructions of gender activism and empowerment. This paper intends to begin filling that gap by illustrating how the elite young women in American University’s “She’s the First” campus organization – a group that “provides scholarships to girls in low-income countries” – grapple with gender empowerment discourse. Through critical discourse analysis of textual and ethnographic data, I link the neoliberal underpinnings of gender empowerment discourse to the social realities created by these young women both in text and action. I particularly highlight the unjust power dynamics between the women of “She’s the First” and the women who are being ‘empowered’ through decontextualization, erasure, and iconization within the text. My analysis illustrates how these women of privilege attempt to build global feminist community in a neoliberal world, and end up hierarchizing groups of women in ways that are harmful to all women and ultimately gender justice as a movement. I elucidate how structures of power are re-produced in privileged feminist spaces, while also articulating the need for more research “studying up” in analyses of global gender discourse.*

**Keywords:** Gender empowerment; She’s the First; Feminism; Critical Discourse Analysis;

With the transformation of social movements in the wake of globalization, feminism has taken on new meanings and implications across dimensions of global power. This transformation is illustrated through the mainstreaming of gender-related issues in international politics – international organizations, governmental institutions, and multinational corporations alike are all producing language, discourse, and imagery centered around gender and gender equality.[[1]](#footnote-1) While gender justice certainly deserves to be firmly anchored as a focal point in the landscape of global politics, certain elements of feminist discourse have been manipulated and appropriated into today’s neoliberal development strategies.[[2]](#footnote-2) As a result, today’s feminist discussions are often infused within “development discourses, structures, and practices.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The most prominent of these neoliberal feminist practices is the vehicle of *gender empowerment –* the dominant solution posed to solve gender-based issues spanning the Global South.[[4]](#footnote-4) Birthed from neoliberal Post-Washington Consensus social policy of the 1980s, some scholars argue that gender empowerment was a way hegemonic institutions like the World Bank could diffuse a fresh type of “individual responsibility,” “self-help” ideology in order to bolster neoliberal structures and increase the flow of global capital,[[5]](#footnote-5) and I also work within this framework. In essence, these scholars assert that gender empowerment involves Western actors empowering young non-Western women of color as “idealized” agents of development.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Thus, poor women of color are argued to then bear the brunt of the responsibility in becoming ‘empowered’ and eliminating global poverty.[[7]](#footnote-7) Interestingly enough, this proposed solution to social injustice stemming from the inequitable construction of gender has been widely accepted without much thorough critique precisely because it fits within existing hegemonic structures of power.

Gender empowerment discourse targeting girls of color has a particular momentum in the educational sphere. With the emergence of the heroine Malala, Nicholas Kristof’s *Half the Sky*, as well as the Nike Foundation-funded documentary *Girl Risin*g,[[8]](#footnote-8) the discourse surrounding girls’ education is now bleeding into mediascapes within a variety of contexts. Young feminists across the globe are acquiring new discursive tools and conceptual frameworks that claim to challenge patriarchy and improve gender equity in education. But the idea of gender empowerment itself is a construct created by powerful actors – not women themselves – meaning it must be critically unpacked and analyzed. Through this project, I explore how this discourse manifests in women’s lives. I aim to understand how it becomes embedded in young, privileged feminist text and space, how these women then discuss and construct women within the global South. Most importantly, I uncover how unequal power dynamics between the groups of women are maintained and solidified. I interpret the implications of how privileged young American women like myself attempt to empower women of color and Black women in postcolonial[[9]](#footnote-9) contexts.

This paper explores a ripe example of how hegemonic constructions of gender empowerment and the related conceptualizations of the *Third-World girl* manifest in young American women’s feminist praxis. I conduct a critical analysis of text produced by the feminist college organization *She’s the First*. This group, with campus chapters spanning across the United States, is made up of mostly white,[[10]](#footnote-10) college-age American women fundraising to provide scholarships for young girls in “low-income countries.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The young women conduct cupcake sales and other fundraising activities on college campuses to support their partners overseas with tuition, food, and uniforms.[[12]](#footnote-12) I combine my textual analysis with ethnographic data collected at two American University meetings to illuminate the decontextualization, erasure, and Orientalist iconization occurring within their text. This combination highlights the inequitable dynamics embedded in the discourse that are then perpetuated and made a social reality by the group of young, privileged women. Specifically, I am asking “How do members of *She’s the First* understand and construct *gender empowerment* and the women they are working to *empower*, and, most importantly, what critical social reality is produced through these constructions?” I argue that through the mechanisms I elucidate occurring within the *She’s the First* discourse – stemming from global neoliberal empowerment discourse – inequities between women are perpetuated at the expense of both groups of women, and overall causing harm to international struggles for gender justice.

I now review the core bodies of scholarship and the surrounding discourse, with the first examining women as investments, the second examining women as biological tools, and the third being the postcolonial feminist/womanist critique of the former two. Following the literature, I will detail the specific methodology used to do my critical discourse analysis and then discuss my interpretive analysis of the selected text and my observations. I conclude by tying together my critical interpretations with their implications for transnational feminist praxis and a new, radically-imagined conceptualization of collective feminine power.

**Literature**

*Women as Investments: Empowerment through Neoliberalism*

Mainstream thought regarding educating girls in the Global South is rooted in development economics within the neoliberal structure “based on unfettered global mobility of capital and the relative immobility of racialized labor.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The theoretical framework of development economics argues that educating women and girls is is a key way to increase human capital,[[14]](#footnote-14) boost future productivity, and strengthen capitalist markets.[[15]](#footnote-15) Education is considered to be a tool in cultivating human capital by imparting “skills and knowledge” to individuals and creating the conditions for greater returns of wealth, particularly in postcolonial nations.[[16]](#footnote-16) This school of thought – and the subsequent policies and discourses that have grown from it – is grounded in the idea that individual women should be given educational access to join the global workplace and acquire a better income as a foundation for a better life. Girls’ education has thus gone through a process of “instrumentalization”[[17]](#footnote-17) within the economics realm.

