Empowerment for Sale: The Price of Neoliberal Feminism within the field of Development.

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2024/25

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of BSc in Politics and International Relations.

I declare that the research contained herein was granted approval by the SPAIS Ethics Working Group.

Acknowledgements:

Abstract:

As we enter a heightened post feminist society, this dissertation engages with the present moment by analysing two previous periods in which feminist ideologies came to represent bigger changes happening in the world. By tracing how empowerment narratives have transformed under neoliberalism, this research engages with the contested concept of empowerment and its construction across different contexts within the field of development. Contributing to current research by analysing how these constructions have changed under the pervasive model of neoliberalism, which operates as a political rationality shaping nearly all aspects of life. Embedded within the field of gender and development (GAD), I conduct my research through two key historical case studies which offer real world context to a wider paradigm shift within development discourse. Following a logical structure, I first conceptualise the term empowerment to provide crucial context for my subsequent case studies. My first case study analyses shifting development paradigms and the construction of empowerment within Bangladesh in the 1990s. Following this, I analyse a second case study, a global campaign targeting the empowerment of adolescent girls in the early 2000s. Despite key differences, both case studies reveal similar patterns regarding the neoliberal construction of empowerment within development discourse, revealing key insights into the term's construction since its original conception in the 1980s. Offering a timely contribution to the field by analysing how messages of empowerment were relayed during two previous shifts in global feminism and development, my research provides crucial background for navigating this new era of heightened post feminist backlash.

Word count: 10 000

Contents:

List of Abbreviations:

DFID	UK Department for International Development
CSR	Corporate Social Responsbility
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GAD	Gender and Development
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NORDAD	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
WID	Women in Development
WAD	Women and Development

Introduction:

In March 2025, the UN reported that an expanding online 'manosphere' was mainstreaming misogynistic ideology, with an increase in harmful content spread on social media, driving a backlash against feminism (Lennon, 2025). At the same time, popular feminist discourse remains dominated by individualised narratives such as the 'Girl Boss', embodied in figures such as Bridget Jones and Barbie. Angela McRobbie (2009) traces this dual crisis back to the 1990s, coining 'post feminism' to describe a cultural shift where feminism as a collective project for social justice was becoming actively rejected and viewed as unnecessary. Gill (2007, 2011) extends this into a 'post feminist sensibility', both a doing and undoing of feminism, where young women are offered selected freedoms and empowerment in exchange for, or as a substitute for, feminist politics and collective transformation. This logic has taken root in global development discourse, threatening to erase the ongoing struggles of women and girls in the Global South by reimagining feminism through depoliticised and individualised frameworks that primarily reflect neoliberal values imported from the Global North.

As events like Trump's re-election in 2024 signal a shift toward an intensified post feminist society, this research engages critically with the present moment by analysing two previous periods in which feminist ideologies came to reflect broader changes happening in the world. By tracing how empowerment narratives have transformed under neoliberalism, this research engages with the contested concept of empowerment and its construction across different contexts within the field of development. Offering a timely and necessary intervention that unpacks how empowerment narratives transformed during previous shifts in global feminism and development, my research aims to provide valuable insights for navigating this new era of heightened post feminist backlash. Under the guiding research question, 'How have empowerment narratives within development discourse transformed under neoliberalism?'.

1.1 Literature Review

Development studies emerged in the mid-twentieth century in response to decolonisation, the rise of international organisations, and growing awareness of global inequality (Cooper, 2004, 10). Early

literature, like Myrdal (1968), focused on economic development as a primary measure of progress. However, scholars such as Young (1988) broadened this perspective to view development as a multifaceted process involving social, economic, political, and cultural dimensions. Gender, as a fundamental social relation, became integral to development, which Young defines as a complex process involving the collective betterment of individuals and society itself (1988 in Rowlands, 1997, 5).

Women first entered development discourse through the 'Women in Development' (WID) approach, following Esther Boserup's (1970) groundbreaking book, *Women's Role in Economic Development*. By challenging male-centric models and highlighting women's vital economic contributions, WID advocated for the integration of women into development policies and programs (Boserup, 1970; Tinker & Bramsen, 1976). However, by the late 1980s, the WID approach came under criticism for merely including women in existing structures; this gave rise to the 'Women and Development' (WAD) approach, which challenged the entire development structure, arguing that the problem was not women's exclusion but the exploitative nature of the global economic system (Beetham and Demetriades, 2007, 201).

Building upon these debates, the 'Gender and Development' (GAD) framework emerged in the late 1980s from a body of feminist scholarship seeking to challenge the language of previous frameworks. Feminist scholars were increasingly concerned that the uncritical use of women as a category reinforced essentialist assumptions linking biology to behaviour and ignored the diversity of women's experiences (Murdock, 2003, 130). As Scott (1988) argues, many feminists turned to the concept of gender to emphasise the socially constructed nature of sex-based distinctions, seeking to emphasise gender as a relational power dynamic involving both women and men (Scott, 1988, 29). Similarly, in the development field, the shift to gender signalled a move away from simplistic inclusion models towards analysing the structural forces shaping gender inequalities (Marchand & Parpart, 1995; Young, 1993; Parpart, 1995). As Young (1993, 143) notably describes, GAD represents the 'radical feminism of development'.

Alongside this theoretical debate, the UN's Decade for Women (1976-1985), which included conferences in Mexico (1975), Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985), was drawing attention to the lived experiences

of women in the Global South within the field of development (Sen and Grown, 1988, 15). This engagement with women in the Global South influenced theoretical debates, reaffirming that inclusion in discourse and policy alone would not solve the issues women in the Global South faced (15). It also led to practical shifts as the field looked for alternative methods and frameworks – notably, scholars conceptualised empowerment, arguing that women's empowerment could provide new possibilities for moving beyond current economic dilemmas in the Global South (10). For example, Sen and Grown (1988) wrote *Development Crisis and Alternative Visions* on behalf of Development Alternative with Women for a New Era (DAWN), a network of feminist activists, researchers, and policymakers in the Global South. They aimed to 'open the process of development to the oppressed women of the Third World' by applying empowerment to the field for the first time (10). Within their framework, empowerment included but was not limited to self-definition, access to resources, leadership formation, participation in decision-making and involvement in democratic processes (89).

While not exclusive to development studies, since its conception, empowerment has been central to the field (Rowlands, 1997, 3). Its enduring relevance is exemplified by over four decades of continued use; despite evolving development approaches, gender equality and women's empowerment remain core objectives for international development agencies. In 2023, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reported that forty per cent of bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA) targeted gender equality and empowerment, with $574 million dedicated to women's rights organisations (OECD, 2023, 2). The continued prominence of empowerment within development discourse reinforces the importance of critically analysing the term's evolution since its original conception within gender and development.

