

From the girl to the world: good girls as political endorsers and agents of change

Abstract

This article explores the ways in which “good girls” have been drawn into political discourse since the 1990s and how they are figured as political endorsers and as agents of change. Girls are increasingly addressed as active subjects and future citizens. In a postfeminist context they are regarded as entrepreneurial and self-motivated; constructed as pioneers of progress through protocols activating the “feminisation of responsibility”. Girls are also increasingly prominent as advocates of social reform through their own deployment of social media. It seems then that girls are, in many ways, central to the political scene. Through an examination of good girl figures including Jackie Evancho and Malala Yousafzai this article explores how politicians and political discourse work to harness the voices of girls, to co-opt their youthful promise and to extract symbolic capital from association with them. The overall argument is that girls’ *assumed* future success becomes (mis)represented in political discourse as evidence of progress which is always achievable and soon to be attained by all.

Keywords : good girls, media, politics, Jackie Evancho, Malala Yousafzai, neoliberalism, postfeminism, education

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Introduction

This article explores the ways in which “good girls” are drawn into political discourse.¹ It explores how girls are figured as active citizens-in-becoming in the present and as investments in the future (Dubrowolski, 2002). Scholars have argued that in a postfeminist context, girls are figured as entrepreneurial and self-motivated. They are also addressed as the mobilisers of change, development and progress through protocols activating the “feminisation of responsibility” (Chant, 2005; Koffman and Gill, 2013; see also McRobbie 2009). And they are increasingly prominent as advocates of social reform through their own deployment of social media and digital activism. Girls’ and young women’s voices have become more audible through new media, claiming authority and knowledge across a range of political topics such as practices of everyday sexism, rape culture and LGBTQ rights; lobbying (Mendes 2015, 34-8). It seems then that girls are, in many ways, central to the political scene. Bearing this context in mind, this article illustrates how politicians and political discourse work to harness the voices of girls, to co-opt their youthful promise and to extract symbolic capital by association with them.

I begin by charting the emergence of the good girl on the public scene since the late 1990s, defining her characteristics and outlining some of the ways in which she has been made visible.

I go on to explore the strategies by which the voices of individual girls are drawn on and mobilised by politicians to articulate optimism and to endorse political messages and action. This discussion is illustrated with reference to sixteen-year-old Jackie Evancho’s appearance at Donald Trump’s Inauguration Ceremony, showing how the individual good girl can function as

prop, accessory and endorser when mobilised in the service of mainstream politics. I then move on to address discourses of the successful good girl and the pioneering good girl through an analysis of Michele Obama's work on the Let Girls In campaign. I conclude with a consideration of the media persona of human rights campaigner Malala Yousafzai as the embodiment of the successful and the pioneering good girl.

As a media and cultural studies scholar researching the politics of gender and voice, my analytical frame is derived from feminist-informed thinking about media representation, the politics of voice and the mobilization of postfeminism and neoliberal values in relation to women in public domains. The main methodology is discourse analysis for two reasons. First, the examples under consideration (political speeches, news reports, interviews) are discourse and second, as Elizabeth Frazer (1998, p.282) explains: "...girl's experience of gender, race, class, their personal-social identity, can only be expressed and understood through the categories and concepts available to them in discourse." Taken together, the discourses analysed here coalesce into regimes of knowledge which produce the good girls of the public sphere, establish them as ideal types and mobilise them to refresh and rejuvenate mainstream politics. My overall argument is that the notion of the good girl (and its variants) and of social progress become fused. As a consequence, girls' *assumed* future success becomes (mis)represented as evidence of political and social progress (always achievable and soon to be attained by all). As discussed in my conclusion this strategy risks side-lining or minimising the huge challenges presented by economic and structural inequalities; inequalities which all girls need to navigate and overcome.

Good girls in the media

There is a long and complex history of women and girls as bearers of political meaning and as subjects in a field of ideological struggle. Women and girls have featured historically in political discourse in various iterations, including as symbols of national identity, honour, pride or liberty (e.g. Yuval Davis, 1998; Warner, 2000), as markers of vulnerability or precarity (e.g. Walkowitz, 1982; Pilcher and Wagg, 1996) and as pioneers of economic development or consumerism (e.g. Cogan, 1989; Todd, 2005). Enduring continuities in the discursive construction of women and girls (e.g. the woman as symbol of nationhood) arguably run alongside newly emergent subjectivities, novel discourses and new ways of thinking about the individual, gender and the political. There is a consensus in cultural studies, feminist and sociological scholarship that subjects are currently experiencing one such historical shift, if not break, in political culture and in social structures. The features of this shift became starkly apparent by the 1990s. Angela McRobbie (2009) referred to this period, and its social changes, as the “aftermath of feminism” and Nancy Frazer (2013) as a time of post “state-managed capitalism”. Both thinkers are pointing to a relatively new socio-economic complex of post-feminism and neoliberal forces and the ways these are shaping lives, aspirations and public conversations about gender, femininity, success, responsibility, citizenship and futurity. During this period, as will be outlined below, researchers have argued that a new or newly-inflected political and media visibility of girls came into play, largely due to the joining of neoliberal and postfeminist discourses and practices with expansion in media production, marketing, celebrity and digital culture.

