

Do Women Win?

Transnational development NGOs, discourses of empowerment, and cross-cultural technology initiatives in the Global South

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The Global North now accepts the cultural logic of “The Girl Effect,” or the notion that aid to girls in the Global South is economically impactful. It is in this context that NGOs take residence in the Global South to train girls in digital technology. We examine the ethical and social justice implications of the cross-cultural communication in these initiatives through a case study of *Women Win*, a transnational NGO’s digital storytelling (DST) project. In this qualitative case study, we analyze 37 DST videos, coding recurring discursive themes in both their language and visual iconography and examining the ownership rights, authorship, and sharing practices of these videos. The results suggest that the girls in the DST project labor to produce affective evidence for *Women Win* that circumscribes them as postfeminist development subjects, replicating themes and terms originating in feminism of the Global North. From this inquiry, we conclude that the concept of participatory culture does not travel neatly from the Global North to the Global South. We suggest that professional and technical communication scholars further scrutinize the complexities of cross-cultural communication in global development initiatives, through what this case study reveals about “large culture” ideologies and the political economy of affective labor in technology training. We conclude with a call to action for international professional and technical communicators to find approaches to DST training that are local in nature, and examine how training initiatives might be more sensitive to non-Western narratives by creating dialogic, localized design processes for training materials.



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The Global North now accepts the cultural logic of “The Girl Effect,” or the notion that aid to girls in the Global South is economically impactful. This cultural logic relies on data-driven communication that presents said impact; in essence, numbers rendered visually and verbally, through narrative, compellingly communicate both effect and affect to Western donors. Evidence of girls-in-need and girls-doing-for-themselves incites the emotions of those in the Global North, and, as a result, continuous addition of affective stories, visuals, and animations adds to the economic properties of The Girl Effect (Murphy, 2013). It is in this context that many transnational development NGOs initiate programs that train girls in the Global South in digital technology in order to produce their own narratives through digital storytelling projects.

In this article, we examine the ethical and social justice implications of the cross-cultural communication in these initiatives through a case study of one transnational development NGO’s digital storytelling (DST) project. *Women Win* partners with large multinational corporations (donors/investors) and then regrants to local, grassroots NGOs in the Global South for strategic projects; here, training girls to make their own digital media narratives. This qualitative case study involves two components. First, we examine the 37 videos in the DST project, coding recurring discursive themes in both their language and visual iconography. After consideration of the videos’ contents, we analyze the economic context for this DST project, specifically, looking at how *Women Win* controls the ownership rights, authorship, and sharing practices of the *Women Win* videos.

The results of this study indicate that the girls in the DST project labor to produce affective evidence for *Women Win* that ultimately communicates their positions narrowly as postfeminist development subjects, using the language of empowerment (as imported from the feminism of the Global North) in the service of development initiatives. These new positive images “confirm neoliberal

narrative in which the empowerment of the developing world's women via the market is the solution" (Wilson, 2011, p. 323). Constructions of the empowered agent in digital media culture do not translate as democratic representation when they operate in transnational contexts. The concept of participatory culture does not happily travel from the Global North to the Global South, especially in the context of development organizations and NGOs. The DST projects, then, reflect "large culture" ideologies in its intercultural communication rather than microcultural factors, despite their perceived reliance on individual stories (Agboka, 2012). As a result, we call upon professional and technical communication scholars to take a deeper look into the complexities of cross-cultural communication in transnational development, through what it reveals about "large culture" ideologies and the political economy of affective labor in technology training initiatives. We also issue a call to action for international professional and technical communicators to find approaches to DST training that are local in nature, and examine how training initiatives might be more sensitive to non-Western narratives by creating dialogic, localized design processes for training materials.

Literature Review

The Girl Effect and its website serve as a starting point for discussion of how The Girl Effect is promoted by its data-driven communication to the Global North. In an article on that website, Posada (2012) argued that good data is critical to further programs for girls. "Girls need unique, targeted programmes, centred around them. But if we haven't got the right kind of data to prove this, those programmes don't get funding - and therefore they don't happen" (para. 2). Posada represented the data as instrumental to programming and funding: The Girl Effect created through the discourse of aid to girls is just "smart economics" (Revenge & Shetty, 2012). While the data is meant to help policymakers eliminate wasteful spending and intensify their impact, this way of thinking simultaneously positions the data itself as altruistic.

