Global Studies of Childhood
Volume 3 Number 2 2013
www.wwwords.co.uk/GSCH

Global Studies of Childhood

The Boundaries of Girls' Political Participation: a critical exploration of girls' experiences as delegates to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)

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ABSTRACT This article examines the boundaries of girls' political participation at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). It explores the structural and conceptual limits to girls' meaningful political participation, and brings critical attention to the problematic management of girls' political practices in formal 'adult' spaces. Based upon a series of qualitative interviews with 11 adolescent girl delegates attending the CSW in 2010, the study investigates how girls understand and challenge their political marginalization in order to actualize their participation rights. Using the tools of feminist standpoint theory, the author (re)imagines the forms and possibilities for girls' political participation by privileging their voices and experiences as *current* political actors.

Introduction

In 2007, over two hundred adolescent girls attended the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) as part of the United Nations' effort to 'facilitate youth participation and intergenerational partnership in global decision-making' (Global Youth Action Network, 2007, p. 3). Girl delegates participated in high-level plenary meetings, parallel events, and round-table discussions related to the theme: The Elimination of All Forms of Violence and Discrimination against the Girl Child. During the session, girl delegates shared stories of being soldiers, young wives, mothers, sex slaves and laborers; they spoke about their experiences with gender-based violence and discrimination, and addressed their needs in a public space. At the conclusion of the CSW, they said to the Commission members, 'Please remember that we are more than just a theme' (CSW, 2007).

This study was inspired by the girls' statement to the Commission. It privileges girls' voices and their experiences as *current* political actors, and considers how their perspectives might better inform children's participation rights. Drawing from a series of qualitative interviews with eleven adolescent girl delegates attending the CSW in 2010, the article examines how girls experience their participation rights in adult-dominated spaces. It identifies the conceptual and structural barriers to girls' political practices, and investigates the ways in which girls' political invisibility shapes the realization of their participation rights. The study affords key insights into the forms and possibilities for girls' political engagement and brings further attention to the problematic management of their political voices. Based on girls' CSW experiences, the article challenges us to think critically about how we do and do not engage girls in formal political processes.

 http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/gsch.2013.3.2.173

Girl as Political Subject

Over the last twenty years, girls have increasingly attracted the attention of feminist and human rights scholars – resulting in a proliferation of popular texts on all things *girl*. But despite this growing interest in girlhood and girl culture, the research on girls and politics is surprisingly incomplete. In fact, most studies on girls and politics tend to focus on girls' *potential* or *future* interest in political processes rather than their *current* political practices. Girls' studies scholar Jessica Taft (2011, p. 4) comments that girls' political participation remains 'an extremely under-explored scholarly topic, largely invisible in academic literatures on girlhood', and it is equally as marginal in youth studies and children's rights scholarship. It is my contention that this continued invisibility negatively shapes the forms and possibilities for girls' meaningful political participation. The following identifies key findings and gaps in the literature on girls and politics.

One frequent approach to the study of gender, age, and politics is to measure girls' personal or potential interest in the political sphere. For example, children's rights researchers Mayer and Schmidt (2004) explored the impacts of gender socialization on adolescent girls' and boys' perception of politics in China, Japan, Mexico, and the United States. They sought to understand how gender norms shape young people's perceptions of political participation. In the study, Mayer and Schmidt (2004) concluded that, although girls value political participation at least as much as boys, they were less likely to become politically active because they identified politics as a masculine sphere of engagement. Another research team led by Alozie (2003) investigated how the intersections of gender, race and socio-economic status influenced young people's interest in politics. They similarly discovered that regardless of race or socio-economic status, girls were more likely to recognize political participation as an important component of everyday life. Therefore in contrast to gender socialization expectations, both studies found that girls were equally (if not more) civically minded and politically oriented than their male counterparts.