Current literature on empowerment reflects this sentiment, with a large body of work focusing on empowerment's widespread usage within the field of development (Batliwala, 2007; Sardenberg, 2008; Cornwall, 2010, 2016). Reflecting upon the model's early successes, Batliwala (2007, 557) argues that the perceived merits of empowerment led to its instrumentalism and subsequent transformation into a

'buzzword' by the 1990s. As its usage expanded, so did the range of definitions attached to it, spanning from transformative feminist frameworks coined by GAD scholars to more economistic interpretations that measure empowerment through quantifiable outcomes. With many definitions, empowerment has become a deeply contested concept within development studies, with ongoing debates regarding its foundations in power theory, operationalism, and applicability across different contexts (Rowlands, 1997, 9).

Due to varying constructions of the term, a key research theme has emerged that seeks to critically examine broader dynamics regarding the construction of empowerment, analysing whose interests certain empowerment narratives serve and whether they address or neglect the structural barriers faced by marginalised women globally. While this body of work has offered valuable critiques, there remains a gap in understanding how these empowerment narratives have evolved. Therefore, embedded within studies seeking to engage with the construction of empowerment in different contexts, this dissertation adds nuance to current research by engaging with the operationalisation of the term under neoliberalism, moving beyond a critical analysis of how empowerment narratives are constructed toward a valuable analysis of how these constructions have changed over time.

1.2 Framework and Structure

In recognition that there is not one specific method or combination of methods that makes research 'feminist' (Beetham and Demetriades, 2007, 199), this research adopts an approach grounded in the theoretical framework of Gender and Development (GAD), acknowledging the multifaceted nature of gendered experiences by engaging with lived realities through in-depth case studies. Following a chronological structure, firstly laying out the conceptual framework, then moving to a 1990s case study of Saptagram, and finally, to a 2000s case study of the Girl Effect.

Chapter Two seeks to clarify the ambiguity around empowerment by outlining key debates within the literature, discussing foundational scholars and establishing the conceptual lens through which this

research understands empowerment. Following this conceptual discussion, Chapter Three engages with my first case study, Saptagram Nari Swaridad Parishad, which illustrates the first wave of neoliberal discourse within development. Operating in Bangladesh from the 1970s to the early 2000s, Saptagram navigated evolving donor priorities and a rapidly changing development landscape. As a relatively underresearched Bangladeshi NGO, my case study offers valuable contributions to the field, revealing key insights into broader paradigmatic shifts within development discourse.

Chapter Four examines my second case study, the Girl Effect – a corporate campaign launched by Nike in 2008 that exemplifies the second neoliberal wave in development discourse, a continuation of the first wave but with new, distinct themes. Despite global visibility, the Girl Effect has received limited critical scholarly attention, with most existing literature focusing on its promises (Switzer, 2013, 347). Therefore, by situating it within broader debates on neoliberal feminism, my second case study aims to provide a more critical analysis of the campaign to the field. I chose these two case studies as they enable a comparative exploration of empowerment from the 1990s to the 2000s, offering depth and real-world context to the evolving transformation of empowerment narratives under neoliberalism.

Chapter Two: Conceptual Framework

This chapter establishes the conceptual framework for my research by critically examining the evolving concept of empowerment and its diverse theoretical approaches within development studies. It then traces the transformation of empowerment during the rise of neoliberalism, analysing how this broader shift has influenced the emergence of neoliberal feminism. By engaging with contemporary empowerment debates within development literature, this chapter lays the foundations for examining how neoliberal ideologies have shaped and permeated empowerment narratives in the following two case studies.

While not exclusive to women and gender issues, empowerment has been predominantly discussed in such contexts within development thinking, leading to its framing as a tool for addressing gender inequalities and promoting women's agency (Rowlands, 1997, 3). By targeting women, empowerment becomes central to the complex relationship between gender equality and development. Dulfo (2012, 1053) highlights these dynamics, arguing that gender equality and development are mutually reinforcing processes. While development can help reduce gender disparities, as Sen (1990) pervasively argues, continued discrimination against women can also significantly harm development progress. As a result, Duflo (2012, 1053) argues that achieving gender equality through empowerment is crucial for advancing sustainable development. The perceived positive link between empowerment, gender equality, and development has led to a proliferation of definitions and conceptual variations within the field of Gender and Development, rendering empowerment an essentially contested concept (Rowlands, 1997, 2).

While Kabeer (1999, 436) notes that 'for many feminists, the value of the concept lies precisely in its fuzziness', this chapter aims to bring analytical clarity to the term by establishing a clear framework for understanding empowerment. The Oxford Dictionary defines empowerment as 'the act of giving somebody the power or authority to do something,' highlighting the term's foundational connection to the concept of power (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). However, as Rowlands (1997, 9) notes, much of empowerment's ambiguity stems from power's contested and multifaceted nature. Dahl's (1957, 202) framework, often referred to as the first-dimensional view of power, defines power as that 'A' had power

over 'B' only to the extent that 'A' is able to make 'B' do that which 'B' would not have ordinarily done. This simplistic power-over notion measures power through a visible conflict; scholars have since challenged this idea, proposing alternative forms of power (Lukes, 2005, 39). For example, Bachrach and Baratz (1962, 948) introduce a second dimension of power, where power can be exercised without a visible conflict. Lukes (2005, 27) expands this with a third-dimensional view, arguing that power can be exercised simply by influencing, shaping, or subtly predetermining what someone wants.

By building on these multidimensional understandings, this dissertation adopts a definition of power that moves beyond an overt, conflict-based model of 'power over' to encompass more relational and internalised dimensions. Drawing on Kabeer's (2017, 650) sociological approach, this dissertation understands power as the ability to make choices. While Dahl (1957) argues that those individuals who can make significant life choices to the extent of influencing or imposing their will on others are typically regarded as powerful, this view fails to capture the nuance of empowerment, which implies a prior state of disempowerment. Not all who exercise choice are empowered. Therefore, this dissertation refines this distinction by incorporating Lukes' (2005, 23) notion of 'unobservable conflict', where power operates in ways that prevent individuals from even thinking of resisting. For women and girls in the Global South, making strategic life choices, when previously denied such an ability, requires confronting and overcoming deeply internalised oppression. Consequently, empowerment must involve what Rowlands (1997, 14) terms 'power within' –the ability to participate in making choices through the internal transformation that enables individuals to see themselves as capable and entitled to choose.

In contrast to the first two dimensions of power, a 'power within' model addresses the internalised oppression many disempowered women face, enabling them to make strategic life choices in an environment where they can envision alternatives to their oppression. By applying Freire's (1970) early concept of conscientisation, where people become the subject of their own lives and develop critical consciousness, Rowlands (1997, 16) argues that empowerment requires dismantling negative social constructs, enabling individuals to recognise their capacity to act and influence decisions. Central to this

analysis is understanding empowerment as a dynamic process rather than a fixed endpoint. This distinction is crucial because women experience power and disempowerment differently across cultural, economic, and social contexts. Therefore, empowerment through developing 'power within' is a process different for every woman, not a measurable objective to which static targets can be attached (Rowlands, 1997, 14).