In tracing the discursive history of *The Girl Effect*, Murphy (2013) made the case that data has a representative property, arguing that “The Girl is animated as a colorful circle, a pulsing pie chart, a blooming flower, or a stop-motion, living marionette—all constituted in an overdetermined vortex of statistical studies that correlate girlness with either extremes of poverty and abjection or compliant and community beneficial forms of waged and unwaged labor” (para. 8). The evidence of girls in need and their stories—in poverty, unaware of their rights, dominated by controlling parents and backwards, cultural norms—incite the emotions of viewers from the Global North. The addition of affective stories, visuals, and animations adds to the economic properties of *The Girl Effect* by purposefully hailing sympathetic audiences to support a girl.

“The Girl Effect” and programming of transnational development NGOs

Critiques of the *The Girl Effect* are beginning to emerge. Wilson (2011) argued that *The Girl Effect* emerges from a new representational regime in which female subjects from the Global South are represented through positive imagery of empowerment and agency. However, these positive images conform to neoliberal globalization that ultimately obscures exploitative relationships. In the discourse celebrating feminist ideas travelling to the Global South, the context in which these feminist ideas are employed gets lost. Koffman and Gill (2013) questioned the imposition of feminist ideas in the Global South by asking if *The Girl Effect* is about “global sisterhood and/or cultural imperialism” (p. 87). In Switzer’s (2013) assessment, the feminist ideas portrayed by the girls from the Global South do more to hail a Northern audience than to help girls in “need” (p. 347). Murphy (2013) called attention to the creation of *The Girl Effect* through discourses of feminism and finance by claiming that “The Girl is not a subject effect, but rather a subject figure—a stereotyped representation of a subject figured out of a matrix of social science correlations and financial probabilities” (para. 8). These critiques of *The Girl Effect* question representations that

continue to produce these girls and women as passive subjects for a neoliberal economy.

By looking at the representational regimes operating in *The Girl Effect*, scholars have created space for further study of how *The Girl Effect* operates discursively in certain contexts. As Switzer (2013) argued, “Discourse is a social project; representations become real inside institutions that enable certain interventions and prevent others” (p. 357). Critiques of *The Girl Effect* as a discursive regime highlight the limitations placed on the ability for transformation. A girl must be taken out of context to thrive (Switzer, 2013). As *The Girl Effect* shapes specific development programs, there is an exigency for further study of how empowerment, self-reliance, and agency may be reproduced by development organizations through their cross-cultural DST projects.

Problematizing participatory culture in cross-cultural technology training initiatives

Additionally complicating cross-cultural technology training initiatives such as the DST project is the Western-focused concept of digital media in participatory culture. Jenkins et al. (2006) defined participatory culture as “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices” (p. 3). This type of creation and sharing aligns with a bottom-up control of the creative process and an empowered digital citizen.

Jenkins (2013) favorably portrayed what he calls participatory culture in the context of globalization and web 2.0, stating:

Spreadable practices offer them [non-Westerners] perhaps the most effective means to achieve this expanded communication practice [transnational media]. In a world where everyday citizens may help select and circulate media content, playing active roles in building links between dispersed communities, there are

new ways of working around the entrenched interests of traditional gatekeepers and in allegiance with others who may spread their content (p. 288).

Jenkins set up an us/them binary, and the “them” of Jenkins’ examples are individuals and small local media companies in the Global South. These projects, Jenkins (2013) argued, help spread cultural awareness that flows from the bottom up (meaning from the Global South to the Global North). In the case of media produced for projects like *Women Win*, the purposes, production, and distribution of that media are different. While the girls do produce their digital stories, they do it under the training and support of the NGO; thus, the claim that this media is democratic, free flowing, or bottom-up (Baym, 2010; Gee & Hayes, 2011; Lessig, 2009; Shirky, 2009), is problematic.

Jenkins’ positive assessment of transnational media fails to assess media created contexts. In the DST project of *Women Win*, while the media is created from what seems like enthusiastic desire on the girls’ part, the influence on and control of the media by an NGO from the Global North mires the claims of democracy. The girls are not creating the media solely from their own minds (they are trained in storytelling) and they are not sharing the stories themselves (the NGO copyrights and owns them). Claims of participatory culture in the context of transnational media need to be further assessed. Transnational feminist thought complicates Jenkins’ bottom-up, linear flow of information from the Global South to the Global North, by questioning linearity and uncritical assessments of power in flows of information across borders. Mediation may actually increase the distance between individuals (Rajagopal, 2001). The teaching of culture that Jenkins assumes in exchanges between the Global South and the Global North does not actually close cultural gaps or make differing nations closer; rather, Rajagopal argued that media produced through globalization actually creates the façade of closeness and contact. Hedge (2013) suggested that “the global is performed, reproduced, and contested” through the collision of cultures with new media practices (p. 6). Dingo (2011) argued that “transnational feminist rhetorical analytic is necessary to show how . . . rhetorical acts relate to one another and how they change as they cross national developmental borders”

(p. 15). Transnational feminist scholars answer Jenkins' concept of transnational media flow with an analytic in which media flows must be questioned in terms of power dynamic, location, and cultural work. In terms of the DST project, these questions complicate the notion that digital media produced by the girls simply gives them the agency to help themselves and their community.