Economist Stephan Klasen’s work illustrates this instrumentalization – he argues that gender injustice in education “undermines economic growth directly by lowering average human capital” and then “indirectly through its impact on investment and population growth,” specifically in the Global South.[[18]](#footnote-18) Other economics-based scholars, such as George Psacharopoulos,[[19]](#footnote-19) T. Paul Schultz,[[20]](#footnote-20) Peter Glick,[[21]](#footnote-21) David Dollar and Roberta Gatti[[22]](#footnote-22) have produced scholarship that understands women of color and Black women of the Global South, and their educations, from an investment framework. This construction of women as investments holds that Southern women should participate in and contribute to global capitalism to be empowered. She is an individual agent to be invested in and activated for economic return.

The documents, policies, and programs of the World Bank, UNESCO, and countless Northern NGOs have reflected and incorporated this neoliberal theory since the early 2000s.[[23]](#footnote-23) Some of these key texts include the Global Gender Gap Reports spanning the past few years,[[24]](#footnote-24) the McKinsey Global Report,[[25]](#footnote-25) the United Nation Girls’ Education Initiative,[[26]](#footnote-26) and the Education for All Global Monitoring Report of 2015 – “Gender and EFA 2000-2015: Achievements and Challenges.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Coupled with this discourse of women as investments is the idea of empowerment. “Women’s empowerment,” as argued by these elite institutions and supporting academic frameworks, is the most important tool for fighting global gender inequality.[[28]](#footnote-28) This construct looks at changing and empowering the individual woman herself rather than overarching structures of power that perpetuate inequity, positioning “girls and women of the global South as ‘entrepreneurial subjects’ who have the ability to ‘empower’ and help themselves as well as their families and communities to achieve greater social and economic security.”[[29]](#footnote-29) This construct implies that if women reach a certain level of this idea of empowerment, they have the ability to end gendered oppression themselves. Thus, societal social injustice pertaining to gender is combatted through this strategy layered with “self-reliance, personal transformation, individualism, and economic efficiency.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

*Women as Biological Tools: Racialized, Gendered Population Control*

Intermingled with neoliberal discourse constructing women to be investments is a construction of women to be racialized biological tools. As I noted earlier, Klasen argues that a particularly beneficial side effect of educating women is the decrease in population growth. He is not alone in this way of thinking – the intervention of both the body and the fertility of the ‘Third World’ woman has been a dominant point of discussion in development discourses since post-World War II.[[31]](#footnote-31) The “explosive fertility” of Black women and women of color is seen and labeled as a “threat.”[[32]](#footnote-32) While women’s control over their fertility and reproduction is essential to gender justice, scholars have found that there are competing agendas at play. Neoliberal development discussions of population control in the context of postcolonial development are shaped by heteronormative, neo-Malthusian, eugenicist ideology,[[33]](#footnote-33) as effectively argued and illuminated by critical scholars such as Laura Briggs,[[34]](#footnote-34) Matthew Connelly,[[35]](#footnote-35) and Alexandra Stern.[[36]](#footnote-36) As they outline through a sociohistorical lens, eugenics provides the discursive foundation for the mass forced sterilizations and other forms of racialized reproductive violence against Black women and women of color across the both the Global North and South. In the South, this violence is and was supported by strict population control policies under the guise of appropriated feminist language[[37]](#footnote-37) such as that of the World Bank.[[38]](#footnote-38) While neoliberal development discourse uses feminist language such as “choice” and “rights,” taken from feminists who genuinely desire greater female autonomy and equity, scholars shows that the resulting policy constricts women’s choices “on many different levels,”[[39]](#footnote-39) and positions women as biological tools for a racist agenda.

The construction of women – specifically, women of color and Black women – as biological tools is interwoven into the discourse of policy, development organizations, and scholarship. In Harvard’s Global Health Review, Beth Kinsella links increasing secondary education enrollment with decreasing fertility rates in Yemen and Niger.[[40]](#footnote-40) On the United Nations Population Fund website, “Gender equality” and “empowerment” [[41]](#footnote-41)is considered a fundamental piece of the populations puzzle, but there is no clear explanation as to why. In the Earth Policy Institute’s Data Highlights of 2011, Brigid Fitzgerald Reading writes about how fertility rates are “highest in the world’s least developed countries” – code for postcolonial countries made up of people of color – and should strive to reach “replacement level fertility.”[[42]](#footnote-42) The scholarship of Frances Vavrus, Ulla Larsen,[[43]](#footnote-43) Caroline H. Bledsoe, John B. Casterline, Jennifer A. Johnson-Kuhn, John G. Haaga[[44]](#footnote-44) and Susan Cochrane[[45]](#footnote-45) all focuses on Black women and women of color, their bodies, their fertility rates, and their educations in a way that flattens them. While childbearing bodies should undeniably have the choice of whether or not to have children, how many children, and when the children will be born, and feminists have been fighting for this throughout history, the manner in which the body and fertility of the *Third-World woman* of color is discussed limits their agency and shapes them into one-dimensional beings. The focus on specifically women of color, paired with the colonial, eugenicist underpinnings of population control, outlines the discursive creation of the Southern woman of color and Black woman as a racialized biological tool. Discussions of fertility in girls’ education discourse are intermingled with a continuation of this colonial fascination with and fear of the *Third-World woman’s* body.[[46]](#footnote-46)

*Women as Women: Postcolonial Feminist / Womanist Critiques*

In contrast to the first body of scholarship, and using the same critical frame of the second, there is scholarship that critiques neoliberal feminist discourse, as well as critiquing neoliberalism and development as larger structures. This group of scholars takes issue with the entire concept of gender empowerment as liberatory. They argue that the construct operates to maintain unequal structures of racial, cultural, and gendered power,[[47]](#footnote-47) describing how “attempts to ‘empower women’” end up being used to “justify dominant neoliberal development discourses.”[[48]](#footnote-48) A central critique is that the broader discussion regarding girls’ education lacks necessary elements of native identity, local culture, and macro-level systems of power, they argue. Many scholars, such as Nigerian feminist Obioma Nnaemeka, have critiqued the problematic generalizations and lack of specificity in the dominant body of scholarship and policy, arguing that the disregard for local context and space does a good deal of harm to women and girls on the ground.[[49]](#footnote-49).