This view is reflected across early feminist literature on empowerment. Notably, the most widely cited definition of empowerment is 'the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability' (Kabeer, 1999, 435). Kabeer's (1999) definition – alongside her three-dimensional framework of choice – is foundational to empowerment studies. Her three-dimensional framework for strategic choices to be made by women involves resources as the preconditions, agency as the process and achievements as the outcomes. Resources defined as 'access, but also future claims to material, human and social resources' were presented as the groundwork for empowerment. This framing expanded the definition of resources beyond economic resources, including resources that aided consciousness-raising and human relationships (Kabeer, 1999, 437). The second dimension of the framework, agency, is defined by Kabeer (1999, 438) as 'the ability to define one's goals and act upon them.' With a long history in feminist literature, agency is often called power within or the ability for self-direction (Abrams, 1998). Unlike autonomy, which Donald et al. (2017, 5) define as 'being a causal agent over one's life', agency includes defining one's goals and the capacity to act on and realise them. This dynamic aspect makes measuring empowerment challenging as it requires measuring a complex process rather than status (Desai et al., 2022, 509).

Unlike gender equality, which primarily describes women's relative position to men, empowerment fundamentally concerns dynamic shifts in power relations – by nature, it is relational and can not be measured through simplistic static outcomes (Desai et al., 2022, 509). Thus, in defining the empowerment process through agency, Kabeer's (1999) third dimension of achievements captures the outcomes of a complex process. Rather than reducing empowerment to mere access to resources or decision-making

opportunities, the focus is placed on measuring a range of complex and often subtle forms of empowerment, which manifests in achievements such as women experiencing the pleasures of leisure, engaging in the sociality of religious practice and the centrality of affective and supportive relationships with others in women's lives (Cornwall et al., 2010, 2). This reflects the view of empowerment as a journey, rather than a product, which involves constant negotiation and compromise with uncertain and often nuanced outcomes (2).

Recognising the processual nature of empowerment is one of the strengths of Kabeer's (1999) framework, highlighting empowerment's continuous and dynamic nature through her three-dimensional framework – preconditions, the process and the outcomes. In this sense, the framework moves beyond the static indicators of empowerment, such as access to economic resources or decision-making opportunities within the household. Building on the complex process of 'power within' as a necessary adjunct to improving women's ability to make strategic life choices. However, measuring this process requires more than simple measurements, as it involves understanding how individual women navigate the constraints and opportunities they face. In this context, Rowlands (1997, 23) argues that Kabeer (1999) misses the intricate interactions between the personal, collective, and relational dimensions of power as she does not enter into a micro-level analysis of the individual women. Expanding her critique, suggesting that by measuring empowerment through process and outcomes, Kabeer (1999) fails to acknowledge that, due to women's unique life experiences, not all processes lead to the same outcomes (Rowlands, 1997, 23).

However, while a valuable critique, Kabeer's (1999) inclusion of resources, agency, and achievements as interconnected dimensions incorporates the individual and collective domains without necessarily needing to dissect every micro-level interaction. Instead, it provides a generalisable model that can be applied across diverse contexts while still allowing for deep engagement in the relational dimensions of power. Due to this strength, this dissertation uses Kabeer's (1999) framework to investigate specific interactions at the personal and collective levels through two key case studies while maintaining a broader

understanding of empowerment, acknowledging Rowlands' (1997,23) critique by accounting for the complexities of women's experiences at each stage of the process.

While this dissertation draws on an understanding of empowerment rooted in foundational texts from the late 1980s and 1990s (Sen and Grown, 1988; Batliwala, 1993; Kabeer, 1999; Rowlands, 1997) – empowerment within development studies has taken on a distinct meaning since the 1990s. As Kabeer (2021, 436) argues, the instrumental use of empowerment within the field of development has come at a cost, as translating feminist insights into policy discourse has diluted the original nuance and political edge of the concept. Mainstreamed by the 1990s within development discourse, Batliwala (2007, 557) has argued that 'of all the buzzwords that have entered the development lexicon in the past 30 years, empowerment is probably the most widely used and abused'.

Departing from its original feminist conception, the form of empowerment as articulated by scholars in the late 1980s and 1990s (Sen and Grown, 1988; Batliwala, 1993; Kabeer, 1994; Rowlands, 1997) was gradually 'hijacked' (Batliwala, 2007, 558) or transformed, as it was subsumed under the broader neoliberal shift that came to shape nearly every facet of life. The recent prominence of empowerment within development projects falls under key research into gender ideologies as the epitome of larger socio-economic, political transformations (Silliman, 1999; Rankin, 2001). In other words, ideas and beliefs about gender are not isolated – they reflect and represent bigger changes happening in the world. For example, as neoliberal ideology gained global dominance, empowerment transitioned out of the realm of societal and systemic change and into the individual domain – as Batliwala (2007, 563) argues, empowerment has changed from a 'noun signifying shifts in social power to a verb signalling individual power, achievement, and status.'

While popular thought often reduces neoliberalism to rejecting Keynesian welfare state economics and promoting the Chicago School of political economy under theorists such as Friedrich Von Hayek and Milton Friedman, Bourdieu (1998) frames neoliberalism as a political rationality. Rather than seeing neoliberalism merely as a set of economic policies promoting radically free markets with maximised

competition and free trade, Bourdieu (1998) emphasises its role as a mode of governance which promotes individualism, autonomy and self-empowerment (Brown, 2005; Gwynne and Chay, 2022). This new political rationality shapes subjects, influences behaviour, and ultimately configures the organisation of the social realm (Brown, 2005, 37). While Clarke (2008, 138) asks, 'What isn't neoliberal?', suggesting that the concept has been stretched too far to be productive as a critical tool. This dissertation does not see this as a reason to abandon neoliberalism but instead makes it more important to define it explicitly.

Drawing upon Bourdieu's (1998) concept, Brown (2005, 37) develops an analysis of neoliberalism through a social lens, suggesting that neoliberal rationality has emerged as a mode of governance which encompasses but is not limited to the state and one that produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behaviour, and a new organisation of the social. Brown's (2005, 40) analysis forms the foundations of how this dissertation conceptualises neoliberalism, allowing for a deeper exploration of how neoliberalism has permeated feminist discourses. Building on Brown's (2005) work, Rottenberg (2014, 418) introduces the concept of neoliberal feminism to describe a new feminist subject shaped by neoliberalism – one who is neoliberal because she denies the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality, but also because she accepts full responsibility for her well-being and self-care.

Empowerment has become an instrumental tool within this framework, used by donors, NGOs and Global governance to operationalise neoliberal feminism in the Global South through the creation of female subjects, who are integral elements of what Berkovitch and Kemp (2010, 4) term a 'neoliberal matrix of power'. Transformed during two critical periods within both feminism and development, the 1990s and the early 2000s, empowerment has come to represent broader neoliberal shifts in feminism. The following two chapters present detailed case studies critically examining the evolution of this transformation within development discourse. By adopting a definition of empowerment rooted in the ability to make choices by those previously denied such an ability and drawing on Kabeer's 1999) three-dimensional framework – the following chapters will analyse how neoliberal ideologies have systematically permeated and

reconfigured the original feminist concept of empowerment which as Batliwala (2007, 563) argues, has

been 'interred without ceremony'.