The political economy of affective labor in digital media projects

Scholars have also begun to address the question of affective or immaterial labor in participatory digital culture. This affective "immaterial labour involves the production and manipulation of affect and requires (virtual or actual) human contact, labour in the bodily mode" (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 293). For autonomist Marxist scholar Lazzarato (1996), immaterial labor refers to the actual "activity that produces the cultural content" (p. 137). Examples of this include "the fixing of cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion" (p. 133). These definitions and considerations explain the emotional, cultural work that this labor performs.

Current scholarship tends to view affective labor as nonexploitative, overall accepting that laborers in this political economy control their means of production. For example, in her study on the immaterial labor of "tweens," Pybus (2011) contended that although tweens' habits and information are mined in order to intensify the tween market, the relationship is ultimately productive in the sense that the tween has some agency in creating their own subjectivity that marketers will use to hail them. For Pybus and others, the immaterial labor in digital media creation is not always exploitative.

We must consider the context of these studies. Specifically, the relevant scholarship, which claims that digital media and the Internet are free and democratic, looks at these technologies solely as they operate in the Global North. Questioning the power dynamics behind technology, Alzouma (2005) critiqued the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as solutions for development problems in Africa, skeptical that implementation of ICTs will send

African nations into full-scale modernity and “solve quality of life problems” (p. 344). Alzouma aptly questioned the amount of agency Africans will have over their subjectivities with the full-scale adoption of ICTs that flow from the Global North to the Global South. This is an issue that those who celebrate the positive outcomes of immaterial labor and digital media fail to fully consider.

In a similar vein, we should consider how girls producing DST projects in the context of training in the Global North are positioned as subjects. In the context of global development initiatives, subjectivities presented through digital media must be investigated so as to understand what regimes of truth they uphold about individuals from the Global South. Although branding and creating a self through digital media “involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as ‘work’—in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and more strategically, public opinion” (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 61), this type of work, when performed in *direct* service of global development initiatives must be questioned in terms of who is benefiting from this work.

DST projects that involve girls often present these girls as postfeminist development subjects (Switzer, 2013). Switzer used what she calls “(post)feminist development fables” to describe the false binary of “durable schoolgirl subject” and the “pregnant child-bride” created through the instillation of mythic postfeminist stories in the Global South (p. 347). To be a postfeminist development subject (not agent) means to use the language of empowerment as imported from the feminism of the Global North in the context of development. Yet, as McRobbie noted, this seemingly positive empowered subject position actually serves as “re-colonizing mechanism . . . [that] re-instates racial hierarchies within the field of femininity by invoking, across the visual field, a norm of nostalgic whiteness” (p. 43). These girls—empowered agents of change—present their stories of fighting their way out of oppressive families and local cultures, stories that take into account a feminism from the Global North. With cross-cultural technology training initiatives such as a DST project, we must look at the cause each girl works for and whether it is directly in service of the outcomes authored by development institutions from the Global North.

Women Win Case Study and Methods

It is through the representational properties of data discussed above that *Women Win*, a regranting and leadership training NGO, created its digital storytelling (DST) project for women and girls. The mission of the *Women Win* initiative overall is “to equip adolescent girls to exercise their rights through sport” and is currently supported financially by sponsors from the Global North as varied as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, the Human Dignity Foundation, Nike, and DLA Piper (“About Us,” 2013, para. 1). Through stories-as-evidence, *Women Win*’s DST project highlights “stories of girls’ sport achievement and impact.” Girls participating in DST travel to different locales (Amsterdam, Killifi, and Nairobi) to take part in a 2-5 day workshop where they learn both narrative and technical skills to tell their stories in digital video formats. While *Women Win* facilitates the training, during the workshop, the girls create, produce, record, and edit their own videos. The training and development workshops included in the DST project claims to give “storytellers’ ultimate control over the medium—words, images and audio—so stories are told by those who lived the experience” (“About DST,” 2013, para. 1).

