CHAPTER 6

Girl Power Politics: Pop-Culture Barriers and Organizational Resistance

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There has been a great deal of feminist debate over the idea of “Girl Power,” its relation to feminism, and whether or not Girl Power is good for girls and young women.² This chapter intervenes in this debate by focusing specifically on how the discourse of Girl Power relates to girls’ political subjectivity.² With its origination in the riot grrrl movement and third-wave feminism, Girl Power began as an explicitly political concept. By the 1990s, the discourse of Girl Power had also been deployed by various elements of popular culture and the mainstream media in a way that constructed a version of girlhood that excludes girls’ political selves. However, even as some versions of Girl Power discourse were creating barriers to girls’ politics, organizations for girls were constructing their own meanings of Girl Power and challenging these barriers to girls’ social and political engagement.

Stuart Hall defines discourse as “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—i.e., a way of representing—a particular kind of knowledge about a topic” (1996: 201). The discourse of Girl Power, then, is made up of all those statements that use this phrase and therefore create meanings of girls’ power. It is created in the discursive practices of a wide range of individuals and institutions with a variety of interests and agendas, and is therefore both power-charged and diverse. Its meaning is not fixed, and remains open to a multitude of possibilities.

In the first part of this chapter, I explore four meanings or versions of Girl Power (and the popular culture institutions that produce them) that
construct barriers to both girls’ activism in general and girls’ engagement with feminist politics in particular, and define girlhood as a non-political space. These four meanings are Girl Power as anti-feminism, Girl Power as postfeminism, Girl Power as individual power, and Girl Power as consumer power. The discursive practices that prevent girls’ political action are not necessarily organized around a hegemonic master plan with this goal in mind. Each has a specific purpose and localized use, but they do indeed join together to define girls as noncritical, nonactive subjects. Thus, rather than implying a conspiracy of advertisers, pop stars, and journalists working to prevent girls’ politics, I would like to show that the discursive practices that produce these meanings of Girl Power each construct Girl Power in a manner whose implications could serve to inhibit girls’ political engagement.

In the second part of the chapter, I discuss how two girls’ organizations redefine Girl Power to challenge the depoliticizing versions of Girl Power and the barriers to girls’ politics that such meanings create. Based on field research at two sites, I will address the ways that these two programs respond to depoliticizing meanings of Girl Power and attempt to empower girls as sociopolitical actors. Analyzing the discourse of Girl Power from these two angles makes visible how its messages for girls’ political engagement are contested. However, it is crucial to note that the two sides of this conflict do not have equal social and cultural power, and the depoliticizing meanings of Girl Power are more visible due to their location in dominant media institutions. This makes them potentially more influential than the meanings produced by the girls’ organizations discussed. However, girls do not passively accept the discursive practices of either popular culture or girls’ organizations, but produce their own readings from these practices. Unfortunately, due to space limitations, this chapter does not explore girls’ interpretations. Therefore, my argument is not about how Girl Power discourses impact girls’ political selves, but rather that meanings and versions of Girl Power offered by the mainstream media could produce barriers to girls’ active citizenship, and that these depoliticizing meanings of Girl Power are and can be challenged by girls’ organizations.

**Anti-Feminism**

Anti-feminism, as I use it here, refers to those meanings of Girl Power that actively distinguish the phrase from feminism and/or put forth a negative portrayal of feminism, discouraging girls from feminist politics. The Spice Girls are among the most discussed promoters of Girl Power, and their relationship to feminism has been a contentious topic for commentators (Lemish 1998; Davies 1999; Driscoll 1999, 2002). The group has been described as everything from “tools of patriarchy” to “performing affirmative race, gender and class-based politics” (Brabazon and Evans 1998: 41). What I want to suggest here is that while their version of Girl Power may
indeed be empowering, celebratory, and affirmative of girls’ strength, it also contains anti-feminist messages. Namely, the Spice Girls present Girl Power as the nonpolitical and nonthreatening alternative to feminism.