Chapter Three: Case Study One – Saptagram Nari Swanirvar Parishad

Building directly on the conceptual framework established in Chapter Two, this chapter examines the practical transformation of empowerment during the 1990s through a detailed case study of Saptagram Nari Swanirvar Parishad, a Bangladeshi Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO). The analysis systematically traces the initial neoliberal shift in empowerment narratives through three sections: first analysing Saptagram's pre-1990s empowerment model, then exploring the influence of donor priorities and changing development trends during the 1990s, and finally examining Saptagram's operational adjustments as it navigated these external pressures.

Following Bangladesh's independence in 1971, a surge in aid for relief and rehabilitation spurred the rise of development NGOs, as voluntary groups shifted from emergency assistance post-independence to long-term development (Davis, 2006, 4). With a focus on women, these organisations mirrored global development trends but operated within Islamic power structures, shaping how they engaged with the poor population. In Bangladesh, *purdah* – an Islamic practice of female seclusion – shaped women's role in both public and private life, often rendering them invisible within the household (Guttman, 1994, 6). Many women internalised their subordination as their *kismet*, or God's will – reinforcing the belief that their status was divinely ordained and unchangeable (7). In response, development NGOs adopted the feminist concept of empowerment to challenge these entrenched norms (Kabeer, 2017, 659). By the late 1980s, NGOs had significantly diversified their approaches, offering everything from credit-based services to Freirean political conscientisation (Lewis, 1997, 35). While Bangladesh gained global recognition for pioneering microfinance through the success of organisations like Grameen Bank and BRAC, this chapter shifts focus to a lesser-known initiative, Saptagram Nari Swanirvar Parishad.

3.1 Early Empowerment Narratives

Founded in 1976, Saptagram was established with a clear objective: 'to empower grassroots women facing violence and discrimination in their daily lives' (Saptagram Organisational Profile, 2017, 2).

Building on my previous conceptual discussion, the following analysis explores how Saptagram framed and operationalised its core objective of empowerment from its founding in 1976 through to the early 1990s.

As Kabeer (1985, 204) highlights, in contexts where structural constraints restrict access to resources and autonomy, empowerment requires enabling environments that render alternative choices both visible and attainable, or in other words, preconditions. Saptagram aimed to provide such conditions through material, cognitive, and relational resources – the combination of resources earned this approach its distinctiveness (Kabeer, 2017, 650). Recognising that while access to material resources was a crucial entry point for women in Bangladesh, it was insufficient on its own to foster long-term empowerment. Saptagram, in alignment with other empowerment scholars (Mayoux, 2001; Kabeer, 2017), believed that women's financial inclusion must be paired with cognitive and relational changes to facilitate agency.

This approach is exemplified through their core programme – a group credit model. When entering a village, field staff engaged women in forming self-managed groups, offering guidance without dictating the size or membership of groups (Guttman, 1994, 9). Once established, these groups underwent a 'nursing period' (9) – a phase of relationship-building and consciousness-raising focused on issues such as the sexual division of labour, early marriage, and land and wage rights (9). This stage also challenged traditional practices like *purdah* by exposing inherent contradictions. As Rokeya Kabeer notes, 'women in torn sarees working behind the dilapidated walls of their huts are hardly secluded from the view of outsiders' (9). Such reflections prompted women to question whether *purdah* truly protects their dignity, especially when economic survival often necessitated public labour. This critical dialogue became foundational for challenging women's internalised oppression, providing women with key cognitive resources that facilitated new avenues of empowerment.

Following the foundational 'nursing period' (Guttman, 1994, 9), groups could engage with Saptagram's credit scheme, grounded in collective decision-making. As Howes (1999, 5) details, groups under the credit scheme used group savings and loans to progress from small-scale trade in paddy and crops to basic

processing and eventually to land leasing, petty trade, and inter-district commerce. This model enhanced women's control over economic resources, yielding material gains and disrupting gendered power dynamics around labour. However, crucially, without a shift in consciousness, economic independence can often reinforce existing gender inequalities, as women often bear a double burden of work while men retain control over financial resources (Karim, 208, 15). Therefore, the integration of Freirean conscientisation (Freire, 1970), using group discussions, education, and skill training to challenge internalised oppression and foster a collective identity, was crucially used to ensure women had the cognitive resources to engage constructively with material resources.

In addition, recognising the importance of relational resources, Saptagram encouraged women to form and nurture social relations within the organisation. By fostering relationships with staff, other members, and local leaders, women challenged power structures by engaging in a model of collective agency – a factor Saptagram deemed essential for sustaining long-term empowerment. Unlike traditional top-down development initiatives, Saptagram ensured that women themselves led the process of change. This is exemplified by the introduction of their Functional Education programme, as Professor Kabeer recalled, 'One of the first things I did when I started Saptagram was to introduce education for women' (Guttman, 1994, 14). However, she noted that it initially failed because adult women were not interested; they were more concerned with getting an education for their children (14). However, after a group of women discovered employers had tricked them into accepting lower wages for a road-building project, they realised the importance of education for safeguarding their labour rights (4). With greater literacy skills, poor women would be better equipped to recognise and resist exploitative labour practices. Therefore, in response to the demands of women involved in income-generating projects, Saptagram launched its Functional Education Programme. Kabeer proudly notes, 'The women came to us for education' (14).

This pattern continued, as in the second stage of Saptagram's adult education programme, the staff utilised a booklet of life stories as a key resource (Guttman, 1994, 29). Each story followed a Bangladeshi woman navigating real-world challenges, making the learning experience relatable and impactful. One

such story, *Albi's life story*, explored themes of family planning, gender relations, and dowry practices. After reading, women engaged in guided discussions, prompted by questions such as: 'How did Ajmat Bibi view family planning? Do you agree with her? Why? Finally, participants were asked to reflect personally: 'If you were in Ajmat's place, how would you tackle the situation?' (30). Rather than dictating conclusions, Saptagram field workers, known as the group *Apa,* acted as facilitators by introducing topics while ensuring that women led the discussions (Yasmin, 1993, 49). This approach provided intellectual stimulation, but ultimately, the women controlled the conversation, developing critical consciousness and asserting their agency in shaping their futures.

Going beyond individual agency, Saptagram further encouraged collective agency through *Andalon,* translated to movement or campaign in English, and often referring to a collective struggle or activism for social or political change (Guttman, 1994, 9). Embodying *Andalon,* group members would march to the local council's office to report abuses, such as theft of money, extortion of dowry, threats of divorce and rape (9). In 1992, the groups were involved in eighty-four such cases and solved their problems in seventy (9). Often marching on behalf of other women, groups were encouraged to work together to act upon their goals. The capacity to engage in *Andalon* was included in Saptagram's criteria to measure if a group had reached maturity, reflecting the value of collective action within the organisation (Howes, 1999, 13). Women were encouraged to work together to define and act upon their goals in almost all aspects of the organisation, from *Andalon* to their group savings model to their education programmes.

