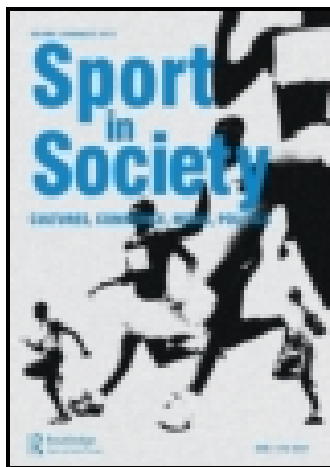


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On: 01 April 2015, At: 00:55

Publisher: Routledge

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Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fcss20>

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Published online: 22 Jan 2015.



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To cite this article: Mary G. McDonald (2015): Imagining neoliberal feminisms? Thinking critically about the US diplomacy campaign, 'Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports', Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics, DOI: [10.1080/17430437.2014.997580](https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2014.997580)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2014.997580>

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Imagining neoliberal feminisms? Thinking critically about the US diplomacy campaign, ‘Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports’

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This paper builds upon the sport for development scholarship that critically explores how Western ideals of gender and sport are mobilized within sport development campaigns. This growing body of development scholarship (e.g. Hayhurst, 2013, “Girls as the ‘New’ Agents of Social Change? Exploring the ‘Girl Effect’ Through Sport, Gender and Development Programs in Uganda,” *Sociological Research Online*, 18 [2]; Chawansky, 2012, “Good Girls Play Sports: International Inspiration and the Construction of Girlhood,” *Feminist Media Studies* 3: 473–476) critically examines the taken-for-granted liberatory character that frequently accompanies accounts of sport’s allegedly progressive role in supporting gender equity. Grounded in this scholarship and transnational feminist sensibilities, this paper critically examines the rhetoric to inspire and assist women in ‘developing’ nations, via the US State Department’s global ‘Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports’ diplomacy campaign. Rather than focusing on those who participate in these programmes and the alleged positive results of such programmes, this analysis instead contextualizes this initiative. This analysis additionally exposes the underlying rhetorical assumptions of this campaign in order to interrogate the ways that national security, ‘developed’ nations, gendered equity, empowerment, and the alleged benevolent role of the US State Department and capital are imagined in these sporting discourses – discourses which also signal the rise of neoliberal feminism. The paper concludes by discussing the continuing need to embody ‘reflexive non-innocence’ (Hemmings, 2011, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, Durham: Duke University) while interrogating popular narratives that constitute discourses of gender equity and feminism both within sport studies and more broadly.

Speaking from the Treaty Room in the White House in June 2012 – on a day near the 40th anniversary of Title IX, the 1972 US law which requires equity in educational programmes receiving federal funding including sport – then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced a new partnership. Clinton announced the ‘Global Sports Mentoring Program’, a mentoring and networking initiative which pairs sporting women from across the globe with US business sector mentors as part of a larger US State initiative ‘Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports’. This broader initiative, announced in February 2012, suggests that sport for development (SFD) practices are not only promoted by the United Nations (UN), the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) but also, in this case, part of US diplomatic and ‘foreign’ policy aims.

‘Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports’ is not simply about the provision of global mentoring opportunities, but also includes US State-sponsored sport envoys to international communities and exchange programmes that bring sport visitors to the USA.

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For example, in 2012, elite US soccer players participated in sport envoys and held clinics in Malaysia, Algeria, Argentina, Venezuela, and Morocco. One sport visitor programme was held that same year in conjunction with the NCAA, USA Basketball, and the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), during the NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament. Athletes and coaches from 'Kazakhstan, Nicaragua, Thailand, Tunisia, Ukraine, and Zimbabwe' participated 'in a variety of activities including: basketball clinics with their American counterparts, teambuilding exercises, workshops on Title IX and nutrition, and community events associated with the NCAA's Women's Final Four Championship' (Empowering Women and Girls 2012).

According to Clinton, the goal of the mentoring project is to

identify women worldwide who are emerging leaders in sports – coaches, managers, administrators, sports journalists, marketers – and then match them with American women who are top leaders in these fields. Through mentoring and networking we want to support the rise of women's sports leaders abroad who, in turn, can help nurture the next generation of girl and women athletes. (Secretary Clinton 2012)

For 2014, mentees hailed from such nations as 'Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Brazil, Denmark, Egypt, Haiti, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Pakistan, Singapore, Turkey, Ukraine, and Zimbabwe' (US Department of State 2014).