In their book *Girl Power*, the Spice Girls proclaim in large pink block letters that “feminism has become a dirty word. Girl Power is just a nineties way of saying it. We can give feminism a kick up the arse” (Spice Girls 1997: 49). Even as they invoke some type of connection to feminism, they make clear that Girl Power is *not* feminism, but instead is going to be a new way of being girls/women, one that kicks feminism, not embraces or extends it. As Whelehan notes, this quote easily plays into anti-feminist backlash and a negative image of feminism instead of challenging those who have made feminism a dirty word (2000: 45). This claim by the Spice Girls is positioned above a picture of the band members in sleepwear, lying on a bed.

This association implies that Girl Power is softer, sexier, less active than feminism and that Girl Power gives feminism a “kick up the arse” by emphasizing beauty and appearance. Additionally, the Spice Girls’ descriptions of why they have Girl Power have nothing to do with changing power relationships, but only developing new personal qualities like “playing girls’ football” and “appreciating my roots” (1997: 5–7). The Spice Girls are not kicking feminism to a new level of political action or expanding it to address their needs. Instead, these quotes and images suggest that they are replacing feminism with an alternative, and make no indication that this alternative is a project for social or political change.

Similarly, in U.S. news coverage of the 1999 Women’s World Cup soccer tournament, the players, as role models of Girl Power, are clearly distinguished from feminists. In an article in *USA Today*, Jill Lieber writes, “There is not a … rebel in the bunch.” She celebrates that “it is girl power, not feminism that inspires these young women and girls” (1999: 1A). For Lieber, Girl Power is not rebellion, but a contained expression of strength and athleticism on the soccer field. Both the Spice Girls and promoters of Women’s World Cup soccer dissociate Girl Power from feminism. Both these groups want and need to make Girl Power palatable and marketable, and a too-close connection with feminism could reduce their success.

This anti-feminism presents girls with a negative image of feminist politics, thus discouraging involvement in this particular movement. Lieber and the Spice Girls both offer Girl Power as the safe, friendly, and “best” way for girls to express their girl pride. The Spice Girls and many who wrote about the 1999 U.S. women’s soccer team claim that a fashion-focused and sports-oriented Girl Power is more appropriate than feminism’s outdated political rebellion. Thus, girls are encouraged to identify their girl-positive feelings with a nonpolitical rather than a politicized discourse, and to think about girlhood in these purely cultural ways, rather than as a space for social and political action.
Postfeminism

Postfeminism, as I use it here, is the argument that girls and women are doing fine, feminism is unnecessary, and the movement is over. The deployment of Girl Power discourse to make these postfeminist claims plays an important role in the disconnection of Girl Power and feminism by dismissing the need for feminist action. Some journalists have used the language of Girl Power to claim that girls have attained all the power they could ever want, and there is nothing left to be done. These assertions that feminism is unnecessary promote the idea that girls should be satisfied and content with the current social order, potentially obstructing their attempts and desires to create social change.

Journalist Susan Orlean, in an article titled “Girl Power: Has Sabrina the Teenage Witch Worked Her Magic on a Generation?” celebrates how great things are for girls today. She writes that the television character Sabrina the Teenage Witch is an empowered girl who lives life “in the way that only girls who have grown up taking feminism for granted are able” (1998: 54). According to Orlean, Sabrina doesn’t need feminism; her life is great as it is. In this article, Girl Power comes to symbolize girls having achieved power and equality in the world.

Going even further than the celebration of girls having made it to equality are those writers who mobilize the discourse of Girl Power to suggest that girls and women now have too much power in the world. The New York Times article “How Boys Lost Out to Girl Power” is one example of this use and meaning of Girl Power. In it, journalist Tamar Lewin suggests that feminism and the focus on girls are excessive. Additionally, this article creates an opposition between Girl Power/feminism and issues of race and racism. Lewin writes that the “myth that schools shortchange girls has diverted policy attention from African-American boys, a group at genuine education risk,” and “boys-versus-girls bean-counting has gone too far, especially when measured against very large racial differences in educational achievement” (1998: sec. 4, p. 3). Girls’ racial identities are made invisible, and, because they are not named, are normalized as White (Kenny 2000). There are no within-gender or within-race comparisons, and both White boys and African-American girls are hidden from view. This not only fails to enact an analysis of the intersecting forces of race and gender but also describes feminism as a movement that is only about gender issues and cannot speak to the needs of African-American boys.