Through this broad, process-oriented empowerment model, Saptagram enabled women to achieve meaningful gains, assessing group maturity throuh outcomes such as loan performance or education participation but also by indicators such as *Andalon* and a group's ability to function autonomously (Howes, 1999, 13). However, as Arn and Lily (1992, 36) later pointed out in a crucial evaluation, disagreements over credit can often destroy a group, suggesting their group-based model, which based resources, agency and achievements on the collective, was too idealistic. For poor women navigating immediate needs such as food and shelter, the expectation to prioritise collective ideals often proved too

idealistic and, at times, unattainable. This, alongside a changing development landscape, led to many of Saptagram's transformative ambitions of empowerment gradually being reframed during the 1990s, a shift the next section explores in more detail.

3.2 Donor Influence and Changing Landscape

Saptagram's ability to implement its empowerment framework relied heavily on donor funding. This was not a unique process, as the continuing status of Bangladesh as a major recipient of international aid created an environment in which the growth of most private voluntary development agencies was directly linked with the provision of external resources (Lewis, 1997, 33). In its early days, Saptagram received funds from Oxfam, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD). Oxfam has supported Saptagram since its beginning in 1977, initially giving a grant of $52 449 for salaries, income-generating projects, a homoeopathy clinic, a women's club, a functional centre and a small agricultural co-operative (Oxfam Information Department, 1987). In the early years, Saptagram fell into Oxfam's wider strategic plan for Bangladesh, involving 'giving priority to the NGOs led by women or with a strong representation of women at senior levels' (Oxfam Information Department Report, 1987, 5). With the broadly defined goals of 'gender equality' or addressing the 'position of women', Saptagram met the simplistic agendas of key development agencies during the 1980s (5).

For example, SIDA, whose primary goal in Bangladesh was to improve the living standards of the poorest, began re-evaluating its aid strategy in the early 1980s (Lewis et al., 1994,10). It observed that government-led agricultural programmes were failing to reach the rural poor or address gender inequality, key issues increasingly raised by SIDA's constituencies in Sweden (21). In response, SIDA shifted away from government-based import support toward a target-group approach, leading to its backing of grassroots initiatives like Saptagram in 1982 (10). NOARAD echoed this perspective, describing Saptagram as 'one of the best local NGOs…their strengths certainly lie in their commitment to rural

women's interests and their democratic approach both with regards to their target groups and the organisation's staff.' (Guttman, 1994, 21). Further, despite a critical Oxfam-commissioned report (Maitrayee, 1986) highlighting organisational weaknesses, Oxfam continued its support throughout the 1980s. In 1986, Oxfam country representative Sue Greig acknowledged initial doubts due to Maitrayee (1986) reporting organisational problems but noted, 'the work going on in the villages was very encouraging', emphasising the rare and impactful nature of women beginning to gain control over their lives (Letter to Marieke Clarke from Sue Greig, Feb 1986).

By 1990, Saptagram's programmes continued to fulfil the development goals of its key funders by addressing the position of poor women in Bangladesh. However, the organisation requested a substantial budget increase, citing rising credit programme demands and staff salary increases (Letter from Saidur to Ro, 1990). The organisation stressed the unsustainability of operating on limited funds for over thirteen years (Saptagram Budget Proposal, 1989). In response, Oxfam commissioned a second evaluation (Arn and Lily, 1992), which found Saptagram's programmes largely effective in meeting members' needs but recommended improvements and pilot initiatives to consolidate progress (46).

Marking a crucial moment for Sapatgram, the Arn and Lily (1992) evaluation reflected a broader shift in international donor priorities, signalling the emergence of a new policy agenda. This evaluation redefined empowerment as a combination of awareness and participation, a framework that linked empowerment to measurable economic outcomes through market participation. This re-articulation aligned with growing donor expectations that empowerment must involve participation, which should translate into market productivity. As Lewis (1997, 37) notes, the 1990s saw the rise of this 'new policy agenda', characterised by a stronger emphasis on tangible results such as market liberalisation, economic self-reliance, and democratic governance. At the same time as this 'new policy agenda' (Lewis, 1997, 37) emerged, Saptagram received a huge increase in donor funding. In 1992, a three-million-dollar budget was approved for Saptagram's new Integrated Rural Development Programme, running from 1993-96. The organisation's funds boomed from around $150,000 in 1992 to $3 million in 1993 (Kabeer, 2010, 82).

While this expansion underscores Saptagram's growing success, it also signals a more profound shift in the empowerment narratives that appealed to donors within their 'new policy agenda' (Lewis, 1997, 37). My following analysis puts this into a real-world context by exploring how Saptagram navigated these new donor expectations.

3.3 Response

In response to the evaluation by Arn and Lily (1992) and changing trends, Saptagram proposed a three-year Integrated Rural Development Programme (1993-1996). Aiming to expand to 1,440 groups with 28,800 members, introduce individual loans for 18 462 participants, add a ten per cent interest to loans, and continue initiatives in education, health, horticulture and pisciculture (Saptagram Project Proposal for Integrated Development Programme, 1993, 13). The sericulture programme was also set to expand, including the opening of a silk production centre employing around 200 women (20). Marking a clear shift towards economic participation, financial independence and measurable outcomes, this section critically examines the contours of Saptagram's response to development trends, drawing on internal reports, donor correspondence and programme documents.

In 1993, the neoliberal notion of individuals lifting themselves up and out of poverty became visible within Saptagram's programmes through the introduction of individual loans, following the recommendation for an individual loan pilot project by Arn and Lily (1992). As noted in their Annual Report (1993-4, 19), 'till 1992 we had never disbursed individual loans. From this year, we have started giving individual loans, though that does not mean we will stop giving group loans also.' Individual loans met donor expectations by enabling more quantifiable empowerment measures, such as repayment rates, individual income generation and business success. These measures were easier to monitor and evaluate, and therefore aligned with the results-oriented framework that increasingly shaped donor funding.

However, while Saptagram adapted to new donor expectations and shifting development paradigms, it still retained elements of its earlier model, suggesting a more nuanced response than simple alignment

with neoliberal trends. While affirming that group loans would continue, Saptagram reported in 1995-96 that the maximum individual loan was set at 5,000 Taka – an amount based on what women felt comfortable borrowing – demonstrating that women's leadership and agency remained key even as the operational logic evolved. This signals a subtle operational shift toward the logic of microcredit schemes in the 1990s, with agency remaining somewhat in the hands of women but increasing emphasis placed on the individual instead of collective struggle and transformation.

This nuance was reflected within organisational reporting, where economic independence became a prominent term, marking a discursive shift within the organisation. According to the Saptagram Annual Report (1993–94, 19), economic independence was identified as the most important tool for transforming the lives of the women they supported, with educational programs ranked as the second most important factor. This reflected a shift in priority for the organisation toward an empowerment model increasingly tied to the notion of individual participation in markets. This shift was also exemplified by their budget allocation for their 1993 Integrated Rural project. Their general programme received the most funding, 725, 200 Taka, with their Silk Production project receiving the second most, 706, 900 Taka and their Functional Education Programme only receiving 219, 760 Taka (Saptagram Annual Report, 1993-4).