Another common research approach is to consider the impact of adult female role models on girls' future activism and political leadership. Toward this end, Wolbrecht and Campbell (2007) studied whether female politicians influenced adolescent girls' future political activities. Their research found that adolescent girls were more likely to envision themselves as future political actors when female role models were depicted in mainstream media. They concluded that, with an increased number of female politicians, girls could 'close the gender gap in anticipated activity as the percentage of women in office increases, matching or even slightly exceeding boys' (Wolbrecht & Campbell, 2007, p. 933). Critically, this study evidences the power of mainstream media in advancing opportunities for gender equality via women's increased political representation; however, it also reinforces the idea that girls' political subjectivity is chiefly related to their *future* political selves and not the present. By characterizing girls and politics as a future event or age-related task, studies such as these make invisible the ways that girls might already *be* political.

In many ways, this popular regard for *girl* as a *future* political subject stems from rather traditional approaches to children and politics in general. Youth studies scholars Johanna Wyn and Rob White (1997, p. 3) comment 'the extent to which young people are seen as citizens in their own right rather than as "incomplete" adults' is invariably shaped by intersections of difference and relations of power. Because childhood is not a fixed or universal concept, the ways that young people conceptualize and articulate their political subjectivity depends upon their socio-historical location and the hierarchical production of power in their everyday lives. One of the ways that power shapes children's experiences is through age-based differences, where biological age affords differential access to social power and political status. Indeed Jones and Wallace (1992, p. 49) contend that because 'it is assumed that children can derive their citizenship rights through their parents, by proxy,' children are left relatively powerless when it comes to individually claiming their rights or challenging their marginalized political locations. In other words, when biological age dictates the conditions of political participation, the only option is for children to *grow up* and *become* political subjects. It is in this way, hierarchal structures of age and gender work to constrain girls' political engagement in accordance with adult models and standards. Because adults classify girls as *future* political subjects, I argue this conceptualization problematically determines the ways in which, girls can *be* political in the everyday.

In addition to the characterization of girls as *potential* political subjects, another common approach is to explore why girls are *not* more interested in politics. This approach presumes that

girls are apolitical or apathetic subjects disengaged from the formal political sphere. Notably, a small group of girls' studies scholars have complicated the 'youth apathy' hypothesis by examining girls' understandings of the political. Taft (2006, p. 330) for example rejects the notion of youth apathy to alternatively argue, 'some US teenage girls deploy the rejection of politics as a tool for political intervention'. She proposes American teen girls reject the political because it represents something done by people not 'like them' – i.e. those of a particular socio-cultural, political and economic group that does not often include or value the insights and experiences of girls. Chilla Bulbeck (Bulbeck & Harris, 2008, p. 230) similarly comments, 'this is not a generation with no opinions about politics ... It is a generation that tests the meaning of politics against the traditional definitions and considers that activism does not need to involve parliaments and "men with pot-bellies".' Both Bulbeck (Bulbeck & Harris, 2008) and Taft (2006) additionally conclude that girls often neglect to label their practices 'political' because their activities appear too concentrated or ineffective to connote *the political*.

On the other hand, Anita Harris (Bulbeck & Harris, 2008, p. 234) proposes, 'for some young people, a lack of engagement [may be the] result of deep suspicion of the formal political process' and not necessarily of politics itself. Because girls are not frequently given the opportunity to participate in formal political structures, it is not necessarily surprising to find that girls distance themselves from the political sphere. Furthermore, Harris notes,

> in a culture where youth often feel they are not listened to, lied to, belittled, and dismissed, developing a critical insight can mean separating oneself from the institutions of power, even if temporarily [and] we might call this a healthy disregard for formal politics and its agendas. (Bulbeck & Harris, 2008, p. 235)

Collectively, this recent scholarship illustrates the structural complexities of girls' political experiences, while also providing a more nuanced understanding of their presumed political apathy. Instead of assuming that girls need to be taught the value of politics, girls' studies scholars redefine girls' political disengagement to expose the conceptual flaws of an adult-defined political system. They further demonstrate how girls 'produce other ways to engage in politics and build community' outside traditional power structures (Bulbeck & Harris, 2008, p. 235). At the same time however, Hava Rachel Gordon (2008, p. 35) maintains that girls' repeated absence from formal political structures 'compromises their ability to become public, social movement actors' and competent political leaders. She consequently asserts it remains imperative that girls learn how to participate in the political sphere, regardless of their outsider status.