In these uses of the discourse of Girl Power, the phrase comes to mean that girls are powerful and that gender equality exists, or even that girls are dominant. While this is certainly not the true state of gendered power dynamics, these meanings of Girl Power also imply that feminism is only about gender issues. This version of Girl Power portrays girls as having achieved gender equality, without ever noting the way that this is tied to racial, sexual, and class politics. Girls cannot be discussed as a racially neutral, classless group; to do so is to normalize White, middle-class,
heterosexual girls and to make invisible girls of color, working-class girls, and queer youth (Bettie 2003). The question of whether or not girls have achieved “equality” must be asked in the context of their racial, sexual, and class identities. Further, to assume that girlhood, Girl Power, and feminism are only about gender issues ignores the substantial contributions of Black, Chicana, non-Western, and queer feminists, and erases their claims about the intersectionality of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, and ability.

The claims that equality exists, and the use of Girl Power to signify girls’ equality (or dominance) in the world, not only make gender oppression invisible but also hide the social forces of racism, classism, and homophobia. In doing so, they alienate girls and young women who are experiencing multiple oppressions, leading them to believe that feminism does not address their own needs and concerns. By presenting a world with no need for social change, this use of the Girl Power discourse fails to provide girls with tools to understand and challenge situations where they experience sexism and other forms of oppression. Thus, girls are discouraged from seeing inequality and from engaging in challenges to such inequalities.

Individual Power
Closely related to Girl Power’s postfeminist meanings is its invocation to describe the world as a meritocracy void of sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and heterosexism. Magazines and advertisements aimed at girls use the discourse of Girl Power in a way that reflects the ideologies of individualism and personal responsibility, and has a noticeable disregard for social systems and institutions. Power relationships are glossed over or ignored as articles and ads in girls’ magazines claim that girls can do or be anything, so long as they work for it. While Girl Power as “girls can be anything” can give girls a sense of power and esteem, it hides both the material and the discursive forces shaping identity and the ways that these gendered, raced, classed, and sexualized identities may give girls privileges or pose challenges.

An article in *Girl’s Life*, a magazine aimed at girls between the ages of ten and fourteen, claims, “You too can be a celebrity.” The article gives two “easy” steps to achieving any and all goals. Step one is to “create a new you [because] making a little external change is a great motivator.” The second step revolves around having helpers—an “agent to help you review what steps you’ve taken toward your goal and plan what to do next,” and a “publicist” to tell others about how much you have done. And Abracadabra, you have made yourself a success! (“You Too Can” 1999: 56–59). Other articles and ads may be a little less outrageous, but have the same emphasis on individual achievements through a combination of looks, work, and support. For example, another issue of the same magazine features a story about a young woman who has her own dance company. How did she get there? Through hard work, standing up for what she believed in, and
following her dreams ("One Girl" 2000: 75). An advertisement for Barbie and space camp claims "you can be a leader, you can be strong, you can be confident. Girls can do it all." These sorts of claims of Girl Power as individual power are fairly common in media for girls, with Girl Power being presented as an attribute of women scientists, athletes, and other success-story figures.

These examples, on the positive side, emphasize girls as potentially powerful people and encourage them to try new things and believe in themselves. However, in failing to address the social factors of race, class, gender, sexuality, and physical ability, the ads and articles mobilize Girl Power discourse to hide current injustices rather than helping girls to analyze oppression or even acknowledge social problems. Instead, they place the responsibility for achievement on the shoulders of each individual girl. Not only can this lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem, but this meaning of Girl Power as individual power could serve to inhibit girls’ connections with one another, reduce the possibilities for social analysis and critical thinking, and thus hinder girls’ social and political engagement. Like traditional liberal feminism, which "ignores the existence of other social and cultural factors which might make it impossible for an individual to acquire the means to realize such potential" (Whelehan 1995: 37), this meaning of Girl Power clouds girls’ vision of current injustices, places blame for all problems on their own shoulders, and encourages their acceptance of the status quo.