Aligning with microfinance trends in the mid-1990s, Saptagram shifted its focus to individual material resources through economic loans with less emphasis on cognitive and relational resources. As a result, the agency of women became increasingly placed on individuals receiving loans as opposed to collective agency through *Andalon* processes. For example, focus on achievements within the home took priority over processes such as *Andalon*, with zero mention of women involved in *Andalon* in Saptagram's Annual Report 1993-4. This resulted in a static, linear model of empowerment that mirrored economic development frameworks, equating access to material resources with empowerment, primarily through a narrowly defined model of economic advancement driven by microcredit.

In addition, a ten per cent interest was introduced on loans – an adjustment accepted by members without protest (Saptagram Annual Report, 1993-4, 19). This marked a subtle but important shift toward profit

generation. This shift was further reinforced by the introduction of the Silk Production scheme, signalling the organisation's wish for women to engage more deeply with markets through silk production and focus on entrepreneurial activity beyond local trade. This emphasis on economic productivity through the market illustrates how Saptagram reoriented its strategies to sustain funding by aligning with an increasingly individualised, market-driven model of empowerment favoured by donor agencies.

3.4 Conclusions

Ultimately, the case of Saptagram illustrates how empowerment narratives in the mid-1990s shifted away from collective resistance and towards individual economic success. While Saptagram retained elements of its transformative position, its empowerment narratives were increasingly reframed through market-oriented logic and the ideal of individual self-sufficiency. Positioned between two extremes, microfinance and transformative collective empowerment, Saptagram shaped its strategies to survive the initial wave of neoliberal development thinking. However, the eventual termination of its activities in the early 2000s suggests that the organisation was ultimately unable to withstand the deeper institutionalisation of neoliberal logic that characterised the next phase of global development discourse (Kabeer and Huq, 2010, 86). The following chapter traces this continuation, examining the evolution of empowerment narratives within the context of global marketisation and corporate philanthropy through a case study of the Nike Foundation's campaign, the Girl Effect.

Chapter Four: Case Study Two – Girl Effect

The Girl Effect emerged in the 2000s, embodying the 'girl powering of international development' – a phenomenon that has drawn substantial feminist critique due to its approach to gender and development interventions (Koffman and Gill, 2013, 86). The campaign garnered so much attention and support that several scholars (Boyd, 2016; Switzer, 2013) have described it as a representational scheme, offering broader insights into discursive shifts within gender and development practice. Following this theoretical framework, this chapter understands the Girl Effect as representative of the significant paradigm shift in development discourse that positioned adolescent girls as the answer. Following the same structure as my first case study, this chapter first examines Girl Effect's early continuation of neoliberal exploitation, paralleling the first shift in the 1990s. The discussion then explores how evolving donor expectations once again shaped the development landscape, before analysing Girl Effect's response to these new expectations in 2010.

Since the early 2000s, within development, there has been an unprecedented interest in adolescent girls as vehicles for economic growth. Focus peaked in 2008 when the Nike Foundation partnered with the Novo Foundation to launch the Girl Effect (Walters, 2019, 12) – defined by Calkin (2015, 656) as a 'virtually arresting and glossy corporate campaign with multiple online platforms including a website, YouTube channel and Twitter'. In 2008, with Nike's marketing staff leading the way, the campaign launched with several YouTube videos, claiming that the 'unexpected solution' to poverty was the adolescent girl (Kylander, 2011). The argument follows that when a girl in the Global South is given an education or a loan to start a business, she will work hard, provide for her family, marry later, have fewer, healthier children and in so doing, improve the economy of her whole country (Wilson, 2015, 818).

4.1 Early Empowerment Narratives

From its 2008 launch, the Girl Effect operationalised neoliberal conceptions of empowerment that aligned with broader development trends identified in my previous case study. The following section builds on

my earlier chapters to analyse how the Girl Effect systemically prioritised individualised economic empowerment from its launch.

The early philosophy of Girl Effect centred on providing key material resources to adolescent girls, particularly access to education and microloans. Grounded in the belief that education serves as an essential pathway out of poverty because it 'opens the doors to employment' through the provision of crucial workplace skills (Shain, 2013, 9) – the programme introduced initiatives focused on literacy, numeracy, and vocational training. These efforts explicitly aligned with market demands, reflecting broader neoliberal logic that equates empowerment with economic productivity and individual self-sufficiency. Susanna, a senior staff member working for Girl Effect in Brazil, introduced their education programme, stating, 'The course objective is preparation for the labour market...We work to develop abilities that the labour market looks for, like teamwork, discipline, respect' (Moeller, 2021, 139). Distinct from education programmes rooted in Freirean conscientisation principles, such as Saptagram's Functional Education Programme, this approach aims to enhance girls' employability and economic independence rather than fostering critical consciousness or collective activism.

Crucially, Girl Effect's approach diverges from Kabeer's (1999) three-stage framework, which positions education as one material precondition to empowerment. Instead, the campaign consistently equates education with empowerment, creating a reductive narrative that obscures the complex structural barriers girls continue to face (Cobbett, 2014, 312; Switzer, 2013, 346-7). Girl Effect assumes that if girls have access to education, they can bypass other barriers that may prevent their entry into the market (Fredman et al., 2016; Walters, 2019; Rosche, 2016). As Switzer et al. (2016, 34) argue, the limited concern with getting girls an education neglects structural inequalities while also dismissing education as a valuable tool for developing awareness and critical consciousness among girls regarding the internalised oppression they may face. In other words, the Girl Effect does very little to provide cognitive resources to adolescent girls through their education programmes, failing to provide a space for girls to challenge

embedded structural norms relating to their inherent subordination and reinforcing the neoliberal ideal of individuals uplifting themselves up and out of poverty, bypassing structural inequalities.

Alongside education, the focus is placed on microloans as a key material resource for adolescent girls, with the expectation that when provided with a small loan, girls can engage in income-generating activities, leading to empowerment as they will have full access to the market (Shain, 2013, 9). However, connecting engagement with the market to empowerment relies on a simplistic 'economised' conception of empowerment (9). This also ignores structural barriers and reflects the campaign's tendency to 'supply easy solutions to complex problems', framing girls as the solutions to problems for which they hold no responsibility (Chawansky, 2012, 474). Emphasis is placed on the girls' ability to use resources wisely and alter their life trajectory through individualised economic empowerment. Koffman and Gill (2013, 90) critique this as a neoliberal vision of empowerment that is delinked from global inequalities and the power of collective transformation, emphasising market logic and individual success through the Southern girl's ability to lift herself out of poverty.