In postcolonial contexts, these scholars argue that neoliberal notions of empowerment are intertwined with white supremacy and the subsequent oppression of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color. This scholarship centers analyses of race, class, and other facets of identity in examining gendered education and feminism.[[50]](#footnote-50) They critique the core development ideology that “Westerners have the unique power to uplift, edify, and strengthen” – they deconstruct these “white fantasies of conquest and heroism” embedded in development, as articulated by Teju Cole.[[51]](#footnote-51) While unpacking white supremacy and the white savior complex, one must also examine the intersecting phenomenon of Orientalism, as coined by Edward Said. Orientalism describes the false dichotomy of West vs. the Orient created by Europe through creating a set of images serving to “define, dominate, and restructure the Middle East” and other colonized regions of the world.[[52]](#footnote-52) To these critical scholars, this pervasive, insidious discourse creates a carefully crafted visualization of Europe’s *Other*, thus providing the ideological backbone for European imperialism and colonialism.[[53]](#footnote-53) White Northerners maintain the “institutionalization of racial and geopolitical hegemony” through this “intellectual arrogance” foundational to development.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Throughout history, these scholars argue that white women – operating at the intersection of racialized power through racism and gendered oppression through patriarchy – have seen themselves as sisters of women in former colonies such as India, sisters of African-American women, and sisters of Indigenous women living on our settled lands,[[55]](#footnote-55) which has caused clumsy activist interventions reproducing racism and paternalism.[[56]](#footnote-56) The scholarship claims that these interventions stem from the liberal ideological structures implying the sameness of all women.[[57]](#footnote-57) This assumed “sameness” privileges the upper-class, cishet, white Western feminine experience while simultaneously marking it as universal.[[58]](#footnote-58) Thus, these feminists assert that the ideal woman becomes a neoliberal, elite, actualized participant in the world – the safe-sex practicing, Westernized “feminist modern,” as scholar Frances Vavrus calls it. This one-dimensional image of the ideal 21st century woman glosses over many social realities women face globally, according to the scholarship, while hierarchizing white as the most privileged feminine existence.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Through her clumsy interventions, indoctrinated in the idea of the *sameness* of all women, the white feminist, these scholars argue, reduces Southern Black women and women of color to “objects at its [her] disposal,” as articulated by Freire.[[60]](#footnote-60) They further argue that white feminist interventions fail to confront the crucial historical birth of colonization and racialization[[61]](#footnote-61) necessary for understanding the complexities that women of color and Black women in postcolonial countries face, such as campaigns like the United Nation’s *Girl Up*. In addition, as the structural issues affecting girls’ schooling are complex and entrenched with “structural inequities, discrimination, patriarchy, etc.,”[[62]](#footnote-62) critical feminist scholars argue that ignoring the nuance and roots of gender injustice in schooling inhibits people from being able to grasp better understandings – and solutions – of the issue. Overall, these scholars make a strong case as to how women of color and Black women of the Global South are perpetually “misunderstood, underrepresented, homogenized, disrespected, or subsumed under the experience of ‘universal sisterhood’” [[63]](#footnote-63) p ervasive in girls’ education discourse created in the Global North.

These bodies of scholarship situate my project in the necessary intellectual context, highlighting the interconnected neoliberal discourses that helped birth groups like *She’s the First* while providing robust postcolonial critiques of the resulting power inequities. Now that the context has been established, for the remainder of the paper, my goal is to provide a rich critical analysis of one small microcosm of neoliberal gender empowerment discourse in action. My project illustrates how these discourses manifest in privileged women’s lives and maintain unjust power dynamics. Since there is virtually no scholarship examining how gender empowerment plays out in an elite group of college-age women, my project should provide fresh insight into the social manifestations of this discourse.

**Methods**

To investigate my question, I conduct critical discourse analysis of video text taken from *She’s the First*’s website with an ethnographic component examining how the text and intertwined visuality create a layered “meaning systems” that maintains racial and cultural power imbalances between different groups of women.[[64]](#footnote-64) I outline how the *She’s the First* organization constructs the girls they are empowering, as well as well as how they conceptualize gender empowerment within feminism. I analyze two specific groups of data to ground my argument. First I will provide a brief analysis of the organization’s title, *She’s the First*, as the name of the group embodies the core message they are striving to communicate to the world. Following that is a critical discourse analysis of the text and visuality interplay in the central *She’s the First* online promotional video.[[65]](#footnote-65) As this video is the most prominent on the page, it is the best example of the interplay of text and visuality within *She’s the First’*s discourse. Then, I analyze my critical observations from two *She’s the First* meetings at American University, an elite private university in Washington, D.C. Through my two data groups consisting of textual analysis and ethnography, I link the power systems embedded in the national organization’s discourse with roots in global gender empowerment discourse to the social reproduction of these meanings in the ethnographic data. This layout allows both an analysis of the “perspective of structure and the perspective of action.”[[66]](#footnote-66)

The *She’s the First* text and the observations together provide an understanding as to how the organization constructs ideological meaning “sustaining unequal power relations” between groups of women.[[67]](#footnote-67) The two central actors in my project are the *She’s the First* organization at the national level, and the American University chapter made up of mostly white American women – based off of my observations – at an elite university in the United States’ capital. Through technology and social media, *She’s the First* connects students in the so-called developing world to campus leaders and sponsors who work together to “foster mentorship, philanthropy, equality, and leadership.”[[68]](#footnote-68) More specifically, this article illustrates the broad decontextualization of *She’s the First’*s work through the text.

I use several key tools to deconstruct text and develop my argument – erasure, deictics, and iconization. The first tool, erasure, is “the process in which ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities (sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible.”[[69]](#footnote-69) Erasure constitutes a “form of exclusion or marginalization particularly in relation to identity categories”[[70]](#footnote-70) – in this case, of women of color in the global South. The second tool, deictics, are “pointing words” that link “speech and writing to context.”[[71]](#footnote-71) They tie language to contextual assumptions the audience makes, marking social space. Lastly, I examine gendered Orientalism with the tool of iconization. Iconization is the “attribution of cause and immediate necessity to a connection (between linguistic features and social groups) that may be historical, contingent, or conventional,”[[72]](#footnote-72) associating images, woven by text, visuality, or both, with ways of being and doing.[[73]](#footnote-73) These tools reveal patterns within the text produce meaning that maintain unjust power dynamic between the women of *She’s the First* and the women they work for.I maintained robust intertextuality – the examination of how “words and grammatical structures are used to quote, refer to, or allude to other ‘texts’”[[74]](#footnote-74) – throughout the process by playing with the relationships between video text, the observations, and the broader girls’ education discourse.