Consumer Power

Marketers and those with products to sell use the discourse of Girl Power to produce and circulate one of the most pervasive images of girlhood: that of the girl as consumer. Girl Power as defined by marketing executives and corporate interests often confines girls’ social power to their purchasing power. In an article titled "Girl Power," marketers and those working in retail can learn about getting “tween girls” (seven to twelve years old) to buy their products (1999: 54). The December 8, 1997, issue of Fortune magazine featured a six-page article on Girl Power and marketing. The piece celebrates the conspicuous consumption of teenage girls, reporting that 88 percent of girls between thirteen and seventeen "just love to shop." A large portion of the article centers on the success of catalog companies peddling trendy clothes for girls.

Airshop knows about girl power. Its catalogue runs pictures and poems sent in by its creative customers. It publishes mini-profiles of teenage girls—girls who are kicking butt in male-dominated fields…. Is Airshop a hip, shoestring literary magazine or a catalogue for adolescent consumers? It’s both. If you want to sell to the girl-power crowd, you have to pretend that they’re running things, that they’re in charge. (Munk 1997: 136)
This emphasis on consumption suggests that without these commodities a girl is not powerful, thus making Girl Power seem like the possession of only those girls who can afford these products. Additionally, even for those who have the power to buy, this discourse limits their power only to the commercial realm. Girls’ power does not include the power to create, to think, and to act. We need to be concerned about the fact that girlhood is produced as a space of consumption at the expense of girlhood as a space of cultural production (Kearney 1998) or social and political engagement.

Program Responses: Camp Ashema

Girl Power as anti-feminism, postfeminism, individual power, and consumer power all write girls’ sociopolitical power out of the language of Girl Power. This poses a challenge to those programs that aim to empower girls in the sociopolitical arena. However, some girls’ organizations are responding to these versions of the Girl Power discourse, reconstructing and creating new meanings of Girl Power and imagining a definition of girlhood that includes girls’ social and political selves. While I focus here on the oppositional aspects of two groups, I would like to make clear that these organizations also reinscribe some of the barriers mentioned above and are constructing their own nonauthentic versions of girlhood and Girl Power. In short, these organizations are not without elements to be critiqued.

Gender analysis and group decision-making are two techniques used by Camp Ashema, a Girl Scout camp in rural New England. The camp serves primarily White, rural girls between the ages of ten and thirteen from a variety of class backgrounds. It utilizes a discourse of Girl Power in its promotional materials, and seeks to encourage campers to “discover the power of being a girl.” The camp’s mission and vision statement state a commitment to “building strong girls,” which includes “developing self-esteem, encouraging personal growth, recognizing and addressing gender bias, appreciating diversity [and] fostering shared values.”

The camp actively tries to incorporate an analysis of gendered social relations and power structures into its daily practices, countering Girl Power as anti-feminism and individual power. The staff’s training manual states, “Campers will have the opportunity to acknowledge society’s barriers which limit girls’ achievement and teach/learn tools to overcome those barriers.” This is accomplished through daily “cool chats.” These are consistent small group conversations between one staff member and approximately six girls. Staff members are given lesson plans for these discussions, which address gender bias, gender stereotyping, and other “girl-focused” issues, and which encourage girls to think critically about the ways social forces influence their own lives.

The second manner in which Camp Ashema tries to challenge versions of Girl Power that construct barriers to girls’ activism is its emphasis on collective girl-decision-making. By giving girls the power to make choices
about their camp program as a group, the camp effectively positions girls as capable and active decision-makers rather than passive consumers of the camp experience. Girl Power here often means girls and women working together toward some sort of group goal. The page in the staff manual titled “Girl Planning: What Makes Us Different” states that it is the camp’s intent to “help girls develop into independent decision makers, while participating in the group process.” The camp encourages girls to make decisions through a progressive approach that starts from the very beginning of camp with staff allowing girls to make basic daily-life choices, and progresses to girls developing their own goals for their time at camp and planning most of the program, while the adults serve mostly as “facilitator[s] and guide[s] in the program planning.” This emphasis on decision-making provides girls with a space to be active agents, thus challenging meanings of Girl Power that position girls only as passive consumers.