Women Win indicates that both the process and the product of the DST project benefit the girls. The website explains that “Once a young woman learns the skills needed to share her story through DST, it becomes her task and responsibility to share those skills with members of her organization, capturing more stories and multiplying the effect of the tool. Born out of this approach, our ultimate goal with DST is to strengthen our partners’ capacities to build girls’ leadership and communicate the impact of the work they do locally and globally” (“About DST,” 2013, para. 3). Yet, these two claims—the girls’ control over their stories and the ways in which DST benefits the girls—construct a narrative around the DST project. The narrative constructed here aligns with two discourses: participatory culture in digital media and The Girl Effect. The DST project uses the language and grammar of The Girl Effect and replicates subject positions offered by The Girl Effect but produces them through real narratives and the digital means and claims of participatory culture.

To further study this practice, we conducted a qualitative case study of the videos produced in the DST project of *Women Win* from February 2013 to March 2014. We designed this study to analyze how the stories of *Women Win*'s DST project, told through the discourse of participatory culture in digital media, may operate through The Girl Effect. We applied for and received our institution's IRB exemption for this study. The data collection and analysis had two major components. First, we viewed and coded by hand in Excel all 37 videos (all videos in the project as of December 2014) using attributive coding (or coding for metadata such as video and girls' names, origin locations, local NGOs, date video produced, and location video produced) and descriptive coding and subsequent thematic analysis of these codes. With these, we focused on recurring elements in the narrative and visual representations and iconography in the videos. Through our descriptive coding procedure, we quantified if, when, and how a narrative of empowerment appeared in the girls' stories. Then, we examined the visual components of the video, analyzing how each girl's story presents visually.

In the second portion of our study, we examine the economics of *Women Win* by looking at the ownership and sharing of these DST videos. We closely attend to the means of production of each video, thinking about the technologies used and how those technologies position the girls as creators. We also consider the author, the ownership, and creative commons license of each video. Through this analysis, we conclude that the girls selected to participate in *Women Win* labor to produce affective evidence for *Women Win*. This evidence ultimately circumscribes their subject positions very narrowly as postfeminist development subjects and positions *Women Win* as a successful training and regranting NGO.

Results and Discussion:

***Women Win* and the Flattening of the Global South**

To better understand the *Women Win* DST project and the cultural logic of The Girl Effect in cross-cultural technology training initiatives, we first analyze the *Women Win* website, which serves as the primary vehicle for the circulation of this cultural logic and the frame for the DST project. We begin with the results of

this analysis, followed by the results and discussion of the video content. Finally, we present an economic analysis of the *Women Win* DST project, with specific focus on the ownership and sharing practices of the videos.

Framing the DST project: the *Women Win* website

The *Women Win* website provides background information for the DST project, a synopsis of the training program, and an introductory video about DST. This information constructs the discursive frame through which viewers are meant to consider the project. Each piece of information constructs a narrative of *Women Win* as a facilitator of the girls' stories, defining the project in line with both participatory culture and Girl Effect discourses. A web audience from the Global North may draw parallels of these videos with other types of media created through the framework of participatory culture, such as Kickstarter campaigns. Viewers also see a repetitive offering of the The Girl Effect mantra: invest in a girl and she will do the rest. Through an analysis of major elements of the website, the frame that *Women Win* creates in order to condition viewers' experiences becomes legible.

Under "Stories," the DST tab of the *Women Win* website features an introduction video called "Girls are Leaders. Girls are Storytellers." The video uses the visual and verbal language of empowerment to position the sporting girl as a worthy investment to northern donors. The girls represent positive affirmations of development through their engagement in sport. However, these positive representations do not directly represent these girls as agents. Rather, in light of a Northern donor audience, they are produced as subjects of development. The girls do not speak on their own behalf, rather, all the information about them comes directly from the narrator. The video opens with close-up shots of brown-skinned girls and moves to photos of them participating in sports. The narrative voice defines "girl" through the language of empowerment. As the narrator moves through a monologue that begins with "Girls are leaders," words like "abilities," "potential," "active," "goals," "leadership," "voice," "right," "action," and "agent of change" accompany photos of girls participating in sports. Viewers are positioned

as voyeurs in the sense that they are meant to derive pleasure from watching the stills of empowered girls participate in sport. Donors see that their investments are secure in the images of the hardworking women of sports. The narrator uses the collective “we” to frame and define the potential of girls. “We” are meant to see empowered girls, and by watching and supporting these girls, “we” are involved directly by activating winning girls. While the narrator articulates girls as agents-of-change in the video it is only through the narrative voice, the “we,” that girls are allowed this agency.

As *Women Win* presents its leadership program (a program by which girls become agents-of-change), the narrative frame reproduces the power of the Northern donor as the ultimate agent of development. The images are purposefully positive to stay consistent with “current neoliberal development consensus which . . . portrays an intensification of labour applied by women in the South as the ‘solution’ to poverty as well as gender inequality” (Wilson, 2011, p. 328). This video hails Northern donors through positive images that elicit a narrative in which these girls are “deserving” subjects.