I study how the “ideological effects” of neoliberal development discourse operate as an “effect of power” in the social realities of American University women.[[75]](#footnote-75) Such study allows a deconstruction of power systems embedded in the text, therefore indexing the forces that sustain hierarchical social arrangements.[[76]](#footnote-76) Shedding light on issues in a certain social context with clearly “emancipatory objectives,” this analysis illuminates oppressive relations within the context of gender empowerment while simultaneously allowing me to maintain crucial self-reflexivity.[[77]](#footnote-77) This research methodology, therefore, provides the flexibility and the tools to unpack culture, ideology, and “social inequality and injustice”[[78]](#footnote-78) while also being critically reflective of my own positionality as a young, middle class white cishet American woman studying women in similar social positions.

## I have carefully crafted this project so that my positionality as a white, middle class, cishet woman does not establish a colonial power dynamic between myself and my project participants. My elite positionality gives me physical access to study and analyze this particular privileged group on my own college campus. It also provides me with important cultural capital to enter and understand the discourse of this group. As most of the women in the group have similar social positionalities that I do, this project strives to “study up” – understanding how responsibility and power is exercised and kept in place[[79]](#footnote-79) – by illuminating a particular social hierarchy and how it is reproduced in this space. As many of the discourses at play serve to elevate and maintain my power as a white Northern woman, I hold myself accountable by producing thorough critical analysis. My self-reflexivity is detailed throughout my work, as this is central to my identity as not just a woman scholar, but a feminist scholar – not speaking from the “perspective of the structure of gender,” but from a “critical distance on gender and on oneself.” [[80]](#footnote-80)

**Analysis**

I select key pieces of *She’s the Firs*t discourse to illustrate how the broader organization constructs the concept of ‘girl’ and to explore the resulting implications for gender empowerment, feminism, and power. I begin with an exploration of the organization’s title, followed by a discussion of the promotional video located at the center of their “About” page.[[81]](#footnote-81) The video serves to provide background information about the organization – it explains how the group began as a small cupcake sale, and grew into a large transnational organization cultivated through a “common shared effort.”[[82]](#footnote-82) I then analyze my ethnographic observations of two *She’s the First* meetings at American University. This portion of analysis explores how the young women grapple with both global girls’ education discourse and the parallel discourse of *She’s the First* itself, revealing the unequitable asymmetrical power dynamics woven into their social realities.

To set the stage for this texual analysis of *She’s the First*, I begin by unpacking the critical cultural context embedded within the name of *She’s the First* itself. The title encourages us to think in terms of a race where a particular gender comes first – it does imply a definite sense of empowerment at the surface level. But what does this privileging rest on? *She’s the First* describes this girl, this “she,” as having won – she is the best, the most elite, the one who has conquered, succeeded, and been ranked at the top of the hierarchy. In one sense, this serves to elevate the *she* above the unmentioned *he*, and shine a well-deserved light upon this *she* as a tenacious star. But this ranking of the *she* also implies the presence of two key neoliberal American cultural pillars: first, the competition and ranking inseparable from capitalistic culture, and second, the individuality[[83]](#footnote-83) that first elucidates. With competition and individuality intertwined, we have now located the Girl Other,[[84]](#footnote-84) the *she* object, from the perspective of the American gaze, as she embodies cultural conceptualizations of success as constructed in the United States. With success being filtered through a neoliberal gaze, this could be potentially problematic for different cultures, paradigms, and epistemologies in which success is conceptualized and understood differently.

The embedding of the Girl Other within the American cultural conceptualizations of success has tangible parallels the dominant construct of gender empowerment and education. Not only does it imply that an education requires competition and an embrace of individualism, but it implies that in order to be an empowered, educated young woman, the *she* must subscribe to these neoliberal values. The conflation of individualism with success reveals the ethnocentrism at the heart of the construction of gender empowerment – empowerment must be defined, judged, and validated from a set of neoliberal values and cultural standards as mandated by the North. A stark power dynamic is thus engendered between cultural paradigms; these neoliberal values are marked as superior to differing cultural values and conceptualizations of education, success, and empowerment. Because neoliberal discourse implies the “sameness of all women,”[[85]](#footnote-85) the experiences and social realities of the white woman are marked as universal. She is the first to be like *us*. Centering the identity and culture of the white Western woman ignores “the material conditions and needs of non-western, non-white, lesbian, disabled and poor women”[[86]](#footnote-86) while simultaneously conflating all other women into the colonial icon of the Girl Other.

What establishes and solidifies the aforementioned claims regarding neoliberalism in *She’s the First* discourse is the interplay of text and visuality within their main promotional video “Host a Tie-Dye Cupcake Bake Sale Fundraiser October 25-November 1st with *She’s the First*!”[[87]](#footnote-87) published on August 26th, 2012. A transcription of the video text can be found in *Appendix A*.

The video opens with a ticking sound, followed by that of a buzzing bell. The immediate association is that of a classroom in the United States, where bells signify the beginnings and endings of class periods. However, discussions of education are largely absent from the video’s text – school itself is mentioned once, the 209th word of the complete 384. This absence reveals the decentralization of education from the discourse. Schooling is not a focus within the text, but a side note. For an organization that focuses’ on girls’ empowerment through education, this absence is particularly striking. Since the education of marginalized girls is not a principal concept within the discussion, one could argue that it is not a principal focal point of the organization, as portrayed by this central online video.

Following the bell, Tammy Tibbetts*, She’s the First* founder, begins speaking about the first cupcake sale in lines 1-4:

**Tammy Tibbetts, “Founder”:**

1. I don’t know
2. if
3. Lindsey simply had a vanilla cupcake bake sale
4. I don’t think we would be talking about this now

Upon first glance, something is clearly missing. There no sort of agent, catalyst, or driving force, either linguistically and conceptually. Without a robust verb acting as an agent, there is no explanation as to what spurred the cupcake sale. The text is left without asubject that acts as a catalyst between “talking about this now” and the “cupcake bake sale.” The audience interprets the double-negative within the phrase to mean the cupcake sale was needed to create a discussion about *this*. But *this* is never explained or unpacked, leaving the viewer with an unclear understanding of the conversation topic, as well as a sense of curiosity regarding the causal mechanism entirely missing from the sentence structure. This lack of agency is a pattern that continues to evolve and take shape within the remaining text. In lines 5-9, Lindsay Brown, *She’s the First* member continues to reflect on the first cupcake sales without any verb agent justifying what caused the fundraisers or articulating what catalyzed her efforts:

**Lindsay Brown “Tie-Dye Cupcake Mastermind”:**

1. I think the tie-dye cupcakes are just
2. a big shock
3. and when you take a bite into it
4. you’re not expecting
5. a bunch of tie-dye

Such lack of agency within the text leaves the cupcake sales completely decontextualized from any driving force or social call to action.