Scholarship has clearly shown an exponential rise in media culture featuring and/or addressed to girls since the 1990s. Cultural studies theorist John Hartley (2002, p.51) observed that: “judging by the daily and periodical press young girls may at last have entered history.” He argued that girls were becoming increasingly loaded with “public signification, becoming objects of public policy, public debate, the public gaze (Hartley: *ibid.*)” He maintained that girls overall were being deployed as part of a process of “juvenation”; a method by which the news media draw youthfulness into their orbit for their own commercial and ideological reasons. Anita Harris’s (2004, p.1) much-cited *Future Girl* substantiated Hartley’s observations through her extensive analysis of the growing abundance of webpages, digital platforms, books, goods and services aimed at girls and used by girls. She showed how these helped send a message (not entirely benign because of its regulative directive) that women are the “winners in a new world.” Her book charted the damaging divisions between what she called the “can-do girl” and the “at-risk girl” ; arguing that both subjects’ “fortunes are linked to the particular historical circumstances of their generation” (Harris, 2004, p.14). Marnina Gonick (2006, p.1) also described a notable “proliferation of images, texts and discourses around girls and girlhood” from the late 1990s. She considered, in particular, the media interpellation of the powerful girl (signified by the phrase “girl power”) and the vulnerable girl (the “revived Ophelia” see Pipher, 1994) and the ways in which these two iterations intersected with the changing relations between citizens and government in neoliberal times.

Hartley’s perception that images of girls were proliferating in print media was also later empirically substantiated by Sarah Projansky (2014). Her study of “the ubiquity of girls” from 1990 onwards outlined their significant visibility in magazines. She quantified the growing

numbers of girls featured on front covers including, crucially, generic magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* which were unmotivated by celebrity culture or the youth readership market. She suggested that girls were saturating the media (Projanski, 2014, p.58). Projanski put forward two reasons for girls' new visibility. First, drawing on the work of Harris (2004) she argued that the already "convenient figure of the girl" served to work through the contemporary social formations of postfeminism and neoliberalism which had come to dominate the social and political terrain of new times (Projansky, 2014, p. 11). As will be seen below, this girl functions as an adaptable, intelligent, entrepreneurial and committed "idealised citizen" who chimes with postfeminist and neoliberal values (Projansky: *ibid*). Second, she argued that media conglomerates co-opted girl power to help support their expansion of television following the deregulation of the American TV industry (Projansky, 2014, p.12). Both Nickleodeon and Disney produced what Projanski (*ibid.*) called "multimedia girl celebrities" and market research reached out to a new niche group of consumers who became known as "tween girls" (Hains, 2009).

While the powerful "have it all" girl championed by these media industries was prominent, other girls also found themselves centre stage, although regarded far less favourably. From the 1990s onwards the problem girl was also the subject of extensive judgmental scrutiny. The "bad girl" and the "mean girl" such as the ladette or the bully (Ryalls, 2012), the sexually precocious girl (Jackson and Tinkler, 2007; Meyer, 2010; Jackson and Vares, 2011; Dobson 2014) and the wayward gang girl (Chesney-Lind and Irwin, 2004) were repeatedly highlighted and condemned by the media. Often the judgement levelled against these figures was rooted in prejudices of social class and/or race. Girls who were white, blonde and middle-class were emblematic of both innocence and the social order and ,by implication as well as through explicitly racist media

discourses, girls who failed to meet these criteria were regarded with suspicion (Giroux, 1998, 268).

The powerful girl, the vulnerable girl and the bad girl also shared the stage with another archetype which I am choosing to call the good girl. Clearly, this figure has features in common with her counterparts, some of whom have already been described above. The good girl, like the can-do girl, has the world at her feet and is committed to career planning and future success. But unlike her, the good girl need not embrace consumerism as part of her identity. The good girl, like the “global girl” is friendly, unthreatening, “natural and authentic” and full of good will (McRobbie, 2009, p.59, p.89). But, again, the good girl need not be commercially relevant while the global girl, who mostly originates from developing countries, is used to sell brands and magazines. The good girl has a voice and opinions to express but she is far less likely to be a rebel or a dissenter than her power girl peer (Gonick 2006).