About halfway through the video, the images of girls transform into racialized, geometric figures on graph paper. The video visually abstracts the girls—moving them from specific, visual subjects to geometric stand-ins. Through this abstraction, *Women Win* takes the audience from seeing specific girls to seeing all girls. The empowered, sporting girls take on more generalizable representations in the form of the empowered third world girl as the figures are literally positioned on stage speaking to an audience of black silhouettes. The narrator proclaims that speaking out “gives girls greater control over their bodies, their choice, their lives and eventually their communities” (“Girls are Leaders,” 2013). However, in this instance, the captive audience (presumably the “we” of the narration, the Northern donors) grants agency to the speaking subject. As a result, speaking out gives the girls a sense of agency without giving them actual agency. The Northern donor audience is always in control, and the girls’ voices merely provide the fodder for their experience with *Women Win*. As the visuals move again from abstraction to representative images of girls, the outcomes of development are placed with the collective “we.” The narrator charges the viewers

in that “by 2016 we are on the hook to help 1 million girls realize their leadership potential through sport” (“Girls are Leaders,” 2013). The narrator hails the “we,” the Northern donor audience, to help these girls become leaders. Even though the video represents girls as leaders, the video positions Northern donors as having the ultimate power in these girls’ future.

As an introduction to the DST project, “Girls are Leaders” sets the terms for what viewers should see in the DST videos produced by girls. It offers the promise to see empowered girls engaged in sports, hear stories of girls overcoming obstacles, and witness girls employed as leaders. However, *Women Win*’s decision to not let the girls speak for themselves positions girls as subjects in service of *Women Win* instead of women with agency.

The “About DST” page appears to suggest the girls’ complete narrative control, adherence to feminist methodology, a promise of ICT skill building, and access to affordable technology. This page does not just explain the theory behind the project; rather, it also discursively frames DST as a positive iteration of participatory culture. On the surface, the explanations and rationale for the project provided by *Women Win* mirror bottom-up creations of media (i.e. crowdfunding, self-presentation). Yet, thinking more contextually, the claims of bottom-up creation function as a façade. In terms of narrative control, *Women Win* naïvely suggests, “Participants actively construct and reconstruct themselves and their stories through the process of narration” (“About DST,” 2013, para. 5). In no way does this account for the ways in which participants are also *constructed* by already existing discourse—namely discourses of postfeminism and global development. While the girls have the power to say what they want to say, our analysis of the narratives themselves challenges this claim, for the narrative produced by the girls follow similar themes and use similar terminology.

This suggests that these narratives replicate regimes of truth that operate in the context of *Women Win* as a development program. In the terms of a feminist methodology, the DST project claims that through speaking out, these girls destabilize gendered hierarchies. Yet, these stories all take girls out of their local context and position them as leaders in development programs. The claim of destabilizing gendered hierarchies remains unrealized. Both the claims of ICT

skill building and access to technology suggest that just educating girls on using technology will give them skills they can take into the community. However, educating them uncritically (as the education does not involve the critique of these technologies) gives them a narrow conception of technology. Furthermore, the skills that these videos articulate are basic, so we must question at what level these girls are meant to produce media as autonomous agents. If the goal is to bring the skills back to their communities and their local NGOs, *Women Win* ill equips these girls technologically to fully produce dynamic media for consumption. Yet, these explanations of technology reproduce accounts of technology and storytelling through the lens of participatory culture. As we move into analyzing the DST videos themselves, we see how much the framing of these videos as participatory culture under the influence of The Girl Effect shape the videos themselves.

Discourses of empowerment in *Women Win's* DST videos

The 37 videos that comprise the DST contain stories from girls from origin locations in Africa (Uganda, Zambia, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Nigeria, and Kenya), Cambodia, Colombia, and India. The girls worked with 21 local NGOs to produce the videos between 2013 and 2014. Despite the disparate geographic locations and NGOs, the narratives told in the videos follow a similar narrative structure. The introduction video itself establishes two types of stories: epic wins in sport, and the power of sport to overcome traumatic life events. Of the 37 videos, 16 included stories of a win in sport, and 30 included a resolution of a girl's gainful employment. 31 of 37 videos discuss or portray "rights" while 35 of 37 videos mention empowerment, in either explicit language or theme.