Within lines 10-13, the missing agent is coupled with the construction of *She’s the First’s* growth as organic – now, there is no need for an agent.

1. One cupcake
2. turned into three bake sales
3. and now

13. dozens of bake sales.

Quite literally, a cupcake cannot transform into bake sales, and bake sales cannot transform into a greater amount of bake sales. Again, there is the pattern of the missing agent verb. The only verb present, *turned*, links the “cupcake” to the “three bake sales.” Lines 12 and 13 are void of a verb. In the next text group, Tammy describes her role in making *She’s the First* an official organization. Through her construction of herself as an observer in line 14 (“As I saw the spread of tie-dye cupcakes”), she paints herself as a passive actor. The “spread of tie-dye cupcakes” is then made to have happened “organically” with the aid of social media, thus denying any ethical urgency or overarching social movement present in the situation.

Finally, in line 20, the cupcake sales are given shallow context – “there could be something so much bigger here.” This “something” is left ambiguous, but it hints to a social movement – something macro, intangible, and based upon intricate, expanding human relationships. She then alludes to social justice in lines 21-29:

21. And my goal,

22. in creating a national campaign,

23. was to create a sense of community

24. around

25. all of these

26. passionate enthusiastic young very vocal individuals

27. to

28. for the first time make them feel like they were part of

29. a common shared effort (?)

When a clear focus finally emerges, it’s surrounding ‘us,’ the white Western women. Her goal is explicitly to cultivate community around American women – the erasure of the Girl Other from her mission places the wellbeing and empowerment of the girls and women in postcolonial contexts below the wellbeing and empowerment of the American women. Within the context of neoliberal America, community can only be seen as a group of individuals, the cohesive texture utterly lost, with individuals valued more than the whole – just as Tammy elucidates in her goal statement. This in itself weakens the concept of community; by refusing to acknowledge the importance and value of the whole, I interpret the way Tammy constructs a community to be fundamentally contrived. There is an apparent need, a hunger for this community, but the reasons behind needing a feminine community are not explained. The reason for this much-needed collective feminine community, one could argue, is the structural, cultural, and physical gendered violence institutionalized deeply into the inner-workings of our global society. This is a trend across neoliberal discourse – as Kalpana Wilson argues, the neoliberal gender empowerment sphere entirely excludes efforts to resist structural gender-based violence or gender roles, especially within the household.[[88]](#footnote-88) The implication of a need for a common shared effort without naming what’s spurring this effort, why this effort is important, what it is striving to accomplish, or what the implications of this are for the women they are working with damages their activism. It depoliticizes and strips power from their feminist work.

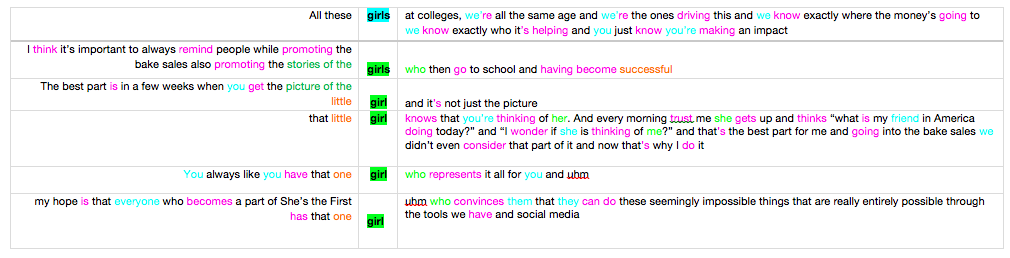
One could synthesize from the text that the cupcake sales were developed to raise money for girls’ education because there is pervasive, structural gender injustice within educational institutions. But without any explicit causal mechanisms in place in syntax, combined with the language constructing the cupcake sales’ growth as spontaneous, their cupcake sales are not given a catalyst. Their work is not grounded in the explanatory context of patriarchal violence and transnational feminism. This is its own form of erasure – not of the ‘girls’ themselves, which I analyze later, but of the urgent gendered injustices fueling the lack of girls’ education. The missing acknowledgement of larger social structures, power systems, and resistance movements cleanly fits into the neoliberal ideology of brushing aside the interconnected, interwoven intricacies of the social world for the purpose of maintaining inequities. This is a common theme within the neoliberal landscape – neoliberal conceptualizations of empowerment were strategically created to “erase questions of structural injustice”[[89]](#footnote-89) and “privilege private action” and “consumerist forms of engagement”[[90]](#footnote-90) key to constructing women as investments, as outlined by the literature. These strategies do not serve to catalyze groundbreaking social change. The lack of textual agents catalyzing their actions as feminists reflects a refusal to acknowledge “specific patriarchal structures, institutions, and ideologies” that is central to the neoliberal paradigm and practices “based on the mobilization and perpetuation of these unequal material relations and ideologies.”[[91]](#footnote-91) Not only does this not do the women they are working to empower justice, but it reflects their own lack of empowerment. The decontextualization is a deliberate “depoliticization” – a faux “sisterly solidarity” with “disadvantaged girls” positioned as entirely disconnected from genuine “redistribution and social justice,”[[92]](#footnote-92) even for themselves.