I am also calling her the good girl to stress her historical roots in the convention of girl-goodness once attributed to juveniles who were demure, hard-working and studious. The good girl has featured in the media as both ornament and testament to the promising future which girls should and could inhabit thanks to their formal schooling (for which they are presented as more psychologically suited than boys), their work ethic and their enthusiasm for self-improvement (Paule, 2017). A familiar and banal example of the good girl in the British media may be found in the annual publication of the press photographs of the high-achievers brandishing the degree certificates that will carry them into the elite universities (McRobbie, 1999). A more prominent global example would be the visibility, throughout the early-mid 2000s, of the character Hermione Granger in J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter novels and of Emma Watson, the actor who played her on screen. Granger’s advocates champion her as a model of contemporary girlhood:

“activist, powerful and full of agency, yet feminine, romantic and stylish- a new kind of feminism for a new kind of girl” (Bell and Alexander, 2012, p.11). Watson’s own image has inevitably been coloured by her performance as the bookish, sensible and supportive side-kick to the eponymous hero. Her activism, which advocates change based on girls’ and women’s ability to make choices and to act on them, might best be read as ‘neoliberal feminism’ (Rottenberg, 2013; Keller and Ringrose, 2015). Watson’s educational success (at Brown University), her elegant (rather than sexy) self-presentation and her humanitarian work help to position her as one of the good girls. In July 2014 Watson was appointed as a United Nations Women Goodwill Ambassador consolidating her image as a social activist and as a serious player on the humanitarian scene. She was subsequently selected by fashion magazine ELLE (UK) as its “fresh face of feminism” for 2014. As Angela McRobbie (2009, p.15) noted of these bright, ambitious and attractive high achievers: “we might say these are ideal girls, subjects *par excellence*, and also subjects of excellence.”

Political good girls

Through the 1990s and in the early 2000s, mainstream politics, as well as the mainstream media, sought to re(juvenate) political authority and political discourse by drawing girls into the public sphere. Contributors to Henry Jenkins’s 1998 collection *The Children’s Culture Reader* indicate some of the ways in which this occurred (see Goldin 1998, Giroux 1998). Jenkins (1998, p.2) himself introduced the collection by arguing that while the dominant conception of children is that they are somehow beyond the political sphere, in fact, the great political battles of the previous century have been ‘fought on the backs of our children...’ (see also Nunn 2002, pp.95-133). He highlighted, for example, how politicians such as Susan Molinari and Hillary Clinton,

mobilised their motherhood and the birth of their daughters to connect with their publics (see also Guerrero, 2011) And of course, parenthood can be mobilised symbolically as well as literally by political figures seeking to shore up both their authority and their humanity. For example in 2004 President George W. Bush, ; adopting a benign paternal tone, mobilised the girl child as both an interlocutor and as an endorsement of his statecraft. In his State of the Union address, made against the backdrop of the ongoing war in Iraq, he tells his audience:

Last month a girl in Lincoln, Rhode Island, sent me a letter. It began, “Dear George W. Bush. If there’s anything you know, I, Ashley Pearson, age 10, can do to help anyone, please send me a letter and tell me what I can do to save our country.” She added this P.S.: “If you can send a letter to the troops, please put, ‘Ashley Pearson believes in you.’”(Bush, 2004, p.211).

In an interesting rhetorical move Bush then speaks to Ashley directly:

Tonight, Ashley, your message to our troops has just been conveyed. And, yes, you have some duties yourself. Study hard in school, listen to your mom or dad, help someone in need, and when you and your friends see a man or woman in uniform, say, “thank you.”

A year earlier, across the Atlantic, Bush’s counterpart Prime Minister Tony Blair also mobilised the girl in aid of a campaign. In 2003 Britain’s Labour government developed an exercise in deliberative democracy called the Big Conversation (BC). It was launched after more than six years in power and well into Prime Minister Tony Blair’s second term of office. Timed to

dovetail with the bi-annual policy development process it aimed to foster a democratic renewal of public engagement in advance of a General Election (see Manwaring, 2014, p.113). The initiative also sought to respond to public despondency over the war in Iraq (launched in March 2003) against which many British citizens had protested. In the Foreword to the BC Prospectus Blair wrote: "It's time for a grown up discussion. Big issues need real debate, a big conversation between politicians and the people." Its promotional campaign included an advert released in November 2003 in which a thirteen-year-old girl asks: "Well, Mr Blair, what are you going to do to make our future better?" Blair responds: "You can come and sit down and we'll have a talk about it" (in Hollingshead, 2006). Both the gender and the youthfulness of Blair's inquisitor are thought-provoking here. Blair's "grown-up discussion" seems to be underwritten by a young teenage girl and one can only speculate on the characteristics that she was expected to epitomise: curiosity, optimism, approachability, intelligence, responsibility, futurity. Her youthfulness also fitted well with the longer-term marketing of "New" Labour as young, fresh and progressive (Yates 2015, p.111). Her fleeting appearance here was arguably a harbinger of the growing symbolic importance of the girl (as opposed to boys or children in general) in political rhetoric and communications.