This study begins with a similar supposition and looks to evidence the possibilities for girls' meaningful political participation in formal 'adult' spaces. It takes seriously girls positioning as *current* political subjects, and in doing so, reveals the structural and conceptual barriers to girls' political engagement. This project addresses a critical research gap in the literature on girls and politics specifically, how girls experience adult-dominated political processes at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. Based upon a series of qualitative interviews with adolescent girl delegates attending the CSW in 2010, I consider the ways in which girl delegates experience and critique the management of their political participation.

Research Parameters

Epistemological Frameworks

Traditional feminist research relies upon women's voices and experiences to inform gender-based theory and politics. This study however, begins at the intersection of age and gender and builds from the standpoint of adolescent girls. Shaped by the emerging discipline of girls' studies and feminist standpoint theory, it presumes first and foremost that girls' voices and experiences as delegates to the Commission offer critical insights into the complicated actualization of their participation rights. It aspires to disrupt the normative association of *girl* with *future* or *potential* political subjectivity, and instead conceives of girls as already speaking, acting and resisting the conditions of their political marginalization.

Sandra Harding (2004, p. 3) defines feminist standpoint theory as 'a kind of organic epistemology, methodology, philosophy of science, and social theory that can arise whenever

oppressed peoples gain public voice.' Standpoint theory moves beyond discursive systems of power to prioritize the voices and knowledge of the marginalized, making the claim that, 'social and political disadvantage can be turned into epistemological, scientific, and political advantage' (Harding, 2004, p. 7). Standpoint theorists maintain that in privileging the experiences of the margins, we gain a better understanding of how systems of power operate to re-inscribe hierarchies of domination and subordination. Standpoint theory therefore allows researchers to illuminate the structural invisibilities that complicate issues of power and inequality.

It is important to note however that in standpoint theory the margins are neither innocent, nor unmarked by power. Rather, as Joan Scott (1991, p. 83) asserts, 'We need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences.' Far from a relativist view from nowhere, standpoint theory locates the knowledge of the margins within the confines of geo-political and socio-cultural difference. In other words, experience is not automatic knowledge, but instead systematically shaped and regulated by institutionalized power. Contemporary standpoint theorists thus make use of a particular view from the margins in order to examine how the *other* navigates the conditions of her oppression. It is in this way that standpoint theory provides a solid epistemological basis from which to investigate girls' experiences as CSW delegates. Indeed, standpoint theory enables me to prioritize girls' voices and perspectives, while further attending to the structural parameters of their political engagement.

Because I am interested in how girls experience their participation rights in formal political spaces, this approach helps to reveal the institutional boundaries and limits of girls' political participation during the Commission. According to Donna Haraway (1988, p. 95) standpoint theory requires 'the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not ... a slave to the master who closes off ... agency and authorship of "objective" knowledge.' Standpoint theory thus allows me to not only privilege girls' voices and experiences at the CSW, but to understand how adult-dominated political spaces operate to silence and marginalize those same voices and perspectives. Most importantly, this epistemological framework positions girls as current political actors with valuable perspectives on their political marginalization.

Research Site: the Commission on the Status of Women

In June 1946, the United Nation's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) established the CSW as the 'principal global policy-making body' dedicated exclusively to the advancement of women's human rights (UN Women, 2011). Each year, Commission members gather for two weeks in New York City to evaluate 'progress on gender equality, identify challenges, set global standards and formulate concrete policies to promote gender equality and women's empowerment worldwide' (UN Women, 2011). The Commission prepares annual recommendations and reports on pressing issues related to the realization of women's human rights. A total of 45 UN member states serve on the Commission at a given time with 13 members from Africa, 11 from Asia, 9 from Latin America and the Caribbean, 8 from Western Europe and other states, and 4 from Eastern Europe (UN Women, 2011).