*The Construction of ‘Girls’: Erasure and Iconization through Personal Deictic Markers*

The girls *She’s the First* fundraises for are not mentioned until the 204th word out of the 384 words total. 56.7% of the video’s text passes before the girls are included in the discussion. The disappearance of the girls from the first 56.7% of the text is a key illustration of erasure that occurs often within development discourse. The centering of the white American women’s narrative, nestling it at the forefront of the video, strips the Girl Other of her agency and while simultaneously attaching greater value and importance to their own empowerment. This is a trend in neoliberal postfeminist activism. “The ‘sisters’ that they try to address are entirely absent… It is their images, thoughts, and feelings which are made public via social media rather than those girls in need of help.”[[93]](#footnote-93)

The personal deictic ‘girls’ marks two separate groups of women within the video text. In this case, the deictic markers used are personal because they create social categories of person. I specifically examine the use of ‘girls’ in reference to the girls of color in postcolonial contexts parallel to the use of ‘girls’ in reference to the white American college women. As exposed throughout the text, these dichotomous groupings fall into the Orientalist – Us vs. Them, Self vs. Other – halving of the world, as elucidated by Said.[[94]](#footnote-94) This binary division has insightful implications for how girls in the North are taught to grapple with feminism within a racist, neoliberal society – echoing postfeminist ideology, young American women can “endorse feminism but only in relation to the South”[[95]](#footnote-95) in order to highlight their empowerment and education in contrast to the Girl Other.

Below is the second portion of the text containing the deictic ‘girls.’ The text is grouped by contextual relevance:



Several key patterns emerge in examining the language layered between the different uses of the selected deictic. ‘Girls’ is first used to mark the college-aged, white American women. Paired with vigorous verbs – “driving,” to “know,” and “making” an impact, the robust capacity of the American women to build, understand, and propel is established; they are the empowered, the elite. This selection of verbs reflects the postfeminist cultural construction of Western girls as “subjects of capacity,” “can-do girls,” with utmost control over their sexualities, reproduction, and independence.[[96]](#footnote-96) However, the context of what exactly their work is accomplishing is still shallow, broad, and depoliticized – while Brown asserts that she “knows” who she is helping and that she is, indeed, making an impact, ­the concepts of “helping” and “impact” are left contextually bare.

With the introduction of ‘girls’ as a marker for girls of color in postcolonial contexts, the contextual gaps begin to be filled with deeply embedded iconization. The Girl Other is first marked as the object of ‘stories’ *She’s the First* promotes in their sales. This is secondary to the promotion of the bake sales themselves, and a sentence-level hierarchy is thus produced within the sentence. First, the cupcake sales must be promoted, then the stories of the ‘girls.’ Which ‘girls?’ The ‘girls’ who “go to school” and “become successful.” Connections are drawn between “success” and “school” – acquiring schooling implies success – and then “stories” and “promotion” – it’s not just the bake sales that must be promoted, but the stories illustrating white American women’s ability to ‘help’ the Girl Other, “civisiling and saving the racialised Other” under the cloak of “unified sisterhood.”[[97]](#footnote-97)

The next several groupings of text are where iconization seeps into both the language, the visual, and the audience’s imagination. The next four times ‘girl’ is mentioned, ‘girl’ is never the subject, the central actor within the sentence. Again, *She’s the First* discusses the *story* of the girl, the *picture* of the girl – the girl is made an object within many levels of the discourse. Out of the four times it appears, twice is with the word ‘little’ in front of it. This reduction of the girls of color both infantilizes them and manufactures them as weak and vulnerable. Describing the Girl Other as “little” feeds into larger humanitarian discourse thick with images of “young, usually foreign, (usually) children of color and we are invited to imagine them as hungry, or sick, or un-housed”[[98]](#footnote-98) – we imagine her to be tiny, an exoticized, gendered, racialized victim, brown or Black, or as Chant would say, a “South Asian or African, often Muslim… iconic vessel of human capital.”[[99]](#footnote-99)

Following the two uses of the ‘little girl,’ L.B. constructs the Girl Other as a satellite revolving around the focal point of the white American woman. This is a rich example of the “construction of girls in the Global North or South as, respectively, empowered, postfeminist subjects and downtrodden victims of patriarchal values.”[[100]](#footnote-100) Every verb giving agency to the Girl Other within the text positions her only in relation to white American women. The “girl knows” – and, implicitly, takes comfort in – that an American woman is thinking of her, it’s not that she “knows” math or science or writing; she “gets up” and “thinks” about American women, it’s not that she gets up and thinks about her dreams and her education; she “wonders” about American women, it’s not that she’s wondering about her future, her dreams, and her hopes. Without any language describing the ‘girls’ schooling, empowerment, thoughts, identities, capabilities, or perspectives, and her just being positioned in relation to the white American women, it is implied that the young Southern woman needs the American woman. An illusion of dependency is fabricated within the text, solidifying the white woman’s role as both savior and as dominant, with the Girl Other being subordinate and operating only in relation to the white woman.

The other two times the deictic is used, ‘one’ is placed directly before ‘girl’ instead of ‘little.’ Again, there is a tint of the same individualistic American ideology rooted in the title. That *one* girl, the *first* girl – she separated from her peers and her community by her empowered, civilized, educated status, implying that her community is not. The two uses of ‘one girl’ are also only described in the possession of the white American woman – “you have that one girl,” “everyone who becomes a part of *She’s the First* has that one girl.” Following the establishment of possession, the verbs paired with the ‘one girl’ serve to benefit the white American women. The ‘one girl’ either “represents it all for you [the white American woman]” or “convinces them [white American women] that they can do these seemingly impossible things.” With the positioning of the Girl Other as both an agent catalyzing empowerment for *She’s the First* members and an inspirational emblem, she is both tokenized and manipulated as a tool for the empowerment of the American woman.

[[101]](#footnote-101)

There is a juxtaposition between the emphasis on the “one,” “first” girl and the collection of images portrayed throughout the video. While the groupings of girls are, in a way, less problematic than an exploitative image of a singular victim would be, the visual grouping also feeds into inequitable power structures maintaining racialized hierarchies. These girls, who only have skin color in common, are lumped into the ‘one girl’ icon. This visual icon is crucial to understanding how the Girl Other is created, as the visual representation of the body is “infused with cultural meaning” and figures “as sites of colonial expropriation, exploitation, and violence.”[[102]](#footnote-102) With the iconization embedded in ‘little girl’ alluding to Orientalist images of small, brown and black victims, intertwined with concrete images of girls and women of the Global South grouped by their distance from Whiteness, the Us vs. Them dichotomy between the two groupings of “trope” colonial girlhoods[[103]](#footnote-103) is maintained and strengthened. She is just as gendered as she is racialized – her feminine image “elicits compassion and monetary donation.” Her photograph represents innocence, purity, authenticity[[104]](#footnote-104) saturated with her Western racialization.