Both these examples feature the girl as a rhetorical device and as a flattering foil to the leader who is depicted as approachable, authoritative and above all paternal. While Bush's actions are authorised by the good girl, Blair is confronted with the girl's challenge which he shows he is ready to meet. This calls to mind the famous 1915 British propaganda poster in which a girl, sitting on her father's knee, asks "Daddy, what did you do in the Great War?" As she points at the history book on her lap her brother, seemingly oblivious to the discussion, kneels on the floor playing with his toy soldiers. The daughter holds her father to account for his past actions while

the son rehearses his future role as a man of action (see Olsen, 2014). Where once the figure of the girl was deployed to admonish her father, who had failed to do his duty now, with Bush and Blair, she's used to bolster political authority and to endorse action. All these examples arguably establish the good girl as the voice of reason, as someone ideally suited to test and to attest to the proper functioning of the political public sphere.

So how is the good girl defined: what are her characteristics, what is her use-value? Preliminary answers are set out in these examples. The good girl is figured as serious (interested in history, politics, democratic process, equality), educated (qualified, the book in her lap, putting pen to paper), industrious and articulate and mature for her years. She lends a "fresh face" to feminism, or to politics or to the political scene at large. She is a "citizen-in-becoming" with all that this entails (Dubrowolsky, 2002, p. 45). Considered in this schematic way her contribution seems relatively clear and her appearance on the political scene eminently manageable. But naturally the reality is more complex. As the following discussion of Jackie Evancho will show, girls, like all subjects, are agentic and the political field in which they are situated is turbulent and unpredictable ..

'Good job Jackie': endorsing and challenging Donald Trump

On Friday 20th January 2017 sixteen-year-old Jackie Evancho took centre stage as she sang the Star-Spangled Banner at the 58th Presidential Inaugural Ceremony on the West front of the

Capitol Building in Washington. She stood on the balcony, immaculately dressed in a simply cut powder-white coat with a collar studded in costume gems, holding a microphone in her tan leather-gloved hand. She wore her blonde hair loose and long. She appeared to be the very picture of demure white teen femininity. As Drucilla Cornell (1995, p.83) has observed, with reference to the work of bell hooks: “it is much easier to pass as the ‘good girl’ if one is white..” and good girl characteristics, such as prettiness , reliability, serenity and care, are whitened ones.

Behind Evancho stood the newly-minted 45th President of the United States of America.

“Good job, Jackie” were the words President Trump enthusiastically shouted to singer Jackie Evancho yesterday as she stepped down from the podium after a rendition of the US national anthem. It was perhaps not an endorsement the 16-year-old believed she could have expected to hear when she came second on America’s Got Talent in 2010... (Noveck, 2017).

The Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies (JCCIC) handbook outlined Evancho’s credentials for this conspicuous role:

Jackie Evancho dazzled American television audiences at the age of 10, gaining global recognition with her stunning debut on NBC’s America’s Got Talent. Since then, she has released a string of platinum and gold albums.... Along the way the singer received numerous accolades, including: youngest solo platinum artist; youngest top 5 debut artist in UK history; youngest artist to give a solo concert at

Lincoln Center...Her broad successes led Billboard Magazine to include Jackie on their list of “music movers and shakers under the age of 21” in 2010 and 2012.

Expanding on her suitability JCCIC also noted that Evancho had been dubbed one of the “Ten Best-Mannered People of 2011” by The National League of Junior Cotillions, an organisation working to develop courtesy and character in America’s young people. As the press subsequently noted “Jackie continues to be well-mannered and is an ambassador for teens everywhere” (Sharp, 2015).

This was not the first time that Evancho had performed for (or perhaps we might say with) an American President. On the 9th December 2010 the child soprano and classical-crossover reality TV star appeared at the Obamas’ official lighting of the National Christmas Tree ceremony and on 2nd February 2012 she sang at the US National Prayer Breakfast. She has also performed at a huge number of other important national and international forums, including at the 2009 memorial ceremony for United Flight 93, the 2010 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, the 2012 Peace for the World Concert in Hiroshima and the 2015 visit of Pope Francis. Her work ethic since the age of 8 years old is impressive by anyone’s standards entailing the production of albums, live performances, modelling and philanthropy.