Clinton originally announced the mentoring programme as a partnership between the sport news website ESPN(W) and the US State Department. However, at the conclusion of this announcement, ESPN's John Skipper thanked other sponsors who would assist with mentoring, including Burton (snowboards), Colavita, Proctor and Gamble, Gatorade, Saatchi and Saatchi, Under Armour, and the USA Gymnastics team (Secretary Clinton 2012). Other partners and participants include the University of Tennessee, the NCAA, and the WNBA, to mention but a few (US Department of State 2014).

That Secretary Clinton would be interested in issues related to women and girls is not new. Indeed, she has long positioned herself as a champion of women and children. In 1995, as the US First Lady she appeared at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, and offered her famous 'Women's Rights are Human Rights' speech. What may not be so clear is why US President Barack Obama's Department of State under the direction of then Secretary Clinton and, more recently, Secretary John Kerry would partner with multinational corporations, sport organizations, educational institutions, and media outlets to mobilize sport in the service of global gender equity, as a means to 'empower women and girls'. Or in the words of Secretary Clinton:

In addition to what sports can make happen between people, they can also bring about transformative change within people ... Sports can make you stronger, tougher, more confident, more resilient, and those qualities stay with you long after you finish the race or the final buzzer sounds. (Morse 2012)

On the one hand, there is nothing new about the State Department using sport as an arm of diplomacy. Closer historical inspection reveals that the State Department has long mobilized sport in the service of US interests. For example, during the Cold War, the USA sponsored goodwill tours for African American athletes to serve as global ambassadors and to counter charges of domestic racism made by members of international communities (Thomas 2012).

On the other hand, the methods and context for using sport for diplomacy have changed over the course of time. More recently, the SportsUnited division of the US State Department was launched in 2002 and has offered sports programming for people in over 100 countries while acknowledging sports diplomacy 'as an integral part of efforts to build ever-

strengthening relations between the United States and other nations' (Sports Diplomacy 2014). Justification for the related 'Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports' project also frequently draws upon broader SFD discourses, especially those advocated for by the UN. For instance, one example used to justify this programme suggests that:

According to the United Nations when girls participate in sports they are more likely to attend school and participate in society. When women and girls can walk on the playing field, they are more likely to step into the classroom, the boardroom, and step out as leaders in society. (Secretary Clinton 2012)

Read from this perspective, this development-diplomacy nexus seemingly promotes the use of sport in the service of global gender equity and as a means to enhance civic and economic participation. However, feminist and transnational feminist analyses increasingly critique similar attempts to 'empower women' as such strategies are used to justify dominant neoliberal development discourses. These conceptualizations increasingly articulate the simplistic belief that with the right guidance and opportunity, women and girls in targeted areas around the globe will develop the necessary economic skills and cultural competencies to overcome poverty, gender stereotypes, and adverse health conditions (Hayhurst 2011; ShainKeele 2013).

Used here neoliberalism refers not just to economic principles which privilege free markets and privatization while eroding state expenditures related to social services for the poor and marginalized communities. Rather, neoliberalism also signifies a shifting regime of thought and action, which produces subjectivities dedicated to promoting self-reliance, personal transformation, individualism, and economic efficiency as ways to solve broader social ills (Rottenberg 2014). Increasingly Western corporations, NGO development agencies, the UN, the World Bank, and state governments position 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 (Hayhurst 2011; ShainKeele 2013).

This paper analyses dominant narratives of the 'Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports' campaign as snapshots of a related neoliberal process whereby the US State mobilizes individualistic notions of girls and women's 'empowerment' and 'agency' in the service of diplomacy, national security, and 'foreign' policy aims. In doing so, this paper is grounded in and contributes to the growing body of critical SFD scholarship, especially those works which discuss the representational politics and dominant unstated assumptions that underlie SFD more broadly (e.g. Chawansky 2012; Darnell 2012; Hayhurst 2011; Nicholls, Giles, and Sethna 2010). While acknowledging the dynamic character of these representational sites, I strategically make visible their dominant ideological import in order to expose powerful assumptions about the presumed benevolent role of US State policies, capital, and racialized and gendered development discourses. This analysis thus interrogates:

existing discourses of power to understand how subjects are fabricated or positioned by them, what powers they secure (and disguise or veil), what assumptions they naturalize, what privileges they fix, what norms they mobilize, and what or whom these norms exclude. (Brown and Halley 2002, 26)

This is an important task for as Cornwall and Brock (2005) remind us 'if words make worlds, struggles over meanings are not just about semantics: they gain a very real material dimension' (1043).