The text within the video highlights four key insights: the decontextualization and depoliticization of *She’s the Firs*t fundraising efforts from larger social structures and movements, the erasure of the Girl Other from over half of the video, the deictic ‘girls’ marking and differentiating the two dichotomous groups of women, the resulting textual hierarchization assigning the white American women more agency than the Girl Other, and the iconization – and subordination – of the Girl Other through the objectification of the deictic ‘girl’ marking racialized Southern women with Orientalist visuality. Together, these mechanisms throughout the text construct women and girls of color in postcolonial contexts as a neoliberal tool for the white American women’s empowerment – an unjust power dynamic flourishes between the two groups of women.

*“What are these weird Americans?”: She’s the First at American University*

On March 15th and 29th, 2016, I observed two *She’s the First* chapter meetings at American University. American University is a private university in the capital of the United States. Consequently, the privilege and power embedded in the social dynamics of Washington, D.C. and American University are reflected in many – but not all – of the students at American University. This privilege bleeds into campus organizations like *She’s the First* – students are then left to absorb, resist, or transform the discourse of power and privilege pervading the social spaces within Washington, D.C. Using broader girls’ education discourse to frame my analysis, I link the textual conclusions of the previous section with the social interactions produced by the young women.

The meetings were culturally and demographically white, with 16 of the 18 young women at the first meeting being white/white passing and all 11 of the young women at the second meeting being white/white passing. Beginning at 8 pm on Tuesday evenings, the meetings would take place without food or drink with a relaxed, fun atmosphere. At the first meeting, the women spread across the room in small clusters made cards for their “scholars” abroad while laughing and discussing classes, politics, musical artists, and more. The second meeting created a space with a similar feel to it – the young women sat around a table and made signs for a social media campaign advertising a charity walk. While they did this, they chatted about an upcoming conference, a mental health survey project, cupcakes, Malala, jobs, plans for next year and room decorating. The most striking conclusion made from my observations was the purpose of the meetings, which was primarily social. The function of the space as a time and place to socialize with other young white women was apparent through the fact that the overwhelming majority of the meeting was casual discussion. Interwoven within the discussions were portrayals of dominant American feminine culture, such as the women putting down their sign-making capabilities – “it’ll go tragically,” one member remarked in describing her drawing. Later, on, they took pictures with their drawings for their Facebook page – what Koffman, Orgad, and Gill describe as a problematic “expression of solidarity” centered upon “refashioning of self” through “self-branding, self-promotion, and media production.”[[105]](#footnote-105)

What was not discussed in great depth or detail was the Girl Other. Gender empowerment was not discussed at all – besides some admiration towards Malala – and the language referring to girls’ education was sparse. The Girl Other was entirely absent from the second meeting. As the Girl Other was also largely missing from the text within the video through textual erasure, this represents a larger trend of empowerment discourse being “self-oriented, contained within the sphere of Northern girls’ lives… Centred on Northern girls.”[[106]](#footnote-106) The first meeting consisted of a letter-writing activity to the girls, who they called their “scholars.” The use of “scholars” as a deictic marker is important, as it serves to elevate the girls and women they are working with and give her a title with greater authority and agency. The American University members did not have a particular connection with the “scholars” – they seemed to be from a variety of countries and cultural contexts, and mostly without key identifiers and names. Several times names were mentioned throughout the meeting, such as “Miriama” and “I think she’s our scholar Sunita from Nepal.” The only key girls’ education discourse absorbed by the women in their social interactions was the neoliberal, capital-centric discourse: “the whole point is getting money” a woman said, in relation to an upcoming fundraiser. With their feminist work centered upon fundraising, the deep roots of neoliberal discourse constructing women as investments and activism as collecting money are revealed.

Another key observation was their specific behavior towards the Girl Other herself, which I have labeled the “cute-ifying” phenomenon. During the letter writing, there was an abundance of “awh”-ing and cooing noises, with their hands held to their chests. While making signs, the word “cute” was mentioned at least three times in describing the artistic representations of the girls and women and the global girls’ education movement as a whole. With the decontextualization of *She’s the First’s* work from the broader structures of gendered inequity, violence, and resisting social movements, as seen throughout the meetings and the video text, there is an Orientalist infantilization of not only the Girl Other herself (as seen in the video), but also an infantilization of the social injustice and themselves as feminists. This is reflected in the “cute-ifying” of the activism – it trivializes and downplays the structural violence that is at the root of educational gender inequity.

However, I also concluded that through the “cute-ifying” of their letter writing and sign making, the women seemed to be struggling to inject the work with genuine, emotional meaning. By holding their hand to their chests and “awh”-ing at the thought of the girls receiving their letters, they were attempting to piece together an emotional transnational connection with the women and girls of color in postcolonial contexts. Settled in the inequitable power structure maintained by broader *She’s the First* discourse, the connection rings as disingenuous, and some of the young women sensed it. There were several moments of uneasiness and awkwardness throughout the activities of the meetings. In hypothesizing what the girls and women would say upon receiving the letters, one member thought they might say “What are these weird Americans?” By using the word “weird” to describe herself, while simultaneously claiming her identity as American, she reveals that she is conscious of the shallow quality of the letter and the unsettling transnational power dynamic present in the activity. Another woman I interpreted to be slightly uncomfortable while writing her letter, through apprehensive tone and body language, simply said, “I don’t know what else to say.” One member was working to write a letter in Spanish to a student in Guatemala, and began to work closely with another woman who was fluent in Spanish. Feeling unsure about the quality of the letter, she said, “They’re going to translate this letter and be like…” She trailed off at the end of the phrase. These subtle acknowledgements of the disingenuous, self-gratifying texture of their work reveal that there is a deep discomfort with the structure of the activism. In this discomfort, there is space for change – the small examples of self-reflexivity illustrate that these young women have the agency to be critical of their work and even re-think new strategies for feminism. This is central to my analysis and my ideas for the future, as the inequitable power dynamics between the groups of young women and girls withheld and maintained in *She’s the First* make it so that transnational feminism of this sort must be completely re-imagined and re-created for a just feminist praxis.