Overall, Evancho seemed to fit the bill for Trump’s inaugural as “the blonde, blue-eyed girl next door, who embodies heteronormativity, feminine frailty, Christian charity, and patriotic fervor” (Gorzeleny-Mostak, 2017, p.5). Her whiteness, in this context, reinforced the black girl’s ongoing “inscription in the margins of representability” (Bainbridge, 2018, forthcoming; Projansky, 2014). In political terms, is also epitomised, by implication, the ongoing disparagement of blackness and otherness which has been the hallmark of Trump’s election

campaign. His “Make America Great Again” slogan spoke “directly and plainly to [a] widespread sentiment that white people are losing political control and economic standing within a polity where social dominance is implicitly their birthright” (King, 2017).

Evancho was the product of years of media management which had figured her as essentially innocent. Despite her history of engagement with reality TV talent shows and social media she appeared to be untainted by scandal or any kind of sexual impropriety. Her musical genre, before she moved into pop music, was opera, but her tender age and general demeanor had defused the sexual charge inherent in the overblown passions of the operatic setting. In her analysis of Evancho’s (pre-Trump) persona Dana Gorzelany-Mostak described how her eerily mature, potentially erotic voice and subjectivity, the voice of a fully-developed operatic diva, was “juvenated” through her iteration of a pre-21st century innocence.² This was coded, in the early years, through references to nature, family, suburbia and home. Her conservative, almost outmoded, costuming, staging and album covers all helped to position her as young, authentic and above all natural (Gorzelany-Mostak, 2016, pp.123-4). I suggest that by the time of her 2017 performance these attributes had become highly cathected. At sixteen years of age “the performance of innocence” remained her currency (Gorzelany-Mostak, 2016, p.123). As the JCCIC handbook indicated, Evancho’s previous musical appearances and her media image together rendered her the ideal candidate for such as honour.

But even for Evancho the decision to appear at the ceremony of a figure as divisive as Trump was controversial. While the Noveck quotation (above) suggests that Trump was endorsing the singer it could be argued that she was endorsing him and this created some image-management problems for her. Many obvious candidates in the music industries instinctively held back from taking part in the ceremony and much coverage was devoted to the artists who declined to

perform. Questions were asked by journalists, fans and by performers themselves about whether and how artists' personal political values could be reconciled with the dubious honour of singing the national anthem. As one influential public relations agent said: "In our politically charged world, performing for Trump is a political statement" (in LeDonne, 2016). Evancho, whose youth disenfranchised her from voting in the election, refused to accept that she was politically compromised by her involvement. She maintained that she was singing for her country not for an ideology:

"I'm not exactly sure why so many people won't perform at the inauguration... Maybe because they are a bit more involved in politics than I am. I'm 16, I don't really pay much attention to politics to begin with, so it's not a thought that crossed my mind when this opportunity was offered" (in Ferguson and Caro, 2017).

In fact, her appearance was complicated by the personalized politics of her own family circumstances as well as by the larger politics of the national scene. Her older sister Juliet came out as transgender in 2015 and the Evancho family was in the process of filing a federal discrimination lawsuit against her school district over the right to use women's toilet facilities. This fact sat awkwardly alongside Trump's highly socially conservative views, his early verbal attacks on sexual and reproductive health and his ill-informed and damaging statements on transgender issues. Vice President Elect Mike Pence's "unequivocal public record of draconian anti-choice and anti-LGBTQ" rights added to the problem (Girard, 2017, p.6). The sisters negotiated the awkward fact of Jackie's forthcoming inauguration appearance with difficulty. A *New York Times* report observed:

Juliet, who has tagged along to Jackie's performances for years to cheer her on - including at the National Christmas Tree lighting ceremony with President Obama in 2010 - said she would not travel with the family to Washington to celebrate her sister's singing at the Capitol. Juliet said that she had become careful about "literally" everything to avoid fueling more criticism. Next week, she said, she has "prior engagements" (Rogers, 2017).³

Since the inauguration, the Evancho sisters have actively campaigned for transgender rights in direct response to actions taken by President Trump to roll back protections for transgender people in both civilian (February 2017) and military life (August 2018). Evancho requested a meeting with Trump on 22nd February, following news that he was rescinding Obama's executive order mandating that all schools that receive federal money must treat a student's gender identity as his or her sex. Reports noted that "Jackie Evancho wants to use her voice for a different cause" (Wong, 2017). In March 2017 the sisters appeared on *Good Morning America* to plea for a reversal of Trump's order. Jackie stated: "I just want to enlighten him on what ...I've seen her [Juliet] go through every single day in school and people just like her".⁴ In August 2017 the sisters were still "pushing back" at Trump's policies while promoting their new TV one-hour special *Growing Up Evancho* (Kimble, 2017) which was billed as a family reality show that would also feature transgender issues.