Give the broader material effects of the discourses discussed here, this analysis also takes seriously the claims of Hemmings (2011) regarding the necessity of using critical

feminist/transnational sensibilities to explicate the political grammar and narrative construction that constitute discourses of gender equity and feminism more broadly. Indeed, a feminist lens can assist in such an investigation given ‘its deep history of attention to differences, intersections, lies and silences’ (Hemmings 2011, 2). But to acknowledge this history is also to acknowledge that Western feminisms are ‘bound up in global power relations, particularly when we consider the various ways in which a presumed opposition between Western gender equity and non-Western patriarchal cultures is mobilized in temporal and spatial modes’ (Hemmings 2011, 2).

Hemmings’ (2011) insights are additionally useful for exposing the ideological effect of SFD and diplomacy narratives. Hemmings suggests that feminist analysis and dialogue can potentially offer a position of ‘reflexive non-innocence’, which assumes both complicity and ethical accountability in knowledge construction projects including scholarship. While critically discussing dominant narratives, I acknowledge that other local stories and practices exist in movements towards justice (cf. Nicholls, Giles, and Sethna 2010). As Kaplan (1992) suggests, critical feminist transnational analysis helps ‘to express the possibilities for links and affiliations, as well as differences among women who inhabit different locals’ (116). This sensibility ultimately seeks to construct new ways to think about and ultimately rearticulate the ‘current economic and cultural hegemonies that are taking new global forms’ (Grewal and Kaplan 2002, 17).

Organizationally, in what follows, I more fully contextualize elements of broader development and diplomacy agendas by placing critiques of development agendas in conversation with frameworks of the ‘Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports’ campaign. This analysis helps to make visible the particular ways that notions of national security, public–private partnerships, ‘developed’ nations, and normalizing characterizations of ‘empowerment’ are imagined and – at times – disrupted. Next, I discuss the convergence of simplified notions of ‘agency’ and (post)colonial gender equity discourses within the ‘Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports’ campaign. This convergence both challenges stereotypical visions and rearticulates (post)colonial fantasies of the racialized ‘other’ while also revealing the rise of neoliberal feminism. I conclude by acknowledging the limits of this analysis as well as the continuing need for ‘reflexive non-innocence’ and feminist transnational criticism within sport studies scholarship.

1. Situating gender, neoliberal development, and sports diplomacy

The Presidency of Barack Obama ushered in a renewed commitment towards both diplomacy and addressing global gender issues previously championed under the presidency of William Clinton (1993–2001) but marginalized during the prior administration (2001–2009) of George W. Bush (Garner 2012). Beginning in 2009, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton initiated a process to make the State Department – which is responsible for diplomacy – and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) – which is responsible for development and international aid – ‘more coordinated, complementary, and mutually reinforcing’ (Clinton 2010, 13). The process sought to create not only ‘a stronger nexus between diplomacy and development’ but also a ‘better coordination with partners in the military in conflict zones and fragile states’ (Clinton 2010, 14). Clinton also saw a need to ‘leverage civilian power by connecting businesses, philanthropists, and citizens’ groups with partner governments to perform tasks that governments alone cannot’ (2010, 15).

According to one advocate, this nexus enables the much-needed emergence of ‘people-to-people diplomacy-outside the halls of government and in communities worldwide’

(Satterfield 2013, 50). Read from this perspective, the case of the ‘Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports’ effort allows for a visible public site of development diplomacy, which directly connects leaders in sport industries, civil society, and governments with women living in other spaces across the globe. The additional use and circulation of sport diplomacy images via social media also potentially helps enhance the programme’s appeal to donor audiences, multinational corporate development partners while also reaching those citizens in the global North and South who have access to social media. Indeed, much has been made of the Obama administration’s use of social media platforms, including websites, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube for diplomatic aims. This creation of ‘Diplomacy 2.0’ has been characterized as a new vehicle of public diplomacy and as a potential way to ‘improve the overall American brand’ (Harris 2013, 17).