While there is no evidence that these narratives of empowerment are explicitly taught by *Women Win*, this data set suggests that *Women Win's* recruitment and training program (produced through postfeminist ideas of empowerment) aided the girls in reproducing postfeminist development regimes of truth. A majority of the stories explain how each girl rose from cultural oppression or economic impoverishment to take leadership roles with sports-in-

development NGOs. Other themes of empowerment articulated in these videos include overcoming obstacles such as lack of education, showing girls-as-potential, overcoming gender norms, learning to understand and wield “rights,” and participating in development initiatives (combating gender-based violence, child abuse, HIV, and seeking reproductive health). It is likely not a coincidence that these themes directly coincide with the goals of *Women Win*. While girls who participate in the DST projects may not be taught these discursive regimes explicitly, *Women Win* operates through The Girl Effect and its programming that circulate postfeminist regimes of truth. Contact with *Women Win* staff—who are trained themselves in the discourses of The Girl Effect—may contribute to this replication of narrative. The selection process of the specific girls who participate in the DST may also contribute to the recurrence of specific themes.

To focus even more closely on the discourses of empowerment circulating in these DST videos, we briefly analyze two representative videos, “Sport is an Amazing World” and “How Football Changed my Life,” as paradigmatic of the entire DST library to illustrate the replication of discursive regimes. In “Sport is an Amazing World” Pallavi Jaywant Gaikwad of Mumbai, India tells her story of empowerment and opportunity through sport in the third person. As the narrative begins, we learn that Pallavi’s teachers and family did not take her love of sport seriously, and instead of quitting, she became resourceful—making her own track pants from her uncle’s rope and finding sponsors on her own. Her involvement in sports eventually leads her to secondary education as well as finding employment in a local, sporting NGO, *The NAZ Foundation Trust*. The narrative leads us to see her drive and desire as directly aiding her in getting an education, finding employment, supporting her family, and challenging gender norms (i.e., becoming the first girl in her family to travel abroad alone). Pallavi’s story represents no complications or setbacks. Rather, the narrative progresses linearly from participation in sport to economic empowerment through employment. This narrative simplifies the lives of girls in the Global South to donors from the Global North by furthering the idea that investing in a girl is smart economics (Revenga & Shetty, 2012).

In “How Football Changed my Life,” Furaha Pascal Karimiko narrates her struggles coming from a polygamous family of 22 children. Raised in this environment, she explains that her community and family had few expectations of her because of her gender. Though her narration, Furaha represents her drive to do something greater. However, her family had no money for school fees. It is at this point that Furaha pauses and tells the audience directly, “I didn’t know I had rights.” The turning point in her story comes when she begins playing football. She explains, “I like feeling stronger than the boys despite all the discrimination from the community.” Being discovered by a coach, Furaha received a football scholarship, and she exclaims, “I will prove to my father that girls can do it.” Curiously, Furaha tells the audience that in school she learned reproductive health and rights (not just traditional math, science, humanities curriculum). Furaha tells us she is currently a coach, and from her salary she is able to take care of herself and her family. Also, because of her actions, Furaha’s younger sister now attends secondary school. Furaha’s story also linearly progresses from a portrayal of a backward culture to economic empowerment. The narrative suggests that she already possessed the means to challenge traditional gender norms—that this potential was something born inside of her. When she says, “I like feeling stronger than the boys despite all the discrimination from the community,” the audience is meant to see her as an empowered, postfeminist subject. This narrative creates an affective element by which donors audience can feel for these girls, get angered at their situations, and see these girls as animated characters (i.e. *real* people); thus, by replicating postfeminist regimes of truth. Furaha’s story provides Northern donors with a mirror (the feeling that these girls are “just like our girls”). This shared representation enables them to give the girls the gift of agency by helping them out of their Global Southern families and cultures.

The perceived realness and authenticity of these narratives created through the discursive frame of participatory culture helps uncritically circulate the postfeminist regimes of truth operating within these stories. While The Girl Effect discourse became persuasive through its combination of hailing narratives and political economy, the “realness” of the DST project furthers these regimes of truth by masquerading as authentic. Dingo (2011) argued that we must “look

carefully at policymaking practices through the lens of transnational networks so that we can identify the multiple strands of influences that give a policy argument clout and demonstrate how repetitive lore often circulated on a translocal scale, blending the local and the global across national or political boundaries” (p. 7). Representational practices need to be analyzed through a transnational lens, for these also dictate the terms of circulation. In the DST project, these narratives portray these girls as positive, postfeminist development subjects through the replication of themes operating in postfeminist regimes of truth (empowerment, education, employment, challenging gender norms, backwardness of local cultures). Furthermore, through the frame of participatory culture, the realness of each of these stories helps them circulate as true, uncritically. At stake here is the view of the Global South as backwards as well as the lack of agency allowed to the girls within this framework, for their stories perform the work of *Women Win*. Although employed and empowered by their local NGO, these girls are simultaneously exploited as representational labor through their digital storytelling.