As a good girl Jackie Evancho was subject to two kinds of social and political pressure simultaneously and these could not be easily reconciled: the pressure to perform as a political subject, prop and endorser of Trump and the imperative to stand by her sister and the transgender equality movement. She was subject to the growing emphasis on youth participation in political life (of which more below) and to the understanding that young women should make their

private selves visible and their “authentic” voice heard for the causes in which believe (Harris, 2004).

From the girl to the world: girls as pioneers of progress

John Hartley (2002) argued that although girls have become so central to news media - addressed by the news, represented in news, deployed as metaphors and targeted by disciplinary mechanisms around their (mis)behaviour - they have been powerless to control their own image. He maintained that in the early 2000s girls were “presumed incapable of self-representation” and unable to share collective interests around which they might mobilise (Hartley, 2002 p.51). It is certainly arguable that being represented or addressed as a citizen-in-becoming is not the same as being politically enfranchised (see also Jenkins, 2008). As already noted, Evancho could lobby for political change but she could not vote for it. But at the same time, much has changed since the millennium turn, at least in terms of assumptions about the agency of girls in the public sphere. Jackie and Juliet Evancho were, at least, assumed to have agency, collective interests and the means to advance them (albeit with the advantages afforded by the celebrity).

It is worth considering in more detail exactly how girls are addressed as activists who can collectively “make a difference”, as entrepreneurs who can create change and as citizens whose opinions matter. Girls are increasingly being addressed as pioneers of social change, economic development and political (read democratic) progress through policies and protocols activating the “feminisation of responsibility and obligation” (Chant, 2005; Koffman and Gill, 2013; see also McRobbie 2009, p. 77). These initiatives include the many global, national and local development programmes which target girls as front-runners of social reform in developing

countries and as models of good practice in developed countries. A good example is the Obama Administration's Let Girls Learn Programme launched in March 2015 with the intention of ensuring that adolescent girls are given access to schooling worldwide. Let Girls Learn was a collaboration between the government agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of State, the Peace Corps and the Millennium Challenge Corporation together with other countries around the world. The programme established three aims: Increasing Access to Quality Education, Reducing Barriers, and Empowering Adolescent Girls through a Let Girls Lead Programme (LGLP) technology, campaigning documentary and communications and seed-funding new enterprises (USAID 2017).

The campaign was fronted by Michelle Obama. She launched the programme with trips to Spain, Japan and England as well as to African countries such as Liberia and Morocco. The programme made it clear that girls were to be regarded as the pioneers of change in their own lives and then too on a larger scale. It targeted girls both at home in the USA and abroad, both in the Global North and the Global South. It nicely encapsulates the two strongly emergent functions of postfeminist girlhood in the public sphere - girls as effective campaigners and girls as pioneers of development. Obama's challenge to girls in more developed countries to take up the cause of widening education and her references to their less privileged peers as drivers of socio-economic change positioned girls specifically (i.e. rather than girls and boys) as agentic and proactive, albeit in different ways.

The First Lady's remarks to the girls of Roseberry School in London is typical of the rhetorical address which positions girls in developed countries as already empowered to achieve success beyond the purely personal realm:

...with an education from this amazing school, you all have everything - everything -
- you need to rise above all of the noise and fulfill every last one of your dreams
And it is so important that you do that, not just for yourselves, but for all of us...
(Obama, 2015a).

To the students of Madrid she declared: "I believe in the power of young women like all of you to truly change the world" (Obama, 2015b). Here she urged students to campaign on behalf of girls everywhere using the power of social media: "you can take action to help these girls....So many girls are counting on you. They need you to step up and create an international movement..."

Koffman and Gill (2013, p.98) argue that girls from the developed nations "are seen as being the most empowered, socially connected and educated girls in history" and thereby split off from their peers in the Global South. This framing of girls is evidenced in Obama's speeches which stress the ability of her audience members to make things happen. These girls are the addressees of the "successful girl" educational discourse which has intensified in postfeminist times. In Jessica Ringrose's (2017) terms, this ideological positioning of the girl as always already well-placed to achieve is the result of complex processes which include liberal feminism's tendency to produce gender-only analyses of social problems such as educational failure. In these analyses boys are disadvantaged or at least struggling in educational settings while their female peers are better equipped to do well. In the US context, Kimberlé Crenshaw (2015) has argued that such rhetoric, and the initiatives underpinning it, deflect attention away from lived structural inequalities. She highlights, in particular, the male-centred framework in which US American education policy and initiatives are usually developed and how these marginalise girls. The result is a "celebratory, neoliberal discourse of girls' new found equality as a formula for the hard work

needed to attain educational and career success...” (Ringrose 2017, p. 474) . A longer analysis of Obama’s speeches would show that even when she does refer to the struggles that English and Spanish girls might face in their own lives, her central message firmly positions them as eminently neoliberal subjects who are deserving of individual success. Obama’s addressees are both capable of grasping success and they are largely responsible for the success of others.