The ‘Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports’ effort additionally exists among a variety of non-sports-related programmes which include ‘multiple and wide-ranging global initiatives to promote women’s social and economic development, integrate women into peace and security building, address and prevent gender-based violence, and ensure women’s full participation in civic and political life’ (Advancing the Status 2013). These initiatives are conceived of as assisting with a variety of diplomatic aims including the enhancement of security goals. As suggested by Secretary Clinton, ensuring the right of women to participate in ‘public realms including sport is not just good for women – but is a matter of national security’. Clinton’s philosophy is:

Give women equal rights, and entire nations are more stable and secure. Deny women equal rights, and the instability of nations is almost certain. The subjugation of women is, therefore, a threat to the common security of our world and to the national security of our country. (Remarks at the Ted Conference 2010)

This vision functions to reinforce the US’ simultaneously ‘benevolent’ and ‘securitized interest’ in gender equality.

Sports diplomacy is thus used in the service of ‘soft’ diplomatic power, which represents attempts to mobilize attractive values, actions, and policies that are thought to be worthy of international emulation for the purpose of ‘getting others to want the outcomes that you want’ (Nye 2008, 95). Centred around assistance and ‘empowerment’, global gender equity initiatives offer a seemingly more benevolent image of influence in contrast to US ‘hard’ and coercive foreign policy interventions including the use of torture, illegal surveillance, US drone strikes in Pakistan, as well as the ongoing military conflicts engendered by the two long-term US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Despite the continuing US role in promoting militarization in particular spaces across the globe, a process which has had detrimental effects on the security and well-being of local populations including women and men in Iraq and Afghanistan, the tenor of American paternalism, benevolence, and exceptionalism frequently accompanies the diffusion of information about the US State Department’s global gender and health diplomacy efforts. According to Secretary of State Kerry, ‘The United States stands ready to protect and advance the health, education, and human rights of women and girls everywhere, because women’s progress is human progress’ (Kerry 2014). The mission of promoting sports for women and girls as with other gender equity programmes is frequently further justified as

not just the right thing to do, but the smart thing to do. When women and girls are able to fully participate in and contribute to society, whether in sports, school or the workplace, it creates stronger economies and more stable communities. (Satterfield 2013, 50)

In this way, the ‘soft’ diplomacy aim is to use ‘smart power’ which according to State Department advocates ‘embraces the use of a full range of diplomatic tools – in this case

sports – to bring people together and foster greater understanding’ (Empowering Women and Girls 2012). These programmes not only seemingly serve US State Department strategic ‘foreign’ and national security policy interests but are also simultaneously part and parcel of a broader shift, accelerated during the global economic crises of 2008, where states enter into public–private development partnerships. Clearly, there are multiple ways to form alliances, each with their own particular effects and consequences (Prugl and True 2014). Suffice it to say, this conjuncture is increasingly characterized by the commingling of roles and actions where multinational corporations are behaving more like states, building ‘corporate patriotism, emphasizing “soft issues” such as their value to society, causes such as poverty eradication, labor standards, environmental sustainability, gender equality, and delivering welfare services’ (Prugl and True 2014, 1138). Conversely, states are behaving more like corporations with branding activities, downsizing practices and the embracing of the language of business and efficiency (Prugl and True 2014).

The US government’s mobilization of sport in the service of gender equity also shares similar elements with the missions of other sport organizations and some multinational corporations. International organizations such as UN and IOC have been important sponsors of development sporting efforts including those championing women and girls via the promotion of gender inclusiveness (Hayhurst 2011). The UN has issued numerous declarations regarding the ways that sport can be effectively used in international development contexts (Darnell 2012). One such resolution promises that the UN will engage with private enterprise, national governments, and interested sport organizations.