Visually flattening the Global South

The *Women Win* DST videos rely exclusively on the use of still images—effectively slideshows with voice-over audio—and this technique lends itself to a particular kind of representation of the girls and their lives. Through the use of still images, these “empowered” girls become visually immobilized. We coded the images used with the following categories: photos of the girls, their families, participation in sports, their schools, photos of the girls “employed,” and group pictures of girls (team or female community). We also coded for stock photos of objects and hand-drawn animation of “difficult” events. In the videos, 21 of 37 utilized stock photos in their videos, and nine used cartoons or drawings. These stock photos and drawings serve to fill in gaps in the narrative visually.

Through these images the audience is given a glimpse into these girls’ lives, akin to leafing through a scrapbook, but these images are not fully explained, as the voice-over narrative in the videos does not always match or elucidate the

images. In the majority of the videos (27 out of 37) there are instances when the image and the voice-over do not align, meaning that the narration does not describe what is shown in the still image. The viewers instead view these images through their preexisting discursive frames, or the discursive frames offered in the website itself, namely, Global Northern ideas of gender and the Global South. With this line of thinking, dirt fields signify cultural backwardness and poverty, photos of large families signify neglected girls, action shots of girls in both sport and education represent empowerment, and group shots of girls embody a supportive, female community. Through these stills, none of these discursive frames are challenged; rather, they are further upheld. In this way, *Women Win* must be questioned for its lack of attention to the politics of representation.

These still images further the limited agency of girls by representing them as visually immobile. In analyzing the positive images of female empowerment, Wilson (2011) argued that “agency, like empowerment, is projected as a gift to be granted by the consumer of images—and potential donor—implicitly reaffirming the civilizing mission” (p. 329). The relationship between donor and visual subject that Wilson describes is intensified through the stillness of DST’s images. In DST, the girls do not speak directly to the camera, and this contributes to the flattening of their subject positions. The audience does not see girls visually as participants and agents in their lives. The stills and voice-overs represent the girls as narrators of their lives in the past tense.

In this sense, the girls’ thankfulness and indebtedness to *Women Win* becomes intensified. In this discursive frame, donor audiences see these passive girls as needing their help. The representational choices made through the direction and production of the DST project—direction given by the *Women Win* training and production staff—directly impact the girls’ agency and positions them as subjects rather than agents of *Women Win*. The ramification of this is two-fold for intercultural professional communication. First, the training materials, training processes, and resulting direct involvement of these girls to produce the videos with *Women Win* all serve to flatten the girls’ own lived experiences into the shared discourses of The Girl Effect and participatory culture. Then, the product of these communications and actions, the videos,

transmit these discourses back to the Global North. This is in opposition to the dialogic intercultural communication practices advocated by many professional and technical communications teachers and scholars (see Agboka, 2013; Kent, 1993; and Weiss, 1993).

Sharing and ownership practices with DST videos

While *Women Win's* DST defines its methods as in line with participatory culture, the sharing and ownership of the girls' videos complicates *Women Win's* full commitment to the girls' complete control over their videos. Returning to the question of exploitation in terms of the immaterial labor involved in digital media creation, the question of ownership complicates scholarship affirming affective labor of digital media as nonexploitative. While *Women Win* upholds the myth of the digital space as free space, these videos represent and sell *Women Win's* development programs through these girls' "self" produced stories. Furthermore, the Creative Commons licenses for each of these videos clearly articulates that *Women Win* owns these girls' videos. Creative Commons explains this particular license as the "most restrictive of our six main licenses, only allowing others to download your works and share them with others as long as they credit you, but they can't change them in any way or use them commercially" (Creative Commons, 2013). Because *Women Win* owns the license and hosts these videos on both their website and their *Vimeo* page, the "you" explained in the Creative Commons license refers to *Women Win*. The CC license would restrict the girls from sharing their own, self-produced videos without crediting *Women Win*.

With this sharing practice, the celebratory framing of participatory culture completely unravels and is exposed as a façade through which *Women Win* positioned their organization as a benevolent helper. As the owner of these videos, they directly profit from sharing these girls' videos in the financial marketplace by attracting donors. While the girls certainly see some benefits of their labor, the return on investment is diminished because it is funneled through both *Women Win* and their local NGO. As Rajan and Desai (2013) noted, "Women from the global South not only do a disproportionate part of the work of globalization, but

they are also caught in the chaotic, intended and unintended machinations of global forces” (p. 6). The paradox here is that while *Women Win* carefully constructs the girls as empowered, entrepreneurs of themselves, it is *Women Win* as an organization that benefits from these representations, not the girls, furthering the use of feminized labor in the process of globalization—even in spaces that seek to liberate women from the oppressive forces of globalization.

Conclusion: Implications for Intercultural Professional Communication

As this article suggests, the marriage of global development programs, postfeminist subjectivity, and “democratic” digital media requires further scrutiny. Digital media’s democratic elements do not happily travel from the Global North to the Global South. Understanding both the regimes of truth operating in digital representations as well as the means of production helps to further contextualize and understand the political economy of affective labor. Through the case study of the *Women Win*’s DST project, unpacking subject positions of girls through Girl Effect programming and participatory culture enables us to see the hidden power dynamic operating between the girls and *Women Win*. In providing a critical case study of *Women Win*’s DST project, our hope is that future deployments of digital media in transnational contexts will interrogate the intricate layers of subjectivity and agency produced by both the representations themselves and the means of producing representations.

For scholars and practitioners of intercultural professional communication, the *Women Win* DST project is reflective of “large culture” ideologies, privileging the Global North’s postfeminist discourses of empowerment and The Girl Effect, as well as utopian perceptions of participatory, digital media culture, over the microcultural factors that shape the lives of the individual girls and their communities (Agboka, 2012). Despite the fact that the individual girls and their

communities are the subject of these DST videos, the prevailing narrative structure and the visual design reflects large culture ideologies. This case study serves as a cautionary tale to intercultural communicators in that transnational NGOs may wish to tell particular kinds of stories that reflect certain cultural norms, even with the stated purpose of aid to the Global South. When designing the communication for cross-cultural technology training initiatives, it is imperative to evaluate the ideologies that circulate in that training, and ensure that partners from the Global South are not solely in service of the political economy of affective labor for the Global North, rather than building locally desired and effective technological infrastructure in the Global South.

For international professional and technical communicators, this requires an intervention in the manner in which training materials for DST projects are created and used. If the videos create specific messages for an audience in the Global North, what might DST videos for a cross-cultural audience look like, and how might training materials scaffold their creation? As an example, Bennett, Eglash, and Krishnamoorthy (2011) used a Virtual Design Studio model to bridge cultural perspectives to create an HIV/AIDS awareness campaign in the Global South that would resonate with audiences in both the Global North and South. As the authors note, graphic design and technical communication research has shown that there is a “visual vernacular” of specific cultures (p. 189). Visual symbols and codes vary across culture, and as our analysis of the *Women Win* DST videos has shown, the visual iconography of these videos reflects Western ideologies, despite the fact that they tell stories about girls and women from the Global South. Technical communicators must work dialogically with partners in the Global South to design and create training materials for DST projects that allow for the visual vernacular of the culture in which the videos are made, and do not privilege Western visual and aural cues and resulting ideologies.

In the case of the *Women Win* trainings, the training program bifurcates “Storytelling Skill Building” and “Facilitation and Technical Skill Mastery.” This storytelling training names “the” digital storytelling methodology, which seems to suggest that this method may articulate a singular approach imbued with the Global Northern ideologies critiqued in this piece. We suggest that improved

training processes consist of new technical trainings that incorporate both storytelling and technical aspects of the work. This may include discussion of the visual vernacular and what specific images and sounds evoke in the locality in which they exist, so that the voice-over narration and the other video and audio, taken together, reflect the girls' and women's visual vernacular instead of Western ideologies.

A more localized approach in which NGO specialists and professional and technical communicators learn and listen in reciprocity with local communities would ensure that technology initiatives do not exist solely for the benefit of Western ideological purposes (Gajjala, 2004). The difficulty faced in a DST project such as *Women Win* is that the local stories and local digital labor serve as a guise so as to potentially look as though it is doing just that. What is necessary is to go beyond the superficial appearance of local stories and local digital labor in the project, and investigate how DST instructions and other training materials might be suggesting a Western visual vernacular rather than a local one.

As another step, international professional and technical communication researchers need to also work dialogically with communities in the Global South to fully examine the effects of this kind of cross-cultural technology initiative—beyond the videos themselves—to uncover whether the effect of DST projects such as *Women Win* moves beyond the creation of promotional videos for Western donations to NGOs. It is important to look beyond the participatory and collaborative veneer of the DST project and ask whether technology (or technology training) is the solution for a local problem (Gitau, Diga, Bidwell, & Marsden, 2010). It is only then that we may know if women and girls in the Global South are truly “winning.” ■

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