This rhetoric also positions girls in the Global South as the primary beneficiaries of education. However, for them the stakes are far higher because they are also charged with altering the social conditions of their own communities. In an article for CNN Michele Obama observed, with reference to the LGLP in Liberia: “We...know that educating girls doesn’t just transform their life prospects -- it transforms the prospects of their families, communities, and nations as well” (Obama, 2015c). The *Huffington Post* summarised this philosophy as:

...the idea that educating girls in the Global South creates a “ripple effect” from the scale of the girl to the world — reducing poverty, increasing economic productivity, improving child and maternal health, limiting population growth, controlling the spread of HIV/AIDS and conserving environmental resources (Moeller, 2015).

There is an assumption that in the more developed countries girls , at least, have won the battles around gender and social mobility, regardless of social class, race or other differences and inequalities. From this perspective one could argue that relations of inequality become displaced onto the patently and visibly less fortunate “sisters” in the South. This characterization of girls has motivated the scholarly argument that individualized, girl-centred approaches to development thus risks reproducing, rather than transforming, these broader structural

inequities. The “common sense” idea that girls’ education solves everything masks complex social realities and actually depoliticises the mechanics of change (Khoja Moolji, 2015a).

Up until now I have discussed political address made directly to girls and about girls as practitioners of approved forms of social change. Now I want to move on to consider a third, related, phenomenon which is the re-voicing of girls’ opinions and the relaying of their experiences for the endorsement or advancement of policy or political philosophy. We saw an example of this ,above ,in relation to Bush’s State of the Union Address. Again , this strategy is used by Obama (2015b) when working to personalise the Let Girls Learn campaign for her Spanish audience:

I also want you to think about girls like Rihab, who lives in a remote town near the Sahara Desert in Morocco. Girls in her community are expected to get married as teenagers and drop out of school. But Rihab proudly describes herself as a feminist. She’s determined to become an entrepreneur and run a major company. And she recently appeared on Moroccan television urging girls to work hard and follow their dreams.

Here liberal feminist ideals are collapsed into a neoliberal message which suggests that an investment in education is also an investment in entrepreneurial selfhood (Author 2013, p. 69). In this way, the girl from the Global South picks up the baton handed to over by girls from the Global North. She is arguably sutured in through a strategy of governmentality which has already created the space into which she will be positioned as a go-getting individual, the heroine of her own life, the writer of her own biography (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Author, 2014). The implied message here is that if Rihab, and others like her, is to embrace the future rather than reside in the past (with all that this entails in terms of backwardness, conservatism

and anti-secularism) then she will need to be flexible, determined and resourceful because “[a]bove all, a future girl is one who engages in self-invention” (Pomerantz et al. 2013, p.190; see also Harris, 2004, p.6)

The successful girl and the pioneering girl: one and the same

The complexity of the field of power in which the successful good girl and the pioneering good girl is situated is most starkly rendered when considering specific subjects as mediated public figures. When personalising the challenge of extending education to millions of girls “who are assaulted, kidnapped, or killed just for trying to learn”, Obama (2015a) naturally turned to the internationally recognised figurehead for education-based human rights, Malala Yousafzai. Global media coverage has led to this young campaigner becoming both a symbol of hope and a respected advocate for change. Yousafzai, who had been an activist blogger and campaigner from age 10, came to public recognition outside of her home nation of Pakistan when she was shot by the Taliban in 2012. In the wake of this attack and her recovery she attained global prominence for her humanitarian work, speaking in prestigious political forums and being awarded numerous honours culminating in the ultimate accolade of a Nobel Peace Prize in 2014 . As Shenila Khoji Moolji indicated in her extensive analysis, the political claims for the rights of girls were made *by* Yousafzai but also *through* her by the many politicians, journalists, policy makers and campaigners who referenced her story. The deployment of the figure of Yousafzai as a Muslim girl, as a survivor and as a student – and as, above all, an *anomaly* within her own culture - helped to replicate normative accounts of other Muslim women and men collectively. In Khoji Moolji’s (2015b, p.540) terms “the interests of power centers - such as nation-states, monetary institutions, and media centers - translate into the consolidation or crystallization of

particular representations...” Put simply, it might be argued that Yousafzai’s exceptionality was constructed and asked to be read as testament to the oppression of all others. Yousafzai was the exception that proves the rule.