As per Commission mandates, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) submit petitions, recommendations, research data, complaints or appeals to CSW members. Commission members 'consider such communications as part of its annual programme of work in order to identify emerging trends and patterns of injustice and discriminatory practices against women' (UN Women, 2011). During CSW meetings, NGOs also present critical cases related to gender inequity and discrimination, as well as participate in high-level plenary sessions and NGO-facilitated parallel events.

The CSW is further supported by the NGO Committee on the Status of Women (NGO CSW), which plays an active role in managing NGO participation during CSW meetings. The NGO CSW represents approximately eighty international organizations that monitor, support, and participate in the work United Nations at its New York City headquarters. During the annual CSW meeting, NGO CSW schedules hundreds of parallel events outside of UN headquarters at the UN Church Center and Salvation Army.

Adolescent girl delegates take part in the Commission proceedings in a variety of ways, but their participation is largely dependent upon their sponsoring NGO or member state delegation. In

order to gain access to high-level plenary sessions or expert group meetings, CSW participants must have a registered CSW delegation pass. For girl delegates, this means that they must be sponsored by an ECOSOC-accredited organization throughout their time at the CSW. In recent years, due to heavy construction at the United Nations, NGOs have been limited to 20 delegate spots per CSW session, with two secondary passes for entering the UN building. These restrictions have meant that with a limited number of grounds passes NGOs often elect to bring adult representatives over girl delegates; thereby reducing the numbers of girls who participate in CSW proceedings, as well as their global representation.

This study, for example, was undertaken in 2010 during the Commission's 15-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action. The session was attended by a record total of 3440 delegates from 138 countries; however, fewer than a hundred participants were under the age of 18 years and the vast majority represented countries in the global north. Critically, these numbers evidence the problematic ways that gender, age and nation inform the scope of girls' participatory rights during the CSW. But it also shaped the methodological parameters of this project.

Research Participants

In this study, I interviewed a group of 11 adolescent girls between the ages of 14 and 18 years. Efforts were made to select participants according to geographical, ethnic, and age-based diversity; however, these efforts were largely pre-determined by sponsoring NGOs and member states. In the end, the study included three girls aged 14-15, six girls aged 16-17, and two girls aged 18. Participants represented an ethnically diverse group with three Caucasian girls, two Jewish-American girls, two Asian and Asian Pacific girls, one African girl, one Middle Eastern girl, and two bi-racial girls who identified as African American and Hispanic, and Native American and Caucasian. The vast majority of the participants however resided in the global north; nine girls lived in the United States and Canada, one in Portugal and another in the Philippines. Of the nine girls in North America, three were first generation American or Canadian citizens. Seven girls were from middle- to upper-middle class families, with the remaining four being of working-class backgrounds. Ten of the girls spoke English as their first or second language, and one delegate required the assistance of a translator. The delegates were sponsored by different girls' organizations with ECOSOC accreditation including: Girls Learn International, Girl Scouts of the USA, the Grail, Loretto Community, and PLAN International's Because I am a Girl Campaign.

Research Methodology

Individual qualitative interviews were conducted to access in-depth descriptions of girls' experiences at the CSW. Questions were semi-structured and open-ended with interviews audiotaped and transcribed in the weeks following the CSW. All of the information was kept confidential and anonymous; the delegates selected their research pseudonyms at the start of the interview process. Interviews were held during the first week of the CSW (1-5 March 2010) in local NGO offices, UNICEF cafeteria, and the UN hotel lobby. Interviews ranged from 60-120 minutes in length, with most taking place at both the start and conclusion of the CSW. Due to timing and spacing constraints, a couple of the interviews were conducted for a single 60-90 minute period. A total of 20 hours of interview data was collected.

I used the voice-centered research (VCR) method developed by Brown and Gilligan (1992) and adapted by Mauthner and Doucet (1998) to thematize the information gathered. The VCR method is designed to accommodate multiple voices and experiences; it requires the researcher to code each narrative transcript four separate times – each time listening in a different way. Mauthner and Doucet (1998, p. 130) characterize this method as 'a phased process of listening to respondents as they speak about themselves, the lives they live and the worlds they inhabit.' In the first reading, I focused on the overall scope of the narrative and my relationship to that testimony. The second reading was about hearing how each girl spoke about herself and her experiences, while the third reading centered upon their interpersonal relationships and the broader social networks that shaped their daily lives. In the final reading, I focused on the structural and conceptual obstacles encountered during the CSW.