To work collectively so that sport and physical education can present opportunities for solidarity and cooperation in order to promote a culture of peace, social, and gender equality and to advocate dialogue and harmony. (United Nations 2004, 30)

One specific SFD example is an outgrowth of the 2012 Olympics where the UK government has worked with the UN and multinational corporations in public–private sponsorships to administer ‘International Inspiration’. This Olympic legacy project uses sport as a means to teach lessons related to public health, protection, inclusion, peace, and female empowerment within a diverse group of counties including Brazil, Kenya, South Africa, and India. One aim of this and similar efforts is presumably to ‘organize sport to improve the lives and life chances of the world’s poor and marginalized, often in the Global South’ (Darnell 2012, 3).

‘International Inspiration’ much like the branding of the London Olympic Games extends the traditional boundaries of public diplomacy by merging state diplomatic efforts with development engagements offered by multinational corporations, NGOs, and multinational sporting organizations (Pope 2014). ‘International Inspiration’ receives support from such partners as the Premier League, Comic Relief, the GE Foundation, the British Council, and UNICEF (France and Jenkins 2014). And as Chawansky (2012) demonstrates new media representations of this Olympic Games legacy project not only construct the spirit of Olympism, but the coverage also plays off the notion of global ‘girl power’ thus ‘creating a certain kind of appropriate girlhood through the use of sport’ (473).

Synergies between the UN, the US State Department, and other corporate players are readily apparent in the documents describing the ‘Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports’ programme. For example, one promotional account suggests that:

Research conducted by the United Nations has shown that girls worldwide who attend just one year of elementary school raise their earning power by 15 percent. Those who play sports are more likely to complete their education and earn more throughout their lives. (Isaacson 2013)

Another account lauds the mentoring programme as a way for ‘American female executives’ to work ‘side-by-side with emerging female leaders (ages 25–40) from around the world, sharing valuable business and leadership skills’ (DeCastro 2013).

These corporate, diplomatic, and development synergies are additionally part of a broader shift aimed at reversing some of the most devastating effects of globalization, ‘market fundamentalism’, and structural readjustment programmes which characterized the 1970s and 1980s. Critics have referred to the subsequent revisions of policies by World Bank and many state governments that increasingly recognized the need for global poverty reduction and the promotion of equity as ‘neoliberalism with a human face’ (Molyneux 2008, 781).

It is also important to note that this strategy of embracing, promoting, and representing global gender issues has important antecedents. For example, ‘the series of International Conferences celebrating the UN Decade for Women (1976–85) highlighted the unique problems facing women particularly in the South’ (Parpart and Marchand 2001, 525). This era of Women in Development was characterized by debate and disagreement, although the framework failed to fully integrate challenges to long-standing inequalities related to class, race, gender, and dependency – long advocated for by activists. It is also important to note that issues of development and poverty eradication have a long and complicated history within the UN and state diplomacy efforts. Advocates of women’s interests in diverse national contexts have been key contributors to the recent history of these discussions thus placing gender on development and diplomacy agendas.

These concerns are now being addressed, albeit within very particular frameworks. In announcing the ‘Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports’ mentorship programme, Hillary Clinton offered a vision of active subjects desiring to play sport but facing barrier to access. This vision is consistent with similar SFD images discussed in the next section of this paper – which position girls and women as the important agents of development. Clinton’s rhetoric creates a vision, most frequently articulated within liberal democracies, which suggests that the lack of opportunities is the main barrier facing women both within and out of sport. According to Clinton:

There are girls and women around the world who have a burning desire to participate in sports. They have the talent, the drive, the sheer love of the game. What they don’t have is the chance to play, the chance to compete, the chance to prove themselves. So we want to support opening up more doors for girls and women in sports So we want to find ways to get more women and girls on the field, the court, the track, in the pool, the mat, wherever their interests and talents take them, so that they can discover their strengths, develop their skills, experience that special satisfaction that sports can bring, win or lose. And we believe in the positive effects that can flow out of that experience for girls and women across their lifetimes and, by extension, for their families and communities. (Secretary Clinton 2012)

As Clinton mentions families and communities, she also articulates another version of the ‘girl effect’ where girls and women are cast as agents of change and as being responsible for their entire communities’ development (Hayhurst 2013).