**Conclusion**

The cupcakes, social media, and pink “girl power” themes of *She’s the First* portray a benevolent transnational sisterhood following in the footsteps of recent development discourse. The young women of the organization are striving to do feminist activism in a way that feels good and makes sense to them given their sociocultural understandings – there is undeniable beauty and importance in providing scholarships for young women who want to go to school, as *She’s the First* accomplishes so well in their fundraising work. But a critical analysis of the organizational discourse reveals that firm structures of power are in place that are reflective of larger global inequity. Dimensions of neoliberalism, Orientalism, and racialization intersect and overlap to construct the groups of women into an unequal binary in terms of agency, ability, and liberation. This hierarchy crafted between the two groups of women fits the post-feminist fabrication that women of the global North are freed from gendered oppression, while women from the global South need a savior to civilize them into neoliberalism and the intertwined culture of the global North. This hurts Northern women by denying the gender-based injustices they face that American ideology asserts simply do not exist. But, while this hierarchy within the neoliberal kyriarchal structure does both groups of women a disservice, the Southern woman is the most disempowered through her objectification as a tool to uplift the white American woman. Neoliberal feminist activism of this style also has one more key problematic implication: it refuses to touch on gender as an inequitable social construct. It also is cissexist in that it doesn’t touch upon or engage with trans, non-binary, intersex, genderqueer, genderfluid, etc. femmes and individuals, whose issues and voices are now central to blossoming conceptualizations of gender justice transcending outdated understandings of gender. Second, with this activism structure, the structural, global gender injustice and violence is depoliticized and trivialized in ways that strips power from all oppressed by patriarchy.

As a young, white, cishet American woman deeply engaged in feminism and educational gender justice, I do not mean to separate myself from the women of *She’s the First*. This is just as much as a critique of my own understandings, social constructions, reproductions of power, and feminist praxis as much as it is *She’s the First’s –* I am restricted by the same blinders of power and privilege as these women are, and I, too, was a member of *She’s the First* during my freshman year of college. My goal in completing this project was to illustrate the urgent need for women, especially women of privileged positionalities, to re-imagine a global feminism that is not within a constricting, harmful neoliberal structure. Through my analysis, I hope to provide the deconstruction necessary to construct a more ethical future feminist vision. In order to resist colonial dynamics, a transnational gender justice movement must center the language, perspective, discourse, and agency of the most marginalized women and femmes globally. Most importantly, young women must completely shift out of the neoliberal paradigm and create a vivacious feminism that cultivates collective feminine agency. Striving to grant individual women their empowerment as defined and regulated by patriarchal neoliberalism will not change what makes women need empowerment to begin with. We must not position one group of women as “giver” and the other as “receiver,” but appreciate and value what every group of women has to give in the struggle for gender justice. Most importantly, we must do all of this while simultaneously embracing an understanding of the matrix of domination that works to both oppress and privilege in nuanced ways. We must strive to abolish not merely patriarchy, but kyriarchy, through developing a “race-and-gender conscious historical materialism,” as coined by Mohanty.[[107]](#footnote-107)

This post-feminist neoliberal movement must grow from a paradigm that does not place the “self-interested individual at center,”[[108]](#footnote-108) but values a tenacious community as the foundation of their movement. Young feminists need a paradigm that encourages cultural, structural social change rather than individualized affirmation; a paradigm centering analyses of race and colonization; a paradigm that does not imply the sameness of all women, but appreciates the rich difference between femme beings; a paradigm that examines the unjust construction of gender as the root of gender-based violence and marginalization. With a radical re-framing of feminism entirely outside of neoliberalism, development, and Western culture, feminism would embody “recognition, commitment, and care”[[109]](#footnote-109) in a way that is not possible within a feminism manipulated by neoliberalism.

**Appendix A**

[tick tock, buzzing bell noises]

**Tammy Tibbetts, “Founder”:**

1. I don’t know
2. if
3. Lindsey simply had a vanilla cupcake bake sale
4. I don’t think we would be talking about this now

(22)

**Lindsay Brown “Tie-Dye Cupcake Mastermind”:**

1. I think the tie-dye cupcakes are just
2. a big shock
3. and when you take a bite into it
4. you’re not expecting
5. a bunch of tie-dye

(49)

**Unidentified:**

1. One cupcake
2. turned into three bake sales
3. and now

13. dozens of bake sales.

(62)

**T.T.:**

14. As I saw the spread of tie-dye cupcakes

15. happen

16. just so organically

17. by

18. the pure coverage that we were putting on our Facebook page and our blog

19. I started to realize that there could be

20. something so much bigger here

21. And my goal,

22. in creating a national campaign,

23. was to create a sense of community

24. around

25. all of these

26. passionate enthusiastic young very vocal individuals

27. to

28. for the first time make them feel like they were part of

29. a common shared effort (?)

(145)

**L.B.:**

30. All these girls at colleges, we’re all the same age

31. and

32. we’re the ones driving this

33. And

34. we know exactly where the money’s going to

35. we know exactly who it’s helping,

36. and

37. you just know you’re making an impact.

(184)

**T.T.:**

38. I think it’s important

39. to always remind people

40. while promoting the bake sales

41. also

42. promoting the stories of the **girls** (204th)

43. who

44. then go to school

45. and having become successful

(213)

**L.B.:**

46. The best part is in a few weeks

47. when you get the picture of the little girl

48. and it’s not just the picture

49. that little girl knows that you’re thinking of her

50. and every morning trust me she gets up and thinks “what is my friend in America 51. doing today?” and “I wonder if she is thinking of me?” and that’s the best part for me

52. and going into the bake sales

53. we didn’t even consider that part of it

54. And now that’s why

55. I do it

(300)

**T.T.:**

56. You always like

57. you have that one girl

58. who represents

59. it all for you

60. and uhm

61. my hope it that everyone who becomes a part of She’s the First has that one girl

62. uhm

63. who convinces them that they can do these

64. seemingly impossible things

65. that are really entirely possible through

66. the tools we have

67. and social media

(358)

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10. By labeling the organization as “mostly white,” I do not mean to erase any Black women or women of color who are members of *She’s the First*. Through this label, I aim to draw attention to majority of the women being white within the group, a conclusion I carefully drew from the organizational leadership, the American University chapter, website imagery, etc.: <https://www.shesthefirst.org/about/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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