The VCR method is a detailed and lengthy data coding process, but Mauthner and Doucet (1998, p. 135) remark, 'if we do not take the time and trouble to listen to our respondents, data analysis risks simply confirming what we already know.' As a research methodology, it allowed me to prioritize girls' voices and experiences while further attending to the limits of their political participation. Based on the girls' testimonies, the next section describes some of the structural and conceptual barriers encountered at the CSW.

Girls' Political Participation: limitations encountered

'Ageism and sexism are two different things' (personal interview with Marie, 2010, p. 10).

Girls' experiences at the CSW underscore the intersectional tensions produced by age and gender in particular, the participatory constraints of generational politics. Despite girls' increasing involvement in CSW proceedings, their participatory inclusion and exclusion serve as powerful reminders of their politically marginalized status. Girls often represent a small portion of the CSW delegates, and as a result, they stand out in most CSW sessions. In the following excerpt, Andi notes both the representational power and collective limits of this normative exclusion. She states:

> Well everybody really wanted to know what we had to say because they needed the um, young girls' perspective on it cause otherwise it is just a bunch of adults sitting in a room talking about what should be best for someone that is not even there to represent themselves. I feel like we still had input and if we wanted to say something especially because like, we might not look as old as we are so, if you stated like 'I am Andi. I am fourteen and from the US' then people really paid attention because there are only a few girls at this whole thing. There is like fifteen thousand people here at this whole thing – I heard that number thrown at me at one point, but there is probably a total of fifty or a hundred girls. (Personal interview with Andi, p. 14)[1]

Ironically, it is because of girls' repeated absence from formal political spaces that Andi's voice carries more weight and authority during the Commission meetings. She experiences a sense of belonging and inclusion in these adult-dominated spaces.

On the other hand, Hannah argues that despite adult delegates' enthusiasm for girls' participation, girl delegates are frequently denied the opportunity to influence policy decisions in the CSW meetings. She notes,

> It is very comfortable and people are excited to see us here and are excited that young people are coming, but I think in some ways, we haven't affected the decisions very much. In the young women's caucus, someone said, another woman said something interesting that, girls a lot of times people will see girls in positions of leadership and see us coming here and will be like, that's so great, it is cute or whatever, it is good that they are doing stuff, but we don't actually have input in decision-making. It is great that we are including girls here, but they are not really doing anything to actually include girls, like in the high-level decision-making, we could have been more included. (Personal interview with Hannah, p. 12)[2]

Jessica likewise comments on being silenced during sessions,

> They were going on and on about how we are the people who are going to change the world, and then when we tried to say something that wasn't strictly to the Beijing +15 theme, we were silenced and they took the microphone away. (Personal interview with Jessica, p. 20)[3]

As a result of girls' normative exclusion from formal political arenas, Hannah attests many girls feel less qualified to advocate for their rights. Consequently, she suggests girls' political engagement requires more concerted efforts be made to facilitate their full and equitable inclusion:

> I think sometimes girls feel like their voices are overpowered by other people; like the women who have been here for many years or the governments. I think sometimes when girls aren't like, when there aren't a lot of girls in places – like the girls' caucus or girls' workshop – once you leave those, I think sometimes girls feel like their voices aren't heard as much. I think a lot of times when there is more experienced people who come in with a lot of statistics and powerful statements and they are talking a lot too – or at a higher level, like the official UN sessions, um, girls kind of start to feel like, 'Oh, maybe I don't know as much as I thought I knew or I don't

> know enough about the issues or they already know about the issues we are talking about.' So, girls kind of lose the confidence that they had in the smaller groups where they really like were talking about their own issue. Once they go out in some cases, they don't really feel like there is an opening for them to speak. (p. 17)