It is remarkable how similar this characterization is to other popular development representations ‘which reproduce entrenched stereotypes of women as the nurturing, self-sacrificing, hard-working heroes who will lift their families, communities and entire nations out of poverty’ or who help generate economic prosperity (Cornwall, Gideon, and Wilson 2008, 8). Consider this storyline articulated by former figure skating champion Michelle Kwan (2012) and posted on the USAID website:

Across all cultures, sport is a compelling leadership platform for young women in their families, communities and society. Sports are even more important when vital life resources

are scarce, as they are in developing countries. From the reduction of chronic disease, increased self-esteem and improved academic performance, participation in sport has helped pave the way for future successes. As sports opportunities rise, communities and societies will reap the benefits.

These accounts replicate the suggestion articulated by Robert Zoellick, then president of the World Bank, who argues the neoliberal axiom that ‘gender equality is smart economics’.

In addition, these sporting representations participate in a broader neoliberal development climate which normalizes ‘Eurocentric perspectives on gender by assuming that microfinance programs, self-empowerment and girls’ individual self-responsibility are the answers to many’ problems experienced by “‘developing” countries’ (Hayhurst 2013, 534).

These and similar dominant diplomacy and development texts also very crudely suggest that issues of low self-esteem and health reside in women and that being granted the right and choice to participate in sport will overcome these personal troubles for the good of the community. Furthermore, the ‘Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports’ campaign as well as many SFD programmes also share a set of assumptions with dominant discourses from the West about the need for bodily and individual choice, freedom, and universal human rights. In this way, these ideals of ‘empowerment’ are thought to be important, while the effects of global unequal power relations are downplayed or obscured. These unequal power relations have helped to produce the militarization of everyday life, a large wealth gap between the richest and poorest nations, and the proliferation of neoliberal economic and social policies. While the specific manifestation of these unequal relations depends on local contexts and histories, these forces greatly influence the availability of empowering ‘choices’ while significantly impacting the health, well-being, and structures of opportunity within local communities. Furthermore, the construction of global gender equality initiatives as national security issues additionally creates a scenario whereby future US military action could be ideologically justified by US politicians’ assessment of whether appropriate rights have been afforded to women and girls by a particular nation state.

2. Rearticulating colonial legacies and neoliberalizing feminism via sport for development and diplomacy

It is additionally important to understand the ‘[Empowering Girls and Women through Sports](#)’ campaign within longer colonial development histories. Read from this perspective, this campaign both replicates and challenges problematic assumptions connected to the longer histories of Western development agendas. As postcolonial scholars suggest, the rationale underlying the post-First World War development model is closely tied to lingering colonial discourses where ‘Third World’¹ people were thought to be backward and primitive in comparison to the alleged superiority of their ‘Enlightened’ white counterparts in the North. The dominant assumption was that ‘only under the direction of benevolent colonial rulers ... could they achieve progress’ (Wilson 2011, 316). That is, post-war development frameworks typically assumed that people or nations moved from underdeveloped (read connected with traditional institutions and values) to full development as embodied by ‘modern/rational/industrialized societies based on the Northern model’ (Parpart and Marchand 2001, 522).

While the presumption of Northern/Western expertise still circulates within popular discourses related to gender and development including sports-related discourses, there have and continue to be alterative narratives. For instance, as previously suggested, the

1970s and 1980s saw black and Third World feminists challenge reductive portrayals pointing out problematic elements of Western feminist, the limits of ‘Women in Development’ ideals, as well as problematic development frameworks which presume women lead ‘an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being “Third World” (read ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)’ (Mohanty 2004, 22). Indeed, similar narratives are not absent from ‘Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports’ representations as advocates frequently point out the limiting cultural (often understood as backward) restrictions which prohibit some women from participating in sport.

In her classic essay, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse*, Mohanty argues that this ethnocentric universalism in turn imagines Western women as the normative referent as ‘educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions’ (2004, 22). A related focus is clearly articulated in discourses, which celebrate a recent version of Western/North expertise through the notion that the ‘Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports’ programme is ‘taking the lessons of Title IX – of opportunity and equality – and going global’ (Stock 2013).

Yet, another storyline again suggests the need for US leadership and expertise, as well as the benevolent role of capital within the ‘Global Sports Mentoring Program’ for the programme ‘enables emerging leaders from all over the world – from the Middle East, East Asia Pacific, Africa, Latin America – to see U.S. business leaders in action’ as this experience ‘will leave an indelible mark and ideally enable these women to envision their future’ (Kelly 2012).