However, the individual agency placed on adolescent girls in the Global South is also uniquely tied and contingent upon the agency of women and girls in the Global North (Chant, 2016, 322). By targeting women in the Global North with slogans like 'invest in a girl, she will do the rest' (Girl Effect, 2008, 2.06), the campaign constructs a 'Global Sisterhood', where girls are granted agency by those who are perceived to have achieved such agency through the liberal elements of individual choice present in the Global North (Walters, 2019, 52). In this framework, girls are granted agency by other women, creating a complex web of agency where they are told responsibility lies in their hands, yet it is given to them by someone else. For example, in a YouTube video titled 'I Dare You', viewers in the Global North are encouraged to reimagine girls in the Global South, 'I dare you to rethink what it means to look at a girl not a burden, not an object, but the answer' (Girl Effect, 2013, 00:57). While the video appears to place agency in the hands of girls by positioning them as 'the answer', it ultimately relies on women in the

Global North to shift their perspectives and invest in these girls, thus reinforcing a dynamic of external dependency. As Mohanty (1991) argues, this paradigm creates a subject positioning of the Third World girl, constructing her as both a subject of pity and the answer, which leaves no space for Southern girls to claim agency within their own lives.

Additionally, Girl Effect reframes adolescent girls not solely as future mothers, but as individuals whose potential can be realised through access to viable alternatives. This logic attempted to push back childbearing and marriage to unlock girls' economic potential (Moeller, 2021, 135). However, as Heather Switzer argues, 'the narrative relies on false dichotomies of the durable sexual object (embodied in the schoolgirl) and the disposable sexual subject (embodied in the pregnant child-bride) that empty girl subjects of agency' (2013, 147). Creating a binary between those who should have access to empowerment and those who are undeserving of access to the programme due to a perceived lack of agency, due to pregnancy or marriage. The program considered it too late to intervene in the life of a pregnant adolescent, as Moeller (2021, 143) states that 'she had already lost her potential to end poverty, or, in other terms, perhaps she was too reproductive to still be considered productive.' Reinforcing harmful stereotypes about who has, or rather deserves, agency in the Global South.

With agency placed in the hands of outside forces, outcomes are measured through the girls' potential as future economic assets, rather than their achievements as present agents in their transformation process. For example, adolescent girls' entry into the workforce is marked as empowerment, with achievement measured in the sense that they contribute to economic growth, increase household incomes, and reduce dependency on welfare or aid (Boyd, 2016, 161). This positions empowerment primarily in terms of financial productivity rather than personal or collective agency. For instance, success is often quantified through measures such as employment rates, income levels, and contributions to national GDP, rather than assessing whether girls have gained critical consciousness or the agency to challenge structural inequalities (Hickel, 2014, 1361). These quantifiable measures explain why development agencies

continued to fund the programme. However, as the next section explores, broader funding trends reveal how this model was slowly reframed to suit new donor avenues.

4.2 Donor Funding and Changing Landscape

The range of funding for the Girl Effect reveals key insights into how empowerment narratives have been framed under neoliberal discourses. From 2008, Girl Effect received funding from a variety of avenues, including development agencies such as USAID, the World Bank and the UK Department for International Development, NGOs such as the NoVo Foundation and finally, corporations such as Coca-Cola, Exxon, Goldman Sachs and Gucci (Calkin, 2015, 300; Hickel, 2014, 1362; Moeller, 2013, 615). This section analyses the organisation's funding pattern, revealing key insights reflecting a second wave of neoliberal exploitation within the field of gender and development.

Emerging at a time when development agencies were increasingly interested in a neoliberal framing of empowerment, as it aligned with what Lewis (1997, 37) deemed their 'new policy agenda' – which focussed on tangible outcomes such as market liberalisation – Girl Effect received an abundance of funding from development agencies in its early years. For key development agencies, the 'Girl effect' encompasses a key form of empowerment which coincides with their broader development goals. Hickel (2014, 1361) writes that 'Gender equality and women's empowerment are thought to lubricate the proper functioning of the free market and ultimately facilitate economic growth.' According to USAID, achieving women's empowerment would improve GDP growth in poor countries by up to 2%, which would help reduce hunger, an ultimate goal for the organisation (1361). The World Bank uses similar language about expanding individual choice, all towards the goal of improving economic growth (1361). The World Bank argues that 'gender equality is smart economics – it can raise productivity and improve other development outcomes' (World Bank, 2012). However, institutions linking empowerment to economic development often rely on a narrowly defined model of empowerment, namely enhancing

adolescent girls' access to wage labour and credit. This represents a continuation of the neoliberal paradigm introduced in the 1990s through microcredit schemes targeting landless women.

However, the added investments from corporations such as Coca-Cola, Exxon, Goldman Sachs and Gucci (Calkin, 2015, 300; Hickel, 2014, 1362; Moeller, 2013,615) highlight a significant shift in development trends. Further, the campaign's launch by Nike, a global corporation, underscores the increasing role of corporate actors in shaping Gender and Development discourses. In the early 1990s, Nike, Inc., the world's largest sporting goods manufacturer, became the global target for anti-sweatshop and anti-globalisation protests (Locke, 2002, in Moeller, 2021, 133). Critics highlighted the corporation's extensively documented exploitation of a predominantly young, uneducated, and female labour force in the Global South (Moeller, 2021, 133). In response, the corporation has focused on reinventing itself as a socially responsible entity (133). Central to this was their message on March 8th, 2005 – International Women's Day – announcing a new corporate foundation to focus exclusively on 'improving the lives and well-being of adolescent girls' (Nike Foundation, 2005). Under this initiative, the Nike Foundation, partnering with the NoVo Foundation, launched its first project, the Girl Effect.

The NoVo Foundation committed $45 million over three years, and Nike pledged an additional $55 million investment, on top of the $36 million it had already invested (Nike Foundation, 2008). Yet Moeller (2021, 144) highlights that the focus on adolescent girls did not persist beyond this initial investment, which ended in 2012. Adolescent girls disappeared as the target of its programming, and the Nike Foundation returned to its prior focus on young women and men (144). This demonstrates that the focus on adolescent girls was a temporary, short-lived initiative that served the goals of a corporation in desperate need of funding and positive publicity following global criticism of its practices (144). Other major corporations that provided funds to the project may have invested for similar motivations – primarily to enhance their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which allows for new markets and potential new customers and thus contributes to the corporations' overall profits (Boyd, 2016, 149).

For example, CSR and sustainability are at the core of Coca-Cola's business strategy. As CSR became increasingly fundamental for multinational companies, Coca-Cola and many others chose gender equality as one of their key CSR causes (Prugl, 2017, 47). By 2010, continuing its funding for the Girl Effect, Coca-Cola launched its programme, '5by20', as part of broader CSR and sustainability goals, aiming to target gender inequality by helping women in the Global South expand their economic opportunities and enter the market (52). This marks a key turning point in targeting women and girls across development, as adolescent girls became increasingly attractive 'clients' to 'good doers' within the corporate world (Berkovitch and Kemp, 2010, 13).