Program Responses: Teen Women’s Action Program

Unlike these somewhat indirect, but still potentially effective, techniques of gender analysis and group decision-making, the Teen Women’s Action Program (TWAP) directly encourages girls to become community change agents and empowered citizens. TWAP is an after-school and summer program in a large mid-Atlantic city that works primarily with African-American, Latina, and Vietnamese-American teen women (ages fourteen to eighteen) from middle-class, working-class, and poor neighborhoods. It is, according to its mission statement, “a multi-cultural organization that builds and supports teen women and girl leaders so that they can improve their own lives and transform their communities.” Participants are encouraged to move through a program progression that begins at the level of the personal and then develops into group and community problem-solving and action. The after-school program begins with training and discussions on self-advocacy skills like communication, problem-solving, decision-making, conflict resolution, and self-assessment.

These skills encourage teens in the program to share their personal experiences with one another and to support each other in their individual struggles to improve their own lives. The program then shifts to a series of topical trainings on reproductive health, violence, stress, and oppression during which the teens continue to take on greater leadership roles within their groups. These serve to help the group move from understanding their individual experiences to a broader social analysis. This is where the challenge to meanings of Girl Power as postfeminism and individual power is most direct.

After completing this phase of the program, the teens focus on a problem in their school community of their own choosing. They design and conduct community needs assessments so that they have an informed understanding of the problem. Then, with these assessments complete,
they plan a project that attempts to contribute to solving the problem. Previous projects have included workshops on pregnancy, eating disorders, and mental health; zines on stress, dating violence, and sexual harassment; and a festival addressing segregation among teen women in the school. The teens can then work with the organization in the summer on larger, citywide action campaigns. One long-term campaign has worked to improve access and quality of life for teen women in the foster care system by creating new residential group home regulations, conducting leadership and self-advocacy workshops, and increasing foster teen involvement in group home governance through organizing. Another has written a new sexual harassment policy for the public schools, presented it to the school board, and actively campaigned for its approval and implementation. This emphasis on group-oriented community projects for social justice counters those meanings of Girl Power that claim that change is unnecessary, that are devoid of structural analysis, and that position girls as consumers rather than active citizens. For TWAP, Girl Power is the power to create community change.

Conclusion
In conclusion, I would like to discuss some of the broader implications of the discursive barriers to girls’ activism and how girls’ programs can empower girls in the sociopolitical realm. First, it seems obvious that both scholars and professionals interested in girls’ political agency need to be cautious about our use of the language of Girl Power, since we do not wish to invoke some of the more widespread meanings discussed in this chapter. We need to recognize this term as a contested one, and be clear about how we are using it. This does not mean giving up on the discourse of Girl Power, but seeing that it has meanings that may be counter to the project of encouraging girls’ political activity. Second, I would like to suggest that girls’ programs need to develop even more ways of challenging the depoliticizing meanings of Girl Power and further encourage girls as agents of social change. Too often, girls’ programs aim to psychologize and individualize the experiences of girls, deemphasizing social forces and collective action. The emphasis on improving the self-esteem of individual girls reinscribes the mainstream media’s versions of Girl Power by continuing to keep discussions of girlhood focused on the individual girl and her path to success. A more radical, sociological, and feminist approach would call for social analysis and collective response to the many forces that shape girls’ lives. It is my hope that this chapter has demonstrated some of the cultural and discursive barriers to such an approach so that we may attempt to rethink both our understandings of girls’ power and the practices of programs that aim to “empower girls.”
Notes

1. See, for example, Budgeon 1998; Wheelehan 2000.
2. I am following Bhavnani’s argument that politics, when discussed in relation to youth, must be broadly defined, and utilize her definition: “the means by which human beings regulate, attempt to regulate and challenge with a view to changing unequal power relationships” (1991: 52).
3. The analysis in this first section is based on extensive document searches conducted between September 1999 and March 2000, and the detailed discourse and content analysis of these articles and advertisements.

References