But as Wilson (2011) also observes, partially in response to Mohanty’s powerful critique, feminists and those working within gender and development frameworks beyond sport over the past 20 years have been careful to challenge the notion of women in the Global South as passive ‘victims’. Indeed, there has been an ‘increased focus on women’s ability to make decisions and choices. But rather than challenging the gendered/racialised power relationships inherent in development, this focus on agency has largely decisively shifted attention away from both material structures of power and gendered ideologies’ (Wilson 2011, 317).

In this representational context, girls and women are instead frequently characterized as making rational choices – in the search for knowledge. For example, sport diplomacy narratives suggest that participants have

been given a space to articulate the challenges most present in their communities. And through facilitated discussion, educational activities, and cultural exchange, these same women are now equipped with the tools, resources, and networks they need to tackle these challenges in their local communities. (Reports 2014)

This quest for knowledge does mention the challenges women face in regard to such issues as poverty and violence; however, this focus typically occurs outside of the acknowledgment of such structural constraints as local gendered division of labour or as part of transformative social struggle (Wilson 2011). Instead, as a way to overcome local challenges, emphasis is placed on acquiring useful knowledges such as that outlined in neoliberal sport development and diplomacy objectives, which focus on education and acquiring business acuity. Armed with this information, women and girls are expected to be individual agents of change for these

individuals demonstrate an ability to reach exceptional success in their profession as well as to share lessons with others in their home country – particularly girls – so that they may

experience the benefits of sports. In order for the mentorship to play into long-term positive change worldwide, each emerging leader will craft an action plan to implement upon her return home with the common goal of creating sports opportunities for underserved girls and women. (17 Voices 2014)

As suggested here, ‘Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports’ narratives problematically cast diverse groups of women from a variety of nations as ‘enterprising’ subjects with the capacity to choose and ‘cope’ while selflessly serving their home communities (Wilson 2011).

In this way, these and similar representations also help to counter stereotypical colonial images of passive victimhood. Instead, most of the programme images feature women in physical activity positions, or engaging with fellow participants and friends. For example, several of the images on the ‘Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports’ web page feature women flexing their biceps muscles to signify their strength and resolve. One image features two participants flexing their muscles next to US First Lady Michelle Obama. Almost all the pictures feature women and girls smiling suggesting that they are learning and having an enjoyable time in the programme. Here, the representational power of sport serves a potentially persuasive function in presenting agenic girls as well as women physically and intellectually playing, practising, and discussing the usefulness of sport. Accompanying videos contain women from around the globe discussing their status as ‘strong women’ poised to make a difference. These images and stories stand in stark contrast to some poverty reduction campaigns that show the devastation that poverty ravages on the human body in order to play upon sympathies from potential donors and corporate sponsors.

The images of athleticism and comradely found in this US State Department diplomacy campaign are additionally ideologically powerful. They articulate similar themes as those broader development discourses which suggest that ‘women in the South can be both “rescued” from oppressive and “backward” societies and “civilized” through subjection to the discipline of global markets’ (Wilson 2011, 329). The ‘Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports’ campaign additionally mobilizes and merges particular forms of liberal feminism championing the need for opportunities and equality with neoliberal sensibilities thus contributing to what Rottenberg (2014) characterizes as the rise of neoliberal feminism. This is a contradictory vision, which individuates and celebrates ‘girls’ and ‘women’ as agents, capable of bringing about economic stability and social change while obscuring the ways in which neoliberal capitalism travels across the globe to differently position gendered bodies within inequitable structures (Hayhurst 2013). These representations additionally help to veil ‘existing social movements which run counter to the neoliberal model, demanding the redistribution of resources, challenging the operation of markets, or confronting the violence of the “democratic” neoliberal states’, including that enacted by US ‘foreign’ policies, desires for national security, and military actions (Wilson 2011, 319). Critical accounts of such powerful histories, contexts, and actors are instead frequently obscured in SFD and diplomacy framings.