Yousafzai was relocated to the UK for medical treatment and then settled there with her family to continue her schooling. Her educational successes, as well as her awards, were well covered in the news reaching a pinnacle, most recently, by her entry to Oxford University. On the 9th October 2017 she tweeted: “5 years ago, I was shot in an attempt to stop me from speaking out for girls’ education. Today, I attend my first lectures at Oxford.” The accompanying image was a shot of three philosophy textbooks, a laptop and pencil. The British press celebrated her latest success in depth; highlighting her choice of course (philosophy, politics and economics), her other options (she might have chosen other prestigious institutions such as the LSE, Durham or Warwick) and the promising future that lies ahead of her (a prominent political post). The *Daily Telegraph*’s education editor Camilla Turner (2017) noted that her chosen degree course had also been the springboard for the careers of stellar British political leaders David Cameron, Michael Foot and Harold Wilson. Many reports highlighted her decision to study at the same college as Benazir Bhutto, who had been a Prime Minister of Pakistan. From this perspective, Yousafzai’s persona, as it’s circulated, developed and worked upon in media representation, bears a double load, functioning as a pioneering girl but one who is also increasingly aligned with the successful girl model. Her individual persistence, her work ethic, her first world education (a good girl persona nicely summarised in a single tweet) became testament to the empowering potential of the postfeminist neoliberal environment, regardless of her own personal views. Although Yousafzai is cited by Obama as representative of the millions of girls who are oppressed she is

also clearly presented as exceptional and non-aligned with the conditions of the majority other (non-Western) girls.

Conclusion

What then do these examples tell us about the positioning of good girls on the political scene since the 1990s? It seems that these girls are, in many ways, central to the ways in which mainstream politics is trying to rejuvenate itself. Girls become figured as safe and uncontroversial embodiments of present opportunities and future progress. They are mobilised abstractly, collectively and sometimes individually to promote, support and refresh conservative political discourse during a period of intense economic and political change. They are addressed as agentic, proactive and responsible. They are expected to participate in public life, to be natural, authentic and to make their voices heard (provided that they stay within the bounds of acceptable political dialogue). When Evancho took a position on transgender rights she risked breaching the bounds and this required extensive media management on her part.

This framing of the good girl is inherently contradictory because it presents girls as politically powerful at the very same time as it depoliticises the terrain upon which they are inscribed. Girls who conform to social norms around education, properly-directed ambition and sociality come to symbolise change for the better (Paule, 2016). But their *assumed* future success becomes (mis)represented as evidence of equal opportunity and progress (always achievable and soon to be attained by all). This assumption overlooks the ongoing obstacles to both individual and collective progress and minimises the huge challenges presented by larger economic and structural inequalities. As an example, consider the social importance of education, which is an important source of the good girl's credentials and her credibility as a public figure. Her individual success belies the serious obstacles and inequalities faced by many children and their

families. Above, I cited Crenshaw's (2015) contention that girls are not so well-served in the American public education system as political rhetoric suggests (see also Evans-Winters and Esposito, 2010). More broadly, there is evidence that the delivery of education systemically disadvantages the poor and the socially disenfranchised. These students are subject to both neglect and to ill-conceived interventions. Writing about American racial politics, the media and the classroom, Goldin (1998, p.154) summarised this well when she described the child in the classroom as the often unfortunate recipient of schooling as a social "testing ground" of strategies for social transformation. Goldin also noted (1998, p.154) "...many are worried that even the most token gestures towards inequality and acceptance are disappearing...we still also seek to "orient" both black and white children to conform to our political agendas" in ways which are profoundly unhelpful. More recently, Henry Giroux (2015, p.47) argued that American public schools have operated as "containment centres" for the "warehousing ... of poor youth of colour.."; a strategy which writes off the promise of a generation. Overall, the strategic deployment of the good girl helps to elide , occlude or side-line from the public conversation the considerable limitations to social success and public citizenship experienced by many less-privileged girls. A worrying consequence is that these girls, in particular, will fail to meet the criteria which qualifies them to act as political endorses and agents of change.

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¹ I use inverted commas on the first usage of “good girls” to emphasize the constructed nature of this positioning. Following on I have omitted inverted commas for ease of reading.

² Here Gorzelany-Mostak is referring to ideas of juvenation in relation to movie stars developed by Gaylyn Stadler. This is somewhat different from its usage in Hartley.

³ It was claimed that on inaugural day Jackie also released a recording titled Together We Stand, containing three songs: "The Star-Spangled Banner", "America the Beautiful" and "God Bless America". Evancho stated that profits

from the release would go to LGBT charities in support of her sister Juliet. I have not been able to substantiate this as citations appear on unofficial Evancho fan pages and in retweets.

⁴⁴ Transcript available at <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/video/jackie-evancho-sister-hope-enlighten-trump-transgender-issues-45681054>