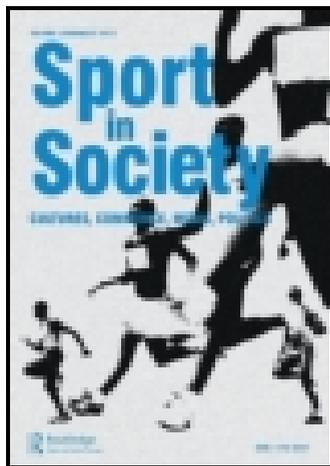


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### Voices of empowerment: women from the Global South re/negotiating empowerment and the global sports mentoring programme

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## ***Voices of empowerment: women from the Global South re/negotiating empowerment and the global sports mentoring programme***

Sumaya F. Samie<sup>a\*</sup>, Alicia J. Johnson<sup>b</sup>, Ashleigh M. Huffman<sup>c</sup> and Sarah J. Hillyer<sup>c</sup>

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The topic of women's empowerment in the Global South not only dominates gender and development programming but continues to be at the forefront of political concerns about the status and position of women across the 'developing world'. Increasingly, it is being championed as an essential 'developmental goal' of northern-led sport for development and peace and sport, gender and development initiatives. Using the US Department of State supported 'Global Sports Mentoring Program' (GSMP) as a case study, this paper centralizes the perceptions and experiences of empowerment, agency and voice as expressed by 27 women from 22 countries across the Global South before and during their participation in the 2012 and 2013 programmes. Findings illustrate the multiple ways in which women fought for, negotiated and asserted power within their lives, and the degree to which their pre-GSMP thoughts on female empowerment were broadened, challenged and positively or negatively impacted.

### **Introduction**

In 2012, the US Department of State (DoS) launched its global effort to engage women and girls in sports through the 'Empowering Women and Girls through Sports' initiative (EWGTS) and named the University of Tennessee Center for Sport, Peace, and Society (CSPS) as the cooperative partner for the initiative. Falling within a SDP and sport, gender and development (SGD) agenda, the primary goals of the EWGTS initiative are (1) to use sports exchange programmes to increase female access and opportunities to sport worldwide; (2) enhance cross-cultural understanding; (3) use life skills training to promote personal and professional development of women; (4) encourage critical thinking about gender equality, inclusion and human rights and (5) assist females in becoming active agents of positive change. Operationally, these broad aims are met via three programmatic components: Sports Envoys, Sports Visitors and the Global Sports Mentoring Program (GSMP). The GSMP is a one-month mentorship experience that pairs international female sports leaders (read: 'Emerging Leaders' or ELs) with American women in the sports industry. This programme commences each year in Washington, DC with ELs meeting programme facilitators from CSPS and other international participants.

During this initial encounter, ELs undergo a critical learning process that seeks to *expose, equip, empower* and *entrust* them with knowledge and life skills to help them re/ think the social world and their position within it as women. In keeping with the broader EWGTS initiative, emphasis is placed on encouraging women to explore the concept of empowerment. However, unlike many other top-down state-led SGD and gender and development programming (GAD) initiatives, CSPS facilitators have a say in what is

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taught in regard to female empowerment (the concept, process and product). So as to reduce Northern or Eurocentric ideas about female empowerment being imposed onto 'foreign' women, multicultural staff are involved with the delivery of the education and advised not to adopt any specific definition of empowerment. Rather, emphasis is placed on engaging women in conversation and dialogue that facilitates thinking around axes of oppression that (1) limit women's social, educational, political and legal opportunities for progress and (2) that collude and intersect to re/produce structural inequalities and hierarchical gendered relations in the women's communities. Ample opportunity is given for women to exchange personal narratives of being 'women' in their sociocultural, political contexts, and to talk about the concept, process and product of empowerment as it relates to them and women in their communities. In doing so, women are encouraged to identify – on their own terms – challenges and social issues facing women and girls in their local communities. Following this educational experience, international participants depart for their mentor sites where they spend the remaining three weeks developing a culturally relevant, sports-based action plan.

In this paper we focus on the perceptions and experiences of female empowerment as expressed by ELs before and during their participation in the 2012 and 2013 educational component of GSMP initiatives. Attention is placed on ascertaining women's experiences of empowerment, agency and voice before their involvement in the GSMP, and the impacts, if any, that the CSPS-led educational experience had in broadening, reinforcing, challenging and positively or negatively impacting their pre-GSMP understandings of female empowerment.

### **GAD, SGD and women's empowerment**

SGD is informed by the principles of GAD, while also seeking to merge with the ideas of sport for development and peace (SDP). Conceptually, this would mean combining the efforts of SDP and GAD work to (1) question and challenge, for instance, an existing gender order and various forms of unequal hierarchies that sustain poverty, oppression and inequity against both males and females (i.e. the GAD approach) and (2) mobilizing sport for the purposes of nurturing broader forms of economic, social, cultural and political change in typically disadvantaged communities and/or post-conflict regions around the world (i.e. the SDP approach) (Kidd 2008; Larkin, Razack, and Moola 2007).