Similarly, Marie asserts that girls' voices do not receive the same level of authority and influence as the adult delegates to the CSW:

> I think that a lot of people tend to be patronizing towards girls and then they will be like, 'Oh, there is a girl. Let her speak for a while and then put her to the side.' Because they want to hear the big, important people speak about blah, blah, blah. Which is nice, I do realize these are important people and that we should hear their thoughts and their opinions, but at the same time, I feel like girls are just being discarded because um, people think that girls have no, they have no experiences, they are not educated, they don't know the issues as well as adults do. (Personal interview with Marie, p. 4)[4]

Marie calls additional attention to the ways that gender, age, and power limit girls' political agency, particularly in the context of their participation rights. In the following, she critiques the ways girls' political participation often favors token inclusion during CSW meetings:

> I think the most important events are the ones where girls are forgotten. Like today, I was doing – you know, the panel session in the morning and I just thought, you know – they made me speak, but I thought at times it was kind of patronizing. It was kind of like [baby voice] 'Oh, let the little girl speak for a little bit' and then, they just left me to the side until the last minute, so that I can end it ... So, yeah I feel that in general girls, in these events, even though the issue is about girls, it's – girls aren't really part of it. They are kind of just putting a girl for decoration, like oh look we included a girl! (p. 7)

Marie furthermore resists the CSW's prioritization of educational expertise (or technical experience) over that of girls' everyday lived experiences. She continues,

> Today, I attended another event and there was only one girl, everybody else was ministers and an economist and these big important people – but that one girl has the most powerful voice of them all and she spoke about the issues that she faced and she was extremely passionate because it was her life. It was her life she was sharing ... but at the same time, people just ignored her afterwards, they just asked other questions to big, important people because they think they are the **experts**. But they don't realize that they are not. It is the girls themselves who are experts of girls, who else are the experts? Right! ... But even the questions that they asked me, were very uh – like, I think I got it, I think I answered it well, but the questions weren't very girl friendly. They were issues that most adults would know after years of research and reading about them, but they weren't issues that girls can really talk about because um – it wasn't really anything that girls could relate to. It was more of like, 'Oh, after years of research, I know this and this and this' but, they never asked anything about girls living through these issues or where their experiences were. (p. 7)

Sasha is also skeptical of girls' inclusion in CSW proceedings, specifically the knowledge and political expertise required to inform CSW policy. To shape these discussions, girl delegates must understand how to navigate the Commission and consequently, she remarks,

> There is also the reality of what [adults] are going to do and how they might be moved by our statements – no matter what we say. I mean there isn't, I mean I don't know how much there is that we could say that they haven't heard before ... but I think it's also still really important to hear from girls and respect their voice. (Personal interview with Sasha, p. 10)[5]

After having attended the CSW for three consecutive years, Ann labels girls' differential treatment an unfortunate but normative part of the Commission. She expresses annoyance with how she and other girls are treated in these politicized spaces:

> I feel that this year, it might still be the same because it's still – well, you are younger than everyone else and so, it's like 'Oh, you can follow! You are not texting or anything like that.' So, I am predicting that it is still going to be shock first and maybe respect after. But that is kind of going off of other things that I have noticed too ... like legislators are always shocked at first that

> there are young people here that actually know what we are talking about. (Personal interview with Ann, p. 5)[6]

Sophie likewise argues that the intersection of age and gender prevents girls' voices from being afforded equal weight in political discussions. Her testimony focuses on the differences between women's empowerment and girls' rights:

> The differences between women's rights and girls' rights is that women have more maturity and are more respected and um, it is true that the things that she could say or advise are more weighted or given more authority than a girl and she can express more confidence – because it is so mixed women's rights and girls', but when we think about girls, we cannot compare the same rights. They do not have the same rights: it is false that they have the same rights. They are very different. (Personal interview with Sophie, p. 7)[7]

Like Sophie, Marie's participation in CSW brings attention to generational disadvantages experienced by girl subjects. She rejects the notion that women's empowerment *trickles down* to individual girls; instead, she highlights how age and power shape the possibilities for girls' meaningful political participation.