This reconfiguration aligns closely with what scholars such as Berkovitch and Kemp (2010) describe as the commodification of gender justice, where corporate actors adopt the language of empowerment while advancing brand legitimacy in the global development space. In this context, corporate 'do-gooders' are not merely donors, but stakeholders in a philanthropic economy that blurs the lines between helping others and pursuing market interest (20). By aligning themselves with gender-based development programs like the Girl Effect, corporations such as Coca-Cola, ExxonMobil, and Goldman Sachs engage in a form of branded benevolence, promoting a socially responsible image while simultaneously embedding themselves deeper into emerging markets, leading to increased profits (21).

4.3 Response

Responding to corporate interest and the increasing potential of girl-centred branding, the Girl Effect expanded its visual identity through the use of slick, viral videos with catchy slogans, utilising social media networks such as YouTube to market this empowerment model. This marked a shift in strategy – empowerment was no longer solely about material resources like education or microloans, but also about constructing a compelling media narrative designed to be consumed by the Global North.

This transformation culminated in the creation of Girl Hub (2010-14), a joint initiative between the Nike Foundation and the UK Department for International Development (DFID) (Shutt, 2021, 909). Girl Hub acted as the primary catalyst of the Girl Effect movement in the early 2010s, with the mission of empowering adolescent girls living in poverty in Rwanda, Nigeria, and Ethiopia (913). Its emergence signified a crucial evolution from the Nike Foundation's original theory of change, which centred on the knock-on effect of girls' education (Boyd, 2016, 153). This was demonstrated by Girl Hub's Strategic Delivery Document in 2013, with item 153 explicitly stating, 'the theory of change had originally focused exclusively on the girl as a change agent. The revised Theory of Change recognised the importance of the enabling environment and established links between Girl Hub's work to build demand for service and their work to influence the supply of services for girls through advocacy, brand development, research and evidence.' (Boyd, 2016, 153). This focus on building an 'enabling environment' means creating what Banet-Wesier (2015) has termed a 'market for girls' empowerment through increased brand awareness.

For example, Girl Hub's board pursued 'brand' as its principal social communication strategy (Shutt, 2021, 913). In advertising, the core idea of 'brand' is that socially 'branded' communications do more than share information – they create emotional connections that can influence people's behaviour (913). 'Brand' experts seek to establish brand recognition among a percentage of the population, before targeting different audiences with customised messages using various social media platforms (913). Through this framework, Girl Hub framed adolescent girls as subjects for women and corporations in the Global North to engage with, incentivising women to invest through emotional ties and corporations through profit incentives. Engaging with Lilie Chouliaraki's (2013) concept of spectatorship, which denotes the relationship between spectators in countries of the West and the distant sufferer on the television screen, Calkin (2015, 654) argues that this led to a spectacle of empowerment.

By effectively marketing girls to the Global North, for corporations to invest in and for women to emotionally engage with, empowerment has become a consumable spectacle rather than a transformative process. With a distribution strategy focused on encouraging others to share and support rather than

encouraging grassroots transformation (Banet-Weiser, 2015, 190), Girl Hub solidified Girl Effect's expanded approach to empowerment as a branded identity, more about appealing to corporations and women in the Global North than providing grassroots empowerment.

4.4 Conclusions

Ultimately, rooted in neoliberal logic, the Girl Effect shifted the burden of development onto adolescent girls, portraying them as both the cause and solution to poverty. This narrative individualises responsibility and erases collective agency in favour of simplified, market-friendly solutions. In its early years, the Girl Effect positioned empowerment as both a means and end of market participation, foregrounding agency in terms of choice, self-investment, and future productivity. However, due to the increased role of corporations in development, this evolved into a more commodified model of empowerment centred on visibility and branding. The Girl Hub (2010-2014) reflected a 'spectacle of empowerment' (Calkin, 2015; Banet-Weiser, 2015) that prioritised engagement metrics in the Global North over material change. Reflecting a broader paradigm shift, as corporate and philanthropic interests increasingly converged around this narrative, empowerment frameworks evolved once again under neoliberal ideologies. Compared to Saptagram's early collectivist focus, Girl Effect represented a hyper-individualised model – designed to be consumed, shared, and measured through engagement and reach metrics, rather than transformation.

Conclusions:

During a period of heightened backlash against feminism, accompanied by the dominance of individualised feminist discourses within popular culture, this dissertation offers a timely contribution to the field by analysing how messages of empowerment were relayed during two previous shifts in global feminism and development, providing crucial background for navigating this new era of post feminism. By examining how empowerment narratives within development have transformed under neoliberalism, it becomes clear that the concept of empowerment has undergone a significant shift – from its roots in feminist, collective, and transformative politics toward more individualised, economistic, and ultimately commodified frameworks.

Tracing the evolution through two key historical case studies, Saptagram Nari Swanirvar Parishad in the 1990s and the Nike Girl Effect campaign in the 2000s, my comparative analysis demonstrates an initial neoliberal wave of development discourse in the mid-1990s and a second wave in the early 2000s with similar patterns regarding market-based logic and individual agency, however the second wave had a heightened focus on appealing to corporations in the Global North and reproducing Global divisions through neoliberal logic.

Saptagram illustrates the early neoliberal shift in empowerment discourse as donor priorities increasingly demanded measurable outcomes, and empowerment became centred around providing material resources to individuals. While Saptagram retained elements of its earlier collectivist model, its gradual move toward individualised economic empowerment marks a critical transition that reflects a broader shift toward market-based logic and individualism—two hallmarks of the neoliberal development paradigm.

My second case study, the Girl Effect, represents a continuation but deepening of neoliberal logic, where empowerment was not only individualised or market-oriented but also explicitly commodified. Through increased focus on branding, the campaign repackaged feminist ideals for a global audience, often reducing complex socio-political issues to simplistic binaries. As corporate interest reflected a shift in

donor priorities, Girl Effect, through the Girl Hub (2010-14), shifted its focus to cultivating an idealised, entrepreneurial girlhood that could be marketed and consumed in the Global North.

Despite operating in different contexts, both case studies follow a similar neoliberal pattern, where empowerment is removed from its feminist roots and repurposed to serve the priorities of neoliberal institutions, such as development agencies and corporations in the Global North. Further, while the Girl Effect explicitly highlights the global dynamics of neoliberal exploitation by placing power in the hands of women from the Global North, similar imbalances were also subtly present in my first case study. For instance, a key funder of the programme, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), noted growing pressure from Swedish constituencies to prioritise investments in gender equality. This reflects how calls from women in the Global North served as a pathway for implementing depoliticised, individualised frameworks of empowerment. In both cases, it's clear that neoliberalism, as a political rationality, has permeated the feminist concept of empowerment with little acknowledgement of the structural barriers women in the Global South face.

Ultimately, this dissertation's contribution lies in its historically grounded, comparative approach, which adds temporal depth to existing academia on empowerment as a co-opted concept. Further, as we navigate today's heightened post feminist society, my findings suggest that the development field needs to rethink the use of empowerment by moving away from individualistic notions and reclaiming empowerment as a collective and contextually grounded concept, enabling the concept to resist further appropriation and remain meaningful in the lives of women and girls worldwide.

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