3. Final thoughts

An important caveat to acknowledge about this analysis is that by focusing on the representational politics of SFD discourses offered via the US State Department’s ‘Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports’ programme, this paper also participates in the erasure of local communities’ own efforts to mobilize sport for a diverse set of

purposes outside of neoliberal feminist developmental frameworks. Indeed, it is important to note that local organizations exist with their unique sport agendas and frameworks. For example, Lindsey and Grattan's (2012) analysis of sporting enterprises in Kamwala and Chawama, Zambia, identifies a broad group of stakeholders from civil society rooted in both communities who used sport to teach youth about local issues of local concern such as using team membership in soccer as a way to discuss HIV/AIDS prevention.

The process of documenting and sharing local 'bottom-up' sport programming to those of us living far away from international locations is not always readily accessible (at least to an English only speaker like me). There is also no doubt that the local receptions of ideas related to 'Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports' campaign will create new hybrid forms of sport through the incorporation of local histories and politics (Hayhurst 2013). In this way, I want to readily acknowledge the diversity of development projects, with the capacity of local actors to subvert and challenge the dominant discourses mentioned throughout this paper (see Nicholls, Giles, and Sethna 2010).

In a similar way, while not emphasized here in this paper, it should be noted that the micro-level engagements potentially enjoyed by the participants in these development and diplomacy programmes cannot be underestimated. And yet while acknowledging the possibility of micro-level productive experiences including the possibilities for pleasure, resistance, and subversion, as well as the enactment of new social movements around these issues, it is important to think critically about some of the dominant logics at play in the SFD agenda. By strategically exploring dominant gender, diplomacy, business, and development narratives, this paper joins other scholars who have previously interrogated these normalizing practices and assumptions operating within the popular SFD discourses. This analysis additionally reveals the active role of the US State Department and its corporate partners in imagining US political, economic, social, and security interests, which promote similar hegemonic SFD practices.

One final point I hope to have demonstrated through this analysis is the ways scholars, activists, sport promoters and local actors are linked in complicated transnational networks of power. Embracing a position of 'reflexive non-innocence' (Hemmings 2011) also means acknowledging the need to constantly move feminist sport analyses beyond a simple (and typically unstated) nation-bound focus on gender. Rather, the content of this analysis suggests the ongoing need for sport scholars to more fully engage with transnational and postcolonial feminisms (see Hayhurst 2011). Such a framing helps us to better understand the representational politics and notions that differences among women and men residing within diverse national spaces are themselves the complex 'effects of geopolitical processes that have always exceeded the nationalist narratives' of particular national 'belonging' (Wiegman 2002, 7).

Much as with women's studies programmes whose bounded knowledge projects frequently 'promote liberal feminist perspectives that cannot account for capitalism or the effects of histories of colonization and racialization', strands of feminist scholarship about sport, frequently fail to fully interrogate transnational global relations (Wiegman 2002, 7). In contrast, critical transnational feminist lenses help reveal global interrelationships and the hierarchical gendered exercise of power while exposing the interests of multinational corporations and the imperial practices of nations via gendered and normalizing processes.

Drawing upon similar sensibilities, this paper has interrogated some of the normalizing practices and assumptions operating within the popular discourses of the 'Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports' programme. Thus, while those sympathetic to development and diplomacy aims might ask what can be done for 'developing' countries,

critical transnational feminists sensibilities advocate for an interrogation of such questions in order to productively engage across the borders of differences.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note

1. There is disagreement about whether or not Third World and First World represent appropriate terminologies and political relationships. In this paper, Third World largely serves as a political term and short hand for Africa, Latin America, and Asia – where First World represents the industrialized nations, largely of Europe and North America. Several transnational feminists have suggested alternative terms such as North and South to further reference the fact that exclusively an East and West do not define global hierarchies divide. Still others suggest such binary terminology erases interrelationships and dependencies, as well as indigenous and marginalized communities in the North and elite actors in the global South. Mohanty (2004) has advocated for the use of the phrase One-Third/Two-Thirds World, a phrase coined by Mona Etienne and Eleanor Peacock. This phrase recognizes how (trans)national policies and practices advanced by the middle and upper middle class in the North and elites in the South – One-Third World – impact the rest of the world’s population, often in ways that perpetuate inequities. The difficulty of conceptualizing complex relationships through existing language is apparent throughout this paper.

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