> When women are empowered, well women are empowered, but that doesn't mean that girls are. I feel like a lot of times, women don't listen to girls. They put on this false front that they are, but I can tell that a lot of women here at the UN don't really care about what girls have to say. And that is a big issue because, well you were once a girl and you wanted to be listened to right? (p. 10)

Ann lastly reflects on the ways that adult delegates *talk at* rather than *with* girls. She offers the following advice to those interested in engaging girls:

> I would say try and make it so that when you speak with girls, um don't come off as 'Okay, I am an adult, I am in charge – do as I say, not as I do.' Be a team member; earn their trust before you start maybe giving advice or anything because if you don't have their trust, then they are not going to listen anyway. (p. 16)

Taken together, girl delegates' testimonies illustrate the structural and conceptual barriers to girls' political participation at the CSW. Whether encountering the impacts of generational power differences, political marginalization, tokenism, or silencing, girls' experiences bring critical attention to the problematic management of their current political practices. Based on girls' experiences, this section highlighted how girl delegates critique and perceive their participation rights in formal 'adult' spaces.

Concluding Thoughts

> 'It's in your best interests too' (Sasha, p. 20).

Women's human rights scholar Sally Engle-Merry (2006, p. 37) characterizes the CSW as 'a transnational setting that has its own norms, values, and cultural practices' – the bulk of which reflect adult women's interests and concerns. Because of the historical exclusion of girl children from CSW proceedings, their present inclusion remains fraught with the logistical and conceptual tensions produced by years of participatory marginalization and generational disadvantage. Girls, it is frequently said, require too much supervision and preparation, and their engagement is difficult, time-consuming, and expensive. Moreover, children's rights scholar Marc Jans (2004, p. 31) attests 'system-controlled participation models' like the CSW 'often become training grounds for children, who, due to their lack of political rights, cannot fully participate' but rather *learn* to be successful citizens in accordance with adult interests and norms. In other words, the management of girls' CSW engagement ensures that girl delegates learn to participate *appropriately,* and that they do not disrupt accepted practices and models for the successful realization of human rights. As a result, Jans (2004, p. 27) provocatively asks, 'is it meaningful to provide children with an adult-centric notion of citizenship? If not, in what way can children be seen as citizens.'

This study investigated girls' experiences as delegates to the CSW in order to illustrate how girls encounter the limits of their participation rights in adult-dominated political arenas. By

privileging girls' voices and perspectives as marginalized subjects, it advances a more nuanced understanding of what is missing or problematic in our current approach to girls' political engagement. Based on the CSW girl delegates' critiques and perspectives, I offer the following recommendations for better realizing girls' participation rights:

- Promote the *annual* inclusion of girl delegates in member state and NGO delegations;
- Incorporate 'girl-friendly' (or less technical) language to encourage dialogue across generations, nations and life experiences;
- Listen to girls as political peers with valuable insights and knowledge to share;
- Include girl delegates in the preparation and outcomes of expert-group meetings and panel discussions;
- Differentiate between girls' human rights and women's rights; and
- Provide opportunities for girls to engage with others as experts in their own lives.

Feminist standpoint theorists conclude that the view from the margins illuminates how institutionalized structures of power function in the everyday. It is my contention that girls' experiences as delegates to the Commission on the Status of Women in turn reveals the structural and conceptual (im)possibilities for girls' political participation. This article is about listening to the voices of girls as politically marginalized subjects in order to rethink how we do and do not engage girls in the formal 'adult' spaces. It is my hope that this work sparks continued conversation about how best to encourage girls' political participation and leadership in our local and global communities.

Notes

[1] Personal interviews with Andi, 27 February and 5 March 2010.

[2] Personal interviews with Hannah, 27 February and 5 March 2010.

[3] Personal interview with Jessica, 1 and 2 March 2010.

[4] Personal interview with Marie, 3 March 2010.

[5] Personal interviews with Sasha, 27 February and 4 March 2010.

[6] Personal interviews with Ann, 28 February and 3 March 2010.

[7] Personal interview with Sophie, 4 March 2010.

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