To date, however, much of the SGD movement has been dominated and guided by 'external powers' from the Global North (GN) concerned about the unequal status of women and girls in the world, especially, although not entirely, in the 'developing world' (or the GS) (Chawansky 2011; Hayhurst 2011, 2013, 2014; Hayhurst, MacNeill, and Frisby 2011; Swai 2010, 35). It also remains compounded by two firm beliefs. First, that women from the GS (read: developing world, 'Third World' and/or two-thirds world) exist as marginalized, oppressed and disadvantaged beings within their own sociocultural and political basis (Mohanty 1988) and, second, that empowerment is the only means through which these women can overcome their internalized oppression (Saavedra 2009). Under this premise, many northern-led SGD programmes centre on nurturing women's empowerment, increasing female agency (read: women's capacity to resist, make strategic life choices) and promoting voice (read: women's capacity to express their desires or refusal to be dominated). Female beneficiaries of these programmes are often positioned as consumers and typically taught three fundamental things: (1) that they are powerful enough to resist (i.e. they have *potential* to generate new possibilities) (Hayhurst 2013, 2014); (2) that they require outside help to unleash their transformative potential (i.e. they lack *controlling*

*power over* their lives) (Rowlands 1997); and (3) that redressing the corruptive social, economic, cultural and political forces that oppress women and girls requires females to change so as to become (more) capable and resilient (i.e. women are victims and oppressed because they lack the ‘can-do’ spirit to fight and resist) (Chawansky 2011; Hayhurst 2011). Indeed, northern-led SGD initiatives promising such change for women and girls are championed as miraculous revolutionary processes that not only ‘rescue’ the oppressed ‘Other’ woman but also enable these ‘have nots’ to gain skills and knowledge to overcome and ‘erase ... their internalized oppression’ (Rowlands 1997; Jeanes and Magee 2014). However, the role that these efforts to empower women play in transmitting Eurocentric depictions of *what* women’s development and empowerment, oppression and *inequality* entails (e.g. the social or material condition) or should look like in and for the GS is overlooked. Oftentimes, the ways in which ‘wider structural domains of power’ operate to reproduce ‘social inequalities’ for women in the GS are also obscured (Hayhurst 2013, 9). Little attention is also placed on making sense of what the term ‘empowerment’ means to/for beneficiaries, and the various (economic, cultural, political or material) conditions *necessary* to foster empowering changes in the foreign individuals community is ignored. Perhaps, unsurprisingly then, the majority of northern-led SGD programmes are criticized for being nothing more than poorly constructed attempts at breaking down or confronting issues of power imbalances, stereotypes and authority (Hayhurst 2011).

### Aims

Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to broaden and diversify current debates about the meaning of empowerment for GS women and the use of northern-led SDP/SGD interventions with/for a cohort of 27 women from 22 countries across the GS. We focus on the women-centred US DoS-funded GSMP that (1) pairs international female sports leaders from the GS (ELs) with American women working in the sports industry and (2) devolves *power* to facilitators from CSPS to lead discussions on female empowerment. While the overarching state-led mission adheres to a top-down approach for development (by requiring ELs to ultimately adopt sport as a vehicle to create social change in their communities and asserting the view that women themselves must be the change agents for the changes they want to see), CSPS facilitators ultimately have influence over *how* the expectations for development and female empowerment unfold and evolve at the bottom with ELs. This flexibility, while knowing we are working *under* a state-led neoliberalist vision of empowerment has always made us more aware of the need to work diligently to ensure we do not ‘exert a negative effect on (women’s) agency’ (McKee 2009, 478).

For instance, so as to overcome the pitfalls of traditional northern-led SGD initiatives, we see our programme participants not as mere ‘consumers’ of our programme or indeed our knowledge of ‘empowerment’ but as already active agents and producers of social, cultural and political change for themselves on their own terms in their own communities. Moreover, despite being university-level educators, we do not position ourselves as all-knowing, powerful ‘bearers of logic’ from the GN, but instead introduce ourselves as real women who are deeply interested in working with and learning from women around the world (Swai 2010, 35). Under this premise, a central aim of this paper is privileging the voices of the programme beneficiaries so as to recover marginalized voices about agency, strength and resilience, and allow participants to speak back and against essentialist representations of ‘Them’ as powerless.

Focusing on participant’s stories of empowerment is not an attempt to ‘hijack’ their accomplishments to bolster the success of an initiative in which we played a pivotal role as

educators and facilitators. Rather, it is a critical attempt for us, as western-based critical educators to listen to and learn from those women whom the wider EWGTS initiative seeks to help, and from those women who are frequently pathologized as victims in need of rescuing. The need to appreciate and celebrate the ‘Others’ sense of agency is a key aspect of this paper. It is underpinned by a firm belief that the power of (and from) initiating struggle for transformative change by the ‘Other’ should not be overlooked, especially when women’s agency was described as a ‘creative possibility’ to cultivate change as part of western women’s feminist struggle for equity in access and opportunities for sport (Theberge 1987, 391).

## Methodology

Located within a qualitative paradigm founded upon an interpretative epistemological framework, this research draws on data pertaining to ELs’ experiences and understanding of empowerment before and during the 2012 and 2013 GSMP educational encounter facilitated by CSPS.

## Sample

Despite the fact that the GS contains countries with emerging economies (e.g. India, China, Brazil and South Africa), the overall lower levels of human development, and the political and economic instability of the majority of its countries, means the region as a whole has been typically depicted through discourses of *poverty* and *upheaval*. This understanding of the GS has influenced how GS women are understood. For instance, females from the GS have been particularly subject to crude processes of categorization that confines ‘Them’ as a ‘homogeneous’, ‘powerless’ group victimized by their own men, and their cultural and socio-economic systems and political basis (Mohanty 1988, 343–346). Indeed, it is this perception of a cloistered, oppressed, disadvantaged woman that has inspired many western organizations to rescue or save the marginalized ‘Other’ woman (Darnell and Hayhurst 2011).

For this study, we focus on the lived experiences and perspectives of 27 women from 22 countries that typically comprise the GS (Table 1). These women possess different social, personal and political geographies, vary in age (25–45 years) and socio-economic status and represent a variety of ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> They also work in diverse professional industries (Figure 1). All participants had undergone various forms of educational and professional training and, at the time of the research, held paid jobs and management roles in a variety of different male-dominated industries. The inclusion of this demographic in our research not only privileges *silenced*

Table 1. Regional representation of participants.

Region	No. of participants	Countries
Africa	12	Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia, & Zimbabwe
Central & Latin America	7	Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Jamaica, Peru, Mexico
East Asia & Pacific	4	China, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines
South & Central Asia	4	India, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan

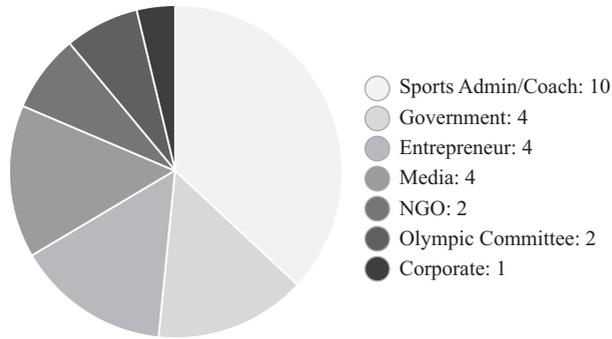


Figure 1. Chart illustrating professionals and industries where emerging leaders work.

voices (of agency and progress) from ‘Othered’ women who have been involved with strategically navigating various axes of inequality to be in their own accomplished positions, but also draws attention to real women who are *absent* in representations of women from the GS.<sup>2</sup>

### Data collection

For this research, video and telecom interviews were conducted (in English) prior to women’s GSMP participation, followed by face-to-face interviews mid-way through the programme. Interviews were semi-structured to offer women opportunities to articulate and reveal oral testimonies and their own life ‘her-stories’ (narratives). This focus allowed women from the GS to re/tell a set of (alternative) truths in which they had their own individual place and voice and could challenge the universalism of Eurocentric perceptions about a homogenous GS.

As researchers, we were thus able to better understand participants’ lives and the various social, cultural, material and political structures that shaped their existence as women from a heterogeneous GS. The focus on dialogue and conversation in all of these interviews provided women ample opportunity to ‘retrieve themselves’ and ‘to speak’ about and for themselves during the crucial stages of the knowledge-production phase (Smith 1999, 4). As such, it allowed us to interact openly with women who have too often been discursively represented in terms of their ‘object status’, and thus frequently portrayed as ‘powerless . . . archetypal victims’ (Mohanty 1988, 66–80).

As critical educators, and women with different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds who were either born in or now residing in the GN, we were mindful about how our own social, cultural and political positioning could impact our participants’ understanding of empowerment and create power imbalances between us and our participants. To overcome this, we ensured that we neither positioned ourselves as ‘all-knowing’ GN figures nor situated the ELs as ‘needing to be saved’. Operationally, this meant balancing our awareness of the ways in which cultural norms and political situations could hinder and restrict women’s life opportunities without essentializing this process through Eurocentric terms. At other moments, we were acutely aware of how Eurocentric notions of gender equity had been embedded in the social, cultural and political systems of reform in various parts of the GS, but wanted our participants to raise this through (and as) their own concerns. We wanted women to reach their own conclusions about what empowerment should look like, and the local, situational and cultural conditions under/through which the development of women’s empowerment would be most effectively achieved.

### **Data analysis**

Analysis of qualitative data was a cyclical and iterative process in which we re/read transcripts and analysed segments of interviews to observe patterns, discover relationships, commonalities and differences across stories, while simultaneously absorbing the contexts and recognizing the emotions imbued in participants' perceptions, testimonies, experiences and histories. While we have sought to retain the authenticity of women's voices in the write-up of the empirical discussion, we are also mindful of how this is a re/presentation of ELs' narratives and testimonies as interpreted and understood through our own sociocultural, philosophical and political consciousness. Nevertheless, we hope that it can serve as a functional text for those involved in SGD.

We now turn our attention to better understanding how women from the GS understood empowerment and what their lived experiences and positionalities revealed about the mediation of power in and/or over their lives prior to their involvement in the GSMP. Given that there is a greater focus on documenting the impact of SGD on women's perceptions and abilities to *become* empowered subjects, focusing on women's viewpoints prior to their engagement in an SGD initiative is essential. Here, it allows us to retrieve authentic information from 'non-Western' women so as to move beyond essentialist ideas that such women are *only* ever 'empowered' (read: saved or rescued) through interventionist programmes from a liberated, civilized and progressive metropolis (Kearney 2009, 19).

### **Findings**

#### ***Experiences of empowerment, agency and voice across the GS***

As a concept, empowerment has been defined in many ways (Kilby 2011), and in discussions with ELs the multiplicity and subjectivity of the term was evident. ELs' testimonies revealed the extent to which empowerment was an evolving *self-awareness* in which women could recognize the presence and dynamics of power and oppression in their lives. Many spoke about their experiences of possessing or not possessing power (the interpersonal) and having or not having the privilege to use it to foster (positive) social change in their lives. More than half of ELs felt compelled to both *genderize* and *personalize* the concept, opting to focus specifically on two points. First, how, as a process and end product, empowerment was aimed at benefiting females and, second, the degree to which the process was self-driven.

#### ***Self-empowerment***

All of the ELs expressed feeling empowered as a result of their current positions as educated, accomplished women. An Indian EL further stated that the outcome of this empowered experience was a 'woman who is independent enough to ... believe in (herself) ... and do whatever (she) really wants to do'. Another, from Mexico, suggested that empowerment was intrinsically linked to confidence, and that the self-worth females gleaned from feeling empowered was conducive to fostering an undeterred attitude to want to 'fight against' complex forms of inequality and injustice, 'fight for' control over their lives and 'fight to have' their voices heard (and acted upon). Both ELs felt that such characteristics allowed women to become 'strong' (Indian EL) 'courageous (and) determined enough ... to demand more' (Mexican EL). In fact, the notion of 'demanding' more was something that the majority of ELs, working both within and beyond the field of sport, commented on. Oftentimes, it was compounded by the belief that when women and girls were more assertive and vocal in decision-making, they could situate themselves in

leadership positions that would command them citizenship and visibility in social, cultural and political aspects of their lives. It was also underscored by the notion that it would liberate women from systems that confined them to other's choices. This is evident when another EL from Mexico claimed: 'If girls don't have a voice ... they are slaves to somebody else's choices'.

Two-thirds of ELs stated that even though their subjective experiences of accruing power originated from within themselves, their families and partners also played a role in facilitating the possibilities for their empowerment. Although none of these women directly identified themselves as being 'head of the household' (and nor did we ask them to construct their experiences under such a Eurocentric label) many identified themselves as both *empowered* and *powerful* agents capable of transformative change within their family units, their communities and local neighbourhoods. Women used words like 'decisive', 'in control', 'in charge of', 'responsible over' and 'powerful' when talking about their positions in the home and the community. A Columbian EL working to prevent young children from joining guerilla gangs spoke about the 'powerful' role that local mothers played in reshaping the future of their children and ultimately their families and communities. 'What I have seen is that women are more likely than men to educate their children ... they are stronger ... stronger women can bring up stronger children ... stronger communities', she stated.

'Strength' in this context came from *resisting* pressure to join local guerilla gangs, and for the EL it was a catalyst for taking ownership of some power. Her participation in the community illustrates her political agency to 'venture beyond (her) own locus of power to engage others in a collective struggle' against oppressive power structures (Gulbrandsen and Walsh 2012, 10). It also reveals the role that other women were playing in resisting the circulation of corruptive power in personally meaningful and purposeful ways. Hence, even when the local mother's power to enact her own agency was, in this context, centralized within the locus of the home, it had far-reaching effects outside of the home, impacting local discourses within public spaces.

ELs also talked about their monopoly of 'power' within the home to achieve positive outcomes. ELs from Argentina, Zimbabwe and Brazil alluded to this. The Brazilian EL said that it was easier for women in her country to 'share power' with others because they grew up 'having power ... at home'. In her own life, she was a decisive and assertive partner, and took the privilege and power to take ownership of and lead social and financial decisions. Meanwhile, the Zimbabwean EL articulated how she had grown up witnessing her mother 'being a leader ... (and) making good decisions' that benefited the family.

Through these interview discussions, we came to better understand the complex and heterogeneous situations in which women from the GS were living and negotiating power for themselves. Their personal stories illustrated women's determination to fight for their personal 'growth in consciousness and actions' and their capacity and experience of mobilizing and organizing themselves (Parpart 2010, 22). Within their communities and families, this occurred without the direct help of foreign 'Others' and was tied to women's intimate understanding of their environments. They served as determined, head-strong mothers, were often taking ownership of decision-making and dealing directly with various domestic and community problems and actively participating in the political life of their families and communities by advocating for transformative change on a range of issues.

Many Eurocentric and/or essentialist re/presentations have tended to view women's domestic or maternal roles as a sign of women's weakened or subordinate position, mainly because the 'maintenance function' has been uncritically juxtaposed against the 'productive role of wage-labor' (Mohanty 1988, 65). Here, we are reluctant to brand ELs as powerless as

this would be profoundly insensitive to the ‘meanings and values’ attributed to the clearly significant act of mothering in these women’s lives and their various cultural systems (McEwan 2001, 94; Rosaldo 1980). It would also be disingenuous since the majority ‘enjoyed considerable flexibility and power’ in this space, with many indicating that it was the place where *power* originated (Swai 2010, 22). Clearly, the act of mothering for them and those around them was regarded as meaningful, productive and transformative, and women’s personal stories certainly allowed us to appreciate the importance of women’s cultural and intimate knowledge in ‘maintaining livelihoods’ supporting ‘cultural continuity’ and fostering ‘community cohesion’ (Swai 2010, 22). That being said, a number of ELs also talked about their personal struggles to ‘get ahead’ and become empowered (Indonesian EL). It is to a closer analysis of this theme that we now turn.

### ***Power and resistance***

Many of the ELs’ experiences of authentic power were centred on *them* resisting the power of others in their lives so as to make their own decisions, as opposed to having power bestowed upon them. A Ugandan EL working as a sports journalist talked about the largely male-dominated and intimidating environment in which she worked, having already fought for her place to get there. She stated: ‘there is a lot of . . . general intimidation from everyone all around . . . from your top boss, from your middle-level bosses, and just from your supervisors’. Another from Kenya stated, ‘You can feel like you’re beat down’, demonstrating the consequence of internalizing the negative attitudes from surrounding people. And since these ELs recognized the instability of their positions, they admitted that they were less likely to be outspoken or defiant in the workplace, despite having been outspoken to achieve what they had.

In fact, in spite of identifying as ‘empowered’, these struggles negatively affected some of the ELs’ ability or desire to work with or even for the betterment of other women. In some cases, ELs refused to name other women as legitimate role models, leaders or mentors. Five ELs confessed that their own difficult journeys to self-empowerment had made them ‘competitive’ (Nigerian EL), ‘guarded’ (Mexican EL) and ‘threatened’ (Zambian and Brazilian EL) by women whom they saw as either being goal-orientated or driven, or whom they felt possessed with the same level of resilience and strength as themselves. The Mexican EL stated that, for her at least, she felt this way because she knew that there were limited opportunities for women in her industry, and therefore she was ‘selfish’ and did not ‘let anyone else come up’. Three of these five ELs also admitted that they preferred working with men. All of these women recognized though that these feelings stemmed from the fact that they were working in traditionally male-dominated industries where female presence was both rare and frequently attributed to women’s possession of aggressive traits. In turn, this meant that while some of these five ELs recognized that the contextual and situational factors influenced them to behave this way (e.g. made them feel possessive over their power and privilege), others believed that it was their ‘defiant’, ‘outspoken’ nature and their assertive and aggressive traits that had enabled them to achieve a privileged position (Nigerian and Mexican EL). Clearly, women’s lived experiences of empowerment were underscored with difficulties in lacking power and voice, despite being educated, accomplished professional women. Working in systems that favoured capitalist patriarchy exacerbated these worries, leaving many ELs to feel powerless in these circumstances.

Although the previously described situation has traditionally been used as a stark reminder of women’s lack of agency and their marginalized status in ‘Other’ (non-western)

cultures, we are mindful of the degree to which accomplished, educated, independent women in the GN, who are typically viewed as ‘empowered agents’, have and continue to struggle for political agency and recognition within capitalist patriarchy (Fenwick 1998). We also came to realize that many ELs’ understanding of women’s empowerment was influenced by Eurocentric thinking in which (1) ‘Othered’ women are seen as *powerless*, *vulnerable* and *voiceless* until ‘They’ are rescued through education and employment and (2) empowerment is seen as coming almost entirely from *within* the *oppressed* individual. The notion that women and girls might actually not be affected by various forms of structural inequalities (Mohanty 1988), or that men and women can both be negatively affected by unequal gender relations or ‘false value systems and ideologies of oppression’, were absent from their discussions of empowerment (Batliwala 1994, 131). In fact, since ELs were more compelled to associate women’s lack of power in society with being uneducated or lacking appropriate knowledge (despite also recognizing the power their mothers and other uneducated women in their communities had), they were dismissive of the idea that women could be empowered with and/or through cultural knowledge.

Instead, ELs viewed women as the *precursors* for the social change that they want to see, and fully believed that they had to take on the social responsibility of fixing the problems that affected them (even if the women had no part in creating these): ‘Women are strong ... we can fix everything ... the world’, expressed one EL from Brazil overlooking how, in many instances, women’s difficulties to negotiate and resist power (in the workplace) were intricately tied up with, and emerged out of the (neoliberalist) discourses of empowerment that some ELs valued. It is beyond the remit of this paper to comment on whether this was a direct consequence of the ELs’ exposure to or engagement with other GN-led (SGD, GAD or reform-based) initiatives, but one cannot ignore the fact that foreign powers have historically played a significant role in dictating the kinds of social, economic and political reform that is required to ‘enlighten’ the female Other to help Herself overcome her Third-World status (Swai 2010, 22).<sup>3</sup> Hence, the kinds of political agency that women were identifying as ‘empowering’, and the avenues through which women had cultivated self-empowerment, were precisely the *subversive* forms of agency that many SGD practitioners argue renders women from the GS more vulnerable in sociocultural, economic and political contexts where ‘non-state actors’ were increasingly using and abusing, indeed colonizing, the rhetoric of empowerment to ‘enhance their own image and reach untapped markets’ (Hayhurst 2013, 9). Having discussed women’s experiences of empowerment, agency and voice prior to their entry into the GSMP programme, we now explore what if any impact the CSPS-led educational encounter had on participants.

### ***Renegotiating women’s empowerment during GSMP***

The GSMP is a one-month mentorship experience which commences with CSPS educators helping ELs think about axes of oppression that limit women’s social, educational, political and legal opportunities for progress, and collude and intersect to re/produce structural inequalities and hierarchical gendered relations. By initiating and focusing discussions around agency, structure and resistance, ELs are encouraged to think about three dimensions of power: (1) oppressive power of existing gender relations; (2) power to critically challenge; and (3) participatory power to shape different social relations (Charmes and Wieringa 2003).

A dominant theme that emerged from mid-programme interviews was how ELs’ initial perceptions of empowerment were broadened in diverse ways. ELs developed a more lucid and intricate understanding of the dynamics of empowerment, oppression and

inequality as it related to people, communities, societies and structure and agency. Many came to appreciate that empowerment was more than the opposite of oppression and powerlessness. In turn, they understood that just as empowerment was more than simply having/gaining power, privilege and voice, oppression was more than not having power, privilege and voice. Many ELs who initially confessed to feeling guarded about their hard-earned power and privilege, and viewed other women as a threat, felt especially compelled to talk about this. A Nigerian EL acknowledged, for the first time, the presence of a ‘real gap’ that existed in her society between ‘the very successful women and the upcoming women’, and confronted the need for people to *challenge* the very *system(s)* in which they found self-empowerment but simultaneously felt unequal, isolated and detached from others in their society. For her this began with imagining connections and similarities between herself and her ‘sisters’ and recognizing that each was already playing a role in the development of their local context (e.g. families, societies and communities). Meaning she could appreciate for the first time that women whom she previously viewed as ‘not being successful’ were successfully already contributing to their own environments.

Meanwhile, a Brazilian EL, who initially alluded to how her career-driven focus caused her to look suspiciously and competitively at other ‘upcoming’ women in her industry, now felt that she could confront her own acquiescence ‘for’ the system (e.g. support of men, and not women). She was also able to understand how this submission both contributed to and sustained inequitable relations (e.g. ‘allowed men to thrive’ in an already unequal, masculinist system while ‘preventing women from getting too close’). Here, we see women discovering that one could be empowered (read: be the subject of power, knowledge and privilege), but essentially use this power to fit into systems that contribute to the marginalization of others (read: the objects of power), and thus contribute to the reproduction of inequalities that negatively impact others and their own quality of life (regardless of whether they felt empowered). We also see women envisioning solutions to redress unequal power structures by confronting their own acquiescence to an oppressive, unequal system, and mobilizing others with the hope that they too will participate in resistance in the future. For many ELs this knowledge had implications for their own SGD action planning.

### ***Implications for SGD action-planning***

#### ***Challenging gendered empowerment***

In addition to broadening ELs’ understanding of empowerment, many attested to the experience challenging their initial perception of empowerment being gendered towards females. ELs eventually recognized that their belief that empowered women could resolve ‘all the feuds in society ... and rule the society’ (Chinese EL) was unrealistic and contradictory to the moral and political underpinnings of empowerment itself. An Egyptian EL stumbled on this point while speaking about the sense of urgency for reform in her country. While she recognized that the evolving sociopolitical context after the Revolution had resulted in more women being ‘out there ... in the streets ... in social life, economic life and political life’, she was also acutely aware of the extent to which they remained underrepresented in influential positions of power that could impact the quality of life for civil society. However, she also recognized that ‘change’ or reform, in this instance, could not simply be centred on nurturing a quantitative change (e.g. increasing the number of women in these positions), but had to be compounded by a human rights and social justice agenda in which the ‘right people’ had to be elected into power so as to bring about the necessary and relevant transformative change.

In Egypt now, it's not about getting all the women to power ... we don't want the women to dominate and men to just be like we were. It's more about the collective struggle now to fight for what we need in our society.

Implicit in this understanding of social change was the belief that (1) women *alone* could not transform society and (2) that in order for society to be better, allowing women to usurp men's positions of (having) power (over others) was not conducive to empowering real people (read: the 'right people'). For her, real change could only be brought about if both men and women worked collectively. Meaning, women's empowerment did not, and could not rest *entirely* on replacing one form of power (e.g. men) with another (e.g. women).

The Pakistani EL also alluded to these ideas and stated that she was only able to recognize that empowerment was about 'people reaching their potential ... regardless of gender' after exposure to the educational component of GSMP which gave her 'a safe space to think, think and think some more'. These beliefs enabled her to respect the importance of including males in empowering strategies aimed at empowering females. In her 'Go-Girl-Pakistan' initiative, she sought to challenge negative societal and cultural attitudes towards Pakistani girls' participation in sport by offering 'Daddy and Me' and 'Mommy and Me' sports-focused clinics. For the EL, an essential part of these clinics is getting parents to grapple with and confront the notion that sport for girls is unacceptable. However, she was aware that this would challenge traditional gendered norms and could leave girls feeling frustrated and disillusioned with their cultural systems and competing for limited resources. To overcome such challenges, she envisioned working with local schools to incorporate physical activity into the school curriculum. This, she felt, would 'slowly' lead to a change in cultural attitudes.

### *Empowerment 'by the people'*

A cohort of ELs also identified how the educational exposure within GSMP reinforced the idea that development should be 'by the people', as opposed to being designed for them. 'Only those who are affected by something can tell you what is needed for change', asserted the Indonesian EL, whereas another from the Philippines stated: 'just like different countries need different policy, different communities need different things. We can work together for change but differently in each city, or sector, not always the same way'.

Many others also came to recognize that development should be delivered within/under conditions that are conducive to facilitating development and empowerment. ELs from the Philippines, Uganda and Peru interpreted this as development and empowerment strategies needing to (1) adopt bottom-up approaches and (2) work with local people, not against them. Nevertheless, since an explicit requirement of GSMP is for ELs to create action plans *for* their communities during their experience, the risk of producing top-down development agendas 'for the people' was inevitable, but ELs demonstrated ingenuity to act in accordance with their own moral beliefs. The Peruvian EL recognized that organized sport may not be effective and devised a plan to incorporate skate boarding, meanwhile the EL from the Philippines adapted her action plan several times after returning home to include physical education and disaster relief.

### **Conclusion**

This paper explored the perceptions and experiences of female empowerment of 27 heterogeneous females from the GS before and during their participation in the 2012 and 2013 GSMP educational component. The pre-GSMP perceptions broaden and diversify

discussions about female empowerment as articulated through the personal testimonies of diversely situated women from the GS. Here, the essentialism of a homogenous GS housing illiterate, uneducated women is challenged, as we encounter accomplished, educated women negotiating and asserting power for themselves. As determined, driven and focused professional women, mothers and wives, we see women accruing and asserting power both within and beyond the prism of a male-dominated world. We also come to better understand the dynamics of resistance and power in their lives before their involvement in any GN-led SGD initiative. In many ways, their personal stories call to question the legitimacy of (1) crude totalitarian re/presentations of 'Them' as *powerless* and (2) Eurocentric feminist analyses that focus on the object status of the 'Other' to reproduce hierarchical power relations between the modern, 'developed' woman, and the 'to-be-developed-woman' from the GS.

Yet, their struggles for self-empowerment also remind us of the damning legacy of colonialist ideas pertaining to women's development and reform. We learn about how women's lived experiences in their fight to become 'self-reliant', empowered agents of change are underscored by neoliberalism and unequal gender relations in work/economic systems that criticize women's contribution to the economic development of their nation. Women's lack of political agency and voice in the workplace fuels their acquiescence to structural systems that celebrate male participation in the global economy, and compounds their fear of allowing other women to 'rise'. The impact that this has on further demarcating men from women, while creating class-based tensions between educated women and their un/educated female counterparts cannot be ignored, especially as it cultivates 'Others' within 'Others' (Nigerian EL), allowing neocolonial 'non/state' forces to (1) further assert the need for a development and gender-equality rhetoric and (2) solidify, if not legitimize, their presence to tackle a set of unequal power gender relations which they had a hand in creating.

Through the GSMP educational component, we noticed some women move beyond romanticizing empowerment as an individualistic endeavour to work only on and for themselves (through education and work) to better appreciate that a cumulative gain in information did not always result in women being subjects of power. Other ELs critically focused on the realities that disconnected people to better recognize the binary ways in which discursive notions of 'empowered' and 'powerless' or 'oppressed' women further segregated people. This realization allowed women to further reflect upon how their own tactics for self-empowerment could (1) demonstrate their superiority over others, while simultaneously reinforcing their marginalized position in a capitalist patriarchy society and (2) result only in their economic, not their social or political, development. By giving women a space to identify oppressive rules of society, CSPA educators were able to encourage women to think about effective ways to circumvent these in their own environments.

Women also focused on shared ideals between 'upcoming women' (previously viewed as the 'have nots') and the 'successful women' (read: the 'haves'), and the 'resourcefulness' of each in developing themselves and their local context (e.g. their families, societies and communities). In turn, women could better grapple with the notion of 'production of capital/ism itself' in a way that allowed them to navigate around 'bureaucratic organization, efficiency planning, and means-ends rationality' that 'reduced and subordinated human creativity and imagination to commodities for exchange production and profit making' (Swai 2010, 154). No longer did they feel compelled to weigh which contribution was more worthwhile. A large cohort of women also realized that empowerment did not necessarily need to be so radical, where women claimed power

by usurping men's power or privileged positions in society, or where women excluded men and boys. By recognizing that this approach would simply replace one form of control with another, women understood that women *alone* could not transform society, since women's oppressed status was related to men (and some women's) subservience to neo/patriarchal ideologies. Meaning, women were and would remain marginalized only if men (and some women) continued to also *enslave* themselves (and remain docile) to neo/patriarchal notions. This allowed our participants to see empowerment as not only a broad process that 'encompasses progress in social and political participation, cultural expression, and access to equitable legal rights' (Swai 2010, 170) but also a transformation in gender relations.

This paper certainly illustrates women's initiative and ingenuity, compassion and affection for their nations and the people in them; however, evaluations from this research only allude to short-term outcomes of GSMP. More research is needed to understand how these women apply their renewed understanding of empowerment in the contours of their own lives and the lives of others. And, while we hope this paper will make some contribution to adapting the rhetoric of SGD programmes focusing on empowerment, in closing we wish to assert that this should not be taken to mean that the GN needs to lead the pathway for improvement. More efforts need to be made to incorporate the views of 'development' from within the GS.

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### Notes

1. ELs [0] were selected through a nomination process initiated and led by the US DoS and respective US embassies, with CSPS educators conducting selection interviews. We fully understand the 'inevitable tensions' of working in partnership with state and corporate funders (Hayhurst and Frisby 2010), and the potential bias in sample recruitment through the process of official nomination. However, addressing these concerns is beyond the remit of this paper. Suffice to say, our commitment at CSPS has been and remains centred on privileging, not *romanticizing*, the voices of women from the GS who were actively involved with the 2012 and 2013 GSMP experience.
2. The pervasive absence of accomplished women in representations of women from the GS stems in part from crude Eurocentric assumptions that condition 'Us' to believe that such females do not exist within the peripheries of the GS. It also evolves from the prevalence of neoliberalist economies that teach 'Us' to naively accept that when women succumb to a 'girl power' discourse in which they obtain all the things they are seen to be lacking (e.g. education, work), they have 'saved' themselves from their 'Third-World' status and become 'empowered'.

3. While it is beyond the remit of this paper to address it in full, it is important to recognize that significant parts of the African continent, Asia and South America were historically part of the colonial project in which the drive for capitalism and modernity enabled external colonizing powers from the GN to re/present lack of western knowledge among the 'Other' as *ignorance*. Indeed much of the GS continues to remain under the monopolizing influence of a 'modern', 'progressive' and 'forward thinking' West, especially in terms of dictating the basis for gender-focused reform, and the development and empowerment of women. Under this premise, it is possible that the comments made by ELs here reflect not only something which they genuinely believe but also something which they have been taught to believe as a consequence of being exposed to and immersed in social, cultural, political, economic and educational systems influenced by GN-led gender-focused reform